

In the Funhouse Mirror: How News Subjects Respond to Their Media Reflections

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Abstract

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Based on in-depth interviews with eighty-three people who were named in newspapers in the New York City-area and a southwestern city, this dissertation explores the phenomenon of being featured, quoted, or mentioned in a news story, from the subject's point of view. Discussions of news subjects usually begin when the journalist comes on the scene and end with subjects' assessments of accuracy in the articles in which they appear. But I find that news subjects perceive the phenomenon of "making the news" as a broader saga that begins with their involvement in an event or issue, often only later deemed newsworthy by journalists, and extends to the repercussions of the coverage in their lives, including feedback they receive from others and effects on their digital reputations. Subjects interpret their news coverage, including its accuracy, in light of the trigger events that brought them to journalists' attention in the first place and the coverage's ensuing effects.

Individual chapters focus on subjects' reasons for wanting or not wanting to speak to reporters; their interactions with reporters; their reactions to the news content in which they were named; and repercussions of news appearances. I conclude that the assumption that news subjects are all victims of the press is both reductive and, often, from the subject's own point of view, inaccurate. While common wisdom suggests that people who seek news attention do so for petty or poorly considered reasons, I find that interviewees often did consider the pros and cons of speaking to the press before agreeing to do so. For most participants the attraction could be summarized as the opportunity to address or display themselves before a large audience, which they saw as rare and elusive, even in today's web 2.0 world.

At the same time, most subjects understood, at least in theory, the main risks

involved: that they were giving up control over their stories to reporters, but would nonetheless bear the repercussions of having had their names in the news. But the majority concluded—even after seeing the, often imperfect, resulting articles—that the benefits outweighed the risks. Subjects were often pleased with their news appearances even despite inaccuracies in the content because they found that, unless they were portrayed extremely negatively, appearing in the news conferred status, which was often not just psychologically but materially beneficial.

Those subjects who were left dissatisfied with their experiences appearing in the news only rarely felt misled or outright betrayed by journalists. It was far more common that subjects felt journalists were unacceptably aggressive or exploitative. Other subjects traced their discontent not to their interactions with journalists but to the content of the resulting news stories, whether because inaccuracies derailed their objectives for appearing in the news in the first place, or because the content had stigmatizing effects. This is the ugly obverse of status conferral: subjects who were portrayed as behavioral deviants—criminals for instance—found that not only was their status not enhanced by their news appearances, their social standing and professional prospects were badly damaged. I conclude that both the status and stigma conferred by the news media are magnified by the digital publication, circulation, and searchability of news articles, which can now continue to have profound effects on subjects' lives far into the future.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse. Like the credulous widow who wakes up one day to find the charming young man and all her savings gone, so the consenting subject of a piece of nonfiction writing learns—when the article or book appears—his hard lesson.

—Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*¹

How much a reporter resembles a con man is not a settled matter.² Since sparking heated debate among journalists with her two-part *New Yorker* article about the dark underbelly of the journalist-subject relationship in 1989,³ Janet Malcolm's argument that all journalists feign sympathy for their subjects—that they, in a sense, *seduce* their subject-victims only to betray them by writing their own versions of subjects' stories later—has taken up an odd place in journalism culture. The book version, published in 1990 as *The Journalist and the Murderer*, has become a classic: one of Modern Library's top 100 nonfiction books of all time, it is required reading in journalism and law courses across the country.⁵ Its central argument that betraying sources is an inevitable cornerstone of journalism has taken on the whiff of conventional wisdom—even as it remains a source of vehement disagreement among practitioners of the craft.⁶ What initially seemed a scathing portrait of journalists has even become a perverse

¹ Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 3.

² Parts of this introduction were previously published in Ruth Palmer, "The Hoax, Uncanny Identity, and Literary Journalism," *Literary Journalism Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 85–105.

³ Janet Malcolm, "Reflections: The Journalist and the Murderer--I: The Journalist," *The New Yorker* 65, no. 4 (March 13, 1989): 38; Janet Malcolm, "Reflections: The Journalist and the Murderer: II--The Murderer," *The New Yorker* 65, no. 5 (March 20, 1989): 49.

⁵ *100 Best Nonfiction, 1998*, <http://www.modernlibrary.com/top-100/100-best-nonfiction/>.

⁶ Douglas McCollam, "'You have the right to remain silent,'" *Columbia Journalism Review* 41, no. 5 (February 2003): 30–31. As Katie Roiphe put it more recently, "Malcolm's work, then, occupies that strange glittering territory between controversy and the establishment: she is both a grande dame of journalism, and still, somehow, its enfant terrible." Katie Roiphe, "Janet Malcolm, The Art of Nonfiction No. 4," *Paris Review*, Spring 2011, 2, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6073/the-art-of-nonfiction-no-4-janet-malcolm>. For a full spectrum of journalists' responses to Malcolm's argument, see Martin Gottlieb, "Dangerous Liaisons: Journalists and Their Sources," *Columbia Journalism Review* 28, no. 2 (July 1989): 21.

source of pride in some (perhaps limited) journalistic circles: “Seducing and betraying since 1912” was among a handful of nominees for a new motto to put on t-shirts at Columbia Journalism School several years ago.⁷ Now, over 20 years after its original publication, Malcolm’s work is back in the spotlight, with the release of renowned documentarian Errol Morris’s new doorstopper of a book re-examining the murder to which her title refers.⁸

Tellingly, Malcolm’s most famous paragraph—the provocative opening lines of her book and the epigram to this chapter—is almost always quoted only in part. While the first part—about journalists—is excerpted as a springboard for discussion, the second half—about subjects—is invariably left out. Whether this is because the writers doing the excerpting take the subject’s victim role as beyond debate; feel unqualified to make claims on behalf of subjects; or simply believe the second half of the quote is implied by the first, the omission rather ironically recalls one of Malcolm’s central claims—that journalists always, in the end, turn their backs on subjects to write stories of their own...in this case, mostly about themselves. But more importantly, it leaves debaters in the strange position of arguing about whether or not most journalists are, in fact, con men, without knowing whether or not most subjects do, in fact, feel conned.

Among non-journalists, the subject-as-victim trope has certain appeal, as does the journalist-as-criminal. Popular opinion of the press, on the decline since the mid-’60s, is at a historic nadir, and anecdotal evidence of subjects railroaded by reporters springs to mind to support Malcolm’s claims.⁹ It seems we all have a mother, rabbi, boss, or neighbor who had a

⁷ Rebecca Castillo, Society of Professional Journalists staff adviser, Columbia Journalism School, email to author, October 26, 2012.

⁸ Errol Morris, *A Wilderness of Error: The Trials of Jeffrey MacDonald* (Penguin Press HC, The, 2012).

⁹ Shribman, quoting from a Harris Poll, cites a decline from 29% (in 1966) to 11% (in 1997), of the public with “a great deal of trust” in the press, although he puts this in context by noting that during that period confidence in all major institutions declined. David M. Shribman, “Insiders with a Crisis from Outside: Congress and the Public Trust,” in *Congress and the Decline of Public Trust* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 27–42. A more recent Pew poll found that on nine out of twelve measures negative opinion of the press equaled or surpassed previous highs (since 1985). Meanwhile Gallup notes that the 43% of

bad experience being misquoted in the paper, and more Kafkaesque cases loom large in our recent history: Wen Ho Lee, the Los Alamos scientist who was ravaged by the press as an accused spy but later found innocent; falsely accused Atlanta Olympics bomber Richard Jewell, now a poster child for how trial-by-media can ruin a life; or even more recently, General Stanley McChrystal, taken down by a too-candid profile in *Rolling Stone*.¹¹ The anecdotal evidence appears to support not just Malcolm's argument, but also popular intuition, that journalists have the upper hand in their relationships with their subjects and cheerfully throw them under the bus when it suits their purposes.

These are the most memorable cases and they certainly make the best stories, but we really know little about how representative they are—or about news subjects in general for that matter. Is it really inevitable that subjects feel distorted by the media, as Malcolm claims? And if such extreme misrepresentation *is* very common, why would the thousands of victims, experts, witnesses, and people-on-the-street who populate our news coverage agree to cooperate with reporters? What are their expectations for the experience and how do they feel about the way they were portrayed? We do not know the answer to any of these questions for sure. While journalists certainly think and write a lot about their relationships to their subjects, these discussions are often strangely one-sided—but perhaps their role in the drama makes them particularly ill-suited to assess how their subjects perceive it. Yet journalism scholarship likewise provides few answers. Except for public figures and celebrities, it has largely neglected the perspectives of people mentioned by name in the news.

This study addresses these questions by examining the phenomenon of being featured, quoted, or simply mentioned in a news story, from the subject's point of view. Based on in-

Americans who have "a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media" ties their record low, and is far lower than the 68-70% reported in the 1970s. *Views of the News Media: 1985-2011* (The Pew Research Center for The People and The Press, September 22, 2011), <http://www.people-press.org/2011/09/22/press-widely-criticized-but-trusted-more-than-other-institutions/>; Lymari Morales, *Distrust in U.S. Media Edges Up to Record High*, Poll (Gallup, September 29, 2010), <http://www.gallup.com/poll/143267/Distrust-Media-Edges-Record-High.aspx>.

¹¹ Michael Hastings, "The Runaway General | Politics News | Rolling Stone," *Rollingstone.com*, June 22, 2010, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/the-runaway-general-20100622>.

depth interviews with eighty-three people who were named in newspapers in the New York City-area and a southwestern city, it explores how people who have been named in news stories feel about and reflect on that experience. Because there has been little effort to study systematically the experiences of ordinary people who find themselves in the media spotlight, the goal of this project is to map that terrain: to identify features of the experience that are salient to subjects themselves; to explore the range of subjects' responses to media representations of themselves, and the dynamics that shape those responses; and to determine areas for future research.

From Champs to Victims: What the Communications Literature Tells Us about News Subjects

The vast majority of communications research about the many non-journalists who contribute to the news is actually about news *sources*—those who provide information to reporters but are not necessarily named in the story—not news *subjects*, those who are explicitly named or pictured in the product.¹² The latter are the focus of this study. While there is a huge amount of overlap between these two categories, making the literature on both relevant here, the traditional scholarly focus on sources instead of subjects is significant because these people have long been seen as information providers, of interest as steps in the news production process, rather than as individuals whose personal images or reputations are at stake in how they are represented in the news product.

And the literature on news sources is overwhelmingly focused on “official” and “elite” sources, usually those who represent powerful institutions. Since Leon Sigal’s groundbreaking work in the 1970s, it has been repeatedly demonstrated by newsroom ethnographies,¹³ content

¹² Here I borrow David Pritchard’s distinction between sources and subjects. See: David Pritchard, “Why Unhappy Subjects of News Coverage Rarely Complain,” in *Holding the Media Accountable* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 39–40.

¹³ Herbert J Gans, *Deciding What’s News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978).

analyses,¹⁴ and studies of media coverage of significant historical events,¹⁵ that the vast majority of news sources are representatives of these powerful institutions.¹⁶ Most academics conclude that such sources often have the upper hand. These powerful informants, it has been repeatedly argued, develop mutually dependent relationships with reporters over time, as well as an understanding of professional journalistic practices, that further enable their manipulation of the media. In what Gans calls “the tug-of-war” over the news message, these sources not only are not the victims, they are consistently the champions.¹⁷

But again, these are people in powerful positions. Whether less powerful news sources with little to hold over the heads of journalists are similarly enfranchised remains an unanswered question. Moreover, these powerful sources are not necessarily news *subjects* per se—their reputations may or may not be on the line, since they may or may not be named in the published news stories.

¹⁴ Leon V Sigal, *Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking* (Lexington, Mass: D. C. Heath, 1973); Jane Delano Brown et al., “Invisible Power: Newspaper News Sources and the Limits of Diversity,” *Journalism Quarterly* 64, no. Spring (1987): 45–54.

¹⁵ Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making & Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980); Daniel C Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

¹⁶ Since these early studies, many content analyses have explored the lack of diversity among news sources, including: Cory Armstrong, “Story Genre Influences Whether Women Are Sources,” *Newspaper Research Journal* 27, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 66.; Daniel C Hallin, Robert Karl Manoff, and Judy K. Weddle, “Sourcing Patterns of National Security Reporters,” *Journalism Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 753–766.; Kathleen A. Hansen, “Source Diversity and Newspaper Enterprise Journalism,” *Journalism Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (Autumn 1991): 474–482.; Conrad Smith, “News Sources and Power Elites in News Coverage of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill,” *Journalism Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 393–403; Michael Schudson, *The Sociology of News*, 1st ed., Contemporary Societies (New York: Norton, 2003).; Dan Berkowitz and Douglas W. Beach, “News Sources and News Context: The Effect of Routine News, Conflict and Proximity,” *Journalism Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 4–12.; Brown et al., “Invisible Power: Newspaper News Sources and the Limits of Diversity.”; D Charles Whitney et al., “Geographic and Source Biases in Network Television News 1982-1984,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 33, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 159.; Lynn Zoch and Judy Turk, “Women Making News: Gender as a Variable in Source Selection and Use,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 75, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 762.; Paul S Voakes et al., “Diversity in the News: A Conceptual and Methodological Framework,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (Autumn 1996): 582.

¹⁷ Gans, *Deciding What’s News*, 81.

When it comes to ordinary news *subjects*, the communications literature deals with them very little, and talks more *about* them than *to* them. News subjects have not exactly been ignored; they have just been subsumed into studies of news coverage of larger topics, events, and groups. Focusing just on groups, academic and popular efforts to analyze how they have been covered in the media are ubiquitous: from various religious and ethnic communities¹⁸ to minorities of all kinds,¹⁹ it is hard to think of a subset of the population that has *not* been so dissected. And content analysis is almost always the preferred method, whether purely quantitative or less so: scholars take the news product and critique the representation therein. On the rare occasions when the literature does explore in depth how individuals are covered, these tend to be figures of at least national importance—JFK,²⁰ for example, or Joseph McCarthy.²¹ These are not your regular Joes. And again, the main unit of analysis is the news product itself; news subjects themselves are almost never asked to critique their own coverage.

But in the scholarly shift of focus from news sources to news subjects—even the individual, often anonymous news subjects implicit in so many content analyses—there is an

¹⁸Just a few of the many examples include: Mohammad Ahmadullah Siddiqi, *Islam, Muslims and Media: Myths and Realities* (Chicago: NAAMPS Publications, 1997); Nahid Afrose Kabir, *Young British Muslims: Identity, Culture, Politics and the Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010); Anthony Burke Smith, *The Look of Catholics: Portrayals in Popular Culture from the Great Depression to the Cold War*, CultureAmerica (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2010); *Muslims and the News Media* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006); *Muslims and Media Images: News Versus Views* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009); *Jewish Images in the Media*, Relation new ser., v. 2 (Wien: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2007); *Jews, Muslims, and Mass Media: Mediating the "Other,"* RoutledgeCurzon Jewish Studies Series (London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

¹⁹ Again, there are many examples to choose from, among them: *Queer Words, Queer Images: Communication and the Construction of Homosexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 1994); Fred Fejes and Petrich, Kevin, "Invisibility, Homophobia, and Heterosexism - Lesbians, Gays and the Media," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10, no. 4 (December 1993): 396–422; Stephanie Greco Larson, *Media & Minorities: The Politics of Race in News and Entertainment*, The Spectrum Series, Race and Ethnicity in National and Global Politics (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Valerie Alia, *Un/Covering the North: News, Media and Aboriginal People* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999); *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C: Howard University Press, 1993).

²⁰ Joseph P Berry, *John F. Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987).

²¹ Lawrence N Strout, *Covering McCarthyism: How the Christian Science Monitor Handled Joseph R. McCarthy, 1950-1954*, Contributions to the Study of Mass Media and Communications no. 58 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999).

odd change of tone that occurs. Suddenly the same people who seemed so controlling and empowered when they were acting as sources—key players in the news process, capable of bending journalists to their will—at least implicitly take on a much less powerful, more passive role. “Victim” may be too strong a word here, but certainly a shift occurs in the literature with our shift in focus from process to content. While sources have not just agency, but great power, it seems subjects have neither—they are simply reduced to a two-dimensional representation in the product that can easily be counted and categorized. You might say they become more object than subject.

And again, when case studies do take up the broader question of how individuals themselves feel about being the subject of press attention, they tend to focus on celebrities and politicians. Charles Lindbergh, it seems, had a rough time of it;²² so did Princess Diana and Marilyn Monroe.²³ In the rare cases when scholars examine how news media attention affected an ordinary individual’s life, those individuals are usually chosen specifically to demonstrate journalistic deficiency, thus falling in step with (or perhaps fueling) the public perception that people are generally ill-treated by the press. James W. Carey, for example, used *The New York Times’s* zealous coverage of Wen Ho Lee—and editors’ subsequent admission of wrongdoing—to illustrate a historic low point in American journalism.²⁴

Academic work on documentary and other genres of long-form nonfiction dig a bit deeper, exploring whether or not subjects understood what they were getting into and how that coverage ultimately affected their lives. In their well-known follow-up to Agee and Walker’s classic *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—itself partly a reflection on representation’s potential effects on individuals—Maharidge and Williamson horrified readers with accounts of one

²² Press and the Public Project and California Newsreel (Firm), *Legacy of a Kidnapping Lindbergh and the Triumph of the Tabloids* (California Newsreel, 2000).

²³ John David Ebert, *Dead Celebrities, Living Icons: Tragedy and Fame in the Age of the Multimedia Superstar* (Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2010).

²⁴ James Carey W., “American Journalism On, Before, and After September 11,” in *Journalism After September 11* (London: Routledge, 2002), 71–90.

beloved character's later suicide, questioning whether the documentarians' intervention in her early life may have contributed to the tragedy.²⁵ Retrospective accounts of the making of groundbreaking documentary works like 1973's "An American Family" similarly raise questions about the naiveté of subjects and long-term negative impact on their lives.²⁶ These, too, are essentially limit cases: examples of private individuals singled out for very invasive, privacy-compromising coverage in formats that were new for their time. This is a somewhat different experience than being mentioned today in a mainstream news article, where the coverage is fleeting, usually less extensive, and the product generally familiar. But although the circumstances differ in important ways, the immediate point is that these well-known cases of distortion contribute to the scholarly and popular picture of an unfailingly abusive media.

Returning to studies specifically focused on news process, there is a strain of research going back to the 1930s that comes a bit closer in spirit to what I have done in this study, but it too tends to place subjects in something of a long-suffering role. Studies of news accuracy have long used surveys to ask people named in news articles to enumerate and categorize errors in those articles.²⁷ More recent studies focusing on different forms of media accountability such as press councils and correction requests have asked people named in news stories, in a limited way, to discuss their experiences.²⁸ With rare exceptions²⁹ these studies, too, tend to rely on

²⁵ James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin company, 1941); Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson, *And Their Children After Them: The Legacy of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: James Agee, Walker Evans, and the Rise and Fall of Cotton in the South* (Seven Stories Press, 2008).

²⁶ Craig Gilbert, "Reflections on 'An American Family'," *Studies in Visual Communication* 8, no. 1 (1982).

²⁷ See, for example, Mitchell Charnley, "A Study of Newspaper Accuracy," *Journalism Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (December 1, 1936): 394; William Blankenburg, "News Accuracy: Some Findings on the Meaning of Errors," *Journal of Communication* 20 (December 1970): 375–386; William A. Tillinghast, "Newspaper Errors: Reporters Dispute Most Source Claims," *Newspaper Research Journal* 3 (Fall 1982): 14–23; Scott Maier, "Getting It Right? Not in 59 Percent of Stories," *Newspaper Research Journal* 23 (Winter 2002): 10–24; Philip Meyer, *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age*, 2nd ed. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009).

²⁸ Pritchard, "Why Unhappy Subjects of News Coverage Rarely Complain"; Louise Williams Hermanson, "News Council Complainants: Who Are They and What Do They Want?," *Journalism Quarterly* 70 (Winter 1993): 947–70.

surveys, limit respondents to commenting specifically about accuracy of content within certain narrow parameters, and, in the case of studies on accountability measures, often select specifically for news subjects who were unhappy with their coverage. While the subjects are given the opportunity to voice their feelings about how they were represented, they are once more cast in the victim role: the underlying assumption is that these people were wronged by the media and by studying their experiences we can better understand journalistic process and more effectively hold the press to account.

And yet, while this may be the main focus of accountability studies, if we look a bit closer we start to find strange tensions between what researchers look for and what news subjects provide. Even subjects who are specifically asked about negative aspects of their experience being in the news—like inaccuracies—stubbornly resist being cast as downtrodden. For example, surveys that ask news subjects to identify and rate the severity of errors in those articles consistently find that news subjects themselves rarely rate errors as severe.³⁰ They further find that subjects almost never request corrections for errors in their stories,³¹ and that 60 percent of subjects who appear in inaccurate stories still say they are not just willing, but “eager” to be in the newspaper again in the future.³² This does not seem like the cringing of victims. It appears news subjects may care far less about inaccuracy per se than journalism

²⁹ As discussed in detail in Chapter Five, Pritchard does conduct interviews with unhappy news subjects (2000).

³⁰ In their cross-market study of 4,800 news subjects, Maier found that “Errors identified by news sources were generally not considered egregious. On a Likert-like scale in which 1 is a minor error and 7 a major error, the mean rating was 2.8.” See Scott Maier, “Accuracy Matters: a Cross-Market Assessment of Newspaper Error and Credibility,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 541; Meyer, *The Vanishing Newspaper*.

³¹ Maier, “Getting It Right? Not in 59 Percent of Stories”; Pritchard, “Why Unhappy Subjects of News Coverage Rarely Complain”; Scott Maier, “Setting the Record Straight: When the Press Errs, Do Corrections Follow?” (presented at the International Communication Association, Dresden, Germany, 2006).

³² Maier found that 60% of those who identified at least one error in the article in which they were named still classified themselves as “eager” to be in the newspaper again, compared to 73% who had been in stories they deemed accurate. Maier, “Accuracy Matters: a Cross-Market Assessment of Newspaper Error and Credibility.”

scholars. And if many people are eager to be in the news again *despite the inaccuracies*, maybe there is something they get from the experience, some reward that matters more to them than whether or not the journalist got all the facts straight. Surveys can raise these questions, but we need qualitative approaches to answer them.

Looking over the literature it is hard to avoid a sneaking suspicion that not only have we generally neglected the perspective of news subjects, but that on the occasions when we did make an effort to take it into account, we may have done so reductively, based on preconceived ideas about what is important to them. Of course, recent explorations of citizen journalism are excited to proclaim that the person formerly known as the victim-subject, or at best the passive bystander, is now the empowered subject-journalist.³³ But even this shift indicates the same underlying assumption that ordinary people being written about in the mainstream media are (or were) essentially pawns.

What would happen, then, if news subjects were given the opportunity to speak at length about their experiences “making” the news? If invited to discuss the events leading up to publication, including their involvement in a newsworthy event and their interactions with journalists and photographers, perhaps they would give us some insight into why they tend to downplay errors. Or perhaps the events following the appearance of the article are what matter most, the ripples of news appearances in individuals’ personal and professional lives. Above all, their perspectives might help us rethink some of assumptions we make about the way journalistic representation works in the lives of individuals—not just in the lives of an assumed audience, but of the people named in our news products every day.

³³ See, for example, S. Robinson, “‘If You Had Been with Us’: Mainstream Press and Citizen Journalists Jockey for Authority over the Collective Memory of Hurricane Katrina,” *New Media & Society* 11, no. 5 (July 2009): 795–814.

Why This Matters

Not only are people the primary subjects of most news stories—in the 1960s and '70s Gans found that less than 10 percent of news magazine and national TV news stories concerned anything *other* than people, but also there is a long-standing tendency to anthropomorphize news stories that focus on abstract concepts or events.³⁴ Thus policy issues are often presented as struggles between individual politicians, economic trends in terms of the unemployed, and catastrophic events of all kinds measured in terms of victims. The reigning assumption is that people both prefer, and best comprehend, stories about other people, so journalism professionals tailor their stories accordingly: distinctions between news subjects and news sources aside, the news is a heavily-peopled product. Even if the majority of these are public figures and not the ordinary people who are the focus of this study, we are still talking about a huge number. Indeed, if we remove both human subjects and human sources, one wonders what would be left.

Setting moral implications aside for the moment, the experience of being a news subject is an interesting social phenomenon in its own right. It is both common—in that it happens to many people every day—and unusual, in that it may only happen to most of us once or twice in our lives, if ever. “I made the news!” has a cultural significance and place in the popular imagination that we know little about. While it may soon be a thing of the past, the clipping and saving of news articles in which we, or people we know, appear, has been de rigueur for many years. One interviewee told me that after appearing in several articles he received targeted online ads for frames and lamination services so he could preserve the article for posterity.³⁵ Whole sections of the paper are devoted to fulfilling this ritual: *The New York Times* wedding section; *The New York Daily News's* “See your baby in the paper” feature that allows parents to

³⁴ Gans, *Deciding What's News*, 9; Leon V Sigal, “Sources Make the News,” in *Reading the News* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 9–37.

³⁵ Interview by author, September 20, 2010.

send in photos of their babies for publication on a special page; birth announcements; death notices.

Being named in a news story is one way individuals navigate between their public and private lives, and, as one of the many ways we find ourselves being mediated today, it sheds light on processes of mediated public display more generally. At the same time, it differs from many of these other forms of public representation because it relies on an institutionalized third party, the journalist; in this case, the price for a public audience is control over one's own image and words. To those who would downplay the distinction between being named in the mainstream media and self-publishing in today's web 2.0 world, I would simply say that the vast majority of the people who participated in this study disagreed. As I discuss in depth in the chapters that follow, they insisted that appearing in the mainstream media is different from other available publication options—indeed, different from any other experience—in important ways. For example, while one could argue that today's news media, when broadly defined to include local and hyper-local sites as well as blogs and self-published material, has a near-infinite news hole, this did not impinge at all on my subjects' sense that the mainstream news product is an exclusive domain, open to only a select few. Indeed, the plethora of other news-ish material online seemed to make being chosen for a spot in a well-known, high-circulation publication all the more important for those hoping to distinguish themselves from the crowd—and all the more damaging for those hoping to avoid it.

But there is also a moral component to this issue. Reams have been written about the democratic and social functions of journalism. Scholars variously emphasize that news does, or should, inform the people, represent their views, contribute to their public conversation, or check power on their behalf; but, regardless of which is emphasized, these functions are always carried out for, and in interaction with, the public.³⁶ And news subjects are integral to that

³⁶ For just a few venerable reflections on what the press does, or should do, in a democracy, see: James W. Carey, "A Republic, If You Can Keep It': Liberty and Public Life in the Age of Glasnost'," in *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, ed. Eve Stryker Munson and Catherine A. Warren (Minneapolis, Minn: University of

process. Whatever news does, news subjects make it possible and, as new consumers, we are the people in whose name it is being done. So we have a stake not just in how news subjects are represented for us, but in how they are treated in the process.

While I do not think it is necessary to advocate one proposed democratic or social function of the press over another to make this argument, I think one in particular deserves our attention because it has the potential to wreak the most havoc on the lives of ordinary people who make the news. This is the function of enforcing social norms, one of several key roles Lazarsfeld and Merton attributed to the mass media in their 1948 classic essay “Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action,” and which I will discuss at greater length in Chapters Seven and Eight.³⁷ As they explain it, the publicizing of social deviance by the mass media forces individual members of society to take a moral stand against that deviance—even if they may privately approve of such behaviors.³⁸

Ordinary people are usually named in the news either because they are representing the populace—this is the “vox pop” or man-on-the-street figure—or because they have deviated from the norm positively or negatively—your criminals, heroes, and human interest subjects. Although even those who are cast as archetypal normal people may find themselves managing repercussions of sudden public attention, those who are upheld as deviant are my main concern right now because, whether chosen because they did something seen as particularly worth

Minnesota Press, 1997), 207–227; James Curran, “Mediations in Democracy,” in *Mass Media and Society*, 4th ed. (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 122–145; Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, 1st rev. ed., Completely updated and rev. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007); Michael Schudson, *Why Democracies Need an Unloveable Press* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008).

³⁷ Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, “Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action,” in *Mass Communication and American Social Thought: Key Texts, 1919-1968*, ed. John Durham Peters and Peter Simons (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 230–241.

³⁸As they put it, “Publicity closes the gap between ‘private attitudes’ and ‘public morality.’ Publicity exerts pressure for a single rather than a dual morality by preventing continued evasion of the issue. It calls forth public reaffirmation and (however sporadic) application of the social norm. In a mass society, this function of public exposure is institutionalized in the mass media of communication. Press, radio, and journals expose fairly well known deviations to public view, and as a rule, this exposure forces some degree of public action against what has been privately tolerated.” (Their italics). *Ibid.*, 234.

celebrating (so, deviating positively from the norm), or associated with something so bad it is deemed of public importance, these become figures we pay special attention to, comment on, and judge, often quite mercilessly.³⁹ It would be nice if social empathy for individuals we see in the news were the norm,⁴⁰ but too often when we are faced with a social “deviant” something roughly the opposite seems to occur. This is made tangible in reader comments posted in response to news stories online, which often devolve into *ad hominem* attacks on the people named in those articles. The lowering of inhibitions absent face-to-face interaction has been called the “online disinhibition effect” when referring specifically to harsh interpersonal behaviors online,⁴¹ but I would contend that something similar takes place in the formation of opinion about people who have been elevated to public status in the news, whether consumed in an online context or not.

This is odd, because when asked to address journalist-subject relations in the abstract, often our sympathies tend toward the subject. While I want to avoid categorically reducing news subjects to victims, since I am trying to problematize that characterization here, it would also be incorrect to suggest they have complete control over the process by which they are made public. As I discuss at length in the chapters that follow, often they are complicit in the process, but ultimately it is hard to avoid concluding that by the time their stories hit our doorsteps—or our computer screens—their role is largely instrumental. Through our attention to news coverage and our reaction (often, judgment) of the people portrayed therein, we are as deeply involved in this process as we would be in the public celebration or punishment of an individual citizen in a public square. As convenient as it is to blame the press for what we perceive as unfair treatment of news subjects, all too often we get caught up in the story and forget that these are human beings who will have to live with the consequences of their

³⁹ I discuss this at greater length in the chapters on status and stigma.

⁴⁰ Schudson, *Why Democracies Need an Unloveable Press*, 17–20.

⁴¹ John Suler, *The Psychology of Cyberspace*, June 2005, <http://www-usr.rider.edu/~suler/psyber/psyber.html>.

coverage—coverage we know intellectually is partial, most likely skewed in some way, and designed to tell a story that may or may not align with that person’s lived experience, but to which we often react emotionally and credulously, rather than critically. Studies like this one that direct our eye toward the experiences of some of those individuals can raise our awareness of how news subjects contribute to the creation of the news, and how their lives can be affected by this process to which we all contribute. Hopefully it will help make us, as news consumers, more sensitive to their complexities, perspectives, and humanity.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four: Responding to *The Journalist and the Murderer*

The three chapters immediately following this one are all aimed at bringing subjects’ oft-neglected perspectives back into the Janet Malcolm debate about the journalist-subject relationship. As noted at the outset of this chapter, although it has been the focus of surprisingly little systematic study, her provocative arguments on this topic have long been an area of interest to both journalists and scholars. Malcolm, a long-time contributor to *The New Yorker* and the author of several nonfiction books, is widely admired among writers as a master of the craft, and no doubt *The Journalist and the Murderer*’s widespread popularity is partly due to her ability to turn a seemingly esoteric topic into something of a page-turner. The murderer at the heart of her book, Jeffrey MacDonald, an attractive, successful, and seemingly content military doctor, is convicted, in 1979, of the apparently motiveless murder of his pregnant wife and two small children. MacDonald insisted—and still insists today—that he was wrongly convicted,⁴⁷ a possibility that Malcolm leaves open.

When a writer named Joe McGinniss approaches MacDonald about writing his story early in the trial process, MacDonald complies eagerly, convinced the resulting work will exonerate him. In an unconventional arrangement, McGinniss receives complete access to the

⁴⁷ Harry Silvergate, “Jeffrey MacDonald, Innocence, and the Future of Habeas Corpus - Forbes,” *Forbes*, October 18, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/harveysilvergate/2012/10/18/jeffrey-macdonald-innocence-and-the-future-of-habeas-corpus/>.

accused during the trial, living with MacDonald and his lawyers while they mount their defense; he is even made an official member of MacDonald's defense team. As Malcolm unwinds it, the two men, similar in temperament and proclivities, become close friends, and throughout the trial McGinniss continually asserts his faith in MacDonald's innocence. The two correspond regularly even after MacDonald is sentenced to life in prison, with McGinniss all the while professing his friendship and support for Jeff MacDonald in a series of obsequiously sympathetic letters, which Malcolm gleefully excerpts.

The publication of the book, *Fatal Vision*, four years later shocks and horrifies MacDonald: McGinniss has portrayed him as a narcissistic monster who murdered his family in cold blood.⁴⁹ Despite serving a life sentence in prison, MacDonald promptly sues McGinniss for fraud. Even more remarkably, five out of six jury members find the writer deliberately and unforgivably deceptive. The trial ends in a hung jury, followed by a settlement, but the eerie fact lingers that most jurors found a convicted murderer more sympathetic and trustworthy than the journalist who wrote about him.

Malcolm, too, condemns McGinniss in no uncertain terms, but agrees with the defense that all journalists are guilty of a degree of deception in their relationship to their subjects. Her book's opening lines summarize the problem: all journalists commit a kind of double identity fraud in which they misrepresent themselves to their subjects in the interview stage, then misrepresent their subjects to the world when they sit down to write. Malcolm sees all subjects—even those who have experienced the con before—as powerless to resist the compulsion to tell journalists their stories, partly because they are flattered by the attention, but ultimately because they want to confess to a fully attentive listener. For their part, journalists appear to provide a sympathetic ear, but are really playing on their subjects' weaknesses in order to get a story, and invariably abandon them to suffer the repercussions of the published

⁴⁹ Joe McGinniss, *Fatal Vision* (New York: New American Library, 1984).

work, as McGinniss abandoned MacDonald. The former's account, and the hit TV movie based on it, shaped public perception about the case; the latter still languishes in jail.

As the literary community was well aware, when Malcolm's argument initially appeared in *The New Yorker*, she had been embroiled in a not-insignificant lawsuit of her own for years, which echoed of the MacDonald/McGinniss suit—but which she had neglected to mention in the article. The omission further fueled the controversy surrounding her provocative conclusions. Jeffrey Masson, a psychoanalyst she had unflatteringly portrayed in another book in 1984 was suing her for defamation in a case that made it all the way to the Supreme Court.⁵⁰ Ten years later a jury trial found for Malcolm, but when she published *The Journalist and the Murderer* the case was still snaking through the judicial system, and under close scrutiny by many journalists because it threatened to set new precedent for how writers could quote their subjects.⁵¹ Detractors argued that *The Journalist and the Murderer* was a poorly veiled mea culpa; Malcolm shot back in an afterword to the book edition that it was not, that the complaints in the two cases were fundamentally different.⁵²

But that did little to placate an irate contingent of the literati who believed her sweeping conclusions about ALL journalists in their relationships with ALL subjects were an unjust effort to assuage a guilty conscience. Although her defenders argue that Malcolm really meant her argument to apply only to her area of expertise, long-form journalism, her critics are correct that she invites critique by writing in sweeping, absolute terms that certainly appear to take in the

⁵⁰ Janet Malcolm, *In the Freud Archives*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1984).

⁵¹ Michael Hoyt, "Malcolm, Masson, and You," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 1991; Malcolm, *In the Freud Archives*.

⁵² Janet Malcolm, "Afterword," in *The Journalist and the Murderer* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 147–163. Masson's suit against Malcolm alleged that she had invented damaging quotes and attributed them to him in the published work. Malcolm argues that the MacDonald/McGinniss suit, in contrast, was not so much about the published work as the behavior of the writer toward his subject during the interview process. In short, the MacDonald/McGinnish suit was for fraud, the Malcolm/Masson suit was for defamation.

profession as a whole.⁵⁴ And others have pointed out that, even if she did not really intend her argument to apply to all journalists, they would probably not have gotten—or continue to get—so worked up about her accusations if they did not strike a nerve.⁵⁵

Malcolm mostly reduces subjects' motivation for speaking to reporters to their desire to unburden themselves to a sympathetic listener in a kind of confession. Regardless of whether we strictly agree with this, our assumptions about subjects' motivations tend to be similarly reductive. Thus, Chapter Two explores the pros and cons that news subjects consider when deciding whether or not to grant interviews to reporters. Chapters Three and Four then enter the thicket of the Malcolm debate, taking up what goes on in what Malcolm calls the "journalistic encounter"—the interview—from the subjects' point of view. There I rely heavily on the work of microsociologist Erving Goffman to help analyze the process whereby an individual's presentation of self becomes a re-presentation in the news product.

Chapters Five and Six: News Subjects as Arbiters of Accuracy

Although I devote more space to my response to Malcolm than to any other single thread, the fact that only three of seven substantive chapters are devoted to it illustrates one of my key findings: contrary to what Malcolm's framing of the issue would lead us to believe, subjects think of being in the news as a phenomenon in which the interaction with the journalist is but one part, which, for many subjects, is equally or less important than the events leading up to it, or those occurring after. Chapters Five and Six shift gears to explore how subjects react when they see themselves in the news product. The first of these, about how subjects perceive and interpret accuracy in their articles, enters an established mini-fray in the mass communication field. As I mentioned briefly above and discuss in a focused literature review in

⁵⁴ Malcolm's text is littered with these absolute claims. For example, from the first page alone, "Every journalist...knows what he does is morally indefensible," or "The disparity between what seems to be the intention of an interview as it is taking place and what it actually turns out to have been in aid of *always* comes as a shock to the subject." (my italics) Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, 3–4.

⁵⁵ Gottlieb, "Dangerous Liaisons."

Chapter Five, news subjects have long been surveyed to assess news accuracy—but those surveys raise more questions than they answer about how news subjects really feel about it. This is partly because those studies of news accuracy—really the only journalism studies research that asks news subjects directly for their input—completely omit the emotional, aesthetic, and even existential effects of seeing oneself as an object in the news product. For many of my interviewees these effects were at least as important as whether or not the article in which they appeared contained errors. Finding little to help interpret these feelings in the journalism or mass communication literatures, in Chapter Six I turn to several theorists of visual culture to explore the odd, at times giddy, at times anxious, reactions subjects had when they finally came face-to-face with their news selves.

Chapters Seven and Eight: News as Norm Enforcer

Chapters Seven and Eight are about the repercussions of appearing in a news article, and an opportunity to look at journalism's social role as a tool that holds individuals up for public judgment and reinforcement of social norms. That the mass media in general, and the news in particular, act as cultural norm-enforcers, bestowing status on a select few and castigating others, is an idea that goes back at least to Lazarsfeld and Merton's designation of norm-enforcement (discussed above) and status conferral as two of the mass media's primary social roles.⁵⁷ The beauty of examining how status conferral works in the life of a news subject over the course of the news cycle is that it makes it possible to trace an otherwise ephemeral social phenomenon: as I discuss in Chapter Seven, subjects noticed changes in their reference groups' treatment of them before and after their appearances in the news. But the obverse side of status is also a powerful force: the news has the ability to confer stigma as well. Here again I found it helpful to look beyond the usual mass communication and journalism studies

⁵⁷ Lazarsfeld and Merton, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action."

literatures, and once more Goffman provided helpful guidance, this time for understanding how stigmatization as a result of a news appearance can reverberate in subjects' lives.

One key way it did was via digital media. Interviews with news subjects provide a little-accessed window into the way the news works today, a period of especially rapid change in the industry. The transition to digital production and dissemination has led to many innovations and changes in the way the news works, and these affect what "making the news" means. The repercussions of being represented in a news article reverberate in a whole new way now that the article will likely be searchable online, and linked to the subject's name, for many years to come. In Chapter Eight I extend my discussion of status and stigma in an analysis of how the experience of appearing in the news differs now than in the past. There I enter the current discussion about online reputation and, in conversation with social theorists ranging from David Riesman to Kenneth Gergen, ask what news subjects' experiences managing the status and stigma that comes from appearing in a news article today suggest about the conscientious crafting of an online—and offline—self.

A Note on Method

For those interested in the details of my research design, I describe them in Appendix A. After considering various ways to study the experience of being named in a news story, I concluded that in-depth, qualitative interviewing, which allows respondents to use their own words to reflect at length on their experiences, was the most appropriate method for exploring what was basically a phenomenological question—a question about how a particular kind of human experience is perceived and understood. This seemed the best way to determine what aspects of the experience were most salient to subjects themselves and what the experience overall meant to them, while still amassing the wide variety of perspectives important in exploratory research. As such, this study is based on eighty-one interviews, conducted over a sixteen-month period between October 2009 and January 2011, with subjects who appeared in

New York-area newspapers and in the daily paper serving a mid-sized southwestern city. Most appeared in the paper between September 2009 and October 2010, but several subjects volunteered to speak about experiences going back to 2006. The interviews lasted between one and four hours and were semi-structured, meaning I tried to guide everyone through roughly the same territory while giving them freedom to emphasize what they felt was important.⁶⁵ In the pages that follow, all names are pseudonyms, and in some cases I have concealed identifying details.

All respondents were named individuals who had been featured, quoted or mentioned, briefly or at length, in either hard news stories or features; opinion pieces and arts reviews were excluded. Not celebrities or public figures, participants were all ordinary people who popped up in the news for a variety of reasons. These included victims; heroes; witnesses; experts; non-professional representatives of movements, organizations, or causes; and people in human-interest stories of all kinds. Some were quoted only once in one news outlet, while others were involved in ongoing stories. Almost all New York-area participants appeared in one of three New York City papers: *The New York Times*, *The New York Daily News*, and *The New York Post*; but many were mentioned in multiple outlets, and several volunteers had been featured in smaller papers in the area. Likewise, the southwestern participants all appeared in the city's major paper, but some also appeared on television or radio news programs.

As I make clear in the chapters that follow, subjects also varied in their amount of previous media exposure. While public figures like government officials, prominent business leaders, and celebrities were deliberately excluded because being in the news is a commonplace for them, participants did include small business owners, civic activists, and performers who are not household names; in other words, people for whom being named in the paper is still out-of-the-ordinary, but not necessarily entirely novel. Other subjects had been in the news only once or twice before, if at all.

⁶⁵ See Appendix B for the interview schedule.

While I was doing my fieldwork, interviewees and other scholars often asked if I would be talking to journalists as well, to “get their side of the story.” Otherwise, they argued, I was essentially taking subjects’ word for what happened. And it’s true: I am certain the reporters of some of the stories included here would dispute the claims made by their subjects. Still, the answer is “no,” for two reasons. First, journalism scholars and journalists themselves do a lot of writing about how journalists think and work, in contrast to news subjects who are rarely given a voice at all. I felt my time would be better spent including more perspectives from news subjects than speaking to journalists. Second, this project is about subjective experience; it is not about, in any objective sense, getting to the bottom of what actually happened in any of the scenarios described. For example, the relevant question is not whether a subject actually *was* deceived or betrayed by a reporter, but whether he or she *felt* betrayed, and why.

Since this study is not based on a randomized sample from the relevant population (in this case, the entire universe of all people named, featured or quoted in news stories over a given period of time), I obviously cannot claim strict generalizability or representativeness. I do think my subjects’ stories allowed me to trace patterns of experience, however; stages really, in which many variables were in play. The chapters that follow are designed to reflect those stages of experience because they, I believe, are near universal. Most, if not all, subjects, when given the opportunity to talk to journalists, have reasons and objectives for doing so, which they measure against the perceived risks of giving an interview (Chapter Two). Subjects who are interviewed present versions of themselves in those interviews based on the events that led them to be there and their objectives for the story (Chapters Three and Four); and all subjects, whether they agree to speak to reporters or not, must deal with the repercussions of the story’s publication: their own reaction and feelings about being represented in public (Chapters Five and Six), and the public’s reaction to that representation in turn (Chapters Seven and Eight). Within these broader stages there are many iterations and differences, which I have tried to document as faithfully as possible in subsections of each chapter.

Prelude: How Much Do Events Really Matter in the News Production Process?

Social scientists tend to speak of the “construction” or “making” of news by journalism professionals, often downplaying the importance of actual events—those occurrences later deemed “newsworthy”—in the news production process.⁶⁶ Schudson has suggested this is an area in the field that warrants further study.⁶⁷ But the occasional attempt to take up his challenge aside,⁶⁸ we still know relatively little about the deceptively simple question of how real-world events figure into news production. News subjects provide interesting insights here: Most of my interviewees did not think of their own contributions as elements in a construction; they tended to perceive a news story as being *about* something—something that is not entirely free floating in the minds of journalists but grounded in existing events or issues. Let’s call this thing the trigger.⁶⁹ It can be an event or an issue or a topic: a hurricane, or unemployment, or the *Divine Comedy*. Broadly speaking, it is the phenomenon that the subject is being asked to describe or talk about, or the events in which he somehow played a role. My interviewee

⁶⁶ Schudson has made this point: “Social, cultural, economic and political forces do in fact structure news production. But they do not produce news out of nothing. They act on ‘something’ in the world. The ‘something’ they work on are events, happenings, occurrences in the world that impress journalists and their audiences with their importance or interest, their remarkable-ness, their noteworthiness.” Michael Schudson, “Four Approaches to the Sociology of News,” in *Mass Media and Society*, Curran and Gurevitch, Ed., 4th ed. (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 172–173.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁶⁸ Paddy Scannell, “Telling News in Tilling” (presented at the Communications Colloquium, Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, March 6, 2011).

⁶⁹ The term “trigger event” is often attributed Cobb and Elder’s work on participation in American politics: they argue trigger events are a key step in issue creation (Roger W. Cobb and Charles D. Elder, *Participation in American Politics: the Dynamics of Agenda-building* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1972). The term has since been used in a number of fields, including, law, finance, and medicine, to refer to instigating events or those after which some irreversible change will occur. And I am not the first to use it to refer to events that trigger news coverage: a 1998 study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism identified 19 categories of triggers, real-world phenomena like official statements, that later become news stories (*Framing the News: The Triggers, Frames and Messages in Newspaper Coverage* (Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, July 13, 1998), <http://www.journalism.org/node/450>). Since then, Wien and Elmelund-Praestekaer have used the concept to analyze how media hype plays out, arguing that it begins with a trigger event. Charlotte Wien and Elmelund-Praestekaer, “An Anatomy of Media Hypes; Developing a Model for the Dynamics and Structure of Intense Media Coverage of Single Issues,” *European Journal of Communication* 24, no. 183 (2009).

Dudley, for example, spoke to several reporters when a huge fireball erupted in the technical school where he studies welding. The trigger, in his experience, and indisputably, was the fire. For more complex stories there might be multiple triggers, and various people involved in the news process can have different ideas about what exactly the trigger is.⁷⁰ For my purposes the point is not that there is one undisputable, objective trigger for every story, but that from the subject's point of view the emerging news story is almost always about a real-world issue or event.

And subjects often already have a relationship to the trigger before the journalist shows up on the scene. This makes sense, since that is precisely why reporters seek them out. Experts, witnesses, heroes, victims, even people-on-the-street are targeted by reporters who believe they have special knowledge or pertinent opinions about the issue at hand. This is because frequently, unlike the reporter, the subject was *there*, or has spent a lifetime studying the issues, or stands to be affected by the occurrence. And as such, subjects often have complex thoughts and feelings about that topic—again, before the reporter even gets involved. There's baggage there.

This is an essential point, and one I am making from the outset, because the subject's feelings about, and relationship to, the trigger will affect how he perceives all subsequent stages of the news production process, beginning with whether or not he wants to speak to a reporter at all. Being in the news for raping a child is fundamentally different from being in the news for saving a child, and both are different from being in the news for losing a child. I interviewed people who found themselves in all three scenarios, and while many variables distinguished each case from the others, it is hard to avoid concluding that the trigger events were essential determinants of how those subjects interpreted their subsequent experiences with the press. I emphasize this because it is tempting to think about "being in the news" purely as a process of representation (or misrepresentation) that begins when the reporter appears on the scene and

⁷⁰ As I discuss in the Chapter Four, disagreements between the subject and the journalist about what the trigger is can be a source of frustration, confusion, and disappointment for subjects.

starts interpreting events. But, for a potential news subject, the process of entering into what will eventually become a news story begins before that, with their relationship to trigger events or issues, which only later become newsworthy.

Triggers are most easily understood in what we think of as hard news stories—those about accidents, crime, and other events of urgent public interest. Ruby, for example, was approached by a *Daily News* reporter in the emergency room after having been caught in the crossfire of a gang altercation near her home in Harlem: she was walking home from the store with a bag of potatoes and the next thing she knew she was lying in the street with blood pouring from her leg. When I asked why she was so sure she wanted to speak to reporters about it, she explained how the experience had affected her, and fit into her understanding of what was going on in her neighborhood:

I: Why did you want to talk to [the reporter]?

RUBY: [forcefully, with indignation] Because it was a random gang shooting! And here I'm going to the store at three in the afternoon, and then I'm shot! And this has disrupted my life. And I'm thinking Bloomberg is downtown telling everybody the city is safe and he's building these stadiums and doing all of this stuff and it's not safe to walk the streets and I've lived in New York—this June it'll be forty-nine years—and I never felt afraid here before. But I'm constantly listening to him telling how safe it is. Being here in Harlem all these years, it was never a problem up in Harlem, until in the last year-and-a-half.

I: So you felt like people should know about this.

RUBY: Yes!⁷¹

Being interviewed by a reporter is not an isolated phenomenon in Ruby's life; she is not responding simply to the excitement or novelty of possibly being in a news story; nor is she reacting solely to the attention from the reporter—although both of these may well have played some role in her decision to give an interview. Her explanation for doing so has to do, first of all, with the trigger itself—her having been shot—and then with her understanding of the way the shooting fits into her life, and her ideas and feelings about how it should be understood by the public.

⁷¹ Interview by author, March 3, 2010.

This is true not just of major *events*, like crimes or accidents, but also *issues* under public discussion: when the subject is approached by the reporter, he usually has some connection to the issue, whether as a community member with something at stake in the matter, as an activist, or as an “expert” with special insight or information about it. Often for reasons inherent in the issue, but just as frequently for other, more tangentially related reasons, people do not relate to the trigger in a cold, clinical fashion; not infrequently, they *care* about the trigger. Wendy illustrates this well. She was one of several people I spoke to who had been quoted in an article in the southwestern newspaper about a controversial proposal to build a park dedicated to cancer survivorship in the middle of the city. She explained that her background in design gave her insight into the poor architecture planned for the park, but ultimately she got involved with the opposition movement—and spoke to the press on the topic—because her mother’s battle with cancer led her to believe the park’s message was pat and exclusionary.

WENDY: And really, the only reason I did it was because—my mom. I felt so strongly about it, and y’know, she had just died and she would’ve reacted so strongly against it that, to me, I just had to do it... I was like, “This is such a bad idea, and this is a civic forum and I have the ability to articulate this because I’m so close to it, I’m gonna go do that.” It was because of my mother.⁷²

Obviously, Wendy’s dedication to the trigger issue is intensely personal and began long before the reporter called. To a greater or lesser extent, this is always true: the degree and nuances of their investment in the trigger inevitably affect subjects’ subsequent interactions with the media. On the extreme end of the spectrum, the trigger event or issue may be so overwhelming or traumatic in the life of the subject that it completely overshadows the news coverage that follows. When I began interviewing subjects I was frustrated to find that many continually redirected the conversation back to the events that had gotten them in the news in the first place. I struggled to get them to focus on their experience being in the news at all. But this was a major finding: for some subjects, the trigger was highly salient; the being-in-the-news part less so.

⁷² Interview by author, July 26, 2010.

This makes sense when we consider that events deemed newsworthy are by definition out of the ordinary and at times outright uncanny. For example, I interviewed several survivors of the Miracle-on-the-Hudson plane crash, and while the subsequent news attention affected them all to various degrees, the dominant feature of the experience was, understandably, having faced certain death and survived. This not only loomed largest in their memories and affected how they reacted to the coverage it colored *everything* that came after it. As Albert put it, in terms of relative importance in his life, “being in Flight 1549 outweighs being in the newspaper by a thousand-fold.”⁷³ Again, media scholars may focus on the construction of the news by journalists, but it is hard to deny the primacy of trigger events if you live through them. I return to the trigger phenomenon often in the chapters that follow because interviewees referred back to it when speaking about literally every stage in the process.

⁷³ Interview by author, November 18, 2010.

CHAPTER TWO: What's In It For Them? Weighing the Pros and Cons of Becoming a News Subject

...people tend to forget that my presence runs counter to their best interests.

–Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*¹

If we help anyone, it is ourselves, to what our subjects don't realize they are letting us take.

–Janet Malcolm, *The Paris Review*²

At first glance, the journalist-as-con man narrative seems sympathetic to news subjects—after all, they are the victims here—but it actually rests on some fairly reductive assumptions about them. The first is that, unlike powerful public figures whose reasons for wanting to shape the news product we take for granted, ordinary people who agree to speak to reporters do not have good reasons for doing so—at least, not good enough to outweigh the risks involved.³ In discussions about the journalist-subject relationship, subjects are often explicitly or implicitly characterized as naïve, petty, or sinister, with motives (narrowly) ranging from base narcissism and a child-like desire for a reporter's immediate attention; to covering up misdeeds or publicizing something better left hidden; currying favor from journalists; or a yen for fame and fortune.⁴ Malcolm herself touches briefly on all of these, but emphasizes above all the immediate psychological rewards of confessing or confiding to an attentive reporter during the

¹ Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968), xvi.

² Roiphe, "Janet Malcolm, The Art of Nonfiction No. 4," 5.

³ Jack Shafer, in an article on General Stanley McChrystal's ill-fated decision to give a long profile to *Rolling Stone*, provides a good example of this attitude, although he does appear to be primarily focused on public, or semi-public, figures: "The first thing a subject must ask himself is what's in it for him. A director who is releasing a new movie or an author who has written a book can reap measurable PR value by allowing a reporter to shadow him and write a penetrating piece. Likewise, a politician running for office might profit from a feature if it raises his Q quotient. But for most players, there is no real reason to submit to an in-depth profile," Jack Shafer, "Unsolicited Advice for Future Subjects of Magazine Profiles," *Slate*, June 23, 2010, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/press_box/2010/06/unsolicited_advice_for_future_subjects_of_magazine_profiles.html.

⁴ See, for example, Michael Kinsley, "Speaking Candidly, Journalists Are Truly Snakes," *Bloomberg*, November 4, 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-11-04/speaking-candidly-journalists-are-truly-snakes-michael-kinsley.html>.

interview stage, even going so far as to suggest that subjects' compulsion to seek this out is *the* main reason they overlook the potential risks of agreeing to speak to reporters.⁵ That news subjects may actually have carefully thought-out reasons to speak to reporters, which may well be practically and morally defensible, is rarely acknowledged. Instead, the argument goes, subjects are blinded by self-absorption or self-aggrandizement into agreeing to speak to reporters even though, by any mature, rational adult's measure, it "runs counter to their best interest."⁶

In fact, contrary to Joan Didion's famous observation, the vast majority of the people interviewed for this study did believe that speaking to reporters was in their best interest. They believed it when they agreed to be interviewed; they still believed it after they saw the resulting, often imperfect, news coverage; and they said they would do it again in the future. And while one would obviously not expect interviewees to name naiveté and narcissism as their primary motivations, when asked, they gave a wide variety of complex explanations for why they agreed to speak to reporters, which add nuance to our understanding of what subjects think the news process and news product can offer them. In the first half of this chapter I explore these reasons, and find that many interviewees saw speaking to a reporter as an opportunity to accomplish something otherwise out of reach—even in today's web 2.0 world.

And this despite the fact that most said they realized it was a high-risk bet. The second faulty assumption often made in discussions of the journalist/subject relationship is that news subjects do not, or cannot, understand the risks inherent in speaking to reporters—that, to paraphrase Malcolm, they do not realize what they are letting journalists take. This is a harder claim to debunk than whether or not subjects have legitimate, complex reasons for wanting to

⁵ Malcolm variously characterizes subjects as "naïve" (4), "on a kind of narcissist's holiday" (5), childishly trusting and impetuous (32), publicity-seeking (58), and self-absorbed (144), but the subject-as-confessor or psychotherapy patient is the most consistent: "The journalistic encounter seems to have the same regressive effect on a subject as the psychoanalytic encounter. The subject becomes a kind of child of the writer, regarding him as a permissive, all-accepting, all-forgiving mother," (32). Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*.

⁶ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, xvi.

be in the news, because, especially in the current media environment, it is not entirely clear what would constitute thorough comprehension of the risks of talking to reporters, or how this could be measured. Whether or not subjects really understand what they are getting into is a theme that surfaces throughout this study, especially in the second half of this chapter and the two subsequent chapters, which focus on the interview itself. As I discuss below, nearly all my interviewees said they at least flirted with misgivings before agreeing to speak to reporters. And, contrary to what Malcolm and Didion's observations would suggest, I found that most subjects were well aware that they were giving up control over their stories in this process—but believed the potential benefits outweighed that risk.

Evaluating Pros and Cons

Stop anyone on the street and ask him if he would like to be in a news story and you will likely get some version of, "Depends what it's about." When I asked interviewees if they would want to be in a news story in the future, or in any number of hypothetical scenarios that came up in our interviews, that was the typical response—they would not want to be in a story "for something negative," or they would if it were "for something good." Of course, in practice the calculus is somewhat more complex, but the fundamental point is that, like every stage in the making-the-news process, a subject's decision about whether or not to speak to a reporter is heavily influenced by what he perceives to be the trigger, and his relationship to it. Although this may seem obvious, it is important to emphasize that discussions of the journalist-subject relationship that treat it as an isolated phenomenon, independent of the real-life occurrences that bring it about in the first place—arguments that, for example, emphasize only the fame motive or the psychological benefits of having a reporter's undivided attention—are missing a key and often determinant factor in that relationship.

While it is crucial to keep in mind they were speaking to me with the benefit of hindsight, most interviewees said that, when approached by a reporter, they immediately

evaluated the pros and cons of participating in a news story about the trigger in question. That said, it would be a mistake to conclude this is an entirely rational process: like most decision-making, it is messy, often as fueled by emotion and intuition as tidy reasoning. Some interviewees recalled being so addled or elated by the trigger event that they did not think through their decision to speak to reporters very carefully; others said their feelings about the trigger *were* their reasons for wanting or not wanting to give interviews. And, depending on the circumstances, subjects varied in how much time they had to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages: those contacted about slow-developing human interest stories sometimes had months to consider the proposal, while those approached on the street had mere seconds. Like many decision-making processes, it is impossible to identify all of the factors and dynamics that go into this one. That said, patterns did emerge among the main pros and cons interviewees said they considered in the process, and below I begin with the most-cited pros.

All of the pros discussed here are, at least to a degree, trigger-dependent. Even when subjects' reasoning appears to have to do only with the news process itself—for example, "being in the news is fun," a common observation—a negative trigger can counteract that feeling completely: being in the news is *not* fun when you have blood pouring from your leg or you euthanized your husband. But the first five categories are what we could call trigger-determined goals: public commenting, witnessing, publicizing, crying for help, and managing reputation. The next two categories cover other, less goal-oriented, factors that made it seem appealing to speak to reporters for a story. If some of the examples below appear to fit into multiple categories, that is because they do: the groupings are analytically useful but in real life a subject's reasons overlap, blur together, and intersect. Many interviewees referred to multiple pros they said they weighed equally, while others had a main reason but imagined a litter of collateral potential benefits.

Awareness Raising, Witnessing, and Beyond: Why People Want to Be in the News

1. Awareness raising: commenting publicly on an issue to voice an opinion, educate the public, or pressure for change

By far the most common reason my subjects said they agreed to speak to reporters was to comment publicly on an issue about which they believed they had something reasonably valuable to say. The trigger in these cases was not usually a single event, but rather a topic or ongoing issue in which the subject was interested and/or invested.

Some had no ultimate goal other than to express an opinion about something they felt qualified to discuss, due to either personal experience or study of the issues. Monica provides a fairly straightforward example of this. She was one of three female college students I interviewed who had been quoted in an article in *The New York Times* about college social life: “Yeah, I think I’m pretty perceptive of gender relations, maybe more so than other kids my age. So I felt like I had a reasonably valuable perspective to offer. So I didn’t feel like I’d just be taking up space necessarily.”⁷

Monica just wanted to participate in the public conversation, maybe shift it a bit, and raise a little awareness along the way. But many interviewees had more ambitious goals—to not just participate in the discussion, but to affect some kind of change, whether to educate the public, combat misperceptions, mobilize public action, pressure power, or some combination of these. These included community activists, and members of the general public asked to comment on cultural, social, or economic issues that affected them.

The subject experts I spoke to exemplify this category. They said they agreed to talk to reporters largely because they felt an ongoing commitment to educating the public or guiding its discussion about the topic in question: after all, they had dedicated a fair amount of time and energy—in some cases their whole lives—to that particular issue. As Bella, a New York-based professor who was contacted to comment about a new videogame based on her area of expertise, put it:

⁷ Interview by author, September 16, 2010.

BELLA: I do strongly feel it's part of my calling and my mission to shape perception of [this subject]...I've begun more and more to see that actually I have a job to do in whatever time is left, in helping people see this [topic] better, because it's been crusted over with misconceptions for centuries...I was being asked as a recognized expert on the [topic] to respond to the videogame. And I really was interested in doing that. I wanted to shape the reception of that.⁸

Like Bella, many subjects said they wanted to speak out about issues to correct what they saw as prevailing misconceptions about them. I spoke with several political activists who expressed this view, including Norma and Patricia, both Tea Party members quoted for a long article on the movement in *The New York Times*. When I asked them why they agreed to lengthy interviews with the reporter their responses were similar:

NORMA: I think there's a lot of misconceptions about the Tea Party. And I was hoping that we could set some of that straight.⁹

PATRICIA: I would say my goal was to dispel myths.¹⁰

Almost all subjects who fell into this category said they saw speaking to a reporter as a rare opportunity because they had no other way to address such a large audience. Even activists and educators who had been frenetically campaigning for a cause or issue via other means said the mainstream media was a unique tool in terms of reach.

And often people wanted to address this large audience for multiple overlapping reasons. Raising awareness to pressure people in power was a fairly common one-two punch my interviewees cited as a goal. For example, Daniel wanted to call the public's—and politicians'—attention to specific policies he passionately felt were wrong and needed to be changed. A substance abuse councilor for at-risk youth in the Bronx, he jumped at the chance to explain to a *Daily News* reporter what his job had been and why his forced departure would have profound negative consequences for the community:

⁸ Interview by author, November 29, 2010.

⁹ Interview by author, March 2, 2010.

¹⁰ Interview by author, May 3, 2010.

DANIEL: I wanted people to know what happened, what's going on, how these kids are gonna be affected. The root, the problem of being laid off and what's gonna happen, cause and effect: these kids don't have this guy there no more, they don't have NO substance abuse counselor, in one of the highest drug-infested neighborhoods in America!...The only reason I agreed to do that story was to bring light to the whole situation. To show people that they're lettin' people go that's good for these kids. In the South Bronx you gotta stand up, you gotta keep these guys on board. Mayor Bloomberg, Governor: we need help. Please help us! I wanted that to be the topic. Please help us.¹¹

2. *Witnessing*

Witnessing overlaps a lot with the previous category. Subjects often said they wanted to bear witness for the same reasons people wanted to speak out about ongoing issues: to educate the public, correct misperceptions, or pressure for change. The main difference for analytical purposes is the trigger: here the trigger is an event, not an issue. In this category I include not only people who were bystanders to a newsworthy event, but also those directly involved, including victims and criminals, as well as those with first-hand knowledge of a person of public interest—character witnesses, essentially. Witnesses felt qualified to speak to the press because they had first-hand knowledge of the event or person in question: unlike the majority of the story's potential audience, and often the journalist herself, the subject was *there*. As Dudley, who witnessed an explosion in mid-town Manhattan, put it, "You're the authority on what happened. Other peoples' opinions who weren't there are gonna be based on your word and your perspective."¹²

Witnessing a newsworthy event is often traumatic, or at least temporarily mind-boggling, and some said that their ability to reason through the ramifications of speaking to the press was probably dulled by the shock. But, at least by the time they sat down to our interview, many witnesses were very articulate about the reasons they had wanted to speak to the press about what they had seen. Some said they wanted to speak to reporters for no reason other than that they felt strongly that the correct information should be known, and they were

¹¹ Interview by author, November 25, 2009.

¹² Interview by author, March 20, 2010.

among the very few people who knew it. Bradley, who witnessed an airplane crash, knew he was one of only two people in a position to really see what happened. When he overheard someone else give an inaccurate account to the police, he intervened and wound up describing the same scene to reporters. He was not eager to speak to them for any reason except that he felt the truth in such matters was important:

BRADLEY: It wasn't like I wanted to be on the news. I heard this woman saying, "It sounded like it had engine trouble, it sounded like it was trying to land." And everything she was saying wasn't true. So one of the only reasons I was talking was like, let's get the story straight. That was the bottom line... It was more important that the correct story be told. I mean, it was just—me and this other guy were the only ones that really, truly saw it beginning to end.¹³

While a cynic might counter that despite his protestations Bradley probably was at least somewhat driven by more self-interested motives, I believed him. When we spoke over a month after the incident, he was still upset by it, and he had not even seen the article about which I had contacted him; he had gone out of his way to avoid the coverage.

Other interviewees expressed concern that if they did not contribute to the documentation of an event it would be completely forgotten or never known. Ori was the only witness to speak to the press about a horrific bus accident; he also took the pictures that were printed in *The New York Post*:

ORI: I thought, "it's good that I took those pictures," because it was like it never happened unless I took those pictures...Because I really thought, "this is a fucking tour bus over a woman, over a crosswalk. This is fucked up." And yeah, I mean, I think it was good that this story was told. And I think I was responsible for doing that. And the fact that you're always afraid that you're going to get lost and your experiences and tragedies are gonna get washed up. If I didn't [bear witness in the paper] that would've happened.¹⁴

As with awareness raising, some subjects said they felt they needed to bear witness to their experiences in hopes of affecting social or policy changes, or exposing malfeasance among the powerful. And many subjects said they wanted to bear witness to their experience in hopes that others would not have to go through something similar. Lucy was at first hesitant to speak

¹³ Interview by author, March 3, 2010.

¹⁴ Interview by author, October 30, 2010.

to reporters about her husband's death: he had been given a diseased organ in a transplant operation and the error ultimately killed him. But, she said, "When I think about it, and I pray about it, I'm so eager to share the story because I feel that it will help other people...And I feel that probably this could save lives."¹⁵ Conversely, others were eager to witness to positive experiences they hoped others could replicate. For example, Quinn made a point of contacting a health reporter in the southwestern city because, after suffering for years from debilitating migraines—she was often bedridden by 5pm—a controversial new medical procedure had cured her. She felt strongly that she had information that could end others' suffering:

QUINN: I just wasn't gonna let the information of what had happened to me stay quiet. I mean, it wasn't okay that this person here [the doctor] could help people, and nobody knew about it. That was the only motive behind it, was that I wanted people to know that there might be something that could help them.¹⁶

Some subjects saw speaking to the press as an opportunity to witness not about an event but a person, usually someone who had garnered intense public interest due to his involvement in newsworthy events. Liana, for example, spoke to a reporter at the police station about her teenage brother, who had just been stabbed to death in a street fight. She explained that since her brother was a young black man, she knew many would assume he was a thug or a gang member; she was eager to explain that he was neither, to witness to his upstanding character before negative assumptions colored the story.

LIANA: I just felt that had they spoken to someone else they would've given them wrong information about my brother or about the incident. I felt it's better to be the front line and say, not what happened, but "this is the kind of person my brother was and the life he lived."¹⁷

Several witnesses said there was a strange thrill to knowing they were the only people who had information others wanted, and that this welling excitement was a factor in their wanting to share it—almost like the charge of knowing a piece of gossip that others would be

¹⁵ Interview by author, November 14, 2010.

¹⁶ Interview by author, August 2, 2010.

¹⁷ Interview by author, April 28, 2010.

eager to hear. Chuck, for example, not only witnessed a fire in his neighborhood, he was one of two people who had seen a note left by a neighbor proving it was arson. Chuck let this nugget slip to a reporter, but later regretted mentioning it when he realized it was a pretty damning piece of evidence in the case against his neighbor. He described the rush he felt knowing he had information reporters would eat up: “See, the psychological game that’s going on here is I’ve got a piece of information you don’t know. And this is really a turning point. This proves this was arson. And so there’s this thing—like gossip. I want to tell you.”¹⁸

Deanne, like Chuck felt conflicted about witnessing, but succumbed in part due to this thrill. She saw a woman attempt suicide with a small child in her arms, and even as she gave interviews to several reporters in rapid succession she said she felt “icky”—like she was contributing to the sensational exposure of a woman’s private depression. At the same time, being one of the only witnesses was strangely titillating:

DEANNE: So there was still part of me that was simultaneously repulsed by the thing [talking to the press] but also kind of—yeah. I do think I was kind of drawn in to the whole thing. Like, yeah, this is a big story. I don’t really know how to explain it, but it was again, “okay, wow, you’re right: I am an eye-witness. Like, I was one of the only two people who saw this happen.”...And so, yes, there was a little bit of excitement, like, “Whoa, you wanna talk to me?”...And then there was still also that, “Oh, but maybe I shouldn’t.” Because, to be honest, my heart was heavy. So it was a weird feeling of, “My heart is really heavy. Having seen this.” But there was a little bit of, I would even say, euphoria. Like, “Oh my god, you wanna talk to me? Great!” It’s kinda weird as I think about it, but both of those things existed for me.¹⁹

3. *Publicity*

Many subjects said, for them, speaking to the press was as an opportunity to plug a business, organization, event, or other personal venture in which they had a stake. Obviously, publicity and awareness raising overlap a great deal: people may start a business for the public good, or want to drum up attendance at an event as an extension of their educational mission. But in general I use “publicity” to refer to those goals aimed at immediate increases in turnout,

¹⁸ Interview by author, January 5, 2011.

¹⁹ Interview by author, October 14, 2010.

profit, or name recognition. As Sophie summed it up, under the right circumstances “news is the cheapest, freest way of advertising.”²⁰

Using the press to recruit people to movements or events was a clear example of this. As Barbara, a Tea Party leader who was featured in a *New York Times* article about the movement explained, “You have to have a little bit of media coverage to get the word out and have people aware of the movement and aware of what you stand for, and about your events and so you can educate people and inform them about what you’re doing.”²¹

Several of my subjects said that getting a non-controversial feature article about their business in the mainstream press was like winning the lottery, publicity-wise: they could trumpet specific features of their business; bolster name recognition for their brand; and pump up their status, since getting chosen to be in the paper at all differentiated them from the competition.

Shannon won that lottery. She was on a date when she happened to meet an employee of the southwestern city’s local paper. After chatting briefly about the small business she owns, he asked if she might be interested in talking to a reporter about her work:

SHANNON: I did it because I knew that it would benefit my business a little bit, in the sense that it was it was prestigious. You know, to be featured, and to be able to kinda tell my story a little bit. So really, I’m a pretty private person, but... I thought, “that’s a really great piece of press for my business.” You know, with all the competition here. *I: And that was immediately your thought, was that this would be good publicity for your job?*
SHANNON: Yes, for my business, that was really the sole thing.²²

Even when their venture was not the main focus of an article, some interviewees still saw it as a great opportunity to increase public awareness of their mission or product. Tim was contacted by a *New York Daily News* reporter who was writing an article about how the economic crisis was affecting local tutoring businesses. Even though he knew the article would

²⁰ Interview by author, August 5, 2010.

²¹ Interview by author, March 6, 2010.

²² Interview by author, August 6, 2010.

not be a feature solely about the tutoring franchise he operates with his wife, he still saw it as an opportunity to plug the business:

TIM: We got the call that they were interested in interviewing us about this story that was supposed to highlight how the economy and the recession has affected tutoring businesses in New York. That's how they presented it to us. And we said, "Sure, ok, that's good." Because we figured, y'know, any sort of name recognition and press or whatever would be good and we can talk about our program and so we said, "Sure, we'll talk about it." ... We just figured that hey, this is a good opportunity to let more people know about our business.²³

4. *Help wanted! Casting the net wide*

As should be evident by now, much of the appeal of being in the news lies in the opportunity to address a much larger audience than the subject could normally access. Many interviewees were trying to communicate very specific messages or to use public attention to leverage some kind of change. But a number of them explained that they did not know exactly what they were looking for—that was the whole point. They had a problem they were unsure how to fix, but figured if they broadcast it someone might just rise to the occasion with a solution. It was a bit like crowdsourcing a dilemma, but with a much broader reach than most citizens could hope to access via social media or other means at their disposal.

I interviewed husband-and-wife team Jon and Jane in the ground floor apartment where they run a small business. The NYC Department of Buildings was threatening to shut them down due to a rarely enforced zoning violation, a harrowing saga that had begun several months before. As Jane explained, "We were feeling—we are still feeling—rather desperate and in a really bad way, and pretty much with a good potential to be completely financially ruined, so I mean, it was pretty exasperating."²⁴

Even with a lawyer they were unsure how to protect their interests, so they called their plight to the attention of a customer—who happened to be a reporter for *The New York Times*.

²³ Interview by author, November 10, 2009.

²⁴ Interview by author, November 16, 2009.

Within hours one of his colleagues was interviewing them for a feature they hoped would unearth some kind of solution or assistance. I asked them to explain their agenda:

JON: It was just general, "Hopefully this will help." And I think, from reading a lot of other stories about similar things, just getting another one out there is good. Right?

JANE: Yeah. No, we didn't have any specific agenda....

JON: Y'know, we're in this position, and we're all alone, and we're looking for -

JANE: Help!

JON: Help. Yeah, help.²⁵

Similarly, as noted above, Daniel explained that he was hoping to raise awareness about how laying off substance abuse counselors would have damaging consequences for at-risk high school students, but a secondary goal was to get some kind of help for himself and a laid-off colleague:

DANIEL: And I think also it would've been good for me and Rodney, because every person will read this paper...Somebody could've seen this! This could've helped us out as well.

I: You mean because a principal might see it and wanna hire you?

DANIEL: Yeah! "Okay, lemme see what I can do for these guys." Y'know, it could've helped out with that, too! So we could've killed two birds with one stone. Helpin' the kids, showing awareness, and plus maybe people saying, "you know what? Let's get the funding back." Or "lemme donate" or I don't know. Something more coulda come out of it.²⁶

I spoke with several other people who were quoted or featured in articles about unemployment as well—sadly, a common theme in recent news—and all hoped their article, because it would be seen by so many, might lead to work or some other opportunity. In Jessica's words, "being laid off you just need to tell anybody and everybody."²⁷

5. Reputation Management

Speaking to the press can also be a way to try to prevent, correct, or address damage to one's reputation. As Jon explained, in addition to putting out a general cry for help, a news

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Interview by author, November 25, 2009.

²⁷ Interview by author, October 9, 2009.

article about how his business was being unfairly targeted for eviction could help preserve a hard-won reputation among his clients:

JON: I hated the idea of [city officials] coming here, closing us down, and us disappearing, and everybody wondering, "Where have they gone?" So I think it was a way of getting the message out to our customers and tell them, "We have this thing, and it's not our fault." ...Y'know, I have a reputation. That we've built over 20-something years of being really honest and straightforward, available and all this stuff. And then the whole idea of my customers calling and finding, y'know, we're just not here. And, "Where'd they go?" So I think that was a real positive for the article.²⁸

Jon and Jane saw the article as a chance to head-off potential reputational harm; it can also be a chance to try to correct damage already done. Several interviewees had been named in the news even before they sat down and told their stories to reporters. These included subjects who were involved in sensitive legal situations or were incapacitated (recovering victims, for example), or who simply chose not to speak to the press at first and then changed their minds. If they felt the previous coverage reflected poorly on them or was inaccurate, some subjects saw giving interviews as an opportunity to address errors or defend themselves.

Emma, who had been the subject of an ongoing local story in the southwestern city because she had euthanized her critically ill husband and attempted suicide, agreed to tell her whole story to a reporter for the local newspaper after her legal battle ended with a surprisingly lenient sentence. Since her lawyer had advised her against speaking to reporters before that, this was her chance to finally give her side of the story and to address some misperceptions she had seen about it in the previous media coverage:

EMMA: I think this is probably similar to a lot of people in my situation, where we've had something happen that is on a public level, and I just wanted to tell my side of the story at that point....kind of, you know, this desire to set the record straight to some extent.....Before this article came out I very much had the sense that people don't know the whole story. And they have these opinions that are based on what I think is missing information, and incomplete and out-of-context information.²⁹

As one might imagine, incomplete information in a case like Emma's made her look like an unfeeling murderer, a public image she wanted to address. In a similar but even more

²⁸ Interview by author, November 16, 2009.

²⁹ Interview by author, August 4, 2010.

explicit case of reputation management in the same town, Chris contacted the local paper and requested a follow-up article after his name was severely tarnished in the first: he had been accused of raping a minor at a party, a story that was reported in all local media outlets. His name and picture were everywhere; enemies gloated, friends disappeared, and Chris spent a month in jail. Then the girl admitted she had made the story up. Eager to put the whole episode behind him after his release, at first Chris was hesitant to contact the media for a follow-up article. But with encouragement from his mother and lawyer he decided to try to correct the public record, for himself and his family. He explained, “It sucks because I put the whole [family] name that we worked hard on through the mud....It [the follow up coverage] clears my name and wipes off the slate. It tells the whole world that you’re an innocent man.”³⁰

6. Social pressures: encouragement from reference groups

Even though Chris knew an article could help clear his name, he said he probably would not have contacted the paper if his mother and lawyer had not been so insistent. Like him, a number of subjects said they were encouraged—or pushed—by friends, family, or colleagues to speak to reporters. Many mentioned this not as the sole reason they did it, but as an additional “pro” that helped them make up their minds. For example, this was one of the deciding factors in Wendy’s decision speak to the press about her opposition to the proposed cancer survivors’ park:

I: You said that you didn’t initially wanna talk to the reporter. But you did make that call. Why did you?

WENDY: As a favor to Gail. I wasn’t gonna leave Gail high and dry...This is something I believe passionately about and I can tell that if I don’t do it, no one will. And I was terribly uncomfortable throughout the whole thing, but Gail needs someone to talk to the press? I will go talk to the press.³¹

As I will discuss further in the next section, subjects often sensed that speaking to a reporter about a particular topic posed a risk to their goals or reputations, so they checked in

³⁰ Interview by author, January 6, 2011.

³¹ Interview by author, July 26, 2010.

with trusted friends or advisors to make sure it was a good idea. Karen, interviewed by multiple news outlets about a bizarre accident that killed her friend at a spiritual retreat, said she probably would not have done it had the family of her late friend not asked her to:

KAREN: I talked to the family, and then they contacted me and said, "Would you be willing to do this?" And I actually did it because I felt this side of the story has to be told, but I also did it, actually, to support the family. And I had the support of the family before I did it.

I: Oh you did? I was gonna ask if you had asked them what their opinion was of your speaking to the press.

KAREN: They wanted me to. They wanted me to.³²

When the pressure to speak to the press comes from colleagues and bosses it can be particularly difficult to refuse. Jim, a scientist who studies natural disasters for a federal agency, said he felt he and his research partner *could* have turned down the opportunity to have their project featured in *The New York Times's* science section, but that there was definitely pressure from above to give the interview:

JIM: I had some qualms 'cause I didn't wanna screw it up. But it was an opportunity you can't pass up.

I: Why is that?

JIM: Well, the management types like to see stories about science projects the [agency] are doing in the news. So it's good visibility. They get, I guess, brownie points for that.

I: Is that something that you feel that the other people you work with are kind of aware of as well? That it's kind of good to get good press if you can?

JIM: Yeah, it's good to get good press if you can, people are aware about that. The projects I'm on have fairly high visibility. More than I'm used to in previous work. It's just—sometimes it can be kind of a drag getting interviewed.³³

As Jim's last comment here suggests, even those who disliked giving interviews for various reasons sometimes felt obligated by those around them to do so. In some extreme cases, when the trigger was major breaking news, the subject found himself swarmed by reporters, herded by professional press operatives, and thrust by superiors into the spotlight to the point where it was nearly impossible to say no. Keith, a New York City cop who got full-blown hero treatment for intervening in a terrorist plot, was essentially muzzled about any significant

³² Interview by author, November 24, 2010.

³³ Interview by author, November 5, 2009.

details by the NYPD public relations department, but when it came to posing at press conferences and making innocuous comments, there was no question of refusing.³⁴ A chief ordered him to attend a press conference within hours of the key events. Soon he was surrounded by his superiors, shaking hands with the mayor, all under the strobe light of news cameras. The press conference felt like something that happened to him, rather than something in which he had chosen to take part—literally, a command performance.

Social pressure is less trigger-dependent than the previous categories because consultation with, and yielding to pressure from, reference groups occurs almost no matter what the news coverage is about, provided the subject has time and access to others before being swept up in a news story. But it should be clear from the examples above that the precise form the pressure takes, who the subject consults and in what way, will be heavily influenced by what the story happens to be about. If Keith had been asked to speak to a reporter about the irrigation business he runs on the side, he would not have been ordered to do so by his boss—but he might have consulted with his wife.

7. It's fun! Social and emotional rewards

When she was told her state agency sent out a press release about her mapping project, biologist Annie told me, “I was kind of excited. I said, well, this’ll be kinda neat. I’ll get to be in the newspaper!”³⁵ For many subjects, the prospect of “making the paper” in general is thrilling, and the expectation that it will be fun either at the interview stage or when the article comes out—or all along the way—factors into their decision to cooperate with reporters. As Marcel explained when I asked him why he had agreed to be interviewed about subway fare hikes, simply put, “it’s fun to be on the news.”³⁶ And while this appeal is not necessarily dictated by

³⁴ Interview by author, November 5, 2010.

³⁵ Interview by author, August 29, 2010.

³⁶ Interview by author, February 11, 2010.

the trigger—it is often more about getting in the news at all than getting in the news for a particular type of story—obviously it is affected at least somewhat by the underlying events.

For some, the prospect of being interviewed and asked to express their opinion by a reporter was the fun, novel, and exciting prospect—more so than appearing in the news product. As Marcel, explained, “I think for me it’s exciting to be asked what your opinion is,” so he gave a few quotes about his experience as a subway rider.³⁷ Hilda, who gave a woman-on-the-street interview about child safety, said she agreed largely because the interaction itself was appealing:

HILDA: [The reporter] asked us if we wanted to be recorded and if we wouldn’t mind being interviewed and talking to him about it. We said it was fine. I don’t care.

I: Did you give any thought to saying, “No?” Why did you want to?

HILDA: I don’t know. It’s fun. I like talking to people.³⁸

As these quotes suggest, being in the news is most uncomplicatedly fun when the subject has little at stake in the article. Some said it was not the interview stage but the prospect of later appearing in the news product that seemed fun—or funny. Dudley explained that he and his fellow welding students were already pretty amped up over the explosion in their building and being evacuated; the prospect of getting on the news just added to the novelty and adrenaline of the event. Students were all but harassing the reporters, trying to get on camera or interviewed for the paper. As he put it, “People were excited. This is what they see on the news and now they’re actually gonna *be* the people they see on the news.”³⁹

This fun and excitement at the prospect of seeing oneself in a news story seemed to be largely related to the novelty of it. But a number of interviewees explained that being in the news seemed fun partly because of the positive feedback and increased status they were anticipating from the audience. Some traced the prestige largely to the specific outlet. As

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Interview by author, June 17, 2010.

³⁹ Interview by author, March 20, 2010.

Shauna, a college student interviewed by *The New York Times* about social dynamics on college campuses put it,

SHAUNA: Once again, it's *The New York Times*. I'm a human being. Of course to have my name in a publication that's so renowned would be a great thing for me. In the back of my mind I was like, "Oh, wouldn't it be great if I was featured?" So I was excited at just the prospect of being in it.⁴⁰

The desire for increased status, which I discuss at length in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight, often overlapped with the publicity motive: a number of my subjects noted that getting your business or venture in the news may not have an immediate impact in terms of sales, turnout, or funding, but as long as the coverage was not for anything "bad" they believed a mention would give them an aura of importance that would benefit them in the long run. For that matter, a status bump can help with most of the trigger-related goals discussed above: from getting the word out to educating the public, subjects felt the prestige that came with being in the paper gave their messages and endeavors weight in the eyes of the audience.

But for many it was not just professional status they were talking about, but a giddy feeling of anticipation that they would, however temporarily, be a mini-celebrity. Many interviewees made some mention of this being their "fifteen minutes of fame," and some actively sought out that sensation. In Marcel's words, the excitement was fueled partly by the size of the audience that would see him, partly by the thrilling uncertainty of not knowing what would happen, and partly by the idea of being in a position normally reserved for the famous:

MARCEL: I remember seeing other people go on the news, and it's fun to be on the news. Like, I feel, it's fun to have random people who watch the news say, like, "Oh! I saw you on the news!"Like I said, it does seem kind of exciting to be on the news. Like, "Oh! They're gonna ask me—what's gonna happen? I get to say something." And then my name will come up [on the screen], so I'll be famous.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Interview by author, September 16, 2010.

⁴¹ Interview by author, February 11, 2010.

I got the sense that the excitement about status and fame (however fleeting), factored into more peoples' decisions than were willing to admit it.⁴² Bella, the college professor, explained that on her campus, "there is very much the idea that it is part of being cool to be a public intellectual and to be contacted by the press"—but she attributed nobler goals to herself.⁴³ Indeed, several respondents argued that while *they* were not eager for the attention, other subjects in their story were. Helen, one of the college students quoted for a *Times* article on college social life, described the scene when she took the reporter to a local bar. Understandably, she was hesitant to include herself among the overeager young women she described, but Helen did eventually admit that she, too, was excited at the prospect of being in an article:

HELEN: Honestly, I didn't think I would even *be* in it, because I remember he went to the bar, and once he said, "I'm a *New York Times* reporter," girls were just flocking to him trying to be interviewed. And they were saying the most outlandish statements. Even the reporter was just like, "Oh my gosh." And then the girls got up on a table and started dancing for the photographer and I was just like, "Oh my god." Everyone was like, "Oh my god, we're gonna be in *The New York Times*! This is so cool!" And they just told him whatever he wanted to hear, basically.

I: Well, did you want to be in the article?

HELEN: I remember during the night I looked at my friend Kelly who was also in it, and I was like, "Damn it, we're not even gonna be in it." Because I don't know—I guess I did wanna be in it.⁴⁴

Again, subjects were much more likely to think being in the news would be fun when the trigger and its coverage held little risk for them. But the degree to which people got a thrill from the possibility of being in the spotlight also appeared to vary by personality type. This seems logical: we all know people who crave attention and others who shrink from it, and several of my interviewees unhesitatingly characterized themselves as cravers. Thomas, for example, said the same impulse that made him eager for news coverage had led him to his

⁴² This hesitation to admit to socially undesirable qualities and behaviors in interviews has been called the "social desirability effect." H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 238.

⁴³ Interview by author, November 29, 2010.

⁴⁴ Interview by author, May 21, 2010.

chosen profession: “I’m an actor and there’s a part of me that wants that—that wants that exposure and wants that attention.” Chuck expressed something similar when he explained why he jumped at the chance to speak to reporters about a house fire in his neighborhood. He made a point of contrasting himself to those who would shirk press attention:

I: Did you want to talk to the reporters?

CHUCK: Yeah. Yeah, there’s no question. I mean, honestly, I just enjoy it. Yeah, I like to talk....there’s no question that there is exhibitionism involved. I mean—it’s a rush to get in the paper. To get on TV...Psychologically I’m more inclined to prefer it rather than not. If there’s a reporter standing there I’ll probably, one way or the other make an indication that I want to talk to him...I think there are a lot of people who would run from [talking to a reporter], and I would run toward it.⁴⁵

8. Other pros

In addition to the most-cited pros detailed above, others came up with less frequency but are worth mentioning because they bore significant weight in the decisions of a small number of subjects. Several mentioned that they were eager to have “official” documentation of something or to contribute to the historical record, and that an article in the paper could fulfill that desire. Two subjects said their religion played a major role in their decisions. One, Lucy, a self-described devout Christian, explained that, “I prayed about it and God answered my prayer. He wants me to share this story.”⁴⁶ She also said that since her story had already been discussed in the press, she felt obligated to give a final interview, “Because, since there is a beginning there should be an end.” Several other interviewees who were involved in ongoing coverage said something similar: They agreed to speak to reporters because they wanted to help provide closure to a story that was already alive in the public imagination. And finally, several interviewees said they thought they might learn more about issues related to the story, usually from the reporter, if they agreed to be a part of it. This was even the case for a few people who

⁴⁵ Interview by author, January 5, 2011.

⁴⁶ Interview by author, November 14, 2010.

spoke to reporters about breaking news they were personally involved in as witnesses or victims. Sometimes those closest to events knew the least about them.

Risk! And Other Reasons for Not Wanting to Be in the News⁴⁷

As all of these reasons subjects gave for wanting to speak to reporters illustrate, being in the news can be a tool for private citizens to achieve specific goals or seek sensations. But it is a singularly intractable tool, since subjects will have little control over how they are represented in the story and what its repercussions might be. Contrary to what the subject-as-unsuspecting-victim characterization might imply, most interviewees said they were aware, at least in theory, that this was a risky prospect, and that they took that into account in their decision to participate. In this section I explore their most frequently cited downsides to participating in a news story. But first, a bit about risk.

What's so risky about being in the news anyway?

The most common reason interviewees said they hesitated to speak to reporters—by far—was that it seemed risky. When pressed, interviewees differed on the source of that risk. Some said the trigger itself was inherently risky—this was especially true when the topic was controversial or socially unacceptable—and they were hesitant to take part in a story about that issue or event all. Gail said she hesitated to speak to the media about her opposition to the construction of a cancer survivors' park in her town because she knew it was a difficult case to make: "I just felt like because this was so complicated people weren't really going to understand it. Because why would you oppose cancer survivorship?"⁴⁸ Similarly, Michelle, a lawyer who was suing a religious group for building a place of worship in her residential neighborhood,

⁴⁷ Since all of my interviewees were ultimately named in articles, most because they chose to speak to reporters, collectively the pros outweighed the cons in my sample. But I make no claims that this may be the case for all potential news subjects. A sample that included more people who were given the chance to speak to reporters but refused would undoubtedly produce more information about the perceived disadvantages.

⁴⁸ Interview by author, July 30, 2010.

said speaking to the media about topics under litigation is always risky, but, especially in this case, she felt the issue itself was dangerous material for a news story: too hot a topic, too prone to misinterpretation:

MICHELLE: Did I want this case reported? No! No...I think that it's a sensitive subject, I think it's very easy to spin this as a religious, race, or civil rights issue. And it's very difficult for an average person who knows nothing about the law in that area to really get confused and convoluted with emotion—it's very difficult to get to the actual heart of it, for an average person who just hears some story without all the facts. So I didn't think that would be very good for me at all! And it wasn't.⁴⁹

Some subjects said that the real source of risk in their case was not the underlying issues or events, but the news media as an institution, or some specific aspect of the reporting process.⁵⁰ Albert, a survivor of the Miracle-on-the-Hudson plane crash who chose not to speak to the media at all until the one-year anniversary of the event, expressed a blanket distrust in "the media":

ALBERT: I feel like [the media] take the information that belongs to them and they twist and turn it and do whatever they want, you know?...Someone's making money off of me somehow and I don't like that. And there's a lot of dishonesty in the media—I don't like to support the media, basically.⁵¹

Albert focuses on his distrust of the profit motive here. Others zeroed in on the unpredictability of the reporting and writing process. As Bridget explained, "you run the risk of: is the reporter sensitive to your story and are they going to report it the way you perceive the story to be? Because they could change it and report it as something sensationalized."⁵² And a number of subjects traced their qualms about participating in news stories to previous experience:

SHANNON: Yeah. And I think I know so much because I have dealt with the press in the past, not on behalf of myself but for people that I've worked for. You know, you're

⁴⁹ Interview by author, January 8, 2011.

⁵⁰ I discuss interactions with specific media personnel at length in Chapters Three and Four.

⁵¹ Interview by author, November 18, 2010.

⁵² Interview by author, June 19, 2010.

kind of prepared for—you know they're gonna get shit wrong. You know they're gonna turn stuff around.⁵³

HELEN: Yeah, the thing is, after being interviewed and being portrayed like that, I was very leery about being interviewed at all again. And so I declined to comment on some things, but I was nervous, y'know? Like with ABC News, I was like, "Oh my gosh, what if they make me out to be even worse?"⁵⁴

In many cases, subjects said it was not just the unpredictable journalistic process or a controversial topic that made the situation risky, but the way the two played off one another. As I discuss at greater length in Chapter Four, when the trigger itself is extremely contentious or complex, it is harder to anticipate how one's own perspective or quote will fit into the story the reporter is developing. This is an especially scary prospect if one believes the outlet in question is generally unfriendly to the trigger or one's point of view. Isabel illustrates this nicely because she was featured in two completely different stories in *The New York Times* within a two-year period. For the first, an article in the real estate section about her hunt for an apartment, she agreed to the interview without hesitation, and from the beginning the whole process felt fun and risk-free:

I: Did you have any qualms about doing that or did you know you wanted to?

ISABEL: No, I thought it was amazing! Everyone's gonna see me in the paper! It's amazing. All the people who are like, "Oh, I wonder what she's up to?" Like, "Here it is! You can read about it." Yes. So that was just a breeze and really easy. The second one was one of the most stressful weeks of my entire life.⁵⁵

The "second one" was the article about which I had contacted her, a long feature about standardized test preparation at the elementary school where she teaches. Not cooperating with the reporter was not an option, since the school principal had made an executive decision that the whole school would, but Isabel and her fellow teachers knew from the outset it was a risky prospect. I asked her why the idea of being interviewed provoked such anxiety, when her previous experience had been so positive:

⁵³ Interview by author, August 6, 2010.

⁵⁴ Interview by author, May 21, 2010.

⁵⁵ Interview by author, October 18, 2010.

ISABEL: Because our school was being spotlighted for performance on test scores and they were coming to see what we do. So they were literally going to watch us, and we were all like, “Alright, *The New York Times*. They’re not in favor of testing. There’s no way they wanna write a good article about us. They’re gonna twist everything we say, they’re gonna take everything we do and turn it into we’re ignoring the curriculum to teach to the test score, we’re drilling our kids and making miserable fourth graders.”⁵⁶

It was not *The Times* in general, but *The Times* writing about this particular topic that concerned her. In a few cases, subjects had similar worries about specific journalists who contacted them about controversial topics. Leyla knew her story about controversial recruiting practices at a national labor union could give fuel to critics of the labor movement, so while she was eager to give an interview to *The New York Times*, she refused Glenn Beck. I asked her why:

LEYLA: Because there are ramifications for the labor movement, which I really support, as opposed to this specific union, which I obviously found very problematic, and I was not interested in engaging in a story that was disparaging to the labor movement as a whole. I felt pretty sure, given Glenn Beck’s political stances that he would be interested in using the story as a way to kind of tear down unions in general. And I don’t feel like I would get a fair conversation with that man. I feel like it would be very much about an agenda that he’s trying to put forward that I don’t support.⁵⁷

Leyla’s worry about “ramifications for the labor movement” nicely captures a key point: whatever the perceived source of risk, be it the trigger itself, the media’s tendency to distort, or a combination of the two, subjects’ concern is ultimately the same: that appearing in a particular news story would have negative repercussions for their goals, their reputations, or their daily lives. In other words, the primary concern was not that the coverage would represent them inaccurately or negatively—although that was often a concern—but that the coverage, accurate or not, would have negative *effects*. As such, although the categories below cover a range of cons mentioned by interviewees, the first two categories both deal with potential repercussions of the coverage.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Interview by author, February 18, 2010.

1. *Potential negative effects on one's safety, reputation, and goals*

The feared repercussions differed by case. For some, the primary concern was safety. Emma, who euthanized her critically ill husband, said this was a major worry for her, because of the nature of the trigger and the public's strong feelings about it:

I: Were you eager to [talk to the media]?

EMMA: It's a very mixed feeling. On the one hand it's the desire to tell my story, and on the other hand it's, "what am I going to stir up by doing this?" And, are people going to...vandalize my house, [starting to chuckle] write "murderer" across my garage or whatever.

I: So you were actually kind of worried about repercussions of going public about this?

EMMA: Oh yeah.⁵⁸

Michelle concurred. Initial coverage of her suit against a religious structure in her neighborhood had led to online threats and a vitriolic virtual campaign against her. If the issue had already incited violent language, who knew what might be next? For others, the concern was less loss of safety than basic privacy:

PETE: When I did the story I figured that people would see the paper, and I said, I hope it's not gonna be where people I haven't seen in a long time are gonna suddenly give me a call. I don't need that. That's why I don't do classmates dot com and that kinda thing. I don't wanna be seein' people I don't see.⁵⁹

ALBERT: Because of my job also, I don't want people to know that I'm part of [College]. I don't want people to know that I'm a student at a specific school. Maybe I'm overly concerned but loose lips sink ships. That's what I believe in, you know? And so I wanted to avoid any kind of real media attention.⁶⁰

For many, the most worrying potential effect of being in an article was not physical danger or loss of privacy, but possible damage to their standing among, or relationships to, reference groups. In a sense, this is the opposite of reputation repair: it is the fear of reputation damage, or stigma, which I discuss at greater length in Chapters Seven and Eight. I interviewed Sophie in the mobile home she shares with her husband and two young children. She was ultimately quoted in the local paper because she helped organize a rally to support Arizona-

⁵⁸ Interview by author, August 4, 2010.

⁵⁹ Interview by author, October 21, 2009.

⁶⁰ Interview by author, November 18, 2010.

style immigration reform, but she explained that, in the lead-up to the rally, she had turned down a last-minute opportunity to do a TV news interview, partly because of concerns about her reputation:

SOPHIE: I have two kids that run around, one that likes to be naked most of the time. And I honestly did not want to be on the news perceived as some redneck. You know, it was with no notice, so the kids had trashed the house. You know, there was no way for me to get the house as clean as I'd like it because it was going to have video cameras and all that sort of thing, and I didn't want to be immortalized in such a way....I didn't want to be identified with moms with unruly kids, living out in the country, chickens running around on the porch, you know?⁶¹

Other subjects' concerns were more targeted at particular reference groups: some expressed concern about how a specific community would react, or how appearing in an article about a particular issue might hurt their professional image. Flora, for example, knew her critique of Haitian leadership in *The New York Times* would anger those who "fancy themselves leaders."⁶² And, as always, the more controversial the trigger, the greater the perceived risk. Quinn, who pushed to get the local paper to do a story about an operation that cured her migraines, said she would only refuse to speak to a reporter if "It would hurt my kids or my reputation. You know, I worked really hard to get where I'm at. I wouldn't do something that would tear it down."⁶³ To illustrate her point she said she had refused to speak to reporters in the past about possible causes of autism. As the owner of a therapy center for autistic children, she knows the topic is as sensitive as it gets in her professional community, and she cannot risk alienating colleagues or clients.

And just as being in a news story can help achieve specific objectives, it can threaten them—this was a common fear interviewees expressed. After spending months pushing the state attorney general's office to investigate a local non-profit she believed was fraudulent, Natasha hesitated to make her case to the local newspaper because, as she explained, "I was

⁶¹ Interview by author, August 5, 2010.

⁶² Interview by author, March 12, 2010.

⁶³ Interview by author, August 2, 2010.

concerned about the paper getting hold of it, because I didn't want to derail the investigation with the attorney general's office."⁶⁴ In the same vein, Michelle resisted a television interview about her contentious lawsuit because she "did not want to say anything that would influence a court... I was very concerned that that just wouldn't be appropriate, or a risk that I want to take."⁶⁵

2. *Potential negative effects on others*

Like Quinn, who said she would never do a story if she thought it could hurt her children, many interviewees said they considered possible negative effects on others—be they family members or people somehow involved in the story—and took them into account when making their decision about whether or not to grant an interview. Here we see echoes of the concerns about safety, reputation, and goals in the previous section, only now directed toward others. For example, Barbara, one of the Tea Party leaders who was interviewed by a reporter for *The New York Times*, had grudgingly gotten used to giving press interviews, but concerns about her family dogged her:

BARBARA: I kinda think I'd rather not have any press—'cause it does sometimes hurt your feelings or your children's feelings, or your spouse's. So you do wanna help guard people. But any time you do wanna make a difference, you do have to work with the fourth estate, which is, you know, the media.⁶⁶

Some subjects expressed concerns about helping reporters with stories they felt were exploitative of others in the story, even if they were not personally acquainted with them. Deanne had serious qualms about talking to the press about seeing a woman attempt suicide because it seemed like a needless invasion in the woman's private life:

DEANNE: I think if I'd thought more about it I just would've said, "No, I don't really wanna talk to you about it." Because here's a woman and a child, and this woman's

⁶⁴ Interview by author, January 3, 2011.

⁶⁵ Interview by author, January 8, 2011.

⁶⁶ Interview by author, May 6, 2010.

suicidally depressed, and she's got some stuff going on with her life and I don't wanna help a news story. Like—I'm happy to help a news story, y'know, if it's something about what's going on in Sudan. Or if it's something that can somehow enlighten people and inform people about a certain situation, and they can give money to the people of Haiti or y'know, whatever. But that isn't what this was...And of course the stories, at least in my mind, turned out to be sort of exploitative.⁶⁷

As Deanne explains, she would be happy to participate in a story that would benefit the public or those in need, but this just seemed to invade a sick woman's privacy for zero social good. Chuck explained that he, too, was worried about how bearing witness to a crime might negatively affect the perpetrator. Privy to information proving his neighbor had committed arson, he had second thoughts about sharing it with reporters because it might jeopardize the man's defense: "So I just didn't want to have it on my mind that the news got it through me. Let them get it from somebody else....I just didn't want to be the source that could, however little, make this case more difficult than it would have been."⁶⁸

3. *Attention aversion*

Even as bathing in the spotlight is a major draw for some, it is a big drawback for others. And like those who said they expected to enjoy the attention, interviewees who dreaded it attributed their aversion to their own personalities:

BRIDGET: I think for me it's more of a self-conscious thing. I just don't—if I could be invisible I would.⁶⁹

JAY: I was nervous. I don't like being in the spotlight. I've always kind of have been like that.⁷⁰

LUCY: Actually, I was very skeptical about it at first when the lawyer suggested if I wanted to talk to the news to publicize and I said no because I don't want people to know and I am very camera shy. I don't want to be popular or anything like that.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Interview by author, October 14, 2010.

⁶⁸ Interview by author, January 5, 2011.

⁶⁹ Interview by author, June 19, 2010.

⁷⁰ Interview by author, November 11, 2010.

⁷¹ Interview by author, November 14, 2010.

BRADLEY: And that—that was my only—yeah. ‘Cause I really didn’t need to be in the spotlight. Y’know what I mean? I live a pretty low-key life.⁷²

Albert, one of the Miracle-on-the-Hudson survivors, who chose not to speak to the media until a whole year after the event, contrasted his own resistance with that of other passengers:

ALBERT: I knew right away I didn’t want to [talk to the press]. They came over to me right away and I was like, “No thanks, no thanks.” And I walked away and I avoided it. And there were some other people who were eager to get to them. I saw that, you know? Other passengers. There’s a couple people that were the face of the reporting. And they went on *Oprah*. They went on *Ellen*. They went on all those things and they had a great time and they became closer and all that stuff...I’m not into it. I like my own quiet life.⁷³

4. *It’s intrusive or inconvenient*

Albert’s last comment suggests another downside of being in a news article: activities associated with it can intrude on daily life. This has obvious implications for those who guard their privacy or do not like attention, but there is also the basic issue of negotiating one’s schedule and commitments to accommodate journalists. Speaking to the press can take time, energy, and occasionally even money, and subjects took these mundane factors into account when deciding whether or not to go out of their way to speak to reporters. After all, appearing in a news story is not the only thing, and often not the most important thing, in a potential news subject’s life. As Liana put it, after giving one interview about her brother’s murder she and her family “felt one interview was enough and we just had other things on our mind that needed more immediate attention. For example, his burial.”⁷⁴

Sometimes the subject is simply too immersed in the trigger event to take time to discuss it with the press. Jay, a ferry boat captain who was rescuing passengers from the Miracle-on-Hudson plane crash, had to fend off a reporter who wanted to interview him *right then*:

⁷² Interview by author, March 3, 2010.

⁷³ Interview by author, November 18, 2010.

⁷⁴ Interview by author, April 28, 2010.

JAY: The lady from *The New York Times* was actually calling my phone while my crew was taking out [people from the water]. That's what bothered me the most. I was like, "Are you serious? Come on. If you think I'm here, wouldn't you give me a couple of hours before—?" And she called to the point where I picked up the phone, and I was like, "Stop calling me." Not even to be like rude or nasty, but like, I don't need my phone ringing...I'm not going to sit there and have a conversation.⁷⁵

In some cases talking to reporters was inconvenient for reasons that had nothing to do with the trigger: it interfered with other real-life activities that needed peoples' attention, like working or caring for children. Several subjects told reporters they would be willing to do the interview, but only if the reporter could come to their home or otherwise accommodate their schedules. For Kim, the main obstacle when she was invited to witness about unemployment at a press conference hosted by the New York City Labor Department was not time, but money:

KIM: Well at first I really wanted to do it, but then it was, alright, what's it gonna cost me to go into the city because obviously I'm on a very tight, tight budget. And I do live out on Long Island, so for me to go round trip into the city would probably cost me about thirty bucks, if not more, with the Long Island Railroad. So I told 'em I'd love to do it but I did have a transportation problem. So they actually offered to come pick me up.⁷⁶

Since many news organizations have policies explicitly prohibiting monetary compensation of sources, these costs can add up, especially since interviews can also interfere with one's livelihood. Ivan, a store owner who rescued a child from a burning building, said every time he closed up shop to give an interview he took a financial hit, so he stopped doing it. Being a hero, as it turns out, quickly gets expensive.⁷⁷

5. Social pressures: discouragement from reference groups

Just as some subjects were encouraged by their reference groups to speak to reporters, others got the opposite advice, and although most of my interviewees ultimately did not heed the discouraging voices, they did consider them in their decision-making. For example,

⁷⁵ Interview by author, November 11, 2010.

⁷⁶ Interview by author, November 3, 2009.

⁷⁷ Interview by author, November 12, 2009.

although Tea Party leader Barbara spoke to a *New York Times* reporter at a rally, supporters kept warning her against it: “They didn’t want me talking to him. Our people thought, ‘Don’t talk to him! Don’t give him any ammunition.’ And one of our co-founders flat out told me we should never interact with media. Never.”⁷⁸

Subjects described receiving a wide variety of warnings against speaking to the press, depending on the circumstances and the people involved. But their reference groups appeared to have the same kinds of concerns as subjects themselves: whether they said the source of danger was the trigger or the journalistic process, they felt that speaking to the media posed a risk to the subject’s security, reputation, or goals. I found that subjects were more likely to heed warnings against speaking to the press when the story at hand had legal or professional implications, perhaps because the risks seemed particularly high. In several cases, subjects had already given at least one interview before their legal counsel jumped in to tell them to *stop* before they damaged their cause. Jon and Jane, for example, had gone out of their way to contact *The New York Times* about their impending eviction, with blessing of their initial legal counsel, but a referral to a specialist lawyer quickly put an end to their media campaign:

JANE: It was the fancy specialist zoning lawyer that they referred us to who has been very negative about [media coverage], ever since the beginning. Totally negative about it...

JON: Yeah. Because we’re paying this lawyer a lot of money, we feel like we better do what he says, otherwise, why are we paying him all this money? So he said, “Don’t talk to politicians, don’t talk to press.”⁷⁹

6. Other cons

Just as with the pros, some cons came up in only a few of my interviews but warrant mentioning because they were decisive in those cases. A few subjects had judge-mandated gag orders forbidding them to speak to the press for the duration of a judicial proceeding. One interviewee, Beth, promised not to speak to the press in perpetuity as part of a plea deal she

⁷⁸ Interview by author, May 6, 2010.

⁷⁹ Interview by author, November 16, 2009.

made when accused of a white-collar crime; I found her because she was written about without her consent or direct interaction with reporters. And several others said they simply would not speak to reporters if they knew nothing about the issue at hand. This is essentially the opposite of feeling one has something of value to contribute to a public discussion about a topic. As Hilda explained, she was willing to talk to a reporter on the street about child safety because she has four children of her own and runs a daycare center, but had the topic turned to unfamiliar matters, she would have passed: "It's something I know, so I'm able to talk about it...If it was something that I don't know anything about I'd say, "I can't help you." If I can't help you, I can't help you."⁸⁰

Weighing Pros and Cons and Calculating Risk

Many of the quotes above include hints of the cost/benefit analyses that subjects said they went through: is repairing my reputation worth risking my safety? Is raising awareness for a pet cause worth alienating my boss? How does publicity for my venture stack up against my family's privacy? As I noted above, these very cut-and-dried calculations must be taken with a grain of salt: my interviewees were reflecting on a process that was probably messier and less rational at the time than it appeared in retrospect, in neatly repackaged form, in our interview. But even if we take this into account, we can still learn a great deal about subjects' ways of thinking about the news process by examining how they said they stacked up pros and cons against each other

For one thing, their decision-making was necessarily speculative: subjects were really weighing *possible* benefits and costs. Since the article had not yet been written, and they had little control over the final product, subjects at this early stage did not know how they would be presented in the article, much less what the repercussions would be. This is the other part of what subjects meant when they talked about being interviewed as a risky prospect: not only

⁸⁰ Interview by author, June 17, 2010.

might there be unwelcome repercussions, but one *just didn't know*. Given all the uncertainties, little wonder if subjects proceeded with caution.

Every subject's calculation was different, depending on their personality, the trigger, and the circumstances under which they were given the option to speak to a reporter. But again there were notable patterns. Some subjects told me that, upon reflection, they felt they had little to lose. When that was the case, subjects did not feel they needed terribly convincing reasons to agree—there is no need to pile high the pros when there are no perceptible cons on the other side of the scale. Those who felt they had little to lose usually meant that either the trigger itself or the reporter's angle did not seem likely to have negative effects on their lives or goals. Tim, for example, considered the pros and cons of giving an interview about his new educational enterprise, and concluded that speaking to a reporter for an article about how tutoring businesses were navigating the economic crisis posed little threat—unlike, say, an article that asked hard-hitting questions about their pedagogical approach:

TIM: I mean, I know that any time you talk to anybody that's in the media you're taking some kind of a risk. Yeah, I had a sense of it but I felt that whatever risk I was taking wouldn't be so damaging that it would really hurt our business that much. So I figured it was worth it because the chance of it helping... Maybe it would be more of a risk if it was about specifically how we are supporting the schools. Or something like that, where you have to get into the specifics about your program and what you do. That would be a lot more damaging than this general state of our business. Because is it really gonna deter someone who needs math help or that is looking for enrichment if they see, "oh, well we had a little bit of a rough start?"⁸¹

It was hard for Tim to imagine that an article like the one proposed by the reporter could actually damage his business, so the minimal risk was worth "the chance of it helping." I found that subjects who were randomly asked for man-on-the-street interviews had similar reactions: they did not see how being quoted could really hurt them, and while they cared about the topics—child safety and subway fares, for example—enough to comment on them, they were not strongly invested in the outcomes of the specific articles or newscasts, so they did not need to do a lot of soul searching about whether or not giving a quote about them was worth it.

⁸¹ Interview by author, November 10, 2009.

On the other hand, the more invested the person was in the story the more he felt he needed a good reason to risk an interview. Colleen struggled with whether or not to speak to a *New York Times* reporter about the new Manhattan private school where she was an administrator. She knew schools in general sometimes got harsh treatment in the paper; her school is designed to serve a specific niche population—more controversial still. She expected to field exactly the kinds of adversarial questions Tim was certain he would *not* encounter about his tutoring business. But, ultimately, Colleen concluded that the potential benefits outweighed the considerable risks for her, the investors, and the future of the fledgling school:

I: Why did you want to do the article?

COLLEEN: Well, because we are a new private school and that the potential for some good exposure, and to generate interest and additional applications to the school, since we just opened, seemed to be worth the risk. Because I do know and had been told by various people that it can go either way. That you can go in, all good intentions, laying out a thing that you would like to have displayed to the world and it may not turn out that way....So I went back and forth about whether or not to do it—whether we don't need that, we can't take the risk—but ultimately came down on the side of the potential benefits outweighing the potential risk. And I know there are people sweatin' bullets because sometimes they do hatchet jobs on the schools. I know that. But this could help us. This could really put us on the map.⁸²

A number of subjects, especially activists and others who saw a chance to raise awareness about causes about which they felt passionate, said they were aware of the dangers but ultimately concluded that giving up control over their stories and the associated risks was the inevitable price of being heard about an important issue:

FATIMA: I guess for me I felt like I had to take the risk because, y'know, I guess a lot of people would say this: In order to kinda get your message or your goal, you're gonna have to give and take. So I kind of was like, "Okay, this is something I'm gonna have to really put myself out on a limb for and trust that she [the reporter] is gonna respect what I want."⁸³

Some people who generally preferred to avoid the spotlight or felt self-conscious about being associated with a particular issue said those more personal concerns paled alongside the potential good they felt they could do by speaking out; they were willing to sacrifice personal

⁸² Interview by author, November 9, 2009.

⁸³ Interview by author, December 5, 2010.

comfort for what they saw as a public benefit. And several subjects involved in public conflicts said they concluded that the risk of *not* speaking to the press, thereby letting the opposing party control the debate, outweighed the risk of speaking to them. Michelle came to that decision about her lawsuit against a place of worship, which happened to coincide with a major national controversy over the building of a mosque near Ground Zero in New York:

MICHELLE: The mosque thing was going on right then and I was like, “I don’t think that [speaking to the press] is something I want to do.” Well, I knew it wasn’t something I wanted to do. But I also was kind of caught in this between a rock and a hard place, because I didn’t want them just telling their story and it all being one-sided, and us not getting to say anything about it. Like, time out people....I thought there had to be some balance. I didn’t think it would be advantageous to me whatsoever for them to talk and me to just be like, “no comment.”⁸⁴

While there may be as many cost/benefit equations as there are subjects, the ultimate point is this: when we see people speaking to the press and wonder why on earth they would do so, it is probably not because they are simply naïve or blinded by narcissism. They have made a choice. As I will discuss in the chapters that follow, sometimes interviewees later concluded that it was the wrong decision—but it was a choice nonetheless.

When You Don’t Have a Choice: Being Written About Without Your Consent.

Except in those cases when it was *not* a choice. Up to this point I have focused on people who, like most ordinary citizens named in the news, were given the option to speak to reporters. Exceptions did come up in my sample: those whose stories were lifted straight from police reports, and those involved in stories deemed of such great public interest—usually crimes or major accidents, but sometimes honors or accomplishments—that they were mentioned by name in the news even though they never actually spoke to reporters. I talked to five people who had been written about without their consent: one who was the victim of a crime, two who were falsely accused of crimes, and two who had committed crimes. Looking

⁸⁴ Interview by author, January 8, 2011.

back on their experiences, all expressed frustration at not having had the opportunity to give their side of the story or correct errors that later trickled into the news.

Paul, for example, was visiting friends in the southwestern city when he and his girlfriend were attacked by a homeless person. In the skirmish that followed, Paul sustained a grisly but non-life-threatening injury. The news coverage, including a brief article in the local paper, was apparently taken straight from the official police report—Paul and his friends were never contacted by reporters. Later we had the following exchange:

I: Well, at any point did it occur to you, did you think, "Gee, I would kind of like to talk to them [reporters] about this?"

PAUL: Yeah, I mean at this point, as time has gone on I could live without it. But initially, yeah. You know, like I said, I had noticed a couple inaccuracies, and I'd rather they had more of an eyewitness account to what happened...just for the sake of accuracy. You know, if my name's gonna be on something, I'd rather it be like 100 percent true than, you know, 90 percent true.⁸⁵

Like Paul, Beth wished she had been given the chance to correct the record in the press. Her plea deal for her role in a white-collar crime forbade it, but she described her frustration at not being able to give her side of the story to a reporter after being eviscerated in a major paper; she realized speaking to the press would likely have just perpetuated the story—and yet, the compulsion to defend herself was almost overpowering: “So much of me wanted to say, ‘Look, this is a bunch of crap.’ Or y’know, whatever, just some rebuttal, or my part of the story, or something that was gonna fix it!”⁸⁶

Chris and Emma were both upset enough by the ways their stories were initially covered without their participation that they went out of their way to speak to reporters later: Emma agreed to a long profile explaining the events leading up to her decision to euthanize her husband and attempt suicide; Chris pushed for a follow-up article after the one that had trumpeted false rape charges against him. They had not had the chance to speak to reporters the first time around because they were too busy dealing with the real-life events that got them in

⁸⁵ Interview by author, January 4, 2011.

⁸⁶ Interview by author, December 17, 2010.

the news in the first place—Chris had been arrested and Emma was hospitalized with multiple organ failure. But having learned first hand what it was like to stand by and watch a story damage their reputations, they made a point of doing lengthy interviews to correct the record later.

Conclusion

Clearly, every decision about whether or not to speak to a reporter is different, depending on the trigger, a subject's goals, his personality, and many other factors. But most of my interviewees had come to the same conclusion as Chris and Emma: despite the risk, speaking to the press is often better than not. Even Janet Malcolm herself recently said she regretted not having defended herself in the press when a much-reported libel case against her made it all the way to the Supreme Court:

So instead of defending myself against the false accusations Masson made in interview after interview, I maintained my ridiculous silence. Eventually I was able to convince a jury that I was telling the truth and had not made anything up. But by refusing to tell my side of the story, by acting as if I didn't have to tell my side of the story, since who could doubt its truth, I lost in the court of public opinion.⁸⁷

Here Malcolm beautifully captures one of the essential points about the process of becoming a news subject: it is an opportunity to address a vast public, often for a specific purpose. Ultimately, almost all of my interviewees were seeking that large audience. But, contrary to the reductive assumptions often made about people who seek press attention, this desire was not always reducible to petty narcissism or a yen for personal fame. A more nuanced approach might be to divide subjects' motives into two broad categories: public address and public display.

⁸⁷ Roiphe, "Janet Malcolm, The Art of Nonfiction No. 4," 14.

We can think of these two categories as roughly corresponding to James W. Carey's two conceptions of communication, as transmission and as ritual.⁸⁸ Subjects with what I would call transmission-related reasons for agreeing to speak to reporters wanted *to address specific information* to a large audience, whether as an end in itself or in hopes of effecting some subsequent change. While at first it may seem strange that news subjects even in today's media environment, in which they are free to publish and publicize their own news and information online, would consider speaking to the news media a rare and special opportunity, this can be explained in terms of audience size. As a number of scholars have noted, the opportunity to publish online does not automatically translate into the ability to reach a large number of people—for most of us, quite the opposite.⁸⁹ Many private citizens simply have no way of addressing the masses other than to engage with the mass media if and when the opportunity comes their way.

Meanwhile, even, or perhaps especially, in a media environment in which everyone can publish and participate online, being chosen for attention by mass media institutions remains a powerful source of status and one that places an individual above the crowd. Setting aside the occasional bit of citizen-produced media that goes viral, the mainstream media still provides one of very few consistent paths to public display available to private citizens. My interviewees were well aware of this, and many actively sought the opportunity to take advantage of it, whether to add an aura of importance and legitimacy to their ventures or simply to elevate themselves briefly in the eyes of their reference groups. Lazarsfeld and Merton noted in their famous essay that status conferral by the mass media—which is what we are really talking

⁸⁸ James W. Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," in *Communication as Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 1–36.

⁸⁹ Many Internet scholars have made this point. See, for example, danah boyd, "Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics" (University of California, 2008), 31–33, <http://www.danah.org/>; Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

about after all—operates independently of editorial endorsement.⁹⁰ Insofar as this use of the news often had little to do with the actual information conveyed in the story, it corresponds to Carey's second model of communication, as a ritual in which no new information is necessarily conveyed, but "a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed."⁹¹ Individuals named in the news are thus participants in *a form of public display that reaffirms their importance in the eyes of the world*—even if they are simply commenting briefly on a local issue.

Whether the appeal is public display, public address, or, perhaps most commonly, a combination, the downside is that subjects must sacrifice control over exactly how their information is conveyed to the public. But few of my interviewees were—or would later admit to having been—completely blind to this when approached by a reporter. Whether their goal was to publicize a venture, educate the public about an issue, or simply ask for help, the opportunity to communicate information to, or appear before, a large audience seemed worth the price—at least initially. As I discuss in the next two chapters, the behavior of reporters was also a factor in news subjects' agreeing to cooperate with them, and the ensuing interaction was a complex one, in which there were no guarantees that subjects' goals would be met. It turns out that understanding the risks of becoming a news subject in the abstract is a far cry from regulating one's behavior accordingly throughout the process.

⁹⁰ Lazarsfeld and Merton, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action."

⁹¹ Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," 20.

CHAPTER THREE: The Interview Stage Part I: Encountering Journalists

...the reader of a work of journalism can only imagine how the writer got the subject to make such a spectacle of himself.

–Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*¹

All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify.

–Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*²

One of the most common questions I am asked about my research is why someone in a vulnerable position would agree to speak to a reporter. We have all seen it: a traumatized victim or family member, usually crying, clearly taken off guard, stammers out responses to questions about what must be the worst day of his life. Why?! As I argued in the last chapter, often news subjects have very good reasons for speaking to reporters, but in these cases their motives are harder to understand. Privy only to what we can see in the news product, we readers and viewers “can only imagine how the writer got the subject to make such a spectacle of himself.”³ It seems clear that something must have gone on behind the scenes to convince the poor subject that appearing on the news would be a good idea, and our accusatory glare falls quite naturally on the journalist; when all we know about an encounter is that it leaves an apparent victim in its wake, it is easy to blame the one other person at the scene.

Most of what we know about the interview stage—what Malcolm calls the “journalistic encounter”—we know from journalists. In this and the following chapter I explore how subjects think about that encounter, and to shed some academic light on the subject I turn to the work of scholar of face-to-face interaction Erving Goffman.⁴ As Goffman influentially argued, all

¹ Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, 5.

² Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1959), 72.

³ Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, 5.

⁴ Although not primarily thought of as a scholar of the mass media, Goffman stands alone among theorists of micro-social interaction in his influence on mass communication and media studies research. His concepts of framing and front and backstage behaviors in particular have been applied in any number of prominent works in the field, including some concerned specifically with how an individual's normal behavior in face-to-face encounters is altered when transmitted across different media

interactions are performances in which the participants are playing situationally appropriate roles—this is an essential skill in social life.⁵ This raises the question of whether an especially friendly, or sympathetic, or pushy journalist behaves in a way that is significantly different from what we're all doing all the time. If journalists are con men, as Janet Malcolm insists, perhaps so are we all. At the same time, as I discuss below, the journalistic interview does differ in some key ways from other kinds of interactions, and these differences suggest that the encounter may, in fact, be irreparably slanted in favor of the journalist—which in turn raises questions about to what degree subjects understand this from the outset and are able to hold their own.

Even setting aside broader debates about the journalist-subject relationship, the interview stage is worth unraveling because it was very important to my study participants—for some it was so salient it overshadowed the news coverage altogether—and it influenced how they experienced subsequent stages of the process. I focus in this chapter on how news subjects absorbed and responded to the immediate circumstances of the interview, beginning with how the demands of face-to-face interaction influenced their willingness to be interviewed for a news story in the first place. In the subsequent chapter I take up questions about how agreements between subjects and journalists were forged, disagreements settled, and battles fought over how the raw material under discussion in the interview should later be repackaged in the news product. Lurking in the background throughout the two-chapter arc is what I have come to affectionately think of as “the con man question”: given the fundamentally performative nature of all encounters, is it accurate and fair to think of journalists as con men, out for guts and glory, preying on the innocent? And is this even the right question to be asking?

technologies. For examples, see: boyd, “Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics”; Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Ytreberg has argued that a selective appropriation of Goffman’s concepts in media studies has led scholars to underestimate Goffman as a legitimate theorist of the mass media in his own right. Espen Ytreberg, “Erving Goffman as a Theorist of the Mass Media,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 4 (2002): 481–497.

⁵ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

Goffman's Ritual Order

To understand how people experience their encounters with journalists, we can take as a starting point that these encounters are interactions, and that interactions have certain basic social norms associated with them, which Goffman can help us elucidate. We might, for example, imagine the following scenario: a reporter working on an article about broken escalators in New York City subway tunnels wants to flesh out her story with quotes from everyday subway riders. Clearly, she needs a man-on-the-street (or man-in-the-tunnel) interview. Our intrepid reporter approaches a "normal" looking man in the subway. She pauses briefly to be sure he is not too hurried (too busy to talk), and not too baffled or too happy-to-be-there (tourist), and in a pleasant, non-threatening-but-professional tone, she introduces herself as a reporter, explains the bare outlines of the story and asks if she can speak to him for a few minutes.

Just as the reporter sizes up her potential subject, he, too, assesses her behavior and appearance and comes to some quick conclusions about what kind of person she is and job she is doing. These little mutual assessments of one another will continue throughout the interaction and inform everything that takes place from the initial approach onward. As Goffman would have it, each participant in an interaction—each interactant—is socially obligated to present a "face" that is appropriate to the current situation.⁶ A face is a version of the self that can be read by others in an encounter—a composition of self-claims, or a projected self-image—that is made up of socially validated attributes.⁷ Our reporter projects friendly professionalism; our potential informant, perhaps, poised approachability.

As the two begin to interact, they engage in "face-work," or constant little adjustments to their self-presentations that ensure that whatever happens in the interaction, their faces

⁶ Erving Goffman, "On Face-Work," in *Interaction Ritual* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 5–45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

remain intact and undamaged.⁸ If our reporter finds that her digital recorder fails or her pencil breaks, or any little threat to her presentation as an utterly competent professional occurs, she will engage in face-saving practices: perhaps she will make light of the situation, thereby acknowledging the face-threat but reducing its potential damage. Or, perhaps she will produce an alternate recording tool with a flourish, thereby converting the face threat into an opportunity to reaffirm that her face is wonderfully intact.

Likewise, if her newfound source should accidentally spit on her, or trip, perhaps he will ignore the small offence and hope she doesn't notice—avoidance is, according to Goffman, one of the most common forms of face-work.⁹ But (and this is equally important) our interviewer will respond by likewise ignoring these potential threats to her partner's face, just as he will chuckle along with her as her pencil breaks in order to prevent her from feeling uncomfortable. This illustrates one of Goffman's key points: just as we engage in practices to protect our own faces, we are constantly engaged in helping others to protect *their* own faces. Should a face threat occur in an encounter, the situation is suddenly uncomfortable to all involved; this shared, off-kilter feeling is what Goffman refers to as "ritual disequilibrium": an acute sense that the normal flow of expressions in an encounter (which Goffman alternately refers to as the expressive, ritual, or ceremonial order) has been disrupted.¹⁰ All involved must scramble to help re-establish the normal, comfortable flow of the interaction so that everyone's integrity—everyone's face—remains intact.

There is a powerful moral component to all of this: an individual has a moral obligation to assist in the maintenance of the ritual order, and he does so by being a reliable interactant, one that helps others to maintain face even as he consistently presents an acceptable face

⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰ Ibid., 19.

himself.¹¹ An unreliable interactant is failing in his moral duty, and insofar as society is made up of interactions, he is socially unfit: “A person who chronically makes himself or others uneasy in conversation and perpetually kills encounters is a faulty interactant; he is likely to have such a baleful effect upon the social life around him that he may as well be called a faulty person.”¹²

In a conversational encounter—like an interview, for example—a very specific ritual code prevails, one that Goffman sees in terms of involvement, or, more accurately, the *display* of involvement. Conversation partners are obligated to appear spontaneously involved in what they and their fellow conversants are saying throughout the discussion; wandering eyes and other obvious expressions of distraction from the interaction are considered rude and disruptive.¹³ In order to avoid these displays of alienation from the conversation, we try to assess what topics might engage our discussion partners fully, and we constantly express our involvement by nodding, or disagreeing, or looking puzzled. These little expressions of involvement are important because they not only display our engagement—thereby helping us to maintain our reliable-interactant face—they help others to stay involved as well, and thereby to uphold their own faces.

Since appearing distracted in conversations is generally felt to be rude, it is sometimes permissible to express more interest in the conversation than is actually felt,¹⁴ hence our well-honed ability to strategically insert “hmm-hmm” or “oh, really?” even when we are paying little attention to the conversation. However—and this is where the delicacy of the ritual order is especially evident—if we express *too* much interest where none is felt, we are seen as insincere

¹¹ Ibid., 44–45.

¹² Erving Goffman, “Alienation from Interaction,” in *Interaction Ritual* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 135.

¹³ Ibid., 114.

¹⁴ Ibid., 126–127.

and our behavior misleading; we have neglected our obligation to help our partner to spontaneously involve us. So a not-too-well-concealed yawn might helpfully guide our conversation partner back to topics that are more interesting to us, thereby rescuing all involved from a failed encounter.¹⁵

Goffman stresses that being both spontaneously involved *and* sufficiently in control of the self to adhere to all of the rules of conduct associated with talk requires such a delicate balance that some degree of alienation from an interaction is probably the rule, with perfect spontaneous involvement the exception.¹⁶ And yet, when spontaneous involvement by conversants *is* sustained, the result is downright euphoric for everyone; this is when time flies and everyone feels their most brilliant.¹⁷ Highly skilled conversational interactants (the ones you want at your party) know how to spontaneously involve others, and they do this largely by seeming spontaneously involved themselves; there is probably no greater enticement to keep us talking than a listener who appears utterly enthralled by everything we have to say.

And journalists are often exceptionally good at this, which is the first distinction I would like to highlight between a journalistic interview and many other encounters. While exceptionally skilled interactants pop up in many professions, journalism generally selects for people who are especially good at engaging others. Even taking into account varying personalities, individual styles, and degrees of skill, as Pulitzer Prize winner David Halberstam puts it, “reporters by dint of their training have a considerable amount of charm and grace and the ability to get people to talk—to project a kind of pseudo-intimacy.”¹⁸ Indeed, journalism textbooks often devote whole chapters to cultivating and interviewing sources that seem like guides to effective spoken interaction as Goffman defines it. Young reporters are advised to do

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 134–135.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁸ Gottlieb, “Dangerous Liaisons,” 31.

extensive research so they can arrive armed with questions that will engage the interviewee, but also to begin with innocuous questions and to volunteer their own personal information, because all of these strategies make the target feel comfortable and “induce the source to speak freely.”¹⁹ Or take veteran journalist Isabel Wilkerson’s description of her own technique to get her sources “to feel comfortable enough to tell [her] anything”:

I only really interview in the strict sense of the word when I have to. I try to do everything else that I can to make sources feel comfortable enough to talk with me. That doesn’t mean that I don’t ask questions. It means I ask lots of questions. But what I mainly try to do is to be a great audience. I egg them on; I nod; I look straight into their eyes; I laugh at their jokes, whether I think they’re funny or not; I get serious when they’re serious. I kind of echo whatever emotion they seem to be sending to me. I do whatever it takes to get them talking.

I call these more guided conversations than interviews...*What’s much more important is that there is an interaction that gets me what I want.*²⁰ The formal interview is not really conducive to someone bearing their soul to you, and that’s what we want them to do.²¹

Wilkerson’s quote highlights a second key difference between this specialized encounter and many others: its almost entirely instrumental nature. From the journalist’s point of view, the key is that “there is an interaction that gets me what I want,” and this underlying goal guides her behavior in the interview. Of course, as I argued in the previous chapter and will discuss further in the next, many news subjects also enter into these encounters with goals in mind, which affect their actions in the interview. But, especially since we are focused on non-professional news subjects here, we can still make an important distinction between the professional extractor-of-information and the amateur pusher of it. The latter may agree to the rare opportunity to share specific information with a reporter, but a professional journalist’s livelihood—and her professional face—depends on getting the most out of her subjects. If there are two sets of norms guiding this interaction—those Goffman identifies as governing spoken interaction in general, and those guiding the instrumental aspect of this encounter in which

¹⁹ Melvin Mencher, *Melvin Mencher’s News Reporting and Writing*, 10th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 293.

²⁰ My italics.

²¹ Isabel Wilkerson, “Interviewing Sources,” *Nieman Reports* 56, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 1.

information is being extracted from the subject for a news article—journalists are probably more likely than subjects to privilege the second set of rules over the first.

Not that these sets of rules are necessarily at odds all or even most of the time—but sometimes they are, and this can result in confusion, miscommunication, and ethical dilemmas within the journalism profession and beyond, when journalists interface with potential subjects. For example, should a source prove less-inclined to talk than is ideal, Melvin Mencher's guide to news reporting suggests what he calls "role-playing":

Role-playing is generally successful if the reporter acts out a role appropriate to the subject and situation....Reporters can adopt the role of friend, confidant and companion when sources appear to need encouragement before they will talk. When a source indicates he will cooperate only if he is sure that he will benefit from the story, the reporter is reassuring, promising that her story will be fair and balanced and that this kind of story can only be helpful.²²

Now in its tenth edition, Mencher's book is probably the most widely used journalism textbook in the country—this is not, in other words, fringe advice. But not all journalists agree with these tactics: the degree to which it is permissible to feign sympathy for a source, for example, is a point of great contention among journalists, as Janet Malcolm extensively documents.²³ Some argue that refusing to do so is not just foolish but tantamount to professional suicide; others advocate total honesty with sources; and still others embrace the middle road, arguing that avoiding appearing *un-sympathetic* is okay, but outward signs of sympathy cross the line.²⁴ And if the question of faking sympathy or any other emotion in order to get subjects to talk is a point of contention among journalists, most potential news subjects would probably feel this is a violation. While feigning interest, for example, may sometimes be required in spoken interaction in order to help everyone involved maintain face, expressing too

²² Mencher, *Melvin Mencher's News Reporting and Writing*, 312.

²³ Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*.

²⁴ Again, see Martin Gottlieb's interviews with prominent journalists for a wide array of opinions. Martin Gottlieb, "Dangerous Liaisons: Journalists and Their Sources," *Columbia Journalism Review* 28, no. 2 (July 1989): 21–35. For an excellent critique of Malcolm's views about this by another of her fellow journalists, see: McCollam, "'You have the right to remain silent'."

much inauthentic emotion out of professional self-interest seems morally suspect, especially if the other interactor involved does not fully understand that that is what is going on.

So to what degree does he know what is going on? Do news subjects understand what they are getting into from the outset—that this not just *incidentally* but *primarily* an instrumental encounter? How often, and under what circumstances, do they feel journalists' behavior crosses an ethical line? Below I turn to my interviewees for answers, beginning with how they described their initial encounters with reporters.

The Ritual Order as Reason Enough (Or Not) To Agree To an Interview

In most standard journalistic encounters, the reporter approaches the potential subject, whether in person, by phone, or by electronic means—my interviewees mentioned email, Facebook, and Twitter—explains she is a reporter, and gives at least a general description of the kind of story she is working on. In theory, once an interaction has been instigated, as in our example of a reporter approaching a stranger in the subway, those involved in the encounter become morally obligated to help one another maintain face. It would obviously be foolish for the reporter to damage her potential source's face in any way, precisely because her own face is dependent on his speaking with her. But at the same time, the source now senses, most likely in a subtle or even subconscious way, that the reporter's face-maintenance is dependent on his responding. Under the circumstances, refusing to agree to be interviewed would be, to borrow one of Goffman's examples, akin to refusing to shake a proffered hand. That kind of disruption of the expressive order, an open refusal to help another maintain her face—to metaphorically spit in that face—is deeply uncomfortable to all involved. So, theoretically, the exigencies of upholding the ritual order are so powerful that they are themselves reasons enough for the subject to agree.

But in reality, as any journalist will attest, people can, and often do, say no to interviews. This raises the question of how, given all the demands of face-to-face interaction Goffman

describes, they justify refusing. In contrast to public figures, who often make the news without speaking to reporters at all, the majority of ordinary people named in the paper have agreed to interact with journalists; predictably, my sample was made up almost entirely of people who did agree to speak to reporters. But based on my finding (discussed in the previous chapter) that many subjects are not just aware of the risks of speaking to reporters, but take them quite seriously, I would hypothesize that these risks—and the instrumental nature of the encounter itself—can seem like justifiable reasons to refuse an interview, even though such a refusal would contravene the ritual order under other circumstances. This is comparable to our feeling justified in slamming the door on a salesman as soon as we find out why he rang our bell.

All my interviewees said that, when approached by reporters, they were aware that the encounter was an instrumental one intended to give the reporter material for a news story, and they agreed anyway. At least on this very basic level they were not conned into an interaction they fundamentally misunderstood. But although they said they were aware that the encounter was an instrumental one, and agreed to it despite the risks, even at the outset of their interactions with journalists the norms of the interview as a social encounter and as an instrumental one were both in play, at times complementing one another, but at times in tension.

Few interviewees seemed to feel that just helping out a reporter who had asked for their assistance—in other words, just helping the reporter save face—was reason enough to give an interview, although in some very low stakes scenarios that appeared to be the case. For most, the risks were too high for that. More often, subjects mentioned wanting to help out the reporter, or not wanting to say “no,” as an *additional* reason to give an interview, on top of the more trigger-related goals discussed in the previous chapter, like witnessing or educating the public. Alegra, who spoke to a number of reporters about how a contagious illness resulted in the loss of her unborn child, is a good example of this. She was eager to alert other pregnant

mothers, despite the fact that she dislikes public attention. But the demands of the interpersonal encounter when a *New York Times* reporter called were also a key part of her decision:

I: When he called and wanted to do a piece did you feel certain that you wanted to talk to him right away?

ALEGRA: Yeah, I'm not the person to say "no" either. I don't like saying "no" to people. So yeah, I said, "yes" automatically. But I'm not going into this like, "Ooh, yay! I'm getting the spotlight on me," y'know? I really don't like that at all. But, like I said, I don't like saying 'no' either, and I do wanna get the awareness out there.²⁵

Alegra was quick to identify "not wanting to say no" as one of her reasons to agree to an interview, but usually the nature of face-work is such that we are often unaware that it is going on. This suggests that not wanting to refuse reporters, simply because it is hard to refuse any interaction with a socially skilled interactor, may be a factor in subjects' agreeing to interviews far more often than they realize, and one that they are unlikely to identify when asked to explain their reasoning.

Understandably, I found that interviewees were less likely to name more abstract qualities about interaction itself as additional reasons they granted interviews than they were to pinpoint specific characteristics or behaviors of the reporter in question. For example, even before the encounters began, some reporters' status and reputations preceded them, and affected subjects' willingness to talk. Some subjects already knew the reporter, personally or by reputation, and factored that knowledge into their decision. As Nikhil succinctly put it, "I knew the reporter. She is smart."²⁶ And if the reporter is well-known enough, there may be a celebrity appeal as well. One interviewee, contacted by the *New York Times* reporter who covers her field, explained that, "In my world getting an email from [reporter] is like getting an email from some really famous actor. [Reporter] is a big deal for me."²⁷ Others were especially inclined to speak to *any* reporter from an outlet they perceived as especially prestigious, like the three college

²⁵ Interview by author, October 30, 2009.

²⁶ Interview by author, August 17, 2010.

²⁷ Interview by author, February 18, 2010.

reporters who jumped at the chance to, as Monica put it, “be palsy with a *New York Times* reporter.”²⁸

Even when subjects did not know, or know of, the reporter in question, some associated a kind of glamor, mystique, or status with the profession, and they felt that getting attention from a professional reporter was in itself appealingly novel or outright flattering.²⁹ Hilda, for example, gave a low-stakes woman-on-the-street interview to a *Daily News* reporter about child safety. She agreed to the interview almost entirely for the fun of talking to a reporter. She even likened watching him work to watching a street performer or novelty act:

HILDA: And then once we knew he was a reporter, our eyes just kinda naturally went over to him to see what he was up to. So he was interviewing this person or he’d interview that person. It was kinda cool. It was just fun to watch him. Just like we watched the music people or the balloon people. It’s something you don’t see on a regular basis.³⁰

Jessica was interviewed by reporters from all over the world when she held up an attention-grabbing sign near an Obama appearance in New York. She found the whole experience exhilarating, but especially the attentions of one print reporter who was eager to spend extra time speaking with her. She explained, “It was flattering that he would want to spend the time and possibly write something else on this.”³¹ The fact that she did not recall the outlet he represented and that the interview did not result in an article just underscores that getting attention from an apparently fascinated reporter is enticing, even if being included in the product is not assured and the outlet not necessarily prestigious.

And the appeal of getting attention from a reporter can be especially strong when the reporter is particularly appreciative or sympathetic. Indeed, the status factors that subjects associate with journalists may be a kind of plumage the reporter wears when entering the

²⁸ Interview by author, September 16, 2010.

²⁹ I discuss the fame and status subjects associate with being in the news in Chapters Six and Seven.

³⁰ Interview by author, June 17, 2010.

³¹ Interview by author, October 9, 2009.

interaction, but once the encounter begins—be it face-to-face or via other communication tools—the reporter’s specific behaviors and self-presentation begin to affect how subjects respond. And, as we would expect, these often increase the subject’s willingness to talk. Maggie, for example, described her encounter with a young reporter who showed up to cover a meeting she attends regularly for mature women on the job market:

MAGGIE: At our breaks she started walking around and talking to different people. And she singled me out. And the funny thing that got it going with me is that she was asking everybody their age and when I said my age, she said, “Oh my god, you certainly don’t look – !” and gave me all these compliments, and everybody likes to hear that, and I said, “Oh, thank you.” That’s what started it. She was very, very easy to work with, y’know. You liked her.³²

Maggie did not want to say “no” to a friendly young reporter, but the flattery didn’t hurt. Many subjects described being approached by reporters who seemed, if not as ready with the compliments as the reporter in Maggie’s case, friendly, sympathetic, and professional. I found that subjects who had been involved in traumatic or alarming events were especially appreciative when reporters made an effort to appear sensitive, and some said this was a deciding factor in their speaking to them. Liana, for example, gave only one television interview after her brother was murdered, and she chose the reporter for specific reasons:

LIANA: I spoke to her because she seemed very kind and very sympathetic about the situation. It wasn’t like an older person that was very cocky and very arrogant that just needed information to put out there for their story. The way she approached me, and the fact that she seemed, sympathetic about the situation—so I said, well okay, I would do her this one favor. And not only that, she looked very young, an aspiring reporter, and I didn’t wanna crush her dreams of having a big story under her name. Those reasons really said to me I’m gonna try my best to assist her as much as I can.³³

Liana spoke to that reporter at the police precinct; she had found out about her brother’s death only a few hours before. That even under such circumstances a subject can feel compelled to help out a sympathetic reporter—although Liana also said she wanted to witness to her brother’s character—suggests just how constant and powerful the exigencies of face-to-face interaction can be. Liana told me she now feels it was an impulsive decision, made partly

³² Interview by author, October 19, 2009.

³³ Interview by author, April 28, 2010.

because she was still in shock. One might argue that a stunned subject is even more likely to automatically cooperate than anyone else. Incapable, in the moment, of calling to mind the various risks and potential disadvantages of speaking to a reporter, he may allow himself to be compelled by the immediate demands of the encounter: the reporter is sympathetic and needs help; the subject is capable of giving it.

The reporters in Maggie's and Liana's cases were playing up, whether instinctively or intentionally, Goffman's conversational norms: they were friendly, sympathetic, and projected a subtle but persistent need for the subject's help. We could say they were implicitly instrumental. Other subjects said they found themselves agreeing to be interviewed in part because of explicit arguments journalists made for why they should, often by invoking the various reasons discussed in the previous chapter. In these cases, the reporter's own friendliness and need for assistance may not have been reason enough to agree, but, along with the case she was making, the subject found it increasingly difficult to refuse.

Sloan, for example, spent weeks as a juror on a high profile police abuse case in New York, and had found the whole saga almost debilitatingly stressful—at one point he even got shingles from the anxiety.³⁴ After the verdict was issued he was eager to put the whole thing behind him, but when he got home there was a knock at his door within 20 minutes. When he found out it was a young reporter from *The New York Times* he was especially unnerved: it was alarming that she appeared so quickly, and he was already feeling overwhelmed by the trial. She wasn't very professional in her appearance or manner, and was very young, and he was on the brink of refusing when she thrust a cell phone into his hand and he found himself speaking to the senior reporter who was actually covering the trial.

This guy was clearly a veteran, an old pro. He was very sympathetic, explained exactly what he was looking for, and why Sloan should give it to him: here was Sloan's opportunity to explain to the public how the jury had come to its decision. Absent his input, the people would

³⁴ Interview by author, December 7, 2010.

be deprived of a key piece of the judicial puzzle. This sounded like a convincing argument, so Sloan found himself discussing the case. His experience demonstrates how a particular reporter's ability to simultaneously play up the demands of spoken interaction and tap into trigger-related reasons a subject might want to speak to the public anyway can be a very compelling combination. Without either of these Sloan would have refused, as he was about to do with the cub reporter who initially knocked on his door.

And as he did with the *Post* reporter who appeared several hours later. By then he felt unreservedly upset about the entire episode, and somewhat inoculated to the reporter's pleas, because the first encounter had prepared him. This illustrates another quality of many of these encounters: depending on the circumstances and the trigger, they can take the subject off-guard, which seems to make some subjects more likely to fall back on the socially ingrained cooperative instincts Goffman describes. Again, subjects with the time and wherewithal to consider the pros and cons of speaking to a journalist can easily justify refusing to uphold the conversational norm to participate. But circumstances and reporters' behavior sometimes make this calculation difficult.

A number of subjects said they found themselves agreeing to interviews not because the reporter was sympathetic or convincing, but for the opposite reason: the reporter appeared in a flurry, was pushy and demanding, and the subject, a bit stunned at the apparent urgency of the encounter, found himself complying almost before he knew what was happening. In a sense these journalists were engaged in a kind of aggressive face-work in which they took advantage of conversational norms that made it unlikely for subjects to refuse to speak to them, even if they were somewhat rude. We could say they overtly privileged the instrumental aspect of the interaction over social niceties, while unprepared subjects found themselves clinging to the latter. For example, Carmen's mother contacted *The New York Daily News* because, after Carmen, who was only 22 at the time, was attacked in an attempted robbery, the local precinct detectives brushed off her complaints. A *Daily News* reporter jumped at the chance to pursue a story about

police neglect, and with little preamble, appeared with photographer in tow at Carmen's home, where she was recovering from surgery to repair her jaw, broken in the attack:

CARMEN: I just woke up. They showed up like, 10, 15 minutes after [the phone call] So they come to the house, with his photographer, and I was kinda like, "Hold on!" [indicating that they were very pushy and persistent]. 'Cause they were like, [in a rushed, pushy voice] "Oh! So what happened?!!" I'm like, "I'm trying to tell you what I feel about what happened! I can't give you any more information." So of course he was all pushy. He wants information so he's gonna be really pushy. Like aggressive...So basically I told him what happened.³⁵

While some subjects who felt the reporters were inappropriately pushy did use that as an excuse to refuse to speak with them—as Sloan was about to do when the first reporter knocked on his door—many found it easier to agree than to refuse. Here I believe the subject's personality also played a role. Some subjects may be more, not less, inclined to cooperate in the encounter because they are not accustomed to interacting with such aggressive interlocutors and simply do not feel like they can to decline. Carmen, a sensitive, soft-spoken young woman, felt quite bowled over by the reporter and photographer who appeared in her home. When I asked her if she felt she could refuse to pose for certain pictures they wanted, she responded, "No. I felt pressured. What they wanted was what they wanted. And they were gonna get it from me. It was bad."³⁶

But even subjects with more assertive personalities may find it hard to refuse aggressive reporters if they are still recovering from the shock of trigger events. Deanne, for example, had a strong negative reaction to the first of several reporters who interviewed her about a suicide attempt she witnessed. The reporter seemed phony and out to sensationalize the incident; but Deanne did not even feel she was given the chance to refuse before the camera was on and she was being interviewed:

DEANNE: So I saw the reporter and her crew. I think she had a little posse of three people with her. But the minute I said, "Yeah, I was here. Yeah, I saw what happened" I didn't expect that immediately she was gonna say, "Harry, turn on the lights," and I was

³⁵ Interview by author, May 25, 2010.

³⁶ Ibid.

gonna have a microphone in my face. There was just no transition. She never said, "Would you be willing to discuss it?" It was just, "Boom. We're in it." And this is probably part of the people person in me somewhere, where I certainly could've just said, "Oh. I'm not comfortable with this. I don't know how I feel,"—but y'know....we've already started, so I guess it's weird to walk away after we've already started and the camera's on me. I mean, I've already kind of tacitly agreed to give her this interview, so I don't wanna be rude. But again, this was all [snaps fingers] within seconds. Really quickly. I just really tried to end it as quickly as possible.³⁷

Deanne felt that by letting the filming begin she had tacitly agreed to be interviewed, even though no oral permission had been asked or given, and that stopping the filming would have been a violation of that agreement. While she knew that, technically, she could have stopped the interview, "the people person" in her felt compelled to cooperate—essentially the well-socialized interactor of which Goffman speaks. But the camera, crew, and microphone also played a role. Among my findings this stood out for near-universality: cameras seemed to make people feel like they had less control over the encounter, starting with the decision of whether or not to participate. This may be partly because the strangeness, size, and intrusiveness of the equipment can itself be intimidating, but also because equipment comes with equipment operators—a single reporter becomes a "posse," that includes cameramen, and boom operators—and this, too, can make it harder to refuse, as any schoolyard runt can attest.

As the examples above illustrate, in most cases journalists' behavior when requesting interviews did take advantage of social norms guiding most interactions, whether in a subtle or more aggressive way. But it would be a stretch to say categorically that they did so to an unethical degree—at least, most interviewees did not think so. Only a small number of even those subjects who felt that the reporter's behavior was a deciding factor in their giving an interview said they later regretted it. Sloan, the juror; Deanne, the witness; and Liana, whose brother had been killed, all said they felt they had let themselves be bullied into speaking to reporters. Liana's regret was largely due to distortions in the subsequent coverage; she stood by her initial instinct to witness to her brother's character. But Sloan and Deanne felt, looking back, that there was little to be gained by speaking publicly about the issues on which they had been

³⁷ Interview by author, October 14, 2010.

interviewed and that, given more time and space to consider the proposition, they would have come to that conclusion. But under the circumstances it was easier to acquiesce than to refuse.

A Tale of Two Frames: Encounter Frames and Story Frames

If interviewees were not tricked into participating in the news process, is there anything that takes place during the interview itself that could constitute a kind of con? In the remainder of this chapter I explore the physical circumstances of interviews—what I call the encounter frame—and in the next chapter I take up the substance of the conversation that takes place there. As I noted in the previous section, all of my interviewees said they understood from the outset that they were entering into an instrumental encounter when they agreed to speak to a journalist; but understanding this in an abstract way and recalling it throughout the encounter are different. Moreover, there are additional aspects of the interview process, including very mundane ones such as the equipment involved, which can influence the encounter in ways news subjects may not anticipate from the outset, and which can make it difficult for them to modulate their behavior in the interview. Once more, Goffman provides a helpful conceptual framework.

Performing appropriate face-work depends not only on who the interlocutors are, but also on what they mutually, if tacitly, agree to be the nature of the encounter. This understanding is expressed and reaffirmed via the constant performance of “feed-back cues that might tell them what the situation really is.”³⁸ In his influential theoretical work, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Goffman refers to the way we understand “what the situation really is” as the “frame” of the encounter.³⁹ Although he has been criticized for not clearly defining the concept, it is nicely illustrated by the quote above: the frame is the mutually-recognized definition of the situation, determined and communicated by those

³⁸ Goffman, “Alienation from Interaction,” 128.

³⁹ Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1974).

involved in the encounter through their little behavioral cues. Thus we understand the frame by the cues we read from others, and we create the frame along with them by emitting our own cues that indicate how we are making sense of the situation. The frame is constantly being renegotiated; we can change its key (or “key it,” in Goffman’s terms) by altering our behavior to indicate that the situation is now a serious one, now a joking one, now a high-stakes negotiation, now a friendly chat, and so forth.

And, as one would imagine, there are times when those involved in an encounter understand the frame differently. This can happen in a number of different ways, including one interactor intentionally misleading the other about the definition of the situation, whether for benign reasons (such as pretending a bad date is a good one to avoid offending the other party) or exploitative ones (such as feigning long-term intentions to instigate a one-night stand). But even when all involved are acting in good faith and no one is intentionally deceiving anyone else about the nature of the frame, interactants may accidentally misread or misinterpret it, which results in action inappropriate for the situation at hand. As Goffman explains, misreading a frame can “establish a set, a whole grammar of expectations, that will not work. The actor will then find himself using not the wrong word but the wrong language.”⁴⁰ For example, one might behave very differently interacting with a random stranger on the subway platform than with a reporter who has made it clear from the outset that the frame of the encounter is an interview. The basic frame of the journalistic encounter—what I mean when I talk about it being an instrumental encounter—is that whatever happens in that frame *does not stay in that frame*. Whatever the source says or does will not just be taken out of context later, it will be put through a deliberate process of re-framing in order to become a standardized piece of the news.

It is now convenient to note that media scholars beginning in the late 1970s have wholeheartedly embraced and repurposed Goffman’s theory of framing in their analysis of the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 309.

news media.⁴¹ In their application of the term, framing is not a mutual and spontaneous interpretive act that takes place among all individuals in an encounter, instead it is a purposeful activity carried out by news professionals for audiences. In the media context, framing is the news production process's application of "principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters."⁴²

This definition suggests that the process of news framing begins when reporters start to choose their stories, and occurs at every stage of the selection, writing, editing, and production process. Thus, it is not simply a matter of taking a source's face and placing it in a new context, but instead, seeking out an individual who meets certain criteria; interacting with him in such a way that he (hopefully) presents a face that fits a preconceived notion of what will be appropriate for the story the journalist has in mind (a notion that may be fully formed, or may be extremely vague and open to revision); then taking that face and further reframing it so that it meets the vision and standards of the news organization publishing the story. Thus, as I discuss at greater length in the next chapter, the interview is not only, as Goffman would have it, a performance the journalist and reporter put on for one another, it is also an audition, with the subject trying out for a role in the news story, and the reporter/playwright casting him in it.

Truly understanding the journalistic encounter frame, therefore, requires understanding that it is an interaction intended for reframing in the news product later, in what I'll call the "story frame." But again, even if one understands this in the abstract, the face-work required for the interview to feel like a successful interpersonal interaction may differ from the face-work that would help the subject successfully survive the journalist's repackaging of the story to

⁴¹ To my knowledge, Gaye Tuchman was the first media sociologist to make extensive use of Goffman's *Frame Analysis* in her ethnographic work, *Making News*. Tuchman, *Making News*. While Tuchman acknowledges that Goffman was clearly drawing on Schutz and Bateson in his concept of frame, she relies on Goffman's own definition of the term. Subsequent use of framing among media scholars has become too widespread to trace, but those who do explicitly acknowledge the theoretical origins of the term (as Gitlin does, for example in *The Whole World is Watching*, 1979, p. 6), trace it back to Goffman. More recently, Michael Schudson has stated that, "Framing is as central a concept as there is in the study of news" in Schudson, *The Sociology of News*, 35.

⁴² Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching*, 6.

convey his message to the public. In this arena, experience probably helps: veteran subjects may learn to adopt a guarded public face even if the interview appears to be a warm private encounter. But Goffman suggests that, even for savvy subjects, the exigencies of a face-to-face conversation will lead almost inevitably to the subject's performing in a way that will not work as well out-of-context, a paradox he tellingly dubs "informant's folly":

when an individual knowingly provides a report for purposes of relay, he falls into the assumption that he can interlard his comments not only with directional cues which will go unreported, but also with off-the-record asides of various kinds....We embroider our discourse with multiple voices (or "registers"), and some of these, being wholly responsive to the site in which the discourse actually occurs, are doomed to be out of place if witnessed away from their original setting.⁴³

In other words, even if the subject tries hard to present a face in the interview stage that is well-suited for reframing and public consumption later, the imperative to maintain face and help the reporter do so in the face-to-face encounter virtually ensures that the subject's performance will be at least slightly inappropriate for the non-present news audience—even if the subject has that news audience in the back of his or her head. This is why professional media training is so valuable to those who appear often in the news: behaving in a face-to-face encounter in ways that will work well in the news product often feels *unnatural*, because it may require prioritizing the non-present audience over the one in the room. Often lesson number one in media training, for example, as all politicians appear to know well, is to ignore the question the reporter asks and respond with the your own preconceived, bullet-pointed message.⁴⁴ Nothing could be more at odds with normal interpersonal interaction than completely disregarding a question, but it makes perfect sense given the oddities of the journalistic interview: it protects the subject from commenting on issues about which he may be ill-prepared to speak cogently, and ensures as much as possible that the only quotes from which news personnel can choose are those that best convey the subject's key messages.

⁴³ Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 473.

⁴⁴ Sally Stewart, *Media Training 101: A Guide to Meeting the Press*, 1st ed. (Wiley, 2003), 79.

But if journalistic encounters can look and feel deceptively like normal interpersonal encounters—to such a degree that professional news subjects receive special training in order to resist behaving as though they were—where does this leave less experienced news subjects in an interview? How do they understand and manage the interview once it is underway?

My interviewees interacted with reporters under a wide variety of circumstances, including prescheduled formal interviews; spontaneous on-the-scene conversations; discussions via phone, email, and social media; meetings in bars, cafes, or homes; and long days on the job with reporters observing their every move. As noted in the previous section, all told me they understood the first principle of the journalistic frame, that they were speaking to a reporter to provide that reporter with information he or she could use for a news story. No one felt deceived about the identity of the reporter *qua* reporter, and all understood that information they provided in the interaction might wind up in the news.

Beyond this basic understanding, subjects varied a great deal, as one would expect, in degrees of journalistic encounter savvy. Those with extensive experience talking to the media tended to be the most wary during interviews. Gail, a long-time arts and neighborhood activist in the southwestern city, had what I would call a sophisticated understanding of the journalistic encounter:

GAIL: Going through the motions of talking to a reporter, I do or don't know if I'm going to end up in the article, but I'm cognizant when I'm talking that anything I say might be held against me. So it's this balance between wanting to be honest—or *being* honest—but how much do you tell? And what will be misconstrued? So it's this very painstaking, thoughtful conversation you have to have with the reporter, because you may talk with him for an hour, and they write three words, or five words, and put in their own context. So, you're really vulnerable when you're talking to the media. When you're talking to a reporter, that's the whole thing that's going through your mind. It's like, "if I say this, how is it going to be interpreted?"⁴⁵

Experienced news subjects like Gail try to be aware throughout the journalistic encounter that not only is everything they say fair game, they have no control over how their words will—or won't—be repackaged later. As Riva, a human rights activist and experienced

⁴⁵ July 30, 2010.

news subject put it, “If you make a statement it’s kind of like taking your clothes off. You make yourself vulnerable to the person handling the statement.”⁴⁶

Recognizing the vulnerability of their position, media savvy subjects try to perform such that they maximize their chances of conveying their message while minimizing any potential damage, no matter how the reporter decides to use their words. As one would imagine, recalling this throughout a face-to-face encounter, with its already strenuous demands, is difficult: you have to remain constantly aware of a variety of potential story frames, in addition to the immediate interview frame, and adjust your performance to fit a role that may not yet be written, in a play about which you know little.

Even experienced subjects sometimes have trouble walking the walk. Gail said she often emerges from interviews feeling like she has said too much, and Quinn, who also had been in the news before, made just this point:

I: So were you completely open with the reporter?

QUINN: I was trying to be careful. [chuckles] Whatever comes out of my mouth I know could be printed, so, I’m just going to try to say, you know, what needs to be said. But.

I: When you say you were trying to be careful, why did you laugh?

QUINN: Because I’m not the most articulate person when I’m just talking in a free-flowing way. Even though I speak publicly and I do seminars all the time, when you know you’re being recorded, and you know that she could say anything and take it out of context—I try and be careful.

I: But it’s hard, especially I think if the other person is really personable, and sympathetic. Before you know it, it’s just coming out.

QUINN: Exactly. Exactly right.⁴⁷

If some interviewees knew, at least in theory, that they should mold everything they said for possible reframing later, on the other end of the spectrum were those who were unsure about where the journalistic encounter frame began and ended—and therefore, what was fair game for reporters to use. This confusion usually arose for self-described inexperienced subjects who were surrounded or shadowed by reporters in informal settings, in which the precise boundaries of the interview were not clearly demarcated. Eve, a Miracle-on-Hudson survivor,

⁴⁶ Interview by author, April 28, 2010.

⁴⁷ Interview by author, August 2, 2010.

learned this the hard way at the one-year anniversary celebration of that event, which was heavily reported:

EVE: I was talking to a reporter, and then he ended the interview on camera. And so I was still kind of chitchatting with him saying, "Yeah, I have on all the same clothes today. I wore the same shoes, the same pants, the same shirt that I had on on the plane that day." And I said, "I even have on the same underwear." And I didn't realize that there was a reporter behind us, and he wrote that down, and it was in the [newspaper] the next day. [laughter] I was like, "Oh, for God's sake, of all the things to quote me as saying!"⁴⁸

This is a funny example of the kind of thing one can easily imagine causing serious problems, and a classic example of Goffman's informant's folly: It is not that the subject was unaware of another eventual audience for part of her performance, she just did not realize that precisely those aspects of the encounter she did *not* intend for that audience—like comments about her underwear, for example—would be the ones the reporter jumped to include.

Journalistic encounters that take place all or partly via digital tools can also create confusion about where the interview frame begins and ends. For example, two of my interviewees had agreed to participate in a series of articles for *The Daily News* about a group of female friends starting a joint exercise regimen. The reporter occasionally emailed them to check on their progress, and they were surprised to find their emailed responses extracted in the paper; they had not realized this was part of the interview. One can speculate that, as communication between journalists and their subjects increasingly occurs via digital tools, and the norms regarding this are still being worked out, this kind of confusion over the boundaries of the interview frame will likely be common.⁴⁹

But confusion over the demarcations of the journalistic encounter was somewhat rare in my sample. Most subjects told me they understood that anything they said in the presence of the reporter could be used in an article, although, as I discuss further in Chapter Five, they were

⁴⁸ Interview by author, November 16, 2010.

⁴⁹ Ethical standards about this have not congealed for journalists either. See, for example, Kelly Fincham, "7 Ways Journalists Can Make Better Ethical Decisions When Using Facebook," *Poynter Institute*, June 11, 2012, <http://www.poynter.org/how-tos/digital-strategies/176649/7-ways-journalists-can-make-better-ethical-decisions-when-using-facebook/>.

often surprised by which particular quotes and details were actually chosen. At the same time, even subjects with prior experience interacting with the media said they found it difficult to maintain a publicly appropriate face throughout the interview. In part this difficulty arose from the immediate demands of being a responsive interactor within the interview frame; but performing well in a journalistic encounter can also be challenging because of the material circumstances of the interaction, which can be unfamiliar, emotionally charged, and distracting. These I discuss below.

The Trigger

The trigger affects how subjects behave in journalistic encounters in two distinct, but frequently overlapping ways. First, events and issues that become newsworthy are often exceptional, dangerous, or controversial, and exposure to them can have emotional, if not physical, effects on those involved. Naturally, if the subject is in a heightened emotional state or physical pain, this can affect his ability to control or moderate his own behavior as he normally would when engaged in conversation.

When Eve left the emergency room after her plane landed in the Hudson River she was immediately swarmed by reporters, and found herself saying things she probably would not have, had she not been so stunned. She recalled, “I sometimes had a hard time just even focusing on what they were asking me. There were some questions that were very personal, and some of them I answered just because I was a little bit in shock still.”⁵⁰ The trigger can also overwhelm subjects in a positive way. Albert, also a crash survivor but no fan of the media, had refused to speak to reporters in the immediate aftermath. But he was so elated—and possibly tipsy—at the one-year anniversary celebration that he found himself giving in, and even enjoying it: “I was like, ‘Eh, whatever. One-year anniversary. I’m excited. I’m celebrating my

⁵⁰ Interview by author, November 16, 2010.

life. It's been great.' So I just let it happen."⁵¹ In the midst of that euphoria he, a resolute media cynic, made not one but two ecstatic mini-speeches to eager reporters. So the aftershock—or afterglow—of the trigger can have immediate emotional and psychological effects, which subjects said affected not just their willingness to cooperate with reporters, but their performance during the interview.

The second way the trigger shapes the encounter is that, as we saw in the previous chapter, based on their relationship to the trigger, subjects develop goals and objectives for what they want to get out of a news story. The specifics of these trigger-related goals affect how invested they are in trying to influence the journalist's story frame during the interview, and what strategies they use to do so. I go into greater detail about this in the next chapter, but for now the essential point is that the subject's investment in the trigger affects how concerned he is about what information is exchanged in the encounter. This in turn affects whether he prepares for the interview (if he has time to do so), how anxiously he monitors his own performance in the interview, and, in some cases, his composure throughout.

Ironically, when the stakes are high, and the subject highly aware of it, the little voice that usually whispers to him to guard his face in public can rise to a distracting volume that actually makes it harder to do so. Colleen, an administrator at a new private school featured in an article in *The New York Times*, described the whole process leading up to the article's publication as, "excruciating," because she was so deeply invested in the school coming across well, and knew that its whole philosophy was controversial:

COLLEEN: I had enough experience with it to think about it and to outline it ahead of time so that I would be sure to say what I wanted to say...Plus, my goal for this was to present a positive image of the school to generate interest in the school, and I didn't wanna do it in any haphazard way. And because the school is brand new, I was very apprehensive about it. Even going into the conversation.⁵²

⁵¹ Interview by author, November 18, 2010.

⁵² Interview by author, November 9, 2009.

Because she was highly invested in what the story was about, she felt anxious throughout the process and hyperaware of every tiny detail in the interview. She explained:

COLLEEN: I probably think too much, but going through my mind is, 'Okay, I already answered that. Are you coming back to it to see if I say the same thing? Or would you like clarity?' So I've even got this little thing going on in my head because I'm just really being careful.⁵³

Colleen ultimately assessed the process as one of the more stressful experiences she had ever had. By contrast, interviewees who were not highly invested in the trigger under discussion, or in how that trigger was going to be repackaged for the public, felt more relaxed during interviews, as one would expect when the stakes are low.

Journalists themselves are not immune to trigger-related strain when conducting interviews—famous on-air examples of TV and radio journalists succumbing to their emotions do come to mind (to wit, Walter Cronkite visibly shaken by the news of JFK's death; Anderson Cooper, weekly)—but the structure of the news production process is such that the journalist often arrives after major events have transpired and approaches issues as a kind of outsider. Add to this her training to remain as neutral as possible, and that her half of the interaction will likely be edited out of the final product anyway, and it is hard not to conclude that under most conditions the subject is more likely than the journalist to be affected during the interview by his proximity to the trigger, potentially in ways that later seep into the coverage. Deanne, who felt taken off-guard by a team of television journalists after she witnessed an attempted suicide, made this point when she described watching the newscast later:

DEANNE: My hair's a mess, I've got no makeup, I've got this little kid. I'm a little bit scattered, and I'm obviously very emotional, my voice's shaking. It was all just so off-the-cuff, I didn't know what the question was gonna be, and—I guess, her questions took me aback.

I: And you feel like that came across?

DEANNE: Yeah. I did.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Interview by author, October 14, 2010.

The Logistics

Just as a subject's investment in the trigger can affect his ability to remain calm and composed in an interview, sometimes the logistics involved can interfere with or inhibit his performance. This is no great claim: the physical circumstances of any encounter often play a role in how the interactants behave—technical difficulties or distractions frequently arise that influence one's presentation of self—and normally both actors simply do compensatory face-work and move on. But the structure of journalistic encounters can be unforgiving in this regard and, since the subject's performance is destined for a larger public, the stakes can be higher. Susan, for example, blamed a poor cellphone connection at least in part for the inanity of some of her quotes about wildlife in a local park. She was standing by a lake, the wind was blowing, and she kept getting cut off. So it was hard to express herself as well as she might have in a true face-to-face interaction. Hilda was trying to answer a reporter's questions about child safety, but her four small children were with her, making it hard to focus:

HILDA: It [The interview] would have probably been longer except I had my four kids with me, and they wanted to go onto the boat. And the guy's just standing there talking to us and my kids are like, [laughing] "Come on, Mommy, let's go onto the boat, already!" ...I'd have to answer a quick question and then be looking at my kids, or I'd be holding my son, my little one or something like that, so it was--

I: Kinda chaotic sounding.

HILDA: Yeah.⁵⁵

As Hilda's quote suggests, sometimes journalistic encounters overlap with other interactions in ways that affect the subject's presentation and, *in situ*, it all makes perfect sense because these influences are evident to all involved. But in the news product the edited version of the performance can come across as stilted or odd. Interviews that take place in public places or at public events can be especially tricky because there can be all kinds of distractions. For example, if other people are listening in on the interview, suddenly the subject must concern himself with three different audiences: the reporter, the immediate crowd around him, and the eventual news audience. For Dudley, a former actor turned welding student who was

⁵⁵ Interview by author, June 17, 2010.

interviewed about a fire at his technical school, the challenge of performing face-work appropriate for all three audiences was such a strain he ended up presenting a babbling hybrid that failed on all accounts:

DUDLEY: I was very conscious about how I was speaking. Because I'm used to carrying myself one way at school, versus...not. When I'm at school, I'm not very articulate. Lotta slang, lotta cursing. And so it was weird because I was like, "Oh no, I don't wanna blow my cover in front of all my friends that I can actually speak English." And on the other hand, I do wanna articulate what I saw so it's somewhat understandable. So I ended up just sounding like an idiot. I was making sure, "Use big words, Dudley, use big words. Oh, wait, no—but that's too big!" So I was rushing really fast and I was trying to get my point across. Meanwhile, I was also listening to what my one friend, Harrison, behind me is screaming, [imitating a thuggish voice] "You made it. Oh! Listen to you Dudley, oh, you're an expert! Yadayadada." So I was distracted by him, I was telling him to shut up, I was trying to talk to the camera...Yeah, it was a mess! And finally he just stopped recording. I was yelling at everybody, I was like, "Great. I sound like a fucking idiot."⁵⁶

Although the cameraman did not use the footage, he immediately had a similarly scattered exchange with a *New York Post* reporter, and was quoted saying something he felt made him sound uneducated and inarticulate—he had said it largely for the benefit of his school friends who were observing the interview, not the general public. Between the chaotic surroundings and his need to choose which face to present, he felt like he ended up presenting a version of himself that was phony and inauthentic: "It was very rushed. I was using some fucked up accent that isn't natural. I don't know where it came from...I misrepresented myself. That's not how I speak [normally]."⁵⁷

This and the above examples illustrate one of the fundamental problems with the journalistic encounter: all kinds of interferences and distractions can occur during the interview that affect the subject's performance, but most of these—including excited children, malfunctioning cellphones, and heckling friends—will be edited out of the coverage when that performance is reframed later, removing much of the contextual material that made sense of how the subject was behaving and what he was saying in the moment.

⁵⁶ Interview by author, March 20, 2010.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Furthermore, unlike most face-to-face encounters, journalistic interviews often involve specialized equipment being used to document the interaction, and for some subjects this was the biggest distraction of all. In theory, notepads, cameras, and recording equipment can be helpful to the subject, because they are reminders that the conversation, however friendly and casual, is an interview that will be repurposed for a different audience later. However, in practice, this awareness, which ideally would help the subject adjust his performance so it would be more likely to translate well in the news product, can also make him underperform. Cameras and other equipment, unless the subject is accustomed to them, can be distracting if not outright nerve-wracking by their mere presence, and more so because they call the subject's attention to the fact that a much larger audience than is present in the interaction will witness it later.

While even a reporter's note taking or relatively unobtrusive sound recording can be a distraction, among my subjects this was especially true of any kind of camera. Setting aside pre-arranged photo shoots, which are a whole different kind of encounter altogether, subjects said the introduction of a still or TV camera into an interview altered the feel of it significantly. Just as cameras seem to have an uncanny power to get subjects to submit to interviews, they were so distracting to some subjects during interactions it was as though an alien life form had entered the room; behaving naturally and not feeling overly self-conscious suddenly felt impossible. As Isabel, whose elementary school class was visited by a reporter and a photographer, succinctly put it, "You can ignore a reporter in the corner. You can't ignore a photographer in your face."⁵⁸ Being photographed was not always distracting in a negative way: some people said they found it fun and exciting, in part because they associated that kind of continuous flashing and snapping with celebrity. But, whether they enjoyed it or not, almost everyone said they were shocked at just how many pictures were taken over the course of the interaction—which is part of why it can be an ongoing distraction.

⁵⁸ Interview by author, October 18, 2010.

For example, Jay, a ferry boat captain, described how being followed by TV cameras was not just distracting for him, but distracting for his passengers, which in turn distracted him more; above all, it made him feel uncharacteristically self-conscious and nervous:

I: What was doing the TV interviews like?

JAY: Nerve-wracking...All the passengers were looking, like, "Oh, what's going on? What's going on?" And I'm trying to talk to them and drive, but when they're on your face, and the camera's right here, and they're like, "Yeah, don't worry about the camera." How do you not? This huge piece of equipment?...I'm like, "Oh my God, is my hair OK?" I never cared about that before!⁵⁹

Emma, who felt very comfortable with the reporter who visited her home for a long profile about her days taking care of her critically ill husband before he died, said the presence of the photographer felt strangely invasive, and each time he took a photo she found herself wondering why *that* would be the chosen shot:

I: What was it like having the photographer here?

EMMA: Well he was quite nice. It was a little weird because it definitely had a sense of—I can't think of the word I want, but just—invasion. Much more so [than talking to the reporter]...I'm not really sure why I had that feeling. But, you know, as he would snap pictures—it's sort of like I didn't have as much control, maybe. In a conversation I can kind of control what information came out, but with a photograph it's just, "there it is!" you know?⁶⁰

Since subjects had very little control over how the journalistic encounter would be reframed and repackaged later, it could be especially jarring for them to feel, as Emma did when the photographer started snapping away, that the one part of the process in which they thought they had a bit more clout—the presentation of their story in the interview stage—was slipping out of their hands. This feeling may peak when subjects are invited for interviews at television and radio stations, where they have even less control over the encounter than when they allow journalists into their homes. Whether interviewees found the surroundings—strange equipment, flashing lights, a fleet of production personnel—exciting or intimidating, they usually found them at least somewhat distracting. Moreover, the behavioral demands of an on-camera or on-radio interaction can be different from an off-camera interview: for example,

⁵⁹ Interview by author, November 11, 2010.

⁶⁰ Interview by author, August 4, 2010.

sometimes the interlocutor is audible, but not visible; she may even be thousands of miles away. And sometimes these interviews are carried live, adding another layer of anxiety to many subjects' performances. One of my subjects described a long delay between when the reporter had apparently asked a question and when she was able to hear it. She was sitting in a hotel room staring into a camera with an earpiece in her ear, speaking to a reporter in another state. But viewers had no way of knowing any of that; she just came across as absurdly slow to respond.

Kim, a young woman who did a number of interviews at the request of the New York Department of Labor because she was one of the first users of a program focused on the unemployed, described the difference between being interviewed by a print reporter and a television reporter in terms of adjustments she had to make to her own performance.

I: So did that interview with the New York One reporter feel conversational?

KIM: I wouldn't say it was conversational because the reporter was telling me, "Don't look at the camera. Look at me. Look at my eyes, don't look around." I think it was a little bit of a distraction because when we first started the interview I was swaying in my chair little bit and not realizing I was doing it. And he told me, "You've just gotta sit still. And don't look at the camera." ...And I think it was the fact that I knew this was gonna be seen all over Manhattan.⁶¹

Between trying not to move or look at the camera, and knowing whatever she did would potentially be seen by many thousands of people, it's little wonder Kim found it hard to relax. By comparison, the interview she did with a print reporter felt much less stressful, even though she knew he was taking notes:

KIM: So it was more personalized because the two of us were standing there having a conversation together and he was writing down everything that he had found out. I didn't have a camera in front of me so it wasn't like I was being thrown on the spot, so if I tripped over my own words or if I sneezed or I coughed or something, it wasn't gonna be on camera.

I: So it felt more like a regular conversation?

KIM: Yeah. Yeah.⁶²

⁶¹ Interview by author, November 3, 2009.

⁶² Ibid.

As Kim indicates, it is not just the equipment that can be distracting or intimidating, but also the fact that, for television and radio, not just the subject's words but his whole presentation of self is being recorded for relay later. Of course, it may be heavily edited, but far more so than for print, with TV and radio interviewees were aware that their performances were going out to much larger audiences than was present in the room. Some subjects who did multiple interviews said they felt that with experience they got better at relaxing during broadcast interviews, and a very few were simply not bothered by it. But the majority of my subjects who spoke to TV or radio reporters felt more self-conscious or nervous in ways that impacted their performances.

Just as triggers may affect journalists' behavior in the interview but are likely to affect subjects more, the material objects and structure of the journalistic encounter probably place amateur news subjects in a relatively more vulnerable position. Inexperienced subjects, especially, are unaccustomed to filtering out the kinds of distractions that can negatively affect performance, including hyperawareness of a large, absent audience and unfamiliar equipment; meanwhile, this is just another day on the job for professional reporters. Moreover, unless they appear on camera or write about themselves in the first-person (somewhat rare in daily newspaper reporting), the journalist's performance in the interaction will be wholly edited out of the product.

The Journalists

This is particularly noteworthy because, as I mentioned above in the discussion of how interviews are initiated, the way the interlocutor—in this case, the journalist or groups of journalists—presents herself has as much effect as anything else on the way the subject performs in the interview. Even the presence of a silently observing journalist can affect the subject's behavior, as Thomas, a disabled actor whose rehearsals were visited by a reporter, pointed out:

I: When he was there you said he was very unobtrusive. Did you feel self-conscious or different when he was there?

THOMAS: Slightly, yeah. Because there's someone there. You're "on." You know you're being watched and it's gonna potentially be out there for public consumption.⁶³

While the presence of any additional body in the room can alter the dynamics, a reporter's body, like a camera, can be a reminder of the eventual news audience. Some subjects who were observed at their jobs for long periods of time felt they were gradually able to forget about the reporter, but at least at first, everyone felt self-conscious, if not outright uncomfortable. And of course, journalists rarely remain silent in encounters. For some subjects, interactions with journalists made such a strong impression they dominated their memory of what being in the news was like, to the nearly complete exclusion of the content of the coverage. As I discuss below, interviewees had a variety of reactions to journalists ranging from overwhelmed, to warm, to outright disgusted.

"Like sharks attacking": journalists in groups

Reporters made an especially strong impression on subjects involved in major events, or whose stories appeared in national publications that spawned interest from many others. In these cases, a subject's life for days or even weeks could be consumed by fending off or engaging with reporters, and while it was not necessarily a miserable experience for everyone, people did, across the board, describe it as "overwhelming." For Jay, the ferryboat captain who rescued Miracle-on-Hudson survivors, reporters' aggressiveness in the immediate aftermath was intimidating:

I: What were the reporters like?

JAY: Like sharks attacking. Like, [imitating voices of pushing reporters] "No, I had him next!" Or "I had him next!"... then you had like three people around you with ten different microphones, and this one's asking a question, and that one, and they're all trying to feed off of each other. And it was just kind of overwhelming. Because I still had no idea—it didn't sink in what was really going on.⁶⁴

⁶³ Interview by author, March 5, 2010.

⁶⁴ Interview by author, November 11, 2010.

As Jay points out, it was not just the aggressive scrum of reporters that felt overwhelming, but the fact that they appeared before he had fully digested what had happened. It felt like an attack, even though this was for a positive story—he was considered one of the heroes. Eve, a Miracle-on-Hudson survivor, had a similar reaction:

I: Well, what was your feeling about your encounter with all of those reporters and cameras and all of that?

EVE: It was a little bit scary. It's quite confrontational, actually. They want information. And they kind of are in your face to get it. And so I found it a little bit daunting ...because it was real forceful, and they were determined to get the story. Some of them were less in your face. Some of them were much gentler and much more interested in, "How are you feeling right now?" That kind of thing.⁶⁵

As Eve points out, even if some individual reporters were friendly and polite—which was not always the case for my interviewees—the sheer number and persistence of reporters in a pack could be unnerving, if not outright frightening. For some, this made an already heady or traumatic experience seem outright surreal. Subjects of major stories were often bewildered at how reporters had tracked them down, either at home or by phone; how quickly they did so; and how insistent they could be. Keith, a New York City cop who was in the news for his involvement in uncovering a terrorist plot, spoke to me for about forty minutes about his experience without ever mentioning the news coverage at all: in his mind, the content of the stories was nothing in comparison to the surreal experience of being pursued by reporters. The NYPD told him he was not allowed to say a word to the many journalists camped outside his house, but his refusal did not stop them from caravanning to his daughter's sporting event, and relentlessly trying to get him to talk:

I: What did you think of them?

KEITH: The media? Hounds. Hounds. Relentless. Like, you'd tell 'em, "I can't say anything." And then...they would keep trying. That's what they do. They do interviews for a living. And they were relentless. Relentless.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Interview by author, November 16, 2010.

⁶⁶ Interview by author, November 5, 2010.

Some subjects said that the questions began to feel so repetitive, and the need to constantly perform in interviews so tiresome, they were eager to return to their normal lives when the attention died down. Others felt telling the same story multiple times actually had its benefits. They got better at it, for one thing. Each interview was like a rehearsal for the next, until they were less nervous and knew their story cold. A couple of people who had been involved in traumatic events even said they felt that telling the story helped them come to terms with what had happened. As Tanya concluded of her media involvement, “it was therapeutic to talk about it and get it out.”⁶⁷ But maintaining one’s face when being tag-teamed by reporters can be hard: as Keith points out, journalists’ job is to get subjects to speak, whether or not it is in subjects’ best interest, and this can be especially evident when journalists are visibly competing with one another, as they often are when they appear in droves. This sense that they were dealing with a competitive, self-interested mob made a strong impression, even on interviewees who felt they managed themselves well in the interaction or liked individual journalists in the crowd.

Liking—and trusting—journalists

For subjects who were involved in smaller stories that resulted in only one or a few articles—and therefore, fewer interactions with fewer reporters—many of the most salient aspects of those interactions had to do with how they negotiated the content of the potential news story, which I discuss in the next chapter. In terms of general impressions of reporters and their interactions with them, the majority of my subjects liked the reporters who interviewed them and assessed their interview experience overall in positive terms. Even when reporters were asking more adversarial questions, most of my subjects said they were friendly, personable, and engaged listeners. Given all of the various interferences cited above that can make a journalistic encounter a strain for a subject, it is all the more impressive that many

⁶⁷ Interview by author, November 12, 2010.

interviewees felt it was more like a casual conversation than a formal interview, and that they felt fairly relaxed speaking with reporters, which they often attributed directly to the reporter's own behavior:

NORMA: Right from the start I really liked [the reporter]. I didn't a hundred percent agree with the way he wrote the article, but as a person, I think that he comes across—I told him, "You give people a feeling of confidence." And I really felt that he listened. I'm not sure that he necessarily showed that in the article, but I did feel that he did listen.⁶⁸

Norma contrasted the reporter's behavior with that of a local journalist who, by comparison, had seemed disrespectful:

I: How much do you think that affected your willingness to talk to him?

NORMA: A lot. I mean, I received a call from our local paper and the reporter that called me, he just had a tone in his voice, that made me think, "I don't really even wanna cooperate with this guy." So there's a difference in how people talk to you. The [local reporter] guy talked down to me. [NYT reporter] never did that to anyone. And, I mean, everyone that met him liked him. So that's definitely an advantage if you're a reporter. To make people be friendly towards you.⁶⁹

Subjects understandably appreciated it when reporters were not just friendly, but respectful, professional, and knowledgeable, all of which they deduced from reporters' behavior, including the tone and type of questions they were asking. Ruby, for example, immediately liked the *Daily News* reporter who sneaked into the emergency room to interview her after she had been shot in a random gang altercation in Harlem. He obviously had guts, or he would not have claimed to be her cousin to get past security. But he also asked professional, focused, non-patronizing questions:

RUBY: So by him being a young man, by him having the guts, being white, saying he was my cousin, he got in. I admired that. Because other reporters were trying to get in and they couldn't get in, so that right then and there made me like him. Gutsy. Friendly. Honest. And he was genuinely into his job, and I liked that. The questions he asked were professional questions. And they weren't demeaning. They were to the point and about the subject, y'know, me getting shot.

I: So when you say that he wasn't demeaning or anything like that, do you think that reporters usually are?

⁶⁸ Interview by author, March 2, 2010.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

RUBY: I see it on TV. Some of the questions they ask and the way they talk to the people. And the people don't realize that these questions are geared to make them look like assholes. So they're not intelligent enough to see this and they fall right into it.

I: *But you felt like he was respectful.*

RUBY: Oh, he was.⁷⁰

I found that many subjects, like Ruby, were judging reporters in part against preconceived ideas of what journalists are like, based not necessarily on past experience being in news stories (although for some that was the case) but on their impressions as media consumers, or what they embraced as the conventional wisdom about what reporters are like. These preconceptions were largely negative—I was told repeatedly that journalists and the media in general are not to be trusted, do not care about individuals, and often get things wrong—but, perhaps counter-intuitively, these preconceptions often seemed to work in reporters' favor. Many interviewees were remarkably quick to make exceptions for the reporter in question if his or her behavior seemed to contradict the stereotype, an exceptionalism that was all the more striking because the same interviewees would often sandwich their glowing review of *this* reporter between sweeping criticisms of the media in general.

This calls to mind the truism that everyone hates Congress but loves their own congressman, but in this case the willingness to make an exception seemed largely based on the way the reporter conducted himself in the interaction. Subjects who said they came to trust the reporter writing their stories were quick to list different qualities the reporter displayed to justify that trust: she seemed genuinely interested in the topic or in covering it in a balanced way; she seemed sympathetic to the subject's situation or concerns; she seemed not just friendly but open and honest about herself and her work. A number of those who had the most pleasant experiences began by telling me that the reporter was not the pushy, manipulative character they had expected.

And, unsurprisingly, subjects who said they liked the reporter, whether they trusted her or not, tended to be the ones who felt more relaxed in interviews, and to say the interview felt

⁷⁰ Interview by author, March 3, 2010.

more like a conversation or an interaction between friends. In theory, this would make them more likely to reveal information that might not be in their best interests. This is the Janet Malcolm model, supported in some ways by Goffman: since a journalistic interview is intended for reframing later, the perception that it is just another friendly encounter is a misreading of the frame, likely to result in the subject presenting an inappropriate face.

And yet, I did not find that those who perceived the interaction as a friendly one were necessarily more likely to feel they had said anything inappropriate than those involved in more formal or adversarial interviews. Often subjects who described more confrontational encounters that did not feel at all friendly were the ones who let something slip they later regretted, and many who said the interview felt more like a casual conversation had no regrets at all. I believe this can be explained in two ways. First, as I discuss at greater length in the next chapter, subjects are capable—not always, but often—of judging whether or not the trigger in question could lead to potentially harmful coverage later: some triggers are simply more risky than others. When topics are essentially fluffy or consensual, as opposed to complex or controversial, the subject may sense it is safe to let his or her guard down, because no matter how their performance is repackaged later their reputation will not be damaged. And this sense is often buoyed by the behavior of the reporter, which, in these cases, is unlikely to seem adversarial or to include hard-hitting questions that ask the subject to really defend him or herself. Not every interview is a sting operation, after all.

Second, I found it was possible for many subjects to feel the interaction was pleasant and friendly without completely losing sight of the true frame of the encounter—that it was intended for reframing later. Appreciation for a friendly interlocutor and caution about one's presentation of self can, as it turns out, coexist in the mind of the subject. Colleen, who was so anxious about how she would represent her school in the interview with the *New York Times* reporter, reiterated multiple times that she actually really liked, and even trusted, the reporter—but she was still very cautious about what she said. Patricia, a Tea Party activist, described

similar feelings during her interview with *The New York Times*, although she stopped short at the word “trust”:

PATRICIA: I felt a heavy responsibility to the movement. I wanted the movement as best represented and as honestly represented as I possibly could.

I: And you were aware of feeling that way during the interview?

PATRICIA: Oh, every moment of it, yes.

I: So it sounds like it felt to you more like a formal interview than a casual conversation?

PATRICIA: No, it was a casual conversation, and [reporter] is a good interviewer and does put you at ease, but I’ve been involved in this [movement] long enough to know that you don’t go into it trusting.⁷¹

Disliking journalists

While the majority of my interviewees had good impressions of reporters and described their interactions as basically positive (which did not necessarily mean they were happy with the subsequent coverage), that was by no means unanimous: some described their encounters in extremely negative terms. The most-cited criticism of individual journalists was that they were “pushy,” with “insensitive” a close runner up. By “insensitive” subjects generally meant reporters seemed to not care about them as people, only “getting their story”; in other words, subjects felt they were prioritizing the instrumental side of the encounter over the basic norms of human interaction. And, as it did when used as a tactic to get subjects to agree to an interview in the first place, at times pushiness seemed to have the desired effect during the interview, with subjects answering questions they would have preferred to avoid, or generally losing their cool. Although some subjects felt they were able to effectively fend off intrusive questions and were surprisingly understanding of even egregious attempts to invade their privacy, some of these tactics raise ethical red flags regardless of their effects. Take Alegra’s assessment of the journalists she encountered when she shared her story about contracting a serious illness while pregnant:

ALEGRA: I would never want their job. Ever. They have to be pushy. I got annoyed with some of ‘em, but that’s their job, they have to be that way, you know? In order to get the stories that they want. Like CBS, they really wanted a picture of the baby that I lost, and I just refused over and over and they continually asked until the minute they

⁷¹ Interview by author, May 3, 2010.

put it on air. But that's their job.

I: It sounds like you're pretty forgiving of their pushiness.

ALEGRA: I mean, it was annoying and it upset me and my husband, but, like I said, that's their job, y'know? You just have to expect that. They wanna get their story.⁷²

Complaints that reporters were pushy or insensitive were most often leveled at TV journalists, who many subjects felt were hurried and intrusive, as was another biting critique of particular reporters: phoniness. Even when subjects said they understood the reasons behind these behaviors—the pressure to secure images in a timely fashion, for example—most were less understanding than Alegra and did not see the exigencies of news production as valid excuses for disrespectful or seemingly inauthentic behaviors. A number of subjects mentioned feeling unnerved and manipulated by broadcast journalists who appeared to change their presentation completely when the little red light went on. Friendly moments before, they suddenly seemed adversarial or maudlin, depending on the performance they were hoping to elicit from the subject.

FATIMA: So anyway, we sit down and [the journalist] is here, and she's the Muslim correspondent from London. And I immediately see her and we give our greetings to each other and I give her a hug and she's SO nice and we're hitting it off and y'know, she's speaking to me in Arabic and I'm just really clicking with her and she seems like a great person. We sit down on the couches, the camera turns on, and she becomes someone else. So she's just like this total actress. Like she turned on this role, and y'know, she grew up in the Middle East, she's been around Muslim women all her life. I knew that she totally understood my perspective and where I was coming from, but it's like for the sake of the audience she had to act like she was dumb and didn't know anything and just started attacking me. For these people it's like an act. It's like a total act. They have to act this way. It just seems really fake.⁷³

In a sense, subjects were simply witnessing an abrupt frame shift, from a friendly, intimate encounter, to one intended for public consumption. Seen in these terms, the journalist's adoption of a different face was just an exaggerated version of what everyone involved tries to do when an interview begins: present a face suitable for reframing later. But what to a journalist may feel like a carefully cultivated professional demeanor can seem like a complete charade to an amateur news subject, who may feel ill-used or violated when, at least on the journalist's

⁷² Interview by author, October 30, 2009.

⁷³ Interview by author, December 5, 2010.

side, professional norms appear to trump the most basic norms of interpersonal interaction. A number of interviewees described similar experiences in which they felt so taken aback by the abrupt change in the reporter's behavior that it took them several on-air moments to compose themselves—understandably, the reporter's behavior moments before had led them to expect that the interview would have a different tone. And subjects who did television interviews uniformly said they felt they were given little instruction or warning that would help them prepare for such a quick shift. As Robert put it, "All of a sudden I realized the light on the camera had turned green and I thought, 'Well, I guess I'm on!' There were no instructions from anybody. Luckily I didn't say, 'Duh, I'm on camera?'"⁷⁴

Conclusion

So what can we make of all of this? All of my subjects understood the fundamentals of the journalistic encounter: that they were handing off their face and their story to a journalist. And, contrary to Malcolm's astonishing claim that subjects' willingness to talk has nothing to do with the skill and behavior of the journalist,⁷⁵ my interviewees made decisions about whether and how to talk to journalists based on how those journalists comported themselves in the interaction. In some cases reporters' behavior was more aggressive than would be acceptable in most encounters, but none of my interviewees felt he had been unfairly or surreptitiously seduced. On the other hand, some did feel the edges of the journalistic frame blurred in ways for which they were not quite prepared, or that reporters' aggressiveness crossed ethical lines they associated with basic human decency. And even those with very sophisticated understandings of what it meant to speak to a reporter—that everything they said was fair game and could be used in any way, including ways they did not intend—found it difficult to recall this at every moment of the encounter and to behave accordingly.

⁷⁴ Interview by author, July 29, 2010.

⁷⁵ Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, 98–99.

Encounters with broadcast journalists are, I believe, the starkest demonstrations of what is generally true in journalistic encounters with ordinary people: simply by virtue of being the professional party, accustomed to the routine of abruptly putting on a public face and blocking out all distractions, be they equipment, crowds, or trigger-fueled emotions, the journalist does, as many readers and viewers intuit, tend to have the upper hand. And even more so since the journalist controls how the performance will be repackaged later, and will likely cut out her own performance altogether leaving the subject to stand alone, like the proverbial cheese. Malcolm argues that the structure of the journalist-subject relationship is inherently uneven because of the deception the journalist inflicts on the subject,⁷⁶ but actually the structural disequilibrium of the relationship exists whether the journalist is deceptive or not. It is important to recognize this in order to ask more nuanced and relevant questions, such as whether a given journalist in a particular situation exploits her advantage to an unethical degree; having the upper hand for structural reasons does not necessarily make every journalist a con man.

Given the way the deck appears stacked against news subjects in the interview process, it is even more remarkable that the majority of my interviewees assessed it overall in positive terms. This would seem to be fairly compelling evidence that exploitation is not the rule, but the exception. Here I believe being “ordinary” actually has its advantages. Many journalistic codes of ethics acknowledge that inexperienced private citizens deserve greater sensitivity than public figures,⁷⁷ and in journalists’ unofficial mandate to “afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted,” ordinary people probably fall into the latter category more often than the former. As I discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, the kinds of stories in which ordinary people play a

⁷⁶ As Malcolm puts it, “The point lies in the *structure* of the situation: the deliberately induced delusion, followed by a moment of shattering revelation.” *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁷ The Society of Professional Journalists’ code of ethics states, “Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.” Society of Professional Journalists, “SPJ Code of Ethics” (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996), <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>.

role are not always the kind that warrant, hard-hitting, adversarial reporting; often the reporter is as invested as the subject in a sympathetic portrayal of the latter's most appealing face.

But, although many of my interviewees were not dissatisfied with their interactions with journalists, those who had negative experiences were extremely turned off, and their complaints deserve attention. Scholarly focus on the content of news stories may blind us somewhat to other aspects of the being-in-the-news process—like being hounded by packs of journalists, feeling intruded upon at a vulnerable moment, or seeing a seemingly sympathetic figure transmogrify—that sometimes make an even greater impression on news subjects. I found that even many interviewees who understood perfectly well that intrusive, insistent, or seemingly phony behaviors were a necessary part of a reporter's job were nonetheless rattled, if not outright frightened and disgusted by them, and these were often the parts of the overall experience they were most eager to discuss. Insofar as these negative interactions confirmed preexisting stereotypes many interviewees had about reporters—stereotypes that even interviewees who liked the journalists they met seemed unwilling to jettison—we need to acknowledge that, perhaps in addition to the content-based problems like bias and inaccuracy that we often assume give journalism a bad name, negative encounters with journalists can also erode credibility and trust.

And if none of my interviewees felt seduced, some did ultimately feel betrayed. As I discuss in the next chapter, this had less to do with the circumstances of the encounter discussed above than with the kinds of information being exchanged and haggled over in the process.

CHAPTER FOUR: The Interview Stage Part II: From Interaction to Story

The catastrophe suffered by the subject is no simple matter of an unflattering likeness or a misrepresentation of his views; what pains him, what rankles and sometimes drives him to extremes of vengefulness, is the deception that has been practiced on him. On reading the article or book in question, he has to face the fact that the journalist—who seemed so friendly and sympathetic, so keen to understand him fully, so remarkably attuned to his vision of things—never had the slightest intention of collaborating with him on his story but always intended to write a story of his own. The disparity between what seems to be the intention of an interview as it is taking place and what it actually turns out to have been in aid of always comes as a shock to the subject.

- Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*¹

Annie, a state employed biologist, works on a cutting edge mapping project that was featured in the southwestern paper. Although she had never been interviewed for a newspaper article before, she tried to prepare beforehand so she could convey her message as effectively as possible, come what may:

ANNIE: I was thinking, “Okay, I wanna try to stress this, I wanna talk about this if he asks me about this, and tried to run through possible questions he might ask me. Not ever being in the newspaper before I had no idea what an interview goes like. I didn’t know if we were gonna sit down and just talk, or I thought maybe he’d come follow me, like a day on the job, ‘cause we had talked about that being maybe a possibility. So I had no idea.

I: So you were running through these various scenarios in your head and trying to be prepared.

ANNIE: Trying to be prepared for what it was gonna be like.²

My interviewees varied in the amount of preparation they were able and willing to do prior to interviews: some took elaborate notes, and others improvised completely. For those who saw it as important, preparation was a way to anticipate and guard against the kinds of distractions I described in the last chapter, as well as any attempt by the journalist to redirect the conversation toward topics they felt were potentially damaging, or simply not central to their main points. So Annie prepared. And yet, when she greeted the reporter and began the winding walk back to her lab, she was taken aback by how quickly the interview began, and found herself answering an array of personal questions she had not expected:

¹ Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, 3–4.

² Interview by author, August 29, 2010.

ANNIE: And he showed up and immediately started interviewing me. Which was really weird. As we're walking he's talking to me, y'know, and I was like, "Oh; he's interviewing me already. [sounding uncertain] Okaaay, this is gonna be fine."

I: So no real preamble, just like—

ANNIE: No. Just zinged right into interviewing me.

I: What did you think about that?

ANNIE: Um. [with a little hesitation] I thought it was fine. A little odd. I don't know, just because he was asking me more personal questions, and not about my job. I wasn't expecting that. He would ask me, "Are you married?" That was like the third question. So it was like, what does that have to do with what I'm doing? He definitely caught me off guard.³

Unlike subjects who had trouble recognizing the boundaries of the interview frame, Annie interpreted the reporter's cues correctly to signal that the interview had begun; and although the abrupt frame-shift took her "off guard," what really caught her unprepared was the type of questions he was asking. She had entered the interview with strong feelings about what the eventual story should be like: it would focus on her map's implications for conservation and the environment, and she had prepared her comments with that story frame in mind. But she began to suspect that the reporter had a different vision, for an article that would focus on her personally, as a kind of heroine explorer. She tried continually to redirect the discussion back to conservation, but the reporter had other plans:

ANNIE: So we went through all these personal questions and I was like, "Oh, great. Here we go." I'm trying to steer it back towards talking about what we're doing at [her state department] for this project, and he just kept asking me very personal—not personal, but I guess I'd call them, "human interest" questions. Like, "What do you have for lunch when you're on the road?"

I: [chuckling] I noticed that made it into the article.

ANNIE: Yes. Y'know, he asked me to describe a typical day while I'm working, what I do. And I think I described it, and then I tried talking about the landscape [starting to laugh] and the project again.

I: Yeah, trying to get back to the initial bullet points.

ANNIE: The big picture, yeah. What I'm doing and what it's gonna do for the environment. So I remember I kept trying to swing it back that way but he wasn't buyin' that. And he did mention halfway through the interview that this was going to be a human-interest story. And I was like, "Well, that's fine, but we need to talk a little bit, just a little bit, about the conservation aspect of the job.

I: Did you say that?

³ Interview by author, August 29, 2010.

ANNIE: Yeah...And I think while I was being interviewed Robert [her boss] came over, and he started talking about the importance of the project. So we were both really drilling it into him.⁴

Despite her minimal experience interacting with journalists, Annie was fully aware during the interview that she was engaged in a kind of struggle with the reporter over the primary message of the story he would later write. At the same time, the immediate exigencies of the face-to-face encounter—that she be at least minimally polite, for example—and the fact that the reporter seemed married to a preconceived idea about how to present the story in the news product—what I call the story frame—limited her ability to redirect his focus. Annie ultimately concluded that, despite her best efforts to control the message, she never really had a chance:

I: You said that you found yourself trying to steer the conversation back to what you thought were the most important points.

ANNIE: Yeah, and he would go back to the human-interest stuff.

I: Did you feel like you could control the thing at all?

ANNIE: No. No, you can't. Nope. [chuckles] No, he definitely, I think, had his mind made up of what he was gonna write about before he came. And he just needed a little more information.⁵

Annie's description of the journalistic encounter illustrates that both the reporter and the subject may enter the interview with a particular story frame in mind, and that these may not be the same. As discussed at length in the previous chapter, subjects like Annie often have specific goals when they speak to reporters: they hope to call attention to a cause, witness to an event, or repair their reputations. Depending on what those goals are and the nature of the trigger, subjects may or may not be highly invested in how the story is reframed for public consumption. On one end of the spectrum, subjects who are stopped on the street for a quick quote likely have only a vague idea of how the story will be framed—after all, their whole involvement in the process may last only minutes. Neither may they *care* much about how that story is told, beyond hoping to not be completely misrepresented or defaced. But many subjects

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

are contacted by reporters because they took part in a major event or had some long-term association with an issue. In such cases, the subject likely has a well-formed idea about what the “true” story is or how it should be told before he even enters into the journalistic encounter. And he may have a lot at stake in his version of the story becoming public.

But journalists, too, often have preconceived ideas about what the story frame will be when they interview potential subjects. Journalistic conventions prevent reporters from simply inserting their own judgments into their stories, even, or perhaps especially, if they have strong opinions about an issue. Instead, they must find sources to voice the various points of view they hope to include in whatever they publish. They are also under stringent time and space constraints, the management of which frequently leads individual reporters and their news organizations to fit idiosyncratic daily events into pre-established categories.⁶ In other words, often reporters begin mentally composing stories from the moment they are assigned, and they frequently seek out sources to fill in specific gaps—to symbolize a particular segment of the population, or to supply quotes they more or less already have in mind.⁷ Essentially, they are looking for actors to cast in a play, the script of which they are in the process of writing. In this respect, it is helpful to think of the interview as not just a performance like any other face-to-face interaction, but as an audition of sorts. If the journalist is still in the initial stages of researching a story, the auditioning subjects may have a great deal of influence on how the story is told and how their part is written—in this case, imagine a highly collaborative process in which the playwright tailors the script to the strengths of the actors. But often, ordinary Joes are contacted to provide quotes when a story is near completion, in which case they may sense they are being cast in pre-established roles.

Since the reporter is the one who ultimately creates the story frame and casts the story (along with a bevy of editors and production personnel who may be entirely invisible to the

⁶ Tuchman, *Making News*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

subject), the interview stage is the subject's only opportunity to contribute to and influence the story frame—to persuade the reporter that a particular frame is more accurate than, or preferable to, another. Since reporters rarely communicate to subjects exactly how they envision the story frame, the subject must use cues in the interaction to judge where the reporter stands on the issues under discussion, and how she will probably reframe them later. These cues allow the subject to pitch his performance in a way that not only maintains his face in the immediate interaction, but also increases the likelihood that the reporter will choose to reframe it favorably.

Annie, for example, anticipated where the reporter wanted to go with her story based on the questions he was asking, and she took steps to try to haul him back to her vision of what the story frame should be. She even addressed her concerns about his envisioned frame explicitly, by telling him she felt strongly that they needed to talk about conservation, at least a *little* bit. Although such steps may be ineffective—he wrote a human-interest story that told the world she ate tuna for lunch—in order to even take these active steps to redirect the journalist and redefine the story frame, the subject must first recognize that the story frame is under construction during the interview.

Indeed, the degree to which the subject understands that the interview is essentially a negotiation over the story frame in which he does not really know where the journalist stands and has only limited influence, and how well he is able to deduce the story frame the reporter already has in mind, significantly shape the subject's performance in the interview stage. In Annie's case, the reporter telegraphed exactly where he was going with the story, but in many cases such cues are subtle or imperceptible to the subject, who essentially ends up working blind. If he cannot envision a story frame that differs from his own, or interprets the reporter's behavior as wholly sympathetic to his own perspective, the subject behaves differently than in a more overtly adversarial interview where it is clear from the outset that the reporter might choose a story frame unfriendly to the subject's point of view. In other words, for the subject to

truly understand the journalistic encounter—what he is “getting into,” he must be aware not only that it is an exchange of information for the reporter to use in a news story, as discussed in the previous chapter, but also that it is a collaboration, negotiation, or outright battle over the story frame.

Below I discuss four scenarios that capture the range of contests over the story frame my interviewees described. In the first two scenarios the subject felt in the encounter that he and the reporter were on the same page. They may have differed over which details they felt should be in the story, but ultimately the subject felt confident that the reporter would mostly adopt his story frame, or one friendly to his own. While such encounters are more pleasant than adversarial interviews, they can also be dangerous, because they raise the subject’s expectations that the coverage will be as he envisions it, and this can lead to disappointment and a sense of betrayal when he sees the published story. As I discuss further in Chapter Five, this is a vital point, because subjects’ expectations also have important implications for how they perceive accuracy.

In the second two scenarios below, subjects sensed their own story frame did not align with reporters’, so the interview felt like a negotiation, or outright struggle, over what the story frame should be. In the most extreme cases, like those described in the final scenario, the subject came to believe during the interview that he was being completely “miscalc,” or manipulated into misrepresenting himself in the interview so the reporter could cast him in a role he felt did not accurately portray his position. These last two scenarios can make for uncomfortable, often adversarial interviews, but they have the advantage of surfacing the constructedness and contestability of the story frame, which can help prepare subjects for coverage that does not quite align with their ideal vision of how the story should be told.

Once more, dividing the range of frame contests into the scenarios below is analytically helpful for understanding the spectrum of subjects’ experiences, but it is important to recognize that these categories blur into one another. Even within a single interview, a subject may move

between them, perhaps feeling at first that the reporter is sympathetic to his frame, then antagonistic, and so forth. As with all encounters, the actors were in a fluid, ongoing process of assessing new informational cues from their partners and adjusting their presentations of self accordingly. All attempts to identify the features of these encounters must take into account their continual metamorphosis.

“I just told him what happened”: Uncontested Story Frames

On one end of the spectrum, the journalistic encounter does not feel like a frame contest at all. This can happen when the subject simply cannot imagine a frame different from his own, or when neither party has a well-formed idea for what the story frame should be.

Interviewees who could not picture an alternative to their own frame tended to look at me blankly when I asked if they felt at all uncomfortable in the interview— if, for example, they felt the reporter was trying to get them to say anything in particular. Often these were witnesses or men-on-the-street who understood they were being cast as such and said they simply told the reporter “what happened” or gave their honest opinion. Take Manuel’s description of his interview. He is a bailiff in a county criminal court, and was featured in the southwestern paper for tackling and detaining a defendant who attempted to escape:

I: Did you want to talk to him? Did you have any reservations about it?

MANUEL: Yeah, I didn’t have any problems with it because I knew what had happened. I mean, there was nothing we were trying to cover up. Like I said, I already knew him, so I felt comfortable with him. I didn’t think he was going to word it the wrong way or give us a bad rap or anything. I felt like he was gonna call it the way it happened...

I: Before you did the interview did you give any thought to what you were going to say?

MANUEL: No. Because you just say what happened. Just like if somebody asked you, “What is your name?” You don’t think about it, you just tell them your name. It’s the same way. When it’s there, it’s there. And that’s how you answer it.⁸

Manuel was confident he would be cast appropriately in a story that would not reflect poorly on him—so confident that it did not even occur to him to doubt it. Although he did hope the story would serve as a deterrent to other potential escapees, he did not have a complex story

⁸ Interview by author, January 8, 2011.

frame in mind other than “what happened,” and he trusted that the reporter’s frame would be the same.

No doubt this trust was partly due to his familiarity with the reporter, but the reporter’s behavior also confirmed Manuel’s confidence that his version of the story was the only one: the reporter did ask him tricky or adversarial questions, or to respond to conflicting reports. This is a key point because, absent this kind of pushback—even friendly pushback—from the reporter, subjects can emerge from the encounter confident that theirs is *the* story frame, and that the reporter’s version of events will largely align with theirs. As such, like Manuel, they tend to simply trust the reporter to tell their story as they themselves envision it, and feel little anxiety during the interview or leading up to the publication of the story; they feel it is unlikely—or outright impossible—that the coverage will depict them negatively or have detrimental effects.

Interviewees also seemed to believe that some triggers were simply less risky than others. Indeed, Manuel, and a number of other interviewees, told me that they felt completely comfortable with the journalist because, given the trigger, they “had nothing to hide.” One could easily conclude that this is a naïve understanding of the journalistic encounter, because all story frames are ultimately under the control of the reporter, who could, in theory, cast the subject in an unflattering role, whether the subject actually has something shameful to hide or not.

But none of my subjects who said they “had nothing to hide” or “just told the reporter what happened” felt, in retrospect, like they had misjudged the encounter. Although some complained about errors in the coverage or noted ways they themselves would have told the story differently, they ultimately did not feel their trust in the reporter had been misplaced. Perhaps this is not so much because they were naïve and got lucky, as it is because people are often better than we give them credit for at discerning when a particular trigger-reporter combination presents very little risk. After all, even the phrase, “I had nothing to hide,” indicates a subject’s awareness that in some journalistic encounters the subject *would* need to

conceal something—that journalists’ job is often inherently adversarial and investigative, to bring to light shameful behavior.

Indeed, many of the same subjects who completely trusted reporters under the particular circumstances of the article we were discussing told me they realized that, under different circumstances—namely if the trigger were controversial or implicated them in some malfeasance—this would be dangerous. But between the benign-seeming trigger and the friendly, receptive behavior of the reporter, this time they intuited that it would be safe to let their guard down. Mike illustrates this well, because he had had a fair amount of experience speaking to more adversarial reporters in his former capacity as the C.E.O. of a national company. He knows how important it is to be very careful about what he says to journalists in general, but for the story about which I had contacted him he chose a different approach. He had been walking home from his first meeting with a young woman who was helping him incorporate social media into his new consulting business, when a neighbor invited him onto her porch for a glass of wine. There he struck up a conversation with another neighbor who, coincidentally, was writing a newspaper article about retirees engaging with new media. Soon he was sitting down with her for a formal interview about his experience:

MIKE: I went up into her home-based office, she sat down at her computer and asked me to pretty much tell the story I told you, and then asked a few questions about it. It was casual, but it was focused.

I: You’d had some interaction with reporters before, so was this particularly different?

MIKE: Well, I mean, we aren’t friends but we’re neighbors and we know each other. So I would say it was easy. I felt completely relaxed. I felt like I didn’t have to screen anything.

I: That’s interesting, because you did have that one experience before that taught you that you had to be very precise.

MIKE: Well yeah, but—as you can see, I talk easily. But when I’m dealing with a reporter I always take one breath and measure my words.

I: And with her it was –

MIKE: I didn’t measure my words.

I: Why do you think that is? Is that because she was a neighbor or –

MIKE: Well, one, I know who she was, and two, it was almost so crazy, I mean it wasn’t, like, positioning my restaurant via a reporter, it was about just telling the story. Again, we’re not friends but we’ve known each other for 5 or 6 years and we’re more or less in the same age group and we suck up to each other about our gardens. So the groundwork was all laid.

I: In that case, if you hadn’t known her, how would that have changed things?

MIKE: I probably would've slowed my speech down and been a little bit more thoughtful in the interview about what was coming out of my mouth.

I: Got it. But in this case it sounds like you trusted her to represent you well.

MIKE: Completely. She could've been my P.R. department for god's sake.⁹

Mike, by any measure, is a fairly media savvy guy. But based on who the reporter was, and what she indicated about the story frame in the encounter—that it would be non-critical, that he could just tell his story freely—he felt completely at ease. He did not have an elaborate vision for the story frame in mind, but he was absolutely certain that whatever the reporter chose to do with his input could only help him.

While I still winced when subjects told me they “trusted” the reporter and felt the interview was a friendly, conversational encounter—just like the one they were having with me, according to more than one interviewee—it was hard not to conclude that under some circumstances subjects are justified in trusting reporters to reframe their performances in ways that will not have negative effects, and that they may well be good judges of when to do so. Here again, a subject's “ordinariness” probably works in his favor. The journalistic imperatives to hold power to account or expose not just malfeasance but any interesting, albeit unflattering, detail about a public figure—exigencies that should make public figures wary around reporters at all times—often do not apply in encounters with ordinary people. When the topic and the subject's involvement in it are uncontroversial, as is often the case with uncomplicated events or basic human interest stories, it stands to reason that the story frame would not be a point of great debate.

Even some subjects who, unlike Mike, did have an ideal story frame in mind, did not feel it was a point of contention in the interview, because they sensed journalist was not coming to the interaction with a prefab story frame: it's hard to have a contest alone. Thomas, a disabled actor who was featured in a long piece in the *New York Times*, went into the interaction with the reporter with strong feelings about what he wanted to get across, and during the interview process he, like Mike and Manuel, did not feel any pushback from the reporter against the

⁹ Interview by author, November 2, 2009.

version of the story he was presenting. This reporter, unlike some Thomas had encountered previously, seemed completely open to having Thomas write his own script:

THOMAS: He did a great job as a reporter and wasn't intrusive, or didn't sort of edge in. He never tried to tell us the story that he wanted—y'know, to get us to tell him the story that he thought he wanted to write. So he just sort of reported as it was. Which was very nice and refreshing. So I guess that's a quality of a good reporter. So he just reported, asked us some questions, interviewed some other people in my life, like actors I had worked with and whatnot. So he did a lot more work than what actually appeared in the article itself. 'Cause in addition to his two or three visits in rehearsal we had a good 3 hour long interview, in which I talked about so many more, much larger issues than what appeared in the article.¹⁰

Thomas's last comment here highlights the potential danger of journalistic encounters in which the story frame feels completely uncontested or uncontestable: it can raise the subject's expectations that his version of events will be adopted whole cloth by the reporter, or will largely shape the story frame the reporter ultimately chooses to adopt. Those expectations might be met, as they were with Manuel and Mike—but they might not be. Thomas still came to love his article—it would have been hard not to, given all the positive feedback he received¹¹ — but his initial reaction to it was that, after all the time he had spent with the reporter, it was not what he had expected:

THOMAS: I remember my mood was like, [sounding let-down] "huhh." I was ambivalent about it—or, I didn't feel so good.
I: Well, do you remember what it was that you were sort of disappointed in? If that's even the word.

THOMAS: Yeah, that would be fine. I think the initial thing was it wasn't really—our concern was that the focus would be on the art and the project and the process, but really [the final article] was this sort of weird quasi-medical story about the physicality of what these two sort of outsiders are doing.¹²

This is a classic clash between the story frame the subject had envisioned—one focused on the performance art he was creating—and the one chosen by the reporter to tell the story—about the medical benefits of the unusual physical activities he took up during rehearsals. If the subject feels during the encounter that the story frame is not in contention—whether because he

¹⁰ Interview by author, March 5, 2010.

¹¹ I discuss audience feedback at length in Chapter Seven.

¹² Interview by author, March 5, 2010.

believes there is only one possible frame, has no particular frame in mind, or believes the reporter to be completely open to adopting his (the subject's) frame—it can be hard for the subject to take special measures to try to influence how the reporter will tell the story, because he simply does not realize it might be necessary. It can also make it hard for the subject to moderate his expectations for the coverage, because, like Thomas, he may assume the story frame he has in mind is also the reporter's. As indicated in some of the examples above, this does not necessarily lead to disappointment with the coverage, because often the subject has, in fact, accurately judged the encounter as one in which the journalist is friendly to his frame. But it is easy to imagine cases, perhaps involving extremely inexperienced subjects, in which the lack of apparent alternative frames could lead to brutal disappointment with the coverage.

Frames Align

Sometimes a subject is highly aware of alternative possible story frames, usually because the trigger itself is complex or controversial. But he feels reassured by the journalist's verbal or nonverbal cues that the journalist's envisioned story frame aligns well with his own. Unlike the previous set of cases, here the story frame becomes more explicitly a point of discussion, negotiation, and collaboration during the interview. And even more so than when the frame feels uncontested, subjects in these cases may let their guard down to a degree and under circumstances that an outsider might think foolish; after all, they are often discussing contentious or sensitive issues. But subjects are responding to immediate cues in the encounter that they believe indicate they can trust the reporter. Indeed, the subject may feel like he is collaborating with the journalist on a story that will meet both their needs, so there is little to be gained by being hostile or guarded. Obviously, this raises the subject's expectations that the coverage will be as he envisions it, which is always a risk. Depending on whether or not he has assessed the situation accurately, this scenario tends to result in the subject either feeling completely satisfied with the coverage or outright betrayed by reporters.

Flora, for example, was contacted by a *New York Times* reporter because she had written an email to prominent members of the Haitian-American community urging them to unite in the wake of the 2010 Haitian earthquake. Someone apparently leaked the email to the reporter, and she was initially tempted to refuse an interview when he contacted her. She had not written the email with a large audience in mind, and worried an article would simply air the community's dirty laundry in public. But the reporter persisted, and convinced her that he wanted to write an in-depth article about an issue she considered very important:

FLORA: At first, when he wrote the email, he just said, "Oh, I heard about this email," and I panicked.

I: And that's when you didn't respond.

FLORA: Yeah, because I didn't want this [the email] to be the thing. But when I spoke to him, it seemed like it was a broader article. And that's when I was like, "Oh, okay." Because I agreed! I had so much to say to him as far as the community and how it wasn't about the earthquake but really about how we need to be a more unified force...

I: Is that what convinced you that you did wanna talk to him? Was it this conversation?

FLORA: Yes. Yeah, because I was just like, this is important.¹³

The reporter presented a fairly loose story frame about the lack of unity in the community, but it was one that corresponded with the message Flora wanted to convey. In their initial phone conversation, and later, in their in-person interview, Flora got continuous cues from the reporter that he was open to her perspective and planned to write an article in which that perspective would be undistorted—because, again, it fit what he was looking for. Since their story frames seemed to align, she felt increasingly comfortable being open with the reporter:

I: Did you give much thought to what you wanted to say to him before the interview?

FLORA: No, not at all. I just figured, like I said, he had a direction he wanted to go. And he just asked me various things...It wasn't an interview, it was more like a dialogue.

I: Did you feel like, in your conversation with him, you had a chance to say the things you really wanted to say?

FLORA: Mm-hmm! I definitely did. I was sad that a lot of the stuff we discussed did *not* make it into the article. But for the most part, yeah. I did get out what I wanted to get out. I told him my personal thoughts...And like I said, you could see he didn't come with an agenda to prove, like to slander or just get the dirt... He had his thoughts, but he wanted to know what the community was thinking and feeling, and he really wanted to put that out there...

¹³ Interview by author, March 12, 2010.

I: So would you say you trusted him?

FLORA: I did. Very much. Very much.¹⁴

Flora's sense that the reporter's envisioned story frame and objectives aligned with hers affected her willingness to talk to him; her behavior in the interview—she shared her “personal thoughts” and felt like the interview was a genuinely open exchange of ideas; and her expectations that, although she could not know all the details of how the reporter would tell the story, the article would be a vehicle for her point of view.

This may sound like a setup for a major letdown, but she was not wrong. The story exceeded her expectations:

FLORA: I liked everything [about the article]. And I liked the context in which he put it, which was, again, in a non-malicious way, it was very much informative and it was really to create this discussion and dialogue about an issue that really exists. I felt like, as a writer, he was trying to accomplish the same thing we were. You know how sometimes someone will quote someone but you can tell they're against what they're saying? But I guess he had an idea and he went out and looked for people to support it. That's really what he did. So, since I was one of those people that supported his thoughts, I guess I like the article [chuckles].¹⁵

Did Flora just get lucky? In a way, probably so, because the reporter still could have chosen to frame the story unfavorably. But she trusted her judgment, intuition—whatever it was exactly—that she was being cast in a role that fit, and cues from the reporter all along the way seemed to confirm that. Looking back on her interactions with the reporter, she concluded, “I felt like his mission was aligned with mine.”¹⁶

Flora felt strongly about the issues addressed in the article, and knew a hostile frame could have damaged her chances to persuade others in her community to agree with her. Leyla had a similar experience, but she was speaking out on a topic so controversial she actually changed her phone number before the article came out. She was contacted by a reporter for a story about contentious organizing practices within a particular union where she was once

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

employed. Long embroiled in the controversy, she was hyperaware of competing story frames that might upend her efforts, and she was especially hesitant to cooperate with any reporter who might use her input to bash the labor movement in general. But she was familiar with this particular reporter's past work, and he made it clear from the beginning that he was on her side of the issue:

LEYLA: So when [reporter] emailed me himself I was pretty willing to speak to him initially just because I know who he is, although I did ask him what he expected his perspective to be. And he was pretty honest with me that he has been friends with [the union president] for a long time, and that he had been very supportive of [the union] but that the reports that he'd heard of this practice were really appalling and he thinks it has no place in the labor movement. And that seemed like a pretty good perspective to have. And so we emailed back and forth and spoke on the phone a whole bunch. And I felt really very comfortable with his handling of the issue.¹⁷

Their subsequent series of encounters felt like a true collaboration to produce the story they both had in mind:

LEYLA: I felt like he was very respectful and it was more of a conversation, a back-and-forth...I felt like he was able to relate, or sympathize; I dunno, he didn't minimize things that I was saying—it's still a pretty hard subject to talk about, honestly... And then when the article came out...he shared with me responses that he got. He made sure that I was abreast of what was going on in the discussion, which I really appreciated...I felt like he was keeping me involved in a way that was really important for me, because the issue is very close to my heart.

I: Yeah, it sounds like what you've described is a very collaborative process.

LEYLA: I really felt like that.¹⁸

Leyla describes an interaction in which she shared painful personal experiences with a sympathetic interlocutor, and he in turn kept her informed about the development of the story and the feedback he received. And the collaboration resulted in the story she had come to expect over the course of that series of encounters. Looking back, she agreed that her level of comfort during the entire process was largely due to the reporter having conveyed to her that his story frame corresponded with her own:

¹⁷ Interview by author, February 18, 2010.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

LEYLA: I felt like he was a vehicle for me to get my story out there in this situation, and I feel like that's what came out in the article, too. I really felt like the story that was out there was the right story.

I: Well, I wonder to what extent you were able to feel that confident due to his being able to tell you right up front that he basically saw the story the way you saw the story.

LEYLA: Yeah. I think that was hugely important for me. Absolutely. I think that I probably would have spoken to him differently had that not been the case. I think I still would've spoken to him, at the end of the day, but I think I may have been more planned, or aware, or even concerned with exactly how I said everything in a way that I didn't have to be because I felt pretty reassured right from the beginning.¹⁹

Several subjects of long personal profiles described a similar feeling of collaborating with reporters to devise a mutually agreeable story frame. In a sense, in these cases the stakes are even higher and the possibility of the story ultimately not meeting expectations greater, because first, the story is entirely about the subject, and second, for profiles the subject and the reporter often spend many hours, even days, together. That's a lot of time to try to maintain a publicly presentable face. But most of the profile subjects I spoke to felt comfortable in their interactions with journalists, partly because there was open discussion about which story frame might work well for the article. Billy, for example, is an up-and-coming comedian who was featured in a long profile in the southwestern paper. He and the reporter discussed it in advance, to make sure they were on the same page:

BILLY: We had a pre-interview. He asked me, "What do you have in mind for this?" Then we kinda discussed that.

I: He asked you what you had in mind?

BILLY: Yeah, he asked, "What do you imagine the finished product will look like?" And he was like, "Yeah, that's kinda what I was thinkin' too."²⁰

Looking back on their interactions, Billy recognized that the reporter had been a skilled interactor who was very good at getting him to talk, and, as subjects often do, Billy used the kinds of questions he was being asked to develop a mental image of what might be highlighted in the article, even as he sensed the journalist was doing the same:

BILLY: We ate and we talked and he recorded the whole time. The best way to flirt with somebody is to get them to talk about themselves, and so, whenever he was talking to

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Interview by author, July 28, 2010.

me it just all started coming out. He would ask me one question and I would go off for like, ten minutes, and then he would come back. He was very laid back. I think he was very good at listening, which I think made it easier for me to talk to him. I never got the feeling of him being judgmental in any way. I could tell he was listening because he would go back, like, five minutes later when I'd been talking and say, "Can you elaborate on this more?" Which I think was his way of saying, "What can I make this article about? What are the things that I think people will be most interested in?" So in that way I think maybe he did have an idea what he wanted, but he didn't know what it was until it started fleshing itself out. So it kinda drew itself and he was kinda filling the paint-by-numbers thing.²¹

Billy described a kind of joint writing of the script, in which he provided the raw material and the reporter honed it along the way. He admitted that, as a comedian, he is unusually comfortable having even embarrassing details about himself aired publicly—his comedy act hinges on this—so maybe he was less concerned than most that the reporter would paint him in an unflattering light. But even profile subjects who had very strict ideas about what they wanted exposed in an article were remarkably trusting of reporters whose basic story frames seemed friendly to them. Fatima, who was featured in a long profile about Muslim women, spent three days with a reporter shadowing her. They spent hours interacting, and she grew to trust the reporter not to expose anything she did not want exposed, including what she looked like behind her veil. It helped that the reporter was female and familiar with the Muslim community and, in contrast to her negative feelings about the TV journalist described in the last chapter, Fatima quickly grew to consider this reporter a friend. For Fatima, not only determining the reporter's idea for the story frame from the outset, but also getting to know the reporter on a personal level, were important in establishing that trust:

FATIMA: She was very open and, to be honest with you, the experience with [the reporter] was absolutely the best experience. What really made it great is that I like to know the person personally... She really took the time to talk to me and not make me feel pressured, and she was very much explaining to me what she wanted to do. She told me it's not a political piece, it's just supposed to be a profile to just to try to show what our life is like, basically.²²

²¹ Ibid.

²² Interview by author, December 5, 2010.

Fatima described a long process that was deeply collaborative. She asked the reporter what kinds of activities she might want to see during her visit and arranged to do those things; in return she explained that she did not cover in front of women, but that she did not want her appearance described in an article, and would prefer that any photographer accompanying them be female as well. She found the reporter amenable to all her requests, and in return she worked hard to help the reporter get the kind of story she was looking for, because it was the kind of story she, Fatima, also wanted to tell.

And she never felt her trust was misplaced: the reporter was an attentive listener, open to her ideas about what might work well in an article:

I: What did you think of those initial interviews with her?

FATIMA: It was very much like this interview right now. She's very personable, she laughed at my jokes, and reacted and she was engaging. Like, "Oh I didn't know that," or "Tell me more about this," or whatever. So it was very easy to talk to her. I didn't feel any nervousness. Then we actually just kind of became friends. She had specific questions that she wanted answered and so she would use those questions to start the conversation and then I would kind of add, like "I think this is a cool point," or "you should put this in." Or "this is a good story."²³

And Fatima loved the published story. It captured her life beautifully and, judging by the readers' comments, portrayed members of her community as relatable human beings, dispelling some damaging myths about Islam, which was her primary goal.

So what is going on here? All of these examples seem to flatly contradict the classic Janet Malcolm scenario of seduction and betrayal: these subjects were explicitly led by friendly reporters to believe they were writing a particular kind of story, and in return the subjects were open and trusting. And, based on their reactions to the coverage, that trust turned out to be well placed. Here, once more, I think it helps to recall that these are not public figures, and both journalistic conventions and U.S. libel law make it contrary to a journalist's best interests to go around egregiously misleading private citizens and writing unflattering profiles of them, unless perhaps the reporter is exposing serious malfeasance. On the other hand, there is a lot to be gained by developing a collaborative-feeling relationship with a subject, especially when

²³ Ibid.

writing profiles or stories about sensitive issues: it clearly leads subjects to be more open and honest and helpful in the encounter. Contrary to Malcolm's claims, many reporters do not go out of their way to lead the subject to expect a particular story frame if they are not fairly sure they will use it. The less ethically questionable alternative—expressing frank agnosticism about the story frame—is often just as effective a technique for getting people to express their views as feigning sympathy with it, and far less messy.

That said, not all of my interviewees who felt they were led to believe reporters' frames aligned with their own turned out to be right, and the result of their misunderstandings ranged from disappointment to Malcolmesque betrayal. In the less extreme cases, subjects said that they had gotten the sense during the interview that the reporter was on their side of a controversial issue—but admitted that the reporter had never come right out and said anything to lead them to expect particularly favorable coverage. Ray, who owns an iconic food cart in the southwestern city, was embroiled in a territory dispute with a new upscale restaurant. The battle escalated until he felt he had no choice but to try to rally public support by sending a press release to local media outlets. In casual encounters with reporters who stopped by the food cart, he told me, "Several of the media people had kinda let me know that they were behind us."²⁴ And he expected that: he was the underdog in this story, and he felt the media usually sided with the underdog in these cases. So he was disappointed when the coverage was completely balanced, deliberately presenting both sides of the argument even-handedly. No reporter had come right out and told him she would write a story favoring his side, but they all seemed so sympathetic to his cause—and he was so certain he was in the right—it just seemed as if they would.

I also saw evidence that, in coverage of controversial issues or local conflicts, even if the reporter did not overtly express sympathy for the subject's views, the nature of the face-to-face encounter was such that it could lead him to believe the article would be more sympathetic than

²⁴ Interview by author, January 4, 2011.

it later turned out to be. Norma, a Tea Party leader who told me she probably spent upwards of twelve hours talking with a *New York Times* reporter, said that he came across as exceptionally friendly, curious, and articulate, and that others in her local chapter came to like him and regard him as a friend. One couple invited him on a fishing trip. She conceded that she was never absolutely certain where he stood on the issue, but she *thought* he leaned slightly in their favor.

While she felt personally well-represented in the article when came out—a long investigative piece of the kind that wins Pulitzers and by most measures would be held up as a paragon of balanced reporting—other members of her local chapter who were also named in it felt quite betrayed. She explained to me, “I think they felt they had opened their hearts to him, and really expressed how they felt, and they felt that that was dishonored.”²⁵ I spoke with two other Tea Party leaders who had interacted with the same reporter in different locations. They found him professional and curious, and in one case, somewhat adversarial; they did not get the sense that he was feigning sympathy for their cause at all. But I suspect that for many people not accustomed to being named in articles on controversial topics, it is hard to have a friendly conversation with a kind, open-minded reporter without developing a sense that he is their side, and that the story frame he chooses will reflect that—even if he gives no explicit confirmation that this is the case.

But, of course, the sense of betrayal was worse if the subject believed the reporter had explicitly confirmed that she had chosen the subject’s preferred frame, and then wrote a story that did not fulfill that oral contract. This sense that the reporter was friendly to their views affected how subjects presented themselves and their messages during their interviews—recall Leyla’s comment that, had she sensed the reporter’s frame did not align with hers, she “would have spoken to him differently.”²⁶ Subjects simply cannot adjust their face appropriately if they

²⁵ Interview by author, March 2, 2010.

²⁶ Interview by author, February 18, 2010.

do not understand that the encounter is still a contest over the story frame, and not one in which that has been settled.

Vernon felt betrayed in just this way. He was spearheading a movement to build a park dedicated to cancer survivorship in the southwestern city, an issue that had periodically made the news over the years, first in a series of positive reports and then as the subject of controversy, when a group of cancer survivors rose up in opposition. With a final decision by the Parks Board looming, and the dueling factions more at odds than ever, the same reporter who had given Vernon's side favorable coverage in the past contacted him for an article about the pros and cons. Based partly on their previous encounters, but also on this one, he was certain that she had in mind a story frame that, like his, presented the park as a boon to the city:

VERNON: [The reporter] was sounding real positive. I asked her not to do anything negative. We didn't wanna argue with [the park opponents]. They had a right to their opinion. We just wanted to be able to express what we were doing.

I: What did the reporter say the article was gonna be about?

VERNON: She said it was gonna be a positive article trying to help the park and get it through. To help us. They knew we were having problems. They had talked to me before, and it was gonna be another article to support the park. She told all of us that.

I: She said -

VERNON: "I'm doing this about both sides, but I wanna lean it toward the positive to try to help you."²⁷

The fact that there were alternative frames to the story—that there was a feud over the issue at all—raised the stakes for the coverage, because Vernon was hoping to win over popular opinion and influence the Parks Board decision. So it was all the more important to him that the reporter appeared to support his cause, and all the more disappointing when she produced an article that presented the opposition as having a very strong case. I had my doubts about the veracity of the above account; it seemed unlikely that the reporter would have explicitly told him she was on his side and, as I discuss in the next section, I interviewed several of the park's opponents who found the same reporter neutral and professional. But whether this exact exchange took place as Vernon recalled it or not, I had no doubt at all that he and his supporters

²⁷ Interview by author, July 28, 2010.

had expected her to favor his story frame, and felt misled when she did not. He concluded, “It made me really not trusting when I talk to the press. I’ll never do another article with the press again. I think none of us will. We felt betrayed by the city and the paper.”²⁸

Something similar happened to Daniel. He and his friend Rodney were interviewed for an article about substance abuse counselors in Bronx high schools who, like themselves, had been laid off due to budget cuts. Daniel was interviewed first, and had a very specific story frame in mind: he wanted to convey to readers that this was one of the most drug infested neighborhoods in the country; that his high school had been successfully confronting the problem through aggressive programming, partly led by himself; and that these cuts would have detrimental effects on the children. He spent over an hour talking to the reporter about all the good works he had done, and even sent her pictures of the students. And he explicitly asked her—more than once—if all of this information would make it into the story:

I: Tell me more about what that conversation was like.

DANIEL: It was good. We started from my first year at [his high school], and the transition that I made from middle school to high school, [more about his work at the school] I was telling her all of that.

I: And was she just kind of letting you talk? Was she interested?

DANIEL: She was very interested. She was like, “Wow. This is so nice. Wow.” I felt betrayal—I felt mad afterwards. Because she seemed like she was so—for us. For our kids, the community. Me. I was excited.

I: Is that because you felt you had been able to say everything you wanted to say and you had this vision of the article that was getting the word out about the school was doing –

DANIEL: Right. And how the parents were involved. Everything. We coulda hit a home run! I said [to the reporter], “most of the stuff we talked about’s gonna be in there, right?” And she said, “Yeah, most of the stuff we talked about’s gonna be in there.” ... I said, “Okay, because I really want people to know about this” ...

I: Okay, got it. That was the story that you were –

DANIEL: Originally. “The Bronx is about to lose two good ones. Why are we lettin’ these guys go?” That’s what she helped me envision when she first got on the phone with me.²⁹

Daniel felt he had been explicitly led to believe that the story frame would be what he was hoping for—a complete portrait of his school and the implications of the recent layoffs—

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Interview by author, November 25, 2009.

and felt betrayed when the reporter wrote a short piece focusing mostly on his friend Rodney and the financial blow of the layoffs on Rodney's family. As Daniel explained, if he had realized that the journalist's story frame did not align with his, he would have modified his expectations for the coverage, and changed his behavior to pitch her a concise sound bite that would have conveyed his main message while conforming to her story frame:

I: Do you think if, when you had said to that reporter, "Now, is most of this gonna be in there," if she had said, "the truth is that it's looking like it will be a shorter article and will probably focus on the fact that you were laid off." Do you think that then you would've been less disappointed with the result?

DANIEL: Yeah. I would've been less disappointed. I wouldn't have been that mad because I would've been expecting it. And I also would've said, "Okay. Just mention that this school is in the highest, drug infested neighborhood in the South Bronx, and the kids are gonna need somebody there."³⁰

Rodney, who spoke to the reporter after Daniel, had a much more positive experience. During that interview Rodney sensed that the reporter was adopting his own frame for the story, which differed from Daniel's: he and his wife had *both* been laid off, a critical blow to his family's economic welfare. Based on his sense that the reporter was intrigued by his story frame, he made a point of adjusting his performance to ensure his message would translate well:

RODNEY: When I brought up the situation that my wife also got laid off, it opened up another set of questions that was like, [imitating a suddenly very interested reporter] "Ooh, really? Oh, this is huge. It's not just you. Because your situation, it affects the whole family." ...I wasn't sure what [the article] was gonna be because you give so much information. You don't know what they're gonna choose. But I made sure to get some key points in. To get the main sound bite in, which was, "Husband and wife laid off." And that was the big thing. "Due to the fact that this situation happened."³¹

To be fair to the reporter, what most likely happened was that she changed her story frame when she spoke to Rodney; perhaps she had fully intended to focus on Daniel's school and the effects of the layoffs on the students until she found Rodney's account of the impact on his family a more compelling way to frame the story—or perhaps her editors made the decision.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Interview by author, November 11, 2009.

But the main point that Daniel and Rodney illustrate is that subjects adjust both their performance during the encounter and their expectations for the coverage based on their sense of how well their own ideal frame for the story corresponds with what the reporter is going to write. Both believed during the interview that their frame aligned with the reporter's because of cues they got from the reporter. Daniel was wrong, and when he saw the coverage, he felt betrayed. Rodney was right, and loved it.

A Tug-of-War³² Over Story Frames

Sometimes the subject remains aware throughout the interview process that the journalist may well choose a story frame that is far from his ideal. These encounters do not necessarily feel antagonistic—some still feel collaborative. But the subject tends to let his guard down less, because the reporter does not give off cues that she is necessarily an ally. The subject often feels he needs to continually defend his points, senses he is giving up more ground than he would like, and tends to maintain moderate expectations that the eventual story frame the reporter chooses will correspond with the ideal story frame he, the subject, has in mind.

Vernon's opponents in the cancer park controversy had a very different experience than he did with that article, largely because they understood their interactions with the reporter quite differently. I spoke with three women who publicly opposed the park, and all three described similar interactions with the reporter. Throughout the interview they found her responsive, invested in trying to understand their points of view and articulate them well, but what I would call "frame agnostic": she seemed open to presenting their arguments, but not promoting them. Wendy, for example, felt the encounter was a concerted effort, even to the point where she trusted the journalist to reword her quotes better than she could word them herself:

³² Here I borrow Gans's characterization of the relationship between sources and journalists. Gans, *Deciding What's News*, 81, 117.

WENDY: [The reporter] called me, before it went to press, and she actually worked with me on the language of this small sentence. And at the end we couldn't quite come up with it on the phone, but I said, "Y'know, I believe that you've heard what I'm saying. I trust you to write it down." Which might've been very naive on my part, but I did feel, after those two conversations that she really was trying to articulate what I was trying to say.

I: So during the course of your conversation you said that she asked really good questions and you got a really good impression of her. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

WENDY: She just asked—she really listened. She reflected back to me, often, what it was I was saying, better than I was saying it. She was more articulate than I was. And she really seemed genuinely concerned about the issue of it being balanced. I knew that she was gonna go talk to people who were mad at that point, and I didn't want her to get Vernon's side of it, but I respected that.³³

Wendy knew throughout the process, and after the interview, that the story frame might well favor the opposing viewpoint:

I: But she didn't push you to say anything you didn't wanna say?

WENDY: No. After the first interview I wondered if I had said too many words and if those too-many-words things were gonna get chopped up and used badly. That type of thing.

I: So do you think you had a sense of what the whole article [would be like]?

WENDY: I had no sense. I had no sense. So in that way it was very naïve.

I: What were your thoughts going forward? Were you –

WENDY: "Oh shit! I hope this is okay."

I: Okay. So kind of anxiety or worry.

WENDY: Yeah. Oh yeah, very much so.³⁴

When the article came out she was pleased at how balanced it was, and judging by reader comments, it seemed her side of the argument had been the more convincing for many readers. Unlike Vernon, who interpreted the reporter's behavior as confirmation that she would write a story in his favor, Wendy felt the interaction was friendly and synergetic, but was conscious throughout that the reporter could choose details and edit her words to frame the story in a way that would be unfriendly to her side. It is impossible to know whether Wendy's and Vernon's different interpretations of the journalist's behavior and expectations for the story frame were really due to the reporter having behaved differently with each of them; perhaps Vernon's conviction that the reporter would write an article favoring the park came more from

³³ Interview by author, July 26, 2010.

³⁴ Ibid.

his preconception that the opposition's argument was absurd than anything the reporter actually did in their interview. Or perhaps the park opponents were simply more media savvy than Vernon, so they knew not to get their hopes up. But what seems clear is that, throughout the interview process, the park opponents were acutely aware that the story frame could go the other way, and they worked hard to convince the reporter of their point of view. If Vernon had not been quite so certain the reporter was on his side, he, too, might have pulled out all the stops to persuade her.

This calls to mind Goffman's observation that genuine behavior in an interaction—even if it is an outward expression of boredom or skepticism—is important because it allows the interactor to make adjustments to his performance.³⁵ When a subject believes the reporter is agnostic—or even openly skeptical—about his position on an issue, he can tweak his presentation in the encounter to present the most convincing possible argument; take defensive measures to counter any potential counterarguments; and modify his expectations for the coverage.

Nikhil is a good example of this. A surgeon who spoke to a reporter for the southwestern paper about a controversial procedure he performs to relieve migraines, he knew right off the bat that the reporter was a skeptic, so he spoke to her as he would a wary patient, sensing this was the best approach to ensure she would choose a favorable—or at least not unfavorable—story frame:

NIKHIL: When I spoke to the reporter, she mentioned that, "I know this thing doesn't work." So I was like, "Okay. Well, I'm not gonna convince you that that this works, but I want to at least give you the other side of the story."

I: So she actually presented herself as someone who was convinced that it didn't work.

NIKHIL: Yeah, she herself was a migraine sufferer. And so she kind of was sympathetic, but she was not fully convinced. So my goal was not to make her a believer, but at least to say, "Well, let's keep it in the middle. Let's get you a balance." So I told her, "You're ultimately gonna write the story. But I want you to at least know both sides of it." And I did tell her that this is not necessarily a controversial procedure, it's a new procedure. We just have to figure out who it works on, and I can tell you it doesn't work on everybody. So, I think when that kind of information was laid out there, she was ready to kind of back off her thoughts, and listen to me.

³⁵ Goffman, "Alienation from Interaction," 128.

I: Well, after the interview, how did you feel it had gone?

NIKHIL: I thought it went okay, I did not—the article came out much better than I thought.³⁶

In a sense, Nikhil was lucky, because the reporter came right out and told him where she stood on the issue, so he could pitch his performance appropriately; his rational, respectful presentation was probably the most persuasive approach he could have chosen. And her attitude helped him lower his expectations, so he was pleasantly surprised with how balanced the article ultimately was.

I found that even if the reporter did not present herself as an outright skeptic, as she did in Nikhil's case, if she behaved like one—asking adversarial questions or continually presenting opposing viewpoints for the subject to address—subjects got the sense they needed to maneuver deftly in the interview to convey their message. In such cases the encounter could feel like a negotiation, if not an outright battle, with the journalist over how the story should be framed. Colleen, for example, went through a series of interviews with a *New York Times* reporter for a story about a new private elementary school where she is an administrator. She was aware going into the interview that the new school, like many issues involving education, was controversial, and she tried to prepare herself for an adversarial interview. She described a classic tug-of-war with the reporter, in which she tried to censor herself, felt pushed by the reporter to say things she had hoped to avoid, and ultimately gave up more ground than she had wanted to:

COLLEEN: There were certain things that she asked me that I was not gonna tell her. And that was tricky.

I: What did you say when she asked you those questions?

COLLEEN: I said, "I'm not at liberty to talk about that." Or "I'm not gonna talk about that." ...A couple of times I was—not manipulated, but I was pushed. And I was pushed to the point of being concerned of how it would be represented if I did not answer.

I: That you would kind of implicate yourself by not responding?

COLLEEN: Yes, that it would be easier to just get it out there than to say, "That's not the point." Which, of course, from my perspective, you're missing the point, but from her perspective, she's writing the article.

I: Right, and it's exactly her point.

COLLEEN: Exactly. That whole thing about whether or not we have an I.Q. cutoff on a

³⁶ Interview by author, August 17, 2010.

standardized test in order for children to be admitted. We don't, and I can support it six ways to Sunday, but she kept pushing, "but all of your applicants are in the high 90s, right?" And [I said] "Most of them are." "But how many would you say?!" "Most of them!" She's hammering.³⁷

Being on the defensive end of an adversarial interview process can be strenuous and exhausting. Since the reporter is ultimately the one who will write the story, subjects may feel hobbled in the tug-of-war over the story frame by their dependence on the reporter's good will; no matter how aggressive the reporter might be, it may be contrary to a subject's best interest to seem overtly defensive or antagonistic in return. After all, the subject is, well, subject to the reporter's interpretation of events, and the stakes can be high:

I: Looking at the experience generally you summed it up as "excruciating."

COLLEEN: Well, having someone ask you questions for 8 hours is exhausting, physically and mentally. Then there's the backstory in your mind of "why are you asking me this again?" But I don't wanna say to her, "Why are you asking me that?" Y'know, you don't wanna be antagonistic to somebody who's writing an article about you! It was excruciating because I did feel like I was in a witness box, and... because there was so much at stake. It was not a little fluffy little, "Tell us about your recipe for chili bread." Y'know, it was not that kind of thing. And even though it may have come across to people reading it that it was just a nice, fluffy, informative piece, that's not what it felt like in the process.³⁸

A subset of tug-of-war encounters are those in which the subject feels the journalist does not understand the issues, or is approaching them from the wrong angle from the outset. In such cases the subject may try to educate or disabuse the reporter of some misperception so she will adopt a different story frame, but it can be frustrating if the reporter just does not seem to get it. Natasha, for example, was caught up in a local controversy in which she accused a charity of fraudulent practices. She spent a lot of time trying to explain her case to the reporter, and provided her with vast amounts of evidence to prove her point. She ultimately felt throughout their interactions that the reporter was not *antagonistic* toward her story frame, but simply could not understand it, and was far too easily swayed by counterarguments:

NATASHA: This reporter is in charge of the charity beat. This was way over her head.

³⁷ Interview by author, November 9, 2009.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

It's much bigger than someone that reports on the March of Dimes fundraiser or the triathlon, or the whatever... I think she just never encountered anything quite like this before. And I think probably one of the biggest problems was representing what's going on is because there's so much information it could be overwhelming. But I felt like even though she said she wasn't gonna take sides, I felt she had no discernment. I mean, she's a nice enough person, but I don't think she had the processing capability of doing an overview of that amount of material.³⁹

A tug-of-war over story frames can provoke a lot of anxiety in the subject, because it can feel uncomfortably adversarial or, as in Natasha's experience, hopeless. But tug-of-war encounters can be preferable to those described in the previous two categories, because they foreground the fact that the story frame is being negotiated, and that the journalist will ultimately make his or her own decision about what it will be. This negotiation between unequal players is always at the heart of the interview process, but it can be more or less evident, depending on the behavior of both actors, especially the journalist. As illustrated by the examples above, since the subject in tug-of-war encounters is always aware the frame is in play, he can adjust his behavior to present the most persuasive version of his argument, and is far less likely to feel betrayed by the coverage, even if it is outright hostile.

Help, I'm Being Miscast!

Sometimes, however, the subject gets the feeling during an interview that the reporter is not just asking tough questions, but trying to get him to say something very specific—to perform a role that the reporter needs to cast, but that the subject may not feel accurately represents him. Some subjects only realized they had been miscast when they saw the published story, and I discuss their reactions in Chapter Five. But I spoke with a number of subjects who sensed during the interview itself that the reporter had an entire script written already, and was trying to get them to parrot back the lines. Obviously, a reporter cannot come

³⁹ Interview by author, January 3, 2011.

right out and tell the subject what to say, but he may ask leading questions, or use other conversational techniques to try to elicit a specific performance.

While quite a few of my subjects got the feeling during the interview that the reporter was trying to get them to follow a prewritten script, they varied a great deal in their ability to prevent it from happening. Bella, a university professor contacted by several publications for comment on a new video game about her area of expertise, captured beautifully what it feels like to sense you are being miscast. She described the struggle to resist the reporter's efforts to get her to play a role she did not want, and that did not accurately represent her point of view:

BELLA: He said he was writing an article on [the game], and would like to know my opinion of it. And I said, "Well, I would like to play it to be able to answer that." And the first really odd thing about it to me was that he said there wasn't going to be time to do that, because the article was due out on Saturday. And I said, "Well, it would be very hard for me to give my impression without ever having played it." And basically, he didn't find that a sufficient reason to not give an impression. So I then asked him to describe it. So then we had quite a pleasant conversation in which he described it and I made some comments. But it was very clear to me that he had a storyline for his article, and that involved asking a professor whose field this was, and that that person would be aghast.

I: How could you tell?

BELLA: Oh, I mean, it was transparent. It really was: did I not disapprove of this? He had that storyline. And I could tell it to such a degree that I had to keep resisting it very consciously...Because he had a very clear script. And I think he was going to have different kinds of interlocutors, but the professor was going to say, "This is really the end of civilization as we know it. That you would make a videogame." He never said those words. I'm telling you what was my sense of what was expected from me. And I had a very clear sense of not wanting to play ball on those terms...I wasn't going to go down as the snooty Ivy League professor who won't even dream of looking at the videogame. That much I wasn't going to have...It was inaccurate, and I don't like being scripted. I don't! And it was so clear to me that he was scripting me. He was not rude. I don't feel like I had a terrible experience. I just felt like I was part of a scripted, already written piece where I was supposed to be just the line from the Ivy League professor.⁴⁰

Although Bella felt she was able to resist being miscast, she spent so much time in the interview trying avoid saying what the reporter wanted her to, she ultimately felt she did not manage to convey anything of value about the topic—a disappointment, since opportunities to influence the public conversation about her area of expertise are extremely rare. As she

⁴⁰ Interview by author, November 29, 2010.

summarized it, “It was too over-determined. I realized that. I did what I could to engage him, but it just had too many constraints built into it in terms of my being able to say anything.”⁴¹

She felt it was a missed opportunity, but at least Bella managed to resist the reporter’s efforts to miscast her—she did not look back and feel she had misrepresented herself, despite the reporter’s efforts to get her to do so. Some subjects did not fare as well. At times, even when they recognized they were being miscast, they had trouble adjusting their performances to avoid it. This can happen when subjects simply acquiesce during the encounter and find themselves saying what the reporter clearly wants them to say, or when they say so much in the interview the reporter can later excerpt quotes that suit her story frame. I spoke with three young women in three different states who had talked to a *New York Times* reporter for a story on social dynamics on college campuses. All three felt the reporter was casting an already scripted story, and all three felt the roles did not quite fit. Shauna described trying to resist:

I: Did you feel like you were able, in that conversation, to say what you wanted to say?

SHAUNA: I think I tried to, but I don’t know if he was even listening when I said stuff. Because I felt like he really just had an agenda already. He knew what he wanted the story to be like and he just wanted to find quotes or bits of information and work them in. He asked the same question over and over again, hoping that I would eventually give him the response that he wanted.

I: Well after you hung up, what were your thoughts about how the interview had gone?

SHAUNA: I called one of my friends and I was like, “Yeah, so I had this interview and I really felt like he wanted me to say a certain thing.” Like, that was my immediate feeling. I was thinking, “Oh, I probably won’t be used because I wasn’t saying what he wanted.” I felt like I wasn’t giving him any supporting evidence that he would wanna use.⁴²

But of course she *was* used, quoted twice, in ways she felt were taken out of context and misrepresented her view completely. Despite her efforts to redirect the conversation during the interview and avoid following the prewritten script, she was cast in a role that supported the reporter’s thesis. While Shauna found herself actively resisting being miscast, Monica chose a kind of middle ground, in which she tried to tell the reporter what he wanted to hear, without entirely misrepresenting herself:

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Interview by author, September 16, 2010.

I: Did you ever get the sense that he was trying to get you to say something in particular?

MONICA: Oh yeah. Definitely. I got the impression that he had his central thesis and he was definitely looking for anecdotes and information that would back that up. And I think I tended to mold things to fit that thesis. I think I still said what I wanted to say, and I said things that I believed were true, but there were other things I could have said that didn't support his thesis that were true as well. Or that I knew that he wouldn't—that he didn't pick up on when I would say them.

I: So it sounds like you felt pretty comfortable giving him information that shored up his thesis because it wasn't false in your experience, but neither was it –

MONICA: I definitely didn't say anything I felt was untrue.

I: I guess that's another way of asking the question: whether or not you felt manipulated into saying anything you weren't comfortable with.

MONICA: No, definitely not. That can be true, to some extent, of any conversation you have with anybody. Just based on their reactions to certain things that you say. And so I suppose in that way that was probably true to some extent, but I don't think that as a reporter he pressured me into saying anything.⁴³

Monica's last point here ties back to Goffman nicely, raising the question of to what degree a journalistic encounter in which the subject finds herself telling the reporter what he wants to hear is really any different from ordinary face-work. As Monica suggests, a skilled reporter can project a face that is dependent not only on the subject engaging with him, but on her supplying certain desired information, in a certain desirable way. To avoid damaging the reporter's face or rocking the ritual boat, the subject suddenly finds herself not only chatting away, but saying things to suit the journalist's story frame. A state of warm mutual regard is sustained—at least until the story comes out. Even Monica, who seemed to recognize what was going on while it was happening, was not *too* thrilled when she saw her quote in *The New York Times*, which she said made her come off as, "shallow, and materialistic, and a gold digger."⁴⁴ She was resigned to it, but it was not how she would have chosen to be cast on a national stage.

As I noted in the previous chapter, interviews that are being recorded for television and radio differ from print interviews in a number of ways, not least that the interview frame and the story frame overlap. By this I simply mean that for broadcast news parts of the encounter are recorded for direct (if highly edited) relay to the public. It can be especially frustrating to

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

feel an off-camera reporter is trying to manipulate your performance, as Deanne discovered. Recall that she witnessed a woman attempt suicide. She was in shock when a *Fox News* reporter approached her and tried, through a series of overly sympathetic expressions and gestures, to get her to emote for the camera:

DEANNE: She said, "Did you see what happened?" I said, "Yes." And then it was immediately lights on, here's the microphone in my face. And she said, "Can you tell us what happened?" But I just felt immediately, I just got a fake vibe from this woman. [phony voice] "Ohh, that must've been hard." And it was like, "Ick." And okay, now you're gonna try to create this big maudlin story.

I: So you felt like she was, like, milking –

DEANNE: Totally! That's exactly what it was.

I: And your sense of that came from her tone?

DEANNE: Totally. Just cheesy. It was fake, it was cheesy. Honestly, it was like *Saturday Night Live*. It was like she's giving me these knowing, sympathetic looks and I was like, "How the hell did I get here? What am I doing?" It was sorta like an out-of-body experience. It was like I heard myself talking, but I didn't wanna be talking, and y'know, this reporter might've been a really nice woman, but at that moment I just had nothing but disdain and was like, "Ick. You're another vulture." Y'know, and maybe you've spent the last twenty years covering the Sudan, y'know, to try to do good with your journalism, but right now the feeling was, "You're just trying to get some sensational, manipulative, heart-tugging story, and how did I become a part of it? Like, why am I agreeing to this?"

I: And you felt that way at the time?

DEANNE: I did. It definitely went through my mind.⁴⁵

Deanne vividly describes how the shock of the trigger event and the immediate demands of the face-to-face encounter, including the cameras and the behavior of the reporter, can lead a subject to not only agree to be in a news story before he can really think through the pros and cons, but to present himself in ways he later regrets. When Deanne saw the coverage she realized she had succumbed to the reporter's efforts: voice shaking, clearly distraught, she *hated* how she came across.

I: Do you think she was doing it because she was trying to get you all worked up?

DEANNE: Yeah! I think she was. I think she was trying to get me to really emote. And I did. When I saw it that night, oh, I just hated it. And I hated it because I felt like, y'know what? I allowed this woman to—

I: Well, did she try to get you to say certain things that you weren't gonna say?

DEANNE: She did.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Interview by author, October 14, 2010.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Miscastings are the encounters that most raise questions about to what degree, from a subject's point of view, the demands of a face-to-face encounter are simply incompatible with the news production process. If a journalist is putting out subtle—or not so subtle—cues that his own face-maintenance is predicated on the subject performing a very specific role, it can be difficult for the subject not to comply, even though that role may not represent him well at all. One might think only very naïve news subjects would fall into this trap, but my data suggests that journalists themselves might be particularly susceptible to it. Shauna and Monica were fourth-year college journalists at the time of their interviews, and both said that made them especially eager to cooperate with any reporter, especially one from a prestigious paper like *The New York Times*. Not only did they feel their experience as journalists made them sensitive to the kinds of material reporters look for, they were especially invested in stoking this particular reporter's goodwill: what college reporter does not dream of a job at *The New York Times*? It stands to reason that the more invested a subject is in pleasing a reporter in the encounter, the more prone to distorting himself to suit her needs.

And lest this appear only a product of youthful inexperience in Monica and Shauna's cases, Ira, who has been working as a magazine journalist for a decade, was a particularly extreme example of a subject contorting to fit a particular, unflattering role, largely because he felt obligated to do so by the reporter. The reporter in question was a former editorial colleague whose work Ira had never particularly admired, and who was writing a piece for a New York tabloid about adult men who play video games. Ira does play video games—as part of his job reviewing them, for limited periods of time in his office, and with his wife's blessing. But little by little he found himself responding to pressures from the reporter, and later a photographer, to present himself as a man-child whose video game habit was threatening his marriage. He even found himself enlisting his wife in the charade: they both gave quotes that indicated video game playing was a point of contention in their home, and posed for pictures to that effect.

I: Was there any point when you guys said, "No, I'm not gonna do that?" Or did you just kinda play along?

IRA: We were definitely a little resistant. But the thing is, like, that whole experience was so awkward anyway so we were kinda like, [acquiescing] “ehhh.” Obviously the photographer knew we were a little bit anxious about it, but we didn’t put our foot down. Actually, the whole thing is this like, weird cumulative effect of obedience. Or just an unwillingness to resist.

I: Yeah, it sounds almost like you were victims of your own willingness to cooperate.

IRA: Yes! Yes.

I: Because it was the path of least resistance or something.

IRA: Yeah. And it essentially—I think it all boils down to me just wanting to be friendly with an editor.⁴⁷

The article was humiliating, of course: technically accurate insofar as no facts were wrong, it failed to mention that Ira played video games *for his job*. But more disturbing than the content of the article per se was the feeling that he had been complicit in misrepresenting himself and his wife. As his experience illustrates, although many subjects do successfully resist what they feel are efforts by reporters to squeeze them into preconceived roles that do not fit, sometimes other factors in the encounter itself—like the subject’s sympathy for a particular reporter or for the challenges faced by all journalists—can make it especially hard to do so. In this sense, far from inoculating a subject from the temptation to misrepresent himself to help out another reporter, a subject’s familiarity with news production may actually make him more likely to succumb.

Conclusion

Many of my subjects expressed frustration with some aspect of the reporting process or the coverage of their stories. But the only ones who used the word “betrayed” were those who, like Daniel and Vernon, felt they had been led by a reporter in the interview stage to expect a particular story frame; adjusted their performance and message accordingly; and then discovered when they saw the coverage that the reporter had chosen to frame the story differently, in a way that was less helpful to their cause or more damaging to their face. This, then, is the classic Malcolm scenario, and as Vernon and Daniel indicate, it is deeply unnerving,

⁴⁷ Interview by author, November 11, 2009.

often leading subjects to question their trust in reporters and their participation in future news stories.

It is also *rare*. Ordinary people feeling personally betrayed by reporters is the exception, not the rule. Once again, I think this is partly due to subjects not being public figures—most stories that draw on private citizens' comments, opinions, and narratives are not sting operations designed to reveal some malfeasance or abuse of power. Moreover, all of my interviewees were subjects in daily news articles, for which the encounters with journalists tend to be relatively brief, and not, as is the case with the long-form journalism that is the focus of Janet Malcolm's critique, intended to present complete portraits of the subject's life and character. Even my interviewees who were subjects of longish features spent days, not months, forging relationships with reporters and letting them into their lives; the level of intimacy developed in such a short time is, one assumes, generally lower, and the amount of potentially humiliating information exchanged less, so the probability of betrayal greatly reduced.

Finally, the subjects on whom Malcolm's analysis hinges are of a particular personality type that may be especially poor at judging interpersonal encounters, even as they are singularly well-suited to a literary journalist's needs. Essentially they are narcissists in the clinical (or nearly clinical) sense.⁴⁸ These are more or less the personality types that casting directors of reality TV shows seek out as well, and they are probably not representative of the population at large. While all people may be susceptible to skilled, attentive interlocutors—recall Billy's comment that the best way to flirt with anyone is to hang on their every word—the more self-involved an individual is, the more prone he may be to respond to such attentions while ignoring other behavioral cues that would lead most socially competent actors to be a bit

⁴⁸ Although she remains agnostic on the question, the alleged pathological narcissism of Jeff McDonald, the betrayed subject at the heart of *The Journalist and the Murderer*, is an ongoing theme in the book. Meanwhile, Jeffrey Masson, the subject who lurks in the background of *The Journalist and the Murderer*, accused her of libel because she depicted him as rather sickeningly self-absorbed; recall that she ultimately won the suit. And regardless of whether these two particular characters fit the bill, she argues repeatedly that larger-than-life personalities are much sought by literary journalists because they are most easily adapted to the page. Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*; Hoyt, "Malcolm, Masson, and You."

more wary. Unlike long-form journalists who must seek out these rather extreme personalities—what Malcolm calls “auto-novelized” characters, referring to how well they lend themselves to full literary treatment⁴⁹—newspaper and other short form journalists are under far less pressure to choose only outsized personalities for their subjects—in fact, the constraints of daily news production probably make this impossible. So daily news subjects may be more boring than your average literary journalistic hero, but they are also likely to be more skilled social interactors, on guard against seduction and betrayal.

But that feelings of outright betrayal are relatively rare does not change the fact that, while public figures may wield as much power as journalists in their interactions—some scholars argue more⁵⁰—ordinary news subjects almost always have less. This is because, as discussed in these last two chapters, the journalist is both the professional party, so better able to manage the interview itself, and the one who will ultimately decide how the story is told to the public. During the interview subjects can certainly engage in a spirited poker game over how the story should be told, but in the end their chips are few. Powerful sources’ ability to throw their capital around to influence a story by, for example, threatening to withhold exclusive information or deny access to beat reporters who depend on cultivating ongoing relationships with them, is simply not available to ordinary people to the same degree. Although witnesses, victims, or heroes of major events may be hot commodities to journalists for a confined period of time, briefly bestowing on those people the power to pick and choose to whom they grant an interview, their importance is short-lived. No, most ordinary news subjects realize they are easily replaceable, unlike people in positions of greater power, and sense they are more dependent on reporters than reporters are on them.

Given a subject’s relative lack of power in the news production process, the interview stage is especially important, because it is only through his performance there that the subject

⁴⁹ Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, 122.

⁵⁰ Gans, *Deciding What’s News*, 116.

can hope to exert any influence over how the story is told. If he misreads—due to lack of experience or a reporter’s intentional misdirection—the reporter’s approach to the story, he might not just miss an opportunity to convey his message, but actually present a version of himself that is outright misrepresentative, or otherwise potentially damaging to his public image.

Thus, although my subjects did generally understand the basic dynamics of the encounter, including their own lack of control over how they would be presented to the public in the final story, I believe the greater part of the ethical burden still lies with the journalist, as the more powerful party, to (1) avoid intentionally misleading the subject about the basic frame of the story she plans to write, and (2) to avoid miscasting him, whether by manipulating him into taking on a role that clearly does not represent him, through the use of leading questions or other conversational pressures, or by selectively quoting in ways that distort his perspective. While the first of these, egregiously misleading ordinary news subjects about an intended story frame, is probably rare—reporters are more likely to simply remain noncommittal or vague about their intended frame—the second, miscasting in its various manifestations, appears to be quite common. This may be especially true for ordinary citizens, who are often contacted not as the drivers of major news stories, but as respondents to them. They are frequently the token experts or men-on-the-street for stories that have largely been written already.

When I asked subjects what they would do differently next time they spoke to a reporter, almost all mentioned something related to their behavior in the interview, again underscoring that it is really the only stage over which they have any control at all. And while many said they advocated being completely open and honest with the reporter, equally as many mentioned the importance of being very selective and careful about what they said. One tactic subjects consistently said they felt was effective at helping them influence the story frame—or at least gave them the sense of not being quite as helpless about it as they would otherwise be—was to explicitly address the possibility of the reporter mis-framing the story, or

misrepresenting them in any way, during the interview. Natasha, who accused a local charity of fraud, made a point of telling the reporter what she thought would be a tempting, but inaccurate way to frame the story. She explained, "I said to the reporter, 'My concern is the salacious angle you could take on it was me against them.' And I said, 'the story is this organization, and are they fraudulent or not. Without the personalities of the people.'"⁵¹

A number of subjects called reporters' attention to what they felt was distorted or inaccurate coverage of the same or similar issues, and exhorted them to do better. Others felt comfortable simply demanding that the reporter not misquote or misrepresent them. In some cases these tactics failed—the reporter in Natasha's case chose exactly the salacious angle she had hoped to discourage—but in many cases subjects felt they helped ensure favorable or accurate coverage. And my impression was that they did, partly because they called reporters' attention to subjects' concerns, and underscored their position as invested arbiters of articles' accuracy. This is the subject of the next chapter: how subjects measure and feel about accuracy and error in the stories in which they appear.

⁵¹ Interview by author, January 3, 2011.

CHAPTER FIVE: Truth (Perceptions) and Consequences: How News Subjects Feel About Accuracy and Error

In August 2011, Craig Silverman's *Columbia Journalism Review* column on press error ran with the headline, "A Victim's Tale: What it's like to be on the receiving end of a press error."¹ Silverman, a freelance journalist, editor of the Poynter Institute press accuracy blog, "RegretTheError.com," and author of a book on the subject,² explained he had recently been contacted directly by the victim himself, one Jon Harris, and that, "It's not often I'm put in touch with a victim of press error, so I followed up and conducted an e-mail Q&A with Harris to hear one man's tale of error, and how a press mistake made a terrible few days even worse."³

Harris had indeed had a rough time of it: twice robbed in one week, the second time he surprised a burglar in his home and the fleeing man fired a shot. The local *Akron Beacon Journal* then printed a brief article, apparently based solely on a police report, which erroneously labeled Harris the shooter. At first amused by the error, Harris explains to Silverman that he quickly realized he should request a correction because he works with teenagers and could be adversely affected by an article that labeled him a "gun-toting resident." After several phone calls, he obtained a printed correction. In the Q&A Silverman presses him for more detail:

Silverman: I'm curious about how an error personally affects people. So for you, after having experienced something fairly traumatic in the first place, how did this mistake impact your state of mind and feeling?

Harris: Honestly, the unintended humor of the entire situation was a break from dealing with what had just happened. All the same, spending a good portion of my day trying to get in touch with the right folks at the paper was frustrating.⁴

¹ An earlier draft of this chapter was published as Ruth Palmer, "Context Matters: What News Subjects Can Tell Us About Accuracy and Error," *Journalism Studies* 13, no. 6 (December 2012): 1–16. Craig Silverman, "A Victim's Tale: What It's Like to Be on the Receiving End of a Press Error," *Columbia Journalism Review*, August 19, 2011, http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/a_victims_tale.php?page=2.

² Craig Silverman, *Regret the Error: How Media Mistakes Pollute the Press and Imperil Free Speech*, First ed. (Union Square Press, 2007).

³ Silverman, "A Victim's Tale: What It's Like to Be on the Receiving End of a Press Error."

⁴ Ibid.

Although Silverman encourages Harris to expound on how damaging the error was, and although Harris was obviously annoyed enough to contact the paper (which is quite atypical of news subjects, as I will discuss below), throughout the Q&A the victim appears at least as amused by the error as he is bothered. This seems to escape Silverman, who, in what appears to be a case of basic confirmation bias,⁵ frames the story as one of press victimhood.

The column is noteworthy less for what it tells us about how errors affect subjects—we are not told outright if this is a representative or exceptional case, although the former is clearly implied—than for what it illustrates about the assumptions we journalism scholars, and professionals like Silverman, bring to the topic. We assume that factual accuracy in reporting is *important*. The reasons are obvious: citizens require accurate information about the events of the day, and errors can damage a news outlet's credibility, as studies of both news audiences and journalists have found.⁶ But surveys that ask individuals who are named in news articles to identify and rate the severity of errors in those articles find that news subjects themselves rarely rate errors as severe.⁷ They further find that subjects almost never request corrections for errors in their stories,⁸ and that sixty percent of subjects who appear in inaccurate stories still say they

⁵ Confirmation bias is defined as “The tendency to seek and interpret information that confirms existing beliefs. It is seen both in social situations, where information that disconfirms one's beliefs is often ignored or misinterpreted, and in cognitive tasks like problem-solving, where people frequently test hypotheses that, if true, confirm already held beliefs rather than entertain hypotheses that would disconfirm those beliefs.” Arthur S. Reber, *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, 4th ed. (London; New York: Penguin, 2009), <http://www.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/cul/resolve?clio8526230>.

⁶ Christine Urban, *Examining Our Credibility: Perspectives of the Public and the Press* (Washington: ASNE, 1999), <http://asne.org/kiosk/reports/99reports/1999examiningourcredibility/>; Robert J. Haiman, *Best Practices for Newspaper Journalists* (Arlington, VA: Freedom Forum, 2000); American Society of Newspaper Editors, *Newspaper Credibility: Building Reader Trust* (Washington: ASNE, 1984).

⁷ In their cross-market study of 4,800 news subjects, Maier and Meyer found that “Errors identified by news sources were generally not considered egregious. On a Likert-like scale in which 1 is a minor error and 7 a major error, the mean rating was 2.8.” See Maier, “Accuracy Matters: a Cross-Market Assessment of Newspaper Error and Credibility,” 541; Meyer, *The Vanishing Newspaper*.

⁸ Maier, “Setting the Record Straight: When the Press Errs, Do Corrections Follow?”; Pritchard, “Why Unhappy Subjects of News Coverage Rarely Complain”; Maier, “Getting It Right? Not in 59 Percent of Stories.”

are “eager” to be in the newspaper again in the future.⁹ If both journalists and audiences care so much about inaccuracy, why would the individuals being written about—those we would expect to care the most—appear to care so little?

Journalists’ and media scholars’ belief in accuracy’s centrality to upstanding journalism tends to blind us to evidence that news subjects have a complex relationship to accuracy, often assess it using different criteria than our own, and frequently do not find it nearly as much of a determining factor in their overall assessment of an article as we would expect. This chapter explores how the eighty-three news subjects I interviewed assessed accuracy and errors in the stories in which they were named. I begin with a literature review tracing how news subjects have been used by journalism scholars in the past to assess news accuracy, and I argue that these studies exhibit the same bias evident in Silverman’s column: scholars tend to overlook evidence that subjects themselves rarely feel victimized by errors.

But I also argue that these survey-based studies raise interesting questions best approached qualitatively, and discuss three key factors surrounding the appearance of a news story that affect subjects’ perception of its accuracy. Some of these are by now familiar, but warrant revisiting because they influence accuracy perception: trigger-related goals, expectations, and reactions from others. In the second half of the chapter I discuss different kinds of errors and why some are deemed more severe than others. As will be evident, the example of Jon Harris cited above is exceptional, in that the error was more egregious than most errors subjects identify, but it is also exactly the type of error—one with potential negative effects on his professional life and reputation—that galls subjects most.

⁹ Maier and Meyer’s cross-market study found that 60 percent of those who identified at least one error in the article in which they were named still classified themselves as “eager” to be in the newspaper again, compared to 73 percent who had been in stories they deemed accurate. Maier, “Accuracy Matters: a Cross-Market Assessment of Newspaper Error and Credibility.”

Background

In 1936, Mitchell Charnley developed a new method for testing newspaper accuracy: he mailed people named in three Minnesota dailies copies of the articles in which they appeared, along with a simple questionnaire asking them to count and categorize errors as mechanical (such as typos); writer's errors (with sub-categories for errors in names, ages, addresses, etc.); or "errors of meaning," such as overemphasis. With their direct knowledge of events described in the story, the thinking went, who better to identify inaccuracies than news subjects themselves?

Since then, communication scholars have repurposed and reworked the Charnley method to explore errors not only in newspapers but also in television news,¹⁰ news magazines,¹¹ wire service coverage,¹² and specific genres of news stories including social issues¹³ and science.¹⁴ Among those studies focused on newspapers, variation in the populations surveyed and the surveys themselves make direct comparisons difficult; nonetheless, when it comes to sheer numbers of errors, the findings have been surprisingly consistent—and sobering—over the last seventy years: sources report that between 46 percent and 61 percent of stories contain at least one error,¹⁵ with the highest percentage, 61 percent, found in the most

¹⁰ Gary Hanson and Stanley T. Wearden, "Measuring Newscast Accuracy: Applying a Newspaper Model to Television," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (Autumn 2004): 546–58.

¹¹ Larry L. Burris, "Accuracy of News Magazines as Perceived by News Sources," *Journalism Quarterly* 62 (Winter 1985): 825–27.

¹² J. Richard Cote, "A Study of Accuracy of Two Wire Services," *Journalism Quarterly* 47 (Winter 1970): 661–66.

¹³ Michael Ryan and Dorothea Owen, "An Accuracy Survey of Metropolitan Newspaper Coverage of Social Issues," *Journalism Quarterly* 54 (Spring 1977): 27–32.

¹⁴ James W. Tankard and Michael Ryan, "News Source Perceptions of Accuracy of Science Coverage," *Journalism Quarterly* 51 (Summer 1974): 219–25.

¹⁵ Charnley, "A Study of Newspaper Accuracy"; Fred Berry, "A Study of Accuracy in Local News Stories of Three Dailies," *Journalism Quarterly* 44 (Autumn 1967): 482–490; Blankenburg, "News Accuracy: Some Findings on the Meaning of Errors"; Charles Brown, "Majority of Readers Give Papers an 'A' for Accuracy," *Editor & Publisher* 63 (February 13, 1965); Hal Marshall, "Newspaper Accuracy in Tucson," *Journalism Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1977): 165–168.

recent and most wide-ranging study—a survey of 4,800 news sources cited in fourteen newspapers across the country.¹⁶

While the total numbers of errors has changed little over the years, the surveys themselves have become more sophisticated, often attempting to correlate errors with specific kinds of stories,¹⁷ newsgathering techniques,¹⁸ or features of their sources,¹⁹ in an effort to try to determine why errors occur. In a 1967 study, Berry set an important new precedent by expanding Charnley's "errors of meaning" category into a series of "subjective" errors (overemphasis, under-emphasis, inaccurate headlines, and omissions) which were counted individually alongside "objective" errors (name, title, age, address, misquotes, figures, times, locations, dates, misspelled words, and typos).²⁰

But even as they have striven to classify and trace errors with increasing precision, researchers who rely on accuracy surveys have acknowledged the inherent subjectivity of all inaccuracy. Since Charnley, scholars consistently have qualified their results with the caveat that they measure error *as perceived by the subject*, and that subjects' unique perspectives will affect that assessment—which their findings appear to confirm. For example, when asked to respond to subjects' accusations of inaccuracy, reporters frequently disagree about whether the offending item is an error at all, especially in cases of "subjective" inaccuracies.²¹

¹⁶ Maier, "Accuracy Matters: a Cross-Market Assessment of Newspaper Error and Credibility."

¹⁷ Berry, "A Study of Accuracy in Local News Stories of Three Dailies."

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; Gary C. Lawrence and David L. Grey, "Subjective Inaccuracies in Local News Reporting," *Journalism Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (1969): 753–757; Joseph T Scanlon, "A New Approach to the Study of Newspaper Accuracy," *Journalism Quarterly* 49 (1972): 587–594.

¹⁹ Blankenburg, "News Accuracy: Some Findings on the Meaning of Errors"; William A. Tillinghast, "Source Control and Evaluation of Newspaper Inaccuracies," *Newspaper Research Journal* 3 (Fall 1982): 14–23.

²⁰ Berry, "A Study of Accuracy in Local News Stories of Three Dailies," 487.

²¹ Tillinghast, for example, found that even on factual errors reporters disagreed with subjects half the time, and that they disputed a full ninety-five percent of subjective errors reported by their subjects. See Tillinghast, "Newspaper Errors: Reporters Dispute Most Source Claims"; Scott R. Maier, "How Sources, Reporters View Math Errors in News," *Newspaper Research Journal* 24, no. 4 (2003): 48–63; Philip Meyer,

Often tension arises in these studies between their underlying goal to measure and reduce inaccuracy and their findings that error is so open to interpretation it is difficult to isolate causes and prescribe solutions. In one such study, Tillinghast concluded that subjects' perceptions of errors were largely affected by their preconceived ideas about what the article *should* be, and that, "error is largely a state of mind....The sources are matching published information not only against their knowledge but also against their expectations."²² He went on to speculate that sources are more likely to identify errors, "as the vested interest of the source increases."²³ In other words, it is likely in the dynamics surrounding a story's reception (such as a subject's expectations and degree of investment), and not in the details of a story's production, that we will find the most relevant clues about when and why errors are perceived.

A study by Blankenburg made a direct appeal for closer attention to context surrounding an article's reception.²⁴ Noting that presumably some errors are more distressing than others, but that previous surveys had treated them all as equal, Blankenburg suggested that future researchers measure not only number and types of errors, but also their perceived severity. He speculated that it is most likely not whether an error is of a particular type—objective or subjective—but rather the error's *effects* that determine how severe a subject will consider it to be. He concluded that, "We need to know more about the seriousness of individual errors in connection with the importance of the story in the life of the newsmaker."²⁵

While Blankenburg's appeal for more studies of how these stories fit into subjects' lives has gone largely unheeded, his call to measure severity of errors in the minds of subjects has not, and findings have been surprising. Recent accuracy surveys have been primarily concerned

"A Workable Measure of Auditing Accuracy in Newspapers," *Newspaper Research Journal* 10 (Winter 1988): 39–51.

²² Tillinghast, "Source Control and Evaluation of Newspaper Inaccuracies," 22.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Blankenburg, "News Accuracy: Some Findings on the Meaning of Errors."

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 385.

with the relationship between perceived errors and the credibility of the news outlet. Maier and Meyer's cross-market survey of 4,800 news subjects—the largest such study by a lot—found that perceived errors do have a negative effect on credibility,²⁶ and by extension on the “circulation robustness” of the newspaper.²⁷ But their focus on the credibility measure overshadows another aspect of their findings, which is that overall, “news sources seemed remarkably tolerant of error.”²⁸ Although subjective errors were generally rated more severe than objective errors, perceived severity of all errors was remarkably low, and the most egregious subjective errors were actually those in the “other” category, suggesting that the most distressing inaccuracies in the eyes of the subjects were unaccounted for in the survey.²⁹ Moreover, the study found that 60 percent of subjects who identified errors in their stories said they were “eager” to be in the newspaper again (compared to 73 percent of those who said their stories were accurate). These numbers are strikingly high, and seem to indicate that subjects are not nearly as wounded by errors as one would expect. Furthermore, if 27 percent of subjects of accurate stories do *not* classify themselves as “eager” to participate in a future news story, there are clearly other salient aspects of the experience that have dampened their enthusiasm, but which lay outside the surveyed landscape. In other words, while there is little doubt that accuracy matters to readers and to journalists, it is less obvious that it matters to subjects, and it is distinctly possible that other aspects of the experience of being in the news matter more.

Taken together, these survey-based accuracy studies continue to produce powerful, sobering data about error perception, but they also consistently raise questions that lend

²⁶ Maier, “Accuracy Matters: a Cross-Market Assessment of Newspaper Error and Credibility”; Meyer, *The Vanishing Newspaper*.

²⁷ Meyer, *The Vanishing Newspaper*.

²⁸ Maier, “Accuracy Matters: a Cross-Market Assessment of Newspaper Error and Credibility,” 543.

²⁹ On a Likert-like scale from one to seven, with seven considered most severe, the most severe objective errors (incorrect addresses) received only a 3.3, and the most egregious subjective errors, at 4.21, were those in the “other” category, exceeding the next most severe subjective category (“Story sensationalized,” at 3.22) by almost a full point. *Ibid.*, 541.

themselves well to qualitative methods. What is the relationship between perceived severity of errors and how the story fits into a subject's life? Why are so many errors so easily dismissed? Such questions are best approached through interviews; but, as discussed in Chapter One, interview-based studies of news subjects are extremely rare.

One, conducted by David Pritchard in the late '90s offers a glimpse into how fruitful interviews can be for fleshing out the phenomenon of error perception.³⁰ Journalism professionals often find it shocking just how few subjects of inaccurate stories actually request corrections. The most common explanation of those surveyed is that they simply consider the errors too minor to bother.³¹ Pritchard set out to find out more about the phenomenon by interviewing dissatisfied news subjects. As he notes, like news itself, inaccuracy is socially constructed: subjects may find a news story flawed for many reasons that may or may not fit unambiguously into preconceived categories.³² One advantage of an interview approach, therefore, is that respondents are not restricted to specific categories of errors: Pritchard began by asking 61 subjects named in an average-sized Indiana newspaper if they were satisfied with the article in which they appeared, and if not, why. In a departure from most accuracy surveys, he intentionally selected for "ordinary people," thus excluding more media savvy public figures. But his numbers were similar to those of previous researchers: roughly half were dissatisfied, but of the fifteen who actually blamed the newspaper for the errors, none lodged a formal complaint. Instead, they consulted their reference groups and, if necessary, actively ran interference with friends, family, and coworkers to resolve any damage to their reputations or

³⁰ Pritchard, "Why Unhappy Subjects of News Coverage Rarely Complain."

³¹ In Maier's case study of *The Raleigh News & Observer*, subjects identified 573 errors, but only requested 3 corrections. Maier, "Getting It Right? Not in 59 Percent of Stories." In a much larger cross-market survey of 2,700 stories, only 1 in 10 news sources had reported errors to the paper (Maier, "Setting the Record Straight: When the Press Errs, Do Corrections Follow?"). In both studies the most common explanation subjects gave was that errors were too minor to warrant reporting.

³² Pritchard, "Why Unhappy Subjects of News Coverage Rarely Complain," 29.

relationships the perceived error may have caused. Finding their efforts successful, none felt the need to complain to the paper.

Pritchard's findings seem to support Blankenburg's suggestion that, unlike journalism professionals who are concerned with inaccuracy for its own sake, perhaps it is not errors per se but their effects that are news subjects' immediate concern.³³ Like scholars engaged in quantitative measures of accuracy, Pritchard focused narrowly on how people react to the content of articles rather than exploring contextual dynamics surrounding them. But his findings suggest ways those reactions to content may be shaped by peoples' social worlds and the circumstances surrounding their participation in the news. Moreover, Pritchard noted that while he had hoped to conduct tightly focused interviews about accuracy, subjects often took the opportunity to speak more broadly about their overall experience:

Respondents who had found the news story deficient did not respond passively to the questionnaire. Instead they tended to use the first few questions of the survey as a springboard into often-lengthy appraisals of their encounter with the press—what the reporter could have done differently, what they (the subjects) could have done differently....It was apparent that many of the respondents had given a lot of thought to the experience of being the focus of press attention.³⁴

This observation highlights one of the problems with isolating an article's content from surrounding circumstances and asking a subject to assess errors: that is simply not how subjects experience errors. As the accuracy literature consistently concludes, it appears that subjects assess content in *light* of those circumstances, as part of a larger phenomenon of being in the news that fits variously into subjects' lives.

But those surveys tell us little about how these dynamics work. Pritchard began interviews by asking subjects if they were satisfied with the article in which they appeared. Widening the lens and asking subjects to describe their overall experience being in the news and what it meant to them, as I did with this study, allows subjects to emphasize content and its accuracy as they see fit, within the context of that larger experience. And it turns out that while

³³ Blankenburg, "News Accuracy: Some Findings on the Meaning of Errors," 385.

³⁴ Pritchard, "Why Unhappy Subjects of News Coverage Rarely Complain," 30.

journalists may be particularly haunted by the specter of factual inaccuracy, error in the minds of subjects encompasses a vast, subjective terrain. Absent any “objective” or “subjective” inaccuracies, the *tone* of an article may, in the mind of a subject, fail to capture their lived experience. I allowed my subjects to identify “error” as they understood it, and to point out anything they felt was deficient about the article, for any reason. If they did not bring up accuracy on their own, I asked them first if they were satisfied with the article, then if they felt it was accurate. This approach provided insight into what is perceived as error and why; but also why some errors are especially distressing and others less so; why news subjects only rarely request corrections, and how important accuracy really is to them.

Context matters

My study does not lend itself well to quantification because many subjects spoke about multiple articles and newscasts, but I would conservatively estimate that 60-70 percent of the news stories subjects discussed contained at least one detail or facet they described as an inaccuracy—which is on the high end of the range found in accuracy surveys—and many stories contained a slew of what survey studies would designate subjective and objective errors. And in keeping with survey-based accuracy studies, I found that subjects were often quick to disregard them. While they were most dismissive of small technical errors, they were often surprisingly tolerant of more subjective errors as well, such as omission, misquotation, and over- or under-emphasis. But not only were subjects often quick to dismiss errors when they identified them, many could not remember whether or not there were any errors in their stories at all. Others had a vague memory of mistakes but could not recall what they were until they looked at the article again, and it was not unusual for subjects to describe their whole experience without even mentioning errors, until asked directly about them.

All of this supports the idea implicit in the accuracy literature that while journalism professionals may regard accuracy as a core value, we should not assume that questions about

content and its accuracy necessarily dominate subjects' personal experiences being in the news, nor that they are always the factor that determines whether the subject has a positive or negative experience. In speaking to subjects I found that, as accuracy scholars have long speculated, *context matters*. By "context" I mean the circumstances and dynamics the subject experiences leading up to and following an article's publication. Context matters not only because it affects the way subjects perceive error, but also because subjects themselves care about it—at times more than the article itself. If we are to understand accuracy from subjects' point of view, it is important to take into account how much emphasis they give it in their overall story, and in what ways the context surrounding the publication of the article may affect their interpretation of its content.

In keeping with surveys of news subjects done in the past, I found that when subjects did identify errors, they did not perceive them all as equally severe. Many factors are at work in error perception and it would be impossible to identify them all. However, while every case is different, some patterns emerged in my interviews that shed light on why some errors are so easily dismissed while others chafe badly. Indeed, while the majority of subjects downplayed errors, some described major distortions that were damaging enough to satisfy even Craig Silverman, and as worst-case scenarios these are illuminating. In what follows I explore three of the important contextual features that affected error perception among my interviewees: the subject's goals for the story; the subject's expectations for the story; and the reactions they got from others after the story appeared. Once more, while it is useful to separate these for analytical purposes, it is important to keep in mind that they actually overlap and interrelate a great deal.

Triggers and goals

As noted in previous chapters, the trigger issue or event—what the story was about, broadly speaking—played a fundamental role in determining many aspects of interviewees'

experience being in the news. This included how they assessed accuracy. For some interviewees the trigger overshadowed the attendant news coverage so completely they did not even want to *see* the coverage—so they were obviously unable to assess its accuracy at all. But for many subjects seeing the articles or broadcasts in which they appeared was an important moment, which they anticipated with dread or excitement largely depending on what the trigger was; their relationship to it; and how they thought coverage of it might affect them. As discussed in Chapter Two, on the one hand, many felt appearing in the news was risky, because knew they were giving up control over their stories but would nonetheless suffer the repercussions of having them told publicly. But it was also seen by many as a rare opportunity to fulfill specific trigger-related goals by addressing a much larger public than they could normally access. I consistently found that subjects assessed the content of news stories, and accuracy in particular, in light of these objectives and their level of investment in them: simply put, subjects were usually willing to overlook errors that did not interfere with their goals.

Alegra, for example, agreed to be featured in an article because she had contracted an illness when pregnant and lost her baby. Hers is exactly the kind of painful personal story that might leave readers wondering why she would agree to let a reporter into her home. But she knew exactly why: if she or her doctor had been more informed about the danger to pregnant mothers things might have turned out differently. Recall from Chapter Two that I asked if she had considered turning down the interview request, to which she replied:

ALEGRA: I looked at both sides and everything. And I just decided it was more important because I was pregnant at the time and my baby didn't survive because of it, so we felt that if we could at least get this out to one pregnant mom and she alerts her gynecologist, you know, earlier than I did, and is saved, then it's helpful.³⁵

There were a number of factual errors in the story, the specifics of which she had forgotten until she looked at the article during our interview. The length of her coma was off by a month; her “near-fatal” seizure was not really life-threatening; and one of her quotes got the gist of what she said but changed her wording (as she told me, “I’ve never said the word

³⁵ Interview by author, October 30, 2009.

‘nonchalance’ in my whole entire life”). When I asked if the errors bothered her, she responded, “No, because they were so minimal. It wasn’t like, ‘Oh my gosh, they really messed this up.’” She explained that the article achieved her goal of getting the word out, and the errors did not interfere with that.

Similarly, Jon and Jane were featured in a big story in the metro section of a New York paper because their neighborhood business was being evicted for reasons they felt were unjust. They loved the article, which they said completely captured their story and raised awareness about their plight, which was their immediate objective. No, their quotes were not verbatim and some of the details about how their business operated were off, but, as Jane noted, those errors did not interfere with their primary goals for the story. As she said in our interview, when it came to the bigger picture, the reporter “got it:”

JANE: But not even just the technical stuff, the social stuff. The heart of the matter. The nut of the problem. He totally got the unfairness of what was happening to us and why it was unfair. He didn’t quite nail what our business is perfectly right. Which is okay, it doesn’t matter. The reason that he was here was not to explain how our business worked. The reason he was here is we were basically being unfairly persecuted. And that he got right. That was the important stuff.³⁶

Even if they did interfere with their immediate goals, interviewees were likely to downplay errors’ importance if their level of investment in these goals was relatively low or if they believed the errors were unlikely to have long-term negative effects on their personal or professional lives. This is logical: we simply do not hold all our objectives equally dear. For example, Gina was a juror on a high profile murder case who spoke to *The New York Post* and *The New York Daily News* after passing a guilty verdict. She wanted to speak to reporters because she felt, as one of a small group who had condemned the defendant in a case with ugly racial overtones, it was her responsibility to explain to the public how the jury had weighed different kinds of evidence. But she felt she was badly misquoted: the wording made her sound barely literate, and was misleading as well. But while she was bothered by what she felt was a

³⁶ Interview by author, November 16, 2009.

misrepresentation of her words, and by extension the jury's perspective, she seemed more amused than distressed by the whole experience by the time we discussed it several months after the story had appeared. She explained that being on a jury for a murder trial is pretty far removed from daily life, so even a severe misrepresentation of her perspective on it would not have long-term negative effects on her:

GINA: Ultimately, nothing I could say would have that sort of [negative] impact, I think, about this case. Unless it were just absolutely false, which is not something I would do anyway. So, yeah, I think it was pretty safe. Maybe if the issue were different and it was more personal, or related to professional topics.³⁷

Not surprisingly, the most distressing errors were often those that undermined a highly invested person's objectives altogether, which is what happened to Daniel. As noted in earlier chapters, he was quoted in an article about layoffs of substance abuse counselors in public schools. The staff, students, and families had worked hard to improve their school, so, when Daniel was contacted by a reporter he was eager to call attention to their accomplishments and the short-sightedness of his having been laidoff. He spent an hour with the reporter explaining activities he had organized, providing her with pictures of himself with the students, and explaining why these layoffs were disastrous for the kids.

The final story was a cruel disappointment. The photo was not of his students, but of another counselor, and the article focused on the financial hardships of laid-off school workers: nothing about the specific schools, nothing about Daniel's work or the potential negative effects on the student body. The most objective error in the story—the implication he had been fired from a previous job—was just the last straw in a long string of subjective inaccuracies of omission and emphasis Daniel felt were much more serious. He perceived all of them as errors, and felt they completely upset his hopes of drawing attention to the injustice of the budget cuts:

DANIEL: I'm just disgusted. [The reporter] stayed on the phone with me for an hour. We went over step by step everything that I did with the kids... We talked about everything that I'd done at the Department of Education. The only reason I agreed to do that story was to bring light to the whole situation. To show people that they're letting

³⁷ Interview by author, May 4, 2010.

people go that's good for these kids. I don't know what that was in the paper. She talked about nothing that I did. Nothing!³⁸

So the degree to which people were bothered by errors often had a lot to do with whether or not those errors interfered with their goals, and how invested they were in those goals—how high the stakes were. Subjects, like Daniel, who were highly invested in the story, and counting on it being told in a particular way to achieve their goals, were likely to interpret coverage that departed from the story they had envisioned as a bitter letdown, and errors within that coverage as particularly egregious.

Expectations

In his 1982 accuracy survey, Tillinghast concluded that sources' expectations must affect error perception.³⁹ My interviews corroborated this: while subjects consistently had objectives for their stories, they varied a great deal in the degree to which they actually believed the story would help them meet those goals. Expectations appeared to be formed and modified in the various stages of their experience. Some interviewees had expectations based on past experience or stories they had heard from others about interacting with the media; others said they knew what the article would be like because they had seen similar stories in the paper before. As discussed in Chapters Three and Four, I found that many subjects' expectations were affected by their interactions with reporters, either in the interview stage or any fact-checking stages that occurred post-interview. In these interactions, subjects often picked up clues about what kind of story the reporter was working on and how she planned to frame it, and adjusted their expectations accordingly.

This is important because expectations had a powerful impact on how much subjects were surprised by inaccuracies, and how severe they perceived them to be. For example, as I discussed in detail in the previous chapter, Daniel, the substance-abuse counselor quoted above,

³⁸ Interview by author, November 25, 2009.

³⁹ Tillinghast, "Source Control and Evaluation of Newspaper Inaccuracies."

was especially disappointed in his article because the reporter had explicitly reassured him that much of what they discussed would make the cut:

DANIEL: I said, “Most of the stuff we talked about’s gonna be in there, right?” And she said, “Yeah, most of the stuff we talked about’s gonna be in there.” Most of the stuff. Yeah. That’s not nothing. I said, “Okay, because I really want people to know about this.”⁴⁰

Not surprisingly, this exchange raised Daniel’s expectations, so the omission of almost everything they had discussed in the interview was especially disappointing. Meanwhile, Tim provides a good example of how low expectations can cushion the blow of an inaccurate article. He runs a tutoring business and was happy to speak to a reporter for an article about how the economic downturn was affecting companies like his own. He explained to her that his business was actually doing very well and gave numbers to prove it, but he began to suspect the reporter might frame his story more negatively before he actually saw it:

TIM: I didn’t feel during the interview like there was necessarily some kind of a spin on it. I was tipped off a little bit after, when she called back, and she asked me some question about some numbers that she said I gave her that were way off. It was totally wrong. And I was like, “I don’t know where you got that from, but that is not at all what I said.” And she was like, “Oh, I’m sorry; I don’t know where I got that then.” ...And then I was like, alright. This probably isn’t gonna be so good.⁴¹

Even though his article contained multiple objective errors and overall misrepresented his business, Tim was disappointed but hardly crushed—after all, he had expected it. Moreover, while his immediate objective to get more publicity for his business was not necessarily damaged by the error—after all, it just cast them as struggling financially, not as providing poor service—he could also see how the miscasting might have unanticipated positive effects: he was hoping to open a second branch of the franchise and laughingly explained that he felt the article might discourage potential competitors from entering the market. In other words, his willingness to downplay the errors was over-determined by first, his anticipation of them and second, their not only not *hurting*, but possibly *helping*, his business.

⁴⁰ Interview by author, November 25, 2009.

⁴¹ Interview by author, November 10, 2009.

Feedback from others: Status and Stigma

I have spoken at length about subjects' goals for their news appearances, but we could add that an underlying or secondary objective of most public acts is to uphold one's own image or that of the group one represents—to maintain “face,” as discussed in Chapter Three.⁴² The same is true for appearances in the news, and as I will discuss further in Chapters Seven and Eight, feedback from their reference groups was one of the primary ways interviewees assessed the impact of a given news story, not just on their goals, but on their reputations as well. Because of this, feedback from others also had important implications for error perception. For example, I found that most interviewees discovered that being in the news enhanced their status, almost regardless of the details of the content. As long as the coverage did not reflect very poorly on them or their endeavors, “making the paper” was generally seen as special, and in some cases the positive attention subjects received from others so dominated their experience that inaccuracies in their stories simply faded into the background. Dudley described a scenario that illustrates well how errors, especially small errors, can seem unimportant to subjects basking in the status glow. On the day *The New York Post* ran a story about an explosion near his technical school, a professor invited him into a class to check out the article in which he was named. Surrounded by impressed students, Dudley read the article, only to discover he was misquoted:

DUDLEY: So I went upstairs, because I guess someone in the class had a copy. And I came in and [the teacher] was like, “Show him the paper.” And everyone in the class was like, “Whoa, that's the guy, that's the guy?!” I read, y'know, the one little line. I was like, “That's not what I said.” Everybody started laughing. Then I left. I felt really cool. I told one of my friends, “Hey, I was in the paper.” And then I told my mom. And I sent a text message to a friend of mine, y'know, that I made it into *The Post*. And then on my way home my dad asked me to get a copy for them and for his father. So I bought copies.⁴³

What is most striking about this scenario is just how little it matters to Dudley that his one quote was actually an error; he alerted his reference groups and bought multiple copies of

⁴² Goffman, “On Face-Work.”

⁴³ Interview by author, March 10, 2010.

an article that misquoted him. He got immediate positive feedback from others and anticipated more from those with whom he would share the article. And this was very common among my interviewees: small errors—and sometimes large ones—were easily dismissed because making the paper at all was regarded as a valued accomplishment.

While some interviewees still felt bothered by inaccuracies despite the torrent of positive feedback they received, most found the torrent persuasive. In some cases specific features of the coverage, such as being visually represented in a photograph or film clip (for television or for newspaper websites), or appearing in national outlets with very large audiences, seemed to further boost status. These—especially photos or television appearances—generated even more positive feedback, from even farther afield, and, in light of that status, inaccuracies that originally rankled started to fade. Of the two substance abuse counselors I interviewed, Daniel and Rodney, only Daniel was unhappy with the story. As I have explained, I believe his discontent with the story was overdetermined by very specific objectives he had for the coverage and cues from the reporter that raised his expectations that those objectives would be met; Rodney had much more modest goals. But I could not help but wonder if Daniel's experience might have been different if he, instead of Rodney, had been featured and pictured in the paper. Unlike Daniel, Rodney was heavily congratulated by his friends, family, and community. Even the drug dealer on his street made a supportive comment about the article.

But just as positive feedback led some interviewees to downplay errors, some who initially felt errors were negligible or nonexistent changed their minds when they received feedback indicating otherwise. Norma, a Tea Party leader who was heavily featured in a lengthy *New York Times* article about the movement, was initially delighted with it and quickly snatched up five copies. Then the emails started rolling in from family, friends, and strangers who read the article as an unfair indictment against the movement, because it lumped the Tea Party in with white supremacist and militia groups. In light of their comments, she began to see the whole article differently:

NORMA: When I read it the first time I did not read it as negatively as I did the second time...I saw those other groups mentioned as totally separate from our organization. I just didn't make that connection. I don't think I felt negatively until I realized that people were literally linking—because we were in the same article—they were linking one part to another.

I: So how did you come to realize that?

NORMA: Partially because my daughter had gotten some emails. And that was talked about. And so she really brought it to my attention. And then after I started seeing other things that were appearing on the net....And right from the start our members were really upset.⁴⁴

Norma and her reference groups felt strongly that portraying the Tea Party alongside the Aryan Nations misrepresented them. Although she had initially read the article as discussing the groups separately, it was clear from feedback she was getting that others interpreted the article differently, as describing like-minded extremist organizations. Even Bill O'Reilly singled her out by name and called her crazy. While she continued to feel that she personally was portrayed accurately in *The Times*, she began to think an article that presented her group alongside those others was misleading to the point of being inaccurate, a conclusion she would not likely have come to had she not received negative feedback from others and begun to see alarming signs that the way she came across in the article was negatively affecting her reputation.

As I detail in Chapter Seven, some articles ended up having even more stigmatizing effects, and subjects found themselves pilloried by the audience for a simple quote. If the subject felt the source of the stigma was actually an error, that error was especially hard to forgive. Indeed, there is a lot of status in being in the news, and this whirlwind of positive attention can, not surprisingly, mitigate against feelings of having been misrepresented in an article, in some cases eclipsing them altogether. But when material attributed to a subject turns out to have stigmatizing effects, if there is any way that material can be interpreted as misrepresentative, subjects are likely to find it so. Even errors that initially seem minor or funny can be amplified and blackened by negative social effects until they seem to block out all other aspects of the experience.

⁴⁴ Interview by author, March 2, 2010.

Types of errors

DEANNE: I mean, obviously saying something about 82nd street, that's an error. Because [the incident occurred] at 72nd, not 82nd. But just selecting parts of my quotes? That's manipulating. That's manipulating the story, and that's what makes me feel icky. I don't feel icky if someone got it wrong. To me, a factual error, it's not a big—you're not screwing with people's lives with a factual error.⁴⁵

Deanne was in a series of articles as a witness to an attempted suicide. Many of the stories contained easily verifiable factual errors: the location was almost always listed incorrectly. So was the time of day. The physical description of the scene wasn't quite right. But none of these factual errors bothered Deanne nearly as much as the sensational tone of the coverage and the exclusion of parts of her quotes, because she felt those reportorial choices were more potentially damaging to the other subjects in the story. Her comment that factual errors do not "screw with people's lives" nicely captures a fundamental difference between the way my interviewees tended to view inaccuracy and the way it is generally assessed by the news industry: to news subjects in my study, errors of tone, omission, and over or under-emphasis often mattered far more than errors of basic fact.

This actually makes sense, because more "subjective" errors—so labeled in the accuracy literature because they are presumably errors of judgment on the part of the reporter—are often more likely than technical errors to negatively interfere with subjects' goals or reputations. They are also precisely the kinds of errors that are most disputable, because they are frequently rooted in a difference of opinion between the subject and the journalist about the story frame. Indeed, many of the details and characteristics my interviewees described as inaccurate or misrepresentative would probably not be considered errors by news organizations at all, and some would be difficult to fit into the categories on accuracy surveys. For example, one interviewee took issue with being described as "living in fear," noting that she had used the expression "I am afraid" during the interview, but in her mind that is a far cry from letting fear

⁴⁵ Interview by author, October 14, 2010.

dominate her life.⁴⁶ Another interviewee pointed out that her quote was set up with the descriptor, “she joked.” She had not been joking. Moreover, she had emailed that quote, so she wondered how the reporter had come to that conclusion. Or take Ruby, who had been shot by teenage gang members. The story failed to mention that the injury had interrupted her criminal justice degree—she was studying to become a juvenile probation officer to try to help exactly the kinds of kids who had shot her. Ruby felt this ironic nugget was journalistic gold, and its omission an error of reportorial judgment.⁴⁷

As these examples suggest, if interviewees were often quick to downplay or dismiss errors, they were also, when given the opportunity to speak at length about them, more likely to identify a greater variety of errors than people not implicated in the story, because they were measuring the published account against (1) their experience of the trigger; (2) their in-depth knowledge of what information was exchanged during their interview with the reporter (but limited familiarity with any other research the reporter may have done); and (3) their projected story frame—all the while sensitive to possible repercussions of the coverage. My interviewees identified so many inaccuracies of such a wide variety it would be difficult to enumerate them all. But I do think it is worthwhile to identify some of the kinds of errors that subjects themselves found most noteworthy, especially those that are counterintuitive, harder to assess using surveys, or likely to have negative effects on news credibility.

“Objective” errors

As noted above, technical errors of number or basic fact were often the most easily dismissed, because they usually had the most negligible effects. Even some examples that might have seemed severe to an outsider were deemed minor by interviewees. For example, Shannon was profiled in the southwestern city about her business, and her entire goal was to get

⁴⁶ Interview by author, March 2, 2010.

⁴⁷ Interview by author, March 3, 2010.

publicity. Her name was misspelled, but—putting a new spin on the old saw that all publicity is good publicity as long as they spell your name right—she was *still* delighted with the article. She pointed out that the reporter did manage to spell her name right at least once, and included not just a picture but an online video, both of which she felt increased the prestige already bestowed by being featured in the paper. Publicity-wise, the misspelling was a minor blip.

Although, absent effects, errors were often deemed minor, some objective errors did rankle just because they were wrong. A few of my interviewees were self-described sticklers for accuracy, and their irritation, or even anger, at all errors set them apart from other participants and suggested that personality traits may affect error perception as well. That said, misquotes, even those that subjects felt were relatively unimportant, were universally memorable and somewhat jarring. Many, many subjects felt they were quoted incorrectly, describing distortions of their remarks that ranged from their being taken out of context, partially quoted, and reworded, to completely fabricated.⁴⁸ Predictably, the misquotes deemed most severe were those that, like other severe errors, distorted the subjects' statements so much they worried about effects on their objectives or reputations. For example, Ray was caught up in a feud with a new restaurant over the location of his food cart, a local institution. The controversy was covered by several outlets in the southwestern city, and Ray was eager to rally public support by making his case through the media. He felt his argument hinged on the fact that he could not easily just move down the street, as the restaurant owner claimed: not only were permits involved, his whole brand was built on a specific street corner:

RAY: [Reading the article] Like this is a misquote: "I feel like my brand is South Street."⁴⁹ I didn't say that. There's no way that that's what I said. That's a whole

⁴⁸ Survey-based accuracy studies usually categorize misquotes as "subjective" rather than "objective" errors. I prefer the latter designation because, although there is usually no way to prove incontestably that the quote was distorted, and in some cases even my interviewees were not completely sure, in the majority of cases when subjects claimed they were misquoted they were so adamant that I was completely convinced. It therefore seems inappropriate to lump these in with errors that subjects themselves tended to recognize were more subjective, like omission and emphasis.

⁴⁹ Street names have been changed to protect anonymity.

different meaning. I know that I stated, emphatically—I'm very clear on this—"Our brand is South and San Fernando." That was a bullet point. We've got it on the t-shirts.⁵⁰

The distinction may have seemed minor to the reporter, but to Ray the specific intersection, not the entire lengthy street, was the identifying brand of his business and saying it any differently weakened his argument significantly.

But Ray's frustration with this particular misquote was predictable given the contextual dynamics already discussed: it interfered with his goals. More generally, misquotes are noteworthy because even when subjects did not feel they were damaging, many found them oddly disorienting and memorable. Observations like Lynn's were common:

LYNN: Even though everything is in quotes, somehow it's not exactly my words. I just remember that when I was reading it I was like, "Well, that doesn't sound like something I would say." The gist of it was always right but it bothered me that things were in quotes that I hadn't actually said.⁵¹

Like Lynn, many subjects felt these quotes captured the main idea of what they had said, but changed their words. Some interviewees were not completely sure, but many were absolutely certain, and some were able to identify exactly where the reporter had strayed from their verbatim statement—as in Alegra's observation that, "I've never said the word 'nonchalance' in my whole entire life."⁵² That quotes are often not verbatim should perhaps not be surprising since many reporters only take handwritten notes, and must do so quickly—indeed, some subjects mentioned this by way of explanation. But still, the vast majority of my interviewees, even some who seemed fairly media savvy, had previously interpreted quotation marks in the paper as a sign that the quote *was* verbatim, and were surprised to learn that was not always the case.

Although the sheer variety of inaccuracies interviewees discussed made it hard to create a clear spectrum of severity, and I found that distinctions between "objective" and "subjective"

⁵⁰ Interview by author, January 4, 2011.

⁵¹ Interview by author, September 30, 2010.

⁵² Interview by author, October 30, 2009.

accuracies tended to blur far more than one would suspect from reading the survey literature, I would say that factual errors that attribute incorrect action, motivation, or views to a person were generally deemed more severe than technical errors—they tended to have greater impact on goals and reputations, after all. Tanya, for example, was outraged when her local newspaper misinformed the public that she had taken actions during the Miracle-on-Hudson plane crash that would have endangered everyone onboard.⁵³ The paper later apologized, but she refused to have anything to do with them after that. Karen was similarly irate to find a news program describe her as an enthusiastic fan of the spiritual leader whose unsafe practices had led to a deadly accident at a retreat.⁵⁴ She had always been suspicious of him (in the wake of the accident even more so), and she felt she had made that clear in the interview; under the circumstances only a lunatic would continue to be a devoted fan. In her case, as in Tanya's, the misattribution of action or feeling could have had negative effects on how the public viewed her, so she made a point of communicating her outrage to the reporter.

"Subjective" errors.

These kinds of mischaracterization or misattribution quickly start to bleed into a more subjective territory of miscasting, over- or under-emphasis, and omission. As the survey literature indicates, these categories are often more related to reportorial judgment than are "factual" errors, but it is important to keep in mind that subjects do not usually make these clear distinctions. Interviewees often registered errors of omission and emphasis as every bit as straightforward and inaccurate as more easily verifiable errors of fact, and since they frequently affected the whole tone or direction of the story frame, subjects often deemed them more severe. They are also harder to prove, harder to categorize, and harder to get corrected; reporters

⁵³ Interview by author, November 12, 2010.

⁵⁴ Interview by author, November 24, 2010.

would probably consider most of the examples below matters of prerogative and choice rather than accuracy.

Errors of omission deserve special attention because they were probably the most common type of inaccuracy cited by interviewees. These, too, varied a great deal: some omissions were, by even subjects' measures, not so much errors as decisions the reporter made about how to tell the story that the subject had not expected or with which he did not agree. Again, expectations were often formed during the interview stage. Unless reporters had shared information with subjects about the other research they were doing for the story and how they envisioned framing it—which was by no means the norm—subjects were left to envision coverage based on the limited clues they picked up in their encounter with the journalist. Especially when interviews had been long and involved, subjects often expected to play a larger role in the story than turned out to be the case. Kim's reaction was common:

KIM: I thought there would've been more about my personal experience. Like my lifestyle change, background, everything. I really didn't know that [the reporter] had interviewed other people, 'cause he spent a lot of time with me. So I kinda thought it was just gonna be me.⁵⁵

Many subjects conceded that the omissions were not errors *exactly*, but still noted they were not just surprised and disappointed, they also felt the decision led to an incomplete or distorted representation of what they had shared in the interview:

PATRICIA: No, it wasn't technically inaccurate. I mean, after four-and-a-half hours of interviews I thought there would be a little more meat to what he picked that I would say. I thought, "Of all the quotes you could've picked, why that one? That sounds pretty stupid." Yeah, I probably did say it, but gee, that wasn't the point of it, y'know? I gave him so dang much substance. I mean, I spilled my heart and soul about what this movement is all about, and did he capture that? No.⁵⁶

As Patricia's comment suggests, the other side of feeling one's best quotes or most illuminating details were excluded was the sense that the most vapid or non-representative ones were chosen. This was also very common in my sample: although it may be somewhat

⁵⁵ Interview by author, November 3, 2009.

⁵⁶ Interview by author, May 3, 2010.

counterintuitive, the *inclusion* of technically correct but undesirable information may be deemed erroneous or misrepresentative, usually because it contributes to the overemphasis of an aspect of the story the subject feels is unhelpful, unflattering, or unimportant. Several subjects, for example, felt that the inclusion of their age in the story—a common journalistic convention—was distracting and, depending on their goals, potentially harmful.

As is evident in Patricia's and Kim's quotes above, many interviewees' feelings that the reporter omitted key information or wrongly emphasized an insignificant comment instead of a meaty one appeared to be based almost entirely on their knowing what information was exchanged in the interview, and then feeling the article did not reflect that thoroughly or accurately. When this was the case, these kinds of errors were also some of the most easily mitigated by positive feedback from others. Subjects reasoned that if people who were not present in the interview said the coverage was fine, perhaps the omissions had not been damaging after all. As Shauna put it, "I guess knowing what I had said versus what was printed, I was just *aware* [of inaccuracies]. Other people who read it were like, 'Oh! I recognized your name!'"⁵⁷

But some accusations of omission were based less on articles' not meeting expectations that grew out of what occurred in the interview, and more on subjects' well-defined sense of what key issues and facts *must* be included in order to tell their story without distortion. In these cases subjects felt the omissions were indisputably errors. They were also most common in stories about feuds or controversies, in which subjects felt their side's argument was given short shrift by the omission. These were also, incidentally, often high stakes stories, in which subjects were depending on the coverage to make their case or defend their image to the public. Michelle, for example, identified many factual and subjective errors in both the southwestern paper and a *Wall Street Journal* article about her lawsuit against a religious group that had built

⁵⁷ Interview by author, September 16, 2010.

a temple in her residential neighborhood.⁵⁸ But the error that most bothered her was the omission of the fact that she had warned the group in writing of her lawsuit *before* the temple's construction, a warning they had ignored. She felt the omission completely distorted the story because it removed all evidence that the congregation had behaved recklessly, and that she had tried to prevent them from having to demolish an already constructed building:

MICHELLE: I sent [the reporter] the letter: "Don't build it! You do it at your own peril. Please don't. You're going to waste your money." And [the reporter] never even mentioned it! And I think that's really pivotal in determining the justness of whether they have to tear it down or not. It seems like, "Oh! Well that's unfair. They built that whole building and now they're having to tear it down!" Without the reality that they knew exactly what they were doing. They took a gamble.

Understandably, Michelle felt that the distortion—caused by the omission of this pivotal information—could potentially have negative effects on her reputation and professional life: in combination with other errors in the story, she came across as an unfeeling bigot. Although one could argue that omissions are never technically inaccuracies, she was not the only one of my interviewees who described omissions that a hypothetical average reader might well agree were errors because they *did* appear to distort the story. In that vein, Ira felt the exclusion of the fact that he plays video games as part of his job as a freelance technology reporter was a pretty egregious error in a *Post* story about grown men whose gaming is threatening their relationships. Absent that fact, he came across as the troglodyte man-child that suited the reporter's story—which, of course, Ira found embarrassing and potentially harmful to his reputation. Again, one can imagine many readers would find that particular omission disingenuous to the point of being misrepresentative.

Even when subjects felt a story was in all other ways accurate, sometimes they took issue with a story's tone. This was a charge leveled most consistently at the New York tabloids, *The Post* and *The Daily News*. Even some subjects who said they had been familiar with those publications' often gossipy, flippant tones said they found it disconcerting to be written about in such a way. Those most bothered by it felt it misrepresented the seriousness of the trigger

⁵⁸ Interview by author, January 8, 2011.

issue or events as they experienced them. Gina, for example, felt the *Daily News* story in which she appeared made it sound as though she and the other jurors on a high profile murder case had not taken their job nearly as seriously as they had. As she put it, “We were an intelligent group and really debated the points thoughtfully and this makes it sound like we *weren’t* deliberate. Like it was a *game*. Come on! We treated it with so much more gravity!”⁵⁹

Some inaccuracies subjects identified were not so much individual points of fact or emphasis as larger choices about framing that they felt completely missed the point, framed the story incorrectly, or utterly miscast them in it. These inaccuracies invariably had at least minor negative effects on subjects’ goals or reputations, so they tended to be some of the errors deemed most severe—even if they were not technically inaccurate at all. For example, Michelle, who was suing the temple in her neighborhood, felt the religious beat reporter’s assignment to the story was itself a major error. In her eyes the story was a question of real estate, not religion, so publishing it in the religion section was already a major mis-framing of the issue. As she put it, the reporter, “really picked it up by the wrong handle of the pot.”⁶⁰

Some subjects said these wrong-handle-of-the-pot misrepresentations were accompanied by other kinds of errors that further distorted their stories to the point of miscasting them completely. As discussed in the previous chapter, in some cases, subjects began to anticipate miscasting during their interactions with the reporter, which helped them to try to take steps to redirect the journalist, and to lower their expectations for the coverage. But in other cases, interviewees had seen few signs that the story frame would be unfavorable to them, and were unpleasantly surprised at the moment they saw the story.

Maggie, for example, was featured in a *Daily News* story about senior citizens trying to re-enter the workforce.⁶¹ She was eager to speak to the reporter largely because she hoped the

⁵⁹ Interview by author, May 4, 2010.

⁶⁰ Interview by author, January 8, 2011.

⁶¹ Interview by author, October 19, 2009.

article might improve her chances of getting a job, and she was careful to present herself as an energetic, experienced, and enthusiastic team player. So she was disappointed to find herself depicted as a “grandma from Jersey City,” in an article that seemed to emphasize over and over her—apparently to the young reporter, extreme—old age, at seventy-one. The choice of quotes, the choice of picture—everything seemed designed to drive home how very old she was, and she felt the emphasis not only misrepresented her—she is a *youthful* seventy-one—but also would damage, rather than help, her chances of finding a job:

MAGGIE: It’s making me seem like this little old grandmother. And I’m out there looking to work—not to be described as a little old grandmother, but as a vital, energetic, valuable worker....I don’t wanna present an image of a little old grandma. I don’t think that way. I don’t think my attitude is that way. I don’t mean to put down little old grandmothers, but it’s just not me.⁶²

Similarly, Riva was featured in a *New York Times* story about the Tea Parties. As an educator and human rights activist in an area known for white supremacist activity, she told me she is always careful to speak of these movements in an empathetic, nuanced way. So she was surprised to find herself both misquoted and miscast as the token minority/victim:

RIVA: I just expected a lot more text. More coverage of what we talked about and from a more nuanced perspective. I felt like I was kind of shaped into a victim of hate crimes and that’s what I very intentionally try to not portray myself as and that’s not how I operate. I think that partly [the reporter] kind of needed that perspective. I mean, he kind of wanted to have some of that said from a minority perspective, and he couldn’t get somebody else to say that.⁶³

Corrections

In accord with the survey literature, I found that although they identified scores of errors, very few interviewees reported them or requested corrections from the relevant news outlet. Many had not even considered it and, when pressed, the most common explanation was

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Interview by author, April 28, 2010.

that the errors were simply too minor to bother.⁶⁴ Others expressed doubts that a correction would actually be printed or felt the damage was already done and a correction would do little to help. And sometimes other obligations and real-life demands, trigger-related or not, simply took precedence over contacting the outlet for a correction. As Paul explained, the article about his being attacked by a homeless woman—an article that, like the one discussed at the opening of this chapter, was taken directly from a police report—contained some errors, but he was too busy recovering from the incident to bother contacting the paper:

PAUL: I mean, at that particular point I was dealing with so much stuff, like having to stay the extra day in the emergency room. I had missed a day of work, and I had to go see my doctor as soon as I got back. You know, there's just kind of a lot going on, and in all honesty, it wasn't a huge deal.⁶⁵

For most of my interviewees, errors had to be a fairly “huge deal” to warrant reporting to the paper, and, as should be predictable at this point, errors deemed that important were the ones interviewees felt reflected poorly on them, or that could have negative ramifications for causes in which they were highly invested. Chuck explained this distinction well. He was quoted in a number of outlets as a witness to a residential fire that turned out to be arson, and an early online version of an article paraphrased him as tying the suspect to the Democratic Party in the neighborhood. An ardent Democrat, he contacted the paper to explain that the suspect was not, in fact, very involved in the party and that the paper's story should be corrected to that effect:

CHUCK: I didn't want that to be used to say “See! A Democrat burned down a house.” I didn't want that to happen. It was an error that could have ramifications. I mean, it's a quantitative issue: to what degree does this error make a difference? And, if [the reporter] had said, “the pickup was ten feet farther north,” it would have been irrelevant. But the fact that it was reported incorrectly with the Democratic Party made a difference.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ As noted earlier, this was also the most common explanation Maier found in a pair of surveys about corrections. See Maier, “Getting It Right? Not in 59 Percent of Stories”; Maier, “Setting the Record Straight: When the Press Errs, Do Corrections Follow?”.

⁶⁵ Interview by author, January 4, 2011.

⁶⁶ Interview by author, January 5, 2011.

But I believe we can trace the underreporting of inaccuracies in large part to fundamental differences in the ways news subjects and journalism professionals perceive errors. Those errors most likely to be acknowledged and corrected by news outlets—verifiable errors of fact—were the ones interviewees themselves tended to care the least about, and were therefore the least likely to report. Meanwhile, in many cases the kinds of errors and misrepresentations that most bothered subjects—like being completely miscast or having a major part of their argument omitted from the story—were not the kinds of inaccuracies that could or would be corrected, in part because reporters and editors would likely dispute that they were errors at all, and in part because they could not be corrected in brief addenda. “The reporter completely missed the boat on the above story,” which in a number of cases would have been the only satisfying correction to my interviewees, is not the kind of correction one sees more than once or twice a decade in major news outlets, and even more rarely when the misrepresentation concerns ordinary citizens.⁶⁷ Interviewees seemed to understand they had little recourse in such cases, and only a small number actually approached the paper to report their dissatisfaction. This suggests, of course, that the number of errors actually reported to the paper is way out of whack with the number perceived by subjects, and the number of corrections actually printed even more dramatically so.

Why errors occur

While some interviewees were dumbfounded at how inaccuracies had trickled into their stories, I found many quite understanding of how errors occur. Small technical errors were easily dismissed not only because they often had negligible effects, but also because they were the most easily explained. Many of these were obviously simple mistakes, and it is hard to

⁶⁷ These do occur under extraordinary circumstances in the form of Editor’s Notes, such as the one that appeared in *The New York Times* acknowledging its mishandling of the Wen Ho Lee coverage (“The Times and Wen Ho Lee,” *The New York Times*, September 26, 2000, sec. N.Y. / Region, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/09/26/nyregion/the-times-and-wen-ho-lee.html#refwenholee>. 2000). In that case the central figure had started out as an ordinary citizen but was quickly elevated to public figure status when he was accused of spying on the U.S. for China. Moreover, the story was of ongoing national importance for a number of months, an extremely rare distinction for a story about a regular Joe.

attribute malice or bias to a reporter who simply got, for example, a street name wrong. Subjects explained that reporters write so quickly, or deal with huge amounts of information, or don't record, or have very limited space, so mistakes simply happen. Contrary to what journalism scholars and practitioners might expect, at least when it came to small errors, many subjects did not appear to be holding reporters to a higher standard than they would anyone else.

More subjective errors of omission and emphasis that could not be explained as simple mistakes were more bewildering. Interviewees varied a great deal in their explanations for how these errors may have occurred, but for the most part they had no way of knowing for sure. Some blamed the reporter for sloppy or careless work. Some concluded more damningly that the reporter simply did not understand the issues well enough to write an accurate story; had a bias that influenced the story frame; or intentionally distorted the facts to sensationalize. Subjects were least understanding of errors they traced to having been deliberately miscast to suit the reporter's preconceived ideas for what the story should be. These errors were often seen as deliberate distortions rather than understandable mistakes, and were the only cases in which I heard the possibility of a libel suit mentioned.⁶⁸

Some interviewees wondered aloud whether another stage in the news process—editorial or legal review, for example—might have diverted the reporter from her original intent. For some this appeared to be an attractive alternative to blaming a likable reporter for a disappointing story, and reporters themselves were often quick to suggest this explanation in follow-up discussions with unhappy subjects. Some version of, “I wrote a longer story but my editors cut it,” was especially common. Some interviewees found this excuse more plausible and satisfying than others did, and many reacted like Patricia, a Tea Party leader who felt a *New York Times* article unfairly “sandwiched” her group in between racist organizations, even though the reporter had assured her he would be fair:

PATRICIA: [The reporter] said, “No, no, I’m gonna keep this all fair and balanced and exactly the way I said I’m gonna do it,” and so still in my mind I just wonder, is this

⁶⁸ See Helen's story in Chapter Eight.

something that happens at the editors' desk where they do the sandwiching, where they attach things to it like the militia and the racism? Was it [the reporter] who did that?⁶⁹

As in Patricia's case, for many subjects the impenetrability of the post-interview news production process was like a black box where anything might have happened, which had the effect of diffusing blame they might have leveled at the reporter, but made it hard to know where to direct it instead. A couple of subjects used metaphors of translation or filtering to explain this system back to themselves; they may not have had a deep familiarity with the news production process, but they understood the telephone game when they saw it in action:

SUSAN: So [the reporter] then ended up co-writing it with a reporter from *The New York Times* who has never even been to this park. So the story has been translated from him to the other reporter, to an editor, to, somehow, this piece of information that is in *The Times*, that gives completely wrong information of what's been going on. What I guessed before, but now I have proof of, is how difficult it is to translate a story from one person to the next. And there were so many people involved and everybody putting in their little things.⁷⁰

But some subjects also blamed themselves for errors, either because they supplied the reporter with misinformation or felt they had not expressed their views articulately, concisely, or clearly. As Marcel put it, "[The article] took what I said. But I don't think I articulated my point of view well." Responses like Bella's, when I asked her if she felt she had expressed her points well to the reporter, were fairly common: "Unfortunately, you know, being a professor, I probably did not do enough of just stopping and saying the same thing over and over again. You know? So I really didn't flag or highlight."⁷¹

Ultimately, I believe the various ways subjects explain errors back to themselves further contribute to the underreporting of those errors. Most of my interviewees had only a minimal—if any—investment in improving their local paper for its own sake or contributing to the betterment of all journalism (if that would, in fact, be the result) by going out of their way to report errors that had minimal impact on their lives and were easily explained. At the same

⁶⁹ Interview by author, May 3, 2010

⁷⁰ Interview by author, October 26, 2009.

⁷¹ Interview by author, February 11, 2010.

time, larger distortions and misrepresentations were also likely to go unreported, in part because they were *not* easily explained—subjects often did not know whom to blame for what they felt were errors of omission and emphasis, and believed contacting the outlet would do little good. Moreover, when they did contact reporters, they were often encouraged to blame an editorial process that seemed inscrutable—often only the reporter had a name and a face—and intimidating—there was apparently a whole team of people supporting her. I would hypothesize that, like my interviewees, most news subjects are unlikely to go to bat against that team unless the errors are both easy to prove and likely to do considerable damage if left uncorrected, a confluence that occurs only rarely.

Conclusion

Communication scholars' tendency to rely on news subjects—especially ordinary people mentioned in the news—for error assessment purposes may have blinded us to evidence that subjects often do not care about errors, and judge them according to criteria that are not always compatible with journalism's own accuracy measures. Media critics and professionals usually judge accuracy by comparing the published "facts" to externally verifiable data, and rate severity of errors based on how far the published material varies from that data. This system tends to define error rather narrowly, as that which can be so verified. But news subjects usually judge errors and their severity on an effects-based scale, and have a much broader understanding of what counts as an inaccuracy, because they are comparing the published material to their experience of the trigger, their interaction with the reporter, and their expectations—all while hyperaware of the coverage's potential ramifications. Ultimately, it is not so much errors themselves that bother many subjects, as it is the effects of those errors on their goals or reputations. Generally speaking, the more serious and lasting the effects, the more severe the error is perceived to be. But even damaging effects can be offset by the powerful status aura that begins to engulf subjects who appear in all but the most negative stories.

Meanwhile, the finding that subjects often have clear objectives and that many are not concerned about error for error's sake should not lead us to the conclusion that subjects always have pleasant experiences as the focus of media attention. As I discussed in Chapters Three and Four, there may well be other aspects of the experience that bother subjects more, such as interactions with insensitive reporters, vicious feedback, loss of privacy, or an overall feeling of having been manipulated or exploited by the press. Moreover, while many inaccuracies do seem minor to subjects, the most severe misrepresentations can have long-lasting effects, and generally go uncorrected because they are not easily verifiable errors of fact.

It is also important to keep in mind that while many errors may not bother subjects because they are offset by other dynamics, there is convincing evidence that they do damage a paper's credibility in the eyes of readers,⁷² and, even though my subjects were often willing to dismiss errors as not worth correcting, in some cases those same errors appeared to negatively affect news credibility in their eyes as well. For example, some interviewees indicated that, as a consequence of their own experience being misquoted, they now realize they should read newspaper quotes with a grain of salt. Most were quite sanguine about this discovery because, again, they were assessing accuracy in light of other aspects of the experience that often countervailed it. But media professionals concerned with credibility should take note, all the more so because these errors usually go unreported. For example, take this cheerful conclusion from Annie, whose article contained what she felt was a non-harmful fabrication (the reporter said she had traipsed over mountains in her mapmaking work, which was simply not true):

ANNIE: I now know that they make a few things up. I always kind of speculated that they did that, but I didn't know. But they do that, they really do! And it's not like it's something that's that important. But.

I: Did it occur to you to contact the reporter and set that record straight?

ANNIE: No. It wasn't that important. To me, it wasn't what the story was about anyway.⁷³

⁷² Urban, *Examining Our Credibility: Perspectives of the Public and the Press*; American Society of Newspaper Editors, *Newspaper Credibility: Building Reader Trust*.

⁷³ Interview by author, August 29, 2010.

CHAPTER SIX: That's Me!...But It's Not Me. Aesthetic, Emotional, and Existential Effects of Confronting Our News Selves

EMMA: When I first saw it, to tell you the truth I kind of got almost an adrenaline rush, because it was front page above the fold. So it was like, "Oh my God! What have I done?!"¹

THOMAS: You throw somebody up on television and suddenly they're different. You put somebody in the newspaper, and suddenly for a brief period of time they have this energy around them that crackles. There is a sense of fame...Fifteen seconds. Whatever. But it does exist. And I feel it personally, too. Something lifted in me. I was abuzz. And it felt great.²

However inherently distortive we may know the representation process to be, the opportunity to glimpse ourselves from the outside is often irresistible, even as the experience can be very strange. Consider the common ritual of recording a new voicemail message: I rehearse briefly. I record, and, curious about how I sound to the rest of the world, I listen back. Then: a strange sense of recognition. I know that's me—it must be. Those are my words and I control the recording mechanism. But this recognition is mingled with an even greater sense of *non*recognition: I don't sound that way to myself. That's not me—it can't be. So warbly and adolescent. Delete. Repeat. And this all takes place in a matter of minutes, in the privacy of my own apartment, on a cell phone few people call.

I use this fairly commonplace example to illustrate a few basic points about confronting mediated representations of ourselves today. First, few experiences are so aesthetically and emotionally strange; the way we respond to representations of ourselves will certainly involve accuracy assessment, especially if the representation is produced by a third party; the previous chapter addressed that. But to suggest that our reaction is only, or even mostly, a matter of error assessment is to miss what for many interviewees is a dominant aspect of the experience: the mixed, often heady emotional response evoked by simply seeing their name or image in the news product.

¹ Interview by author, August 4, 2010.

² Interview by author, March 5, 2010.

Second, familiarity with this experience does not completely eliminate its weirdness: confronting ourselves from the outside is *odd*. If we take into account all the different forms of mediated representation possible today, it is clear that the means for generating them have never been more facile or ubiquitous: with the click of a few keys, I can take a picture, or create a recording of myself—audio or video—using the same computer I’m using to write this. I can publish references to myself, and my friends, far and wide, and they can do the same about me. No doubt some of the initial wonder we feel when we encounter representations of ourselves rendered by new tools begins to fade with sheer exposure; when I see a photograph of myself today, it is surely not nearly as awesome and bizarre as it would have been when photography was new. But that said, in the process of transcribing interviews for this study I have listened to hundreds of hours of myself speaking and can vouch for the fact that this uncanny feeling of recognition/nonrecognition may diminish with experience, but only to a degree. There is still a moment of anxiety and curiosity every time I press “play” and a brief sense of discomfort tinged with embarrassment and self-criticism when I hear myself begin to speak. It may well be that some people are more susceptible to this particular discomfiture than others, and there is no doubt the medium makes a difference—video, for whatever reason, provokes in me a particularly acute uneasiness—but it is still striking that at a time when we are confronted by more representations of ourselves than at any previous moment in history, it still has the power to fascinate and needle us like little else.

Third, as far as *public* representations of ourselves are concerned, the voicemail example could be considered a limit case, insofar as the audience is extremely small and the individual can almost completely control the content of the representation and the circumstances in which others will encounter it. Most representations of ourselves will escape us to a greater degree—they will circulate in ways we cannot predict, be placed in new contexts in ways we did not anticipate, and the content itself will be shaped by forces beyond our own intentions. This will likely only increase the sense of strangeness. The anxiety factor in my example would be

ratcheted up considerably if, instead of hearing my own voice in a replay of my message, I were to turn on the radio and hear it remixed as part of an only-vaguely-familiar narrative. Now the recognition/nonrecognition combines with concerns about how I will be interpreted by a large, and largely anonymous, audience. I've lost control both of the content of the representation and, to the (limited) degree I could ever control it, how it will be understood and repurposed by others. I now feel strange because I am hearing how others hear me, but I feel vulnerable as well: not only might this public representation affect my reputation and sense of self, it—my replica—could be used for purposes I never intended.

Which is more akin to what it is like to see, hear, or read about one's self in the news. In this chapter I begin by elaborating on the news as a form of representation in which what I have been referring to thus far as "news subjects" are converted into objects, which can be interpreted and appropriated by others, and viewed from the outside by the individuals themselves. While subjects sometimes begin to anticipate this feeling before they see themselves in the product, it is at the moment when they open the paper, pull up the website, or see themselves on television that these feelings are usually most acute. I then explore ways my interviewees felt that being represented in the news differed from other forms of representation they had experienced, and how these factors influenced their emotional, aesthetic, and in some cases, existential responses to the phenomenon. For although confronting a news version of one's self has much in common with hearing one's voice on a homemade recording or looking at one's Facebook profile, in some key ways it is unique—even in today's hyper-mediated world.

Representation and the Subject/Object Split

To understand why seeing one's self in the news product elicits an array of complex feelings it is helpful to back up and consider the idea of representation a bit more broadly. Not too broadly, however: representation is a concept that has played a key role in a wide variety of

disciplines across the social sciences and humanities, but that, as Prendergast puts it, “behaves in a whole variety of different ways, according to context, discipline, and object of inquiry.”³ Some of these applications of the term are not just divergent but contradictory: Freudian psychoanalysis refers to representation as a distortional process related to desire, while other approaches, including literary and media studies, are concerned with its complex relationship to reality rather than fantasy.⁴ A cultural studies or anthropological perspective places all social relations, insofar as they are dependent on the representational systems of language and discourse, in a representational or symbolic dimension.⁵ In that formulation I mentally represent the world to myself by shaping my perceptions into recognizable concepts, then use words to represent those concepts when I speak, and others can take my words or image and reshape them yet again, in a seemingly endless series of funhouse mirrors.

While I think it is important to acknowledge these many understandings of the term, it is really this last stage that concerns me. My focus is on representation in the very straightforward sense most commonly applied in media studies, as the creation of a product that renders present the individual it depicts, the referent. Following Goffman, I use the term “presentation (of self)” to describe how an individual expresses himself in a live interaction, such as an interview. Representation is what happens next, when, via a process involving human and technological intervention, a product is generated. The product can be rendered in text, audio, or visual media, or a combination thereof; the key is that a material object results.

Kate Bowles notes of this form of representation that “it is both a process and a product...which has some kind of assumed relationship to something else we call ‘reality.’”⁶

³ Christopher Prendergast, *The Triangle of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 1st ed. (Sage Publications & Open University, 1997); Jen Webb, *Understanding Representation* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009).

⁶ Kate Bowles, “Representation,” in *Media and Representation in Australia*, ed. Stuart Cunningham and Graeme Turner (Crows Nest, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin, 2002), 72.

This is fairly obvious when we are talking about the news: many scholars have dissected how the journalistic process takes the stuff of the world and creates a product that makes—often very convincing—truth claims.⁷ Obviously, not all representations share the same “assumed relationship” to reality; depending on the context, the technological processes involved, and the genre in which a given representation occurs (and probably many other factors), the relationship between the image created and the referent may vary a great deal; my expectations for resemblance to the original differ depending on whether I am looking at a cubist painting, or a photograph, of a guitar.

We are exposed to representations in different forms and genres all the time, and we take into account these constraints and differing implicit claims to resemblance when we judge how well or badly we feel a given representation succeeds at rendering present its referent. But even the most accurate, near-perfect representation will always be distant from experiential reality because it is isolated in both time and space, and reduced to a particular medium that can never fully replicate lived experience.⁸ Smells, tastes, and other physical sensations, for example, are only clumsily approximated by most representational processes, but they are undeniably definitive of many major events in our lives. Even those elements that do lend themselves well to textual description or imagistic replication are chosen, cropped, and shown from a particular angle. In other words, the ways the product does not quite replicate reality are the result not just of technological limitations, but also of a concatenation of very human decisions.⁹

So what does this mean for the individuals who go through the representational process and wind up depicted in the product? Thus far I have referred to news “subjects” in the sense of

⁷ This could be said for much journalism scholarship that focuses on news production, but notable ethnographies of newswork include Gans, *Deciding What's News*; Tuchman, *Making News*; Pablo J Boczowski, *Digitizing the News: Innovation in Online Newspapers*, Inside Technology (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004).

⁸ Bowles, “Representation,” 73.

⁹ Ibid.

the term most commonly applied in journalism and the arts: the subject is that which is depicted, named, or referred to in the product—the person or topic the news story is about. But “subject” is one of those rare words—like representation, as noted above—that can mean both itself and its opposite. A subject, in the philosophical sense of the term, is, of course, the self that acts, and knows, and consciously moves through the world—the opposite of the static, acted-upon figure in a painting. The figure frozen in a representation, in this sense, is more of an object than a subject. What I have been describing as the process of “becoming a news subject” could just as accurately be called the process of “becoming a news object,” insofar as it is a procedure in which a thinking subject—he who is interviewed—is converted into an object represented in the news.

And although the term “objectification” now carries a negative connotation because of its association, originally posited in psychoanalytic feminist theory, with the reduction of women to objects of sexual desire,¹⁰ it is important to note that all representational processes of the kind I am describing, by definition, turn their referents into objects. Despite the nullification (or at least, reduction) of the referent’s agency along the way, this is, in theory, a morally neutral process.¹¹ We all spend our lives constantly vacillating back and forth between being a thinking subject and an object thought about.¹² In social situations we are frequently both at the same time. True, having the object version immortalized in a representational product happens more sporadically, but being viewed as an object is an inevitability of social life.

And increasingly, so is being materially represented in object form, be it photographically, textually, or in moving images. Over the course of our lives we confront many representations of ourselves in moments that recall what Lacan so famously dubbed the

¹⁰ Bowles, “Representation”; Rachel M Calogero, Stacey Tantleff-Dunn, and J. Kevin Thompson, “Objectification Theory: An Introduction,” in *Self-Objectification in Women: Causes, Consequences, and Counteractions* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011).

¹¹ Bowles, “Representation,” 78.

¹² Jen Webb, *Understanding Representation, Understanding Contemporary Culture* (Los Angeles; London: Sage, 2009), 69.

“mirror phase”: that moment in a child’s development when, recognizing himself in a mirror he discovers he is a separate entity from his surroundings—a space or “lack” separates him from all other things—and he can be seen and acted upon from the outside.¹³ Seeing his mirror double makes possible a moment of recognition/nonrecognition in which he realizes he is an object as well as a subject.¹⁴ As Webb puts it, “The movement from curiosity, to anxiety, to pleasure signals this process...I see myself in a mirror, and it is me, and not me.”¹⁵

Whether the subject/object split actually occurs when one confronts one’s reflection for the first time, as Lacan suggests, or it is a more gradual discovery process, as developmental psychologists now believe,¹⁶ the essential point is that early in life my understanding of myself changes to accommodate a sense of it as both subject and object. When I confront an external representation of myself I am faced with material evidence of something I have long known to be true, which is that others can see me and experience me from the outside, and that there will always be a distance and difference—what may be thought of as a “lack”—that separates myself as a subject from a representation of myself as an object.

Self-objectification and self-criticism

¹³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (W. W. Norton & Company, 1998).

¹⁴ Mladen Dolar, “I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night”: Lacan and the Uncanny,” *October* 58 (Autumn 1991): 12.

¹⁵ Webb, *Understanding Representation*, 69.

¹⁶ See Dan P. McAdams, “The Case for Unity in the (Post)Modern Self: a Modest Proposal,” in *Self and Identity: Fundamental Issues*, ed. Richard D Ashmore and Lee J Jussim (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 58–59; Daphna Oyserman, “Self and Identity,” in *Self and Social Identity*, ed. Marilynn B Brewer and Miles Hewstone (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2004), 10–11. Harter provides a good summary: “The infant’s first task is the development of a sense of self as subject. Thus, the infant must come to appreciate that he or she exists as an active causal agent, a source and controller of actions, separate from other persons and objects in the world. Once this “existential” self...has been differentiated from others, the infant must learn to recognize those particular features, characteristics, and categories that define the self as object. A representation of the self that the infant can identify must be developed.” Susan Harter, “Developmental Perspectives on the Self-system,” in *Handbook of Child Psychology: Socialization, Personality, and Social Development*, ed. E.M. Hetherington, vol. 4, 4th ed. (New York: Wiley, 1983), 279. Also cited in McAdams, 58.

An important part of feminist theory's legacy has been to call attention to the potential negative effects of representation, be they to the individuals represented; the groups they, in turn, stand in for; or the audience receiving these damaging messages.¹⁷ However, as I have pointed out in previous chapters, being represented, at least in the news media, actually has many benefits for individuals in many specific instances, and is quite often *not* felt by referents to be inherently damaging or degrading; in many cases, quite the opposite.

What *is* consistently felt is a powerful curiosity (mixed with other anticipatory emotions ranging from excitement to outright dread) before seeing one's self in the product. It was at this moment, on the verge of seeing their news selves, that subjects who had not already realized it were hit hard with the sense that they had very little control over the product, and so were in a very vulnerable position. Being objectified may be morally neutral in theory, and an inevitable part of this process, but giving up control over one's own image, message, or story is often uncomfortable. For some, the dominant feeling was not at all negative; rather, they felt excited to see how they would be represented, or simply interested in finding that out. But others described feelings of nervousness, anxiety, or fear. Take this sampling of responses to my question about how interviewees felt in the interim between speaking to reporters and seeing the end result:

RODNEY: [I felt] anxious and nervous at the same time. And excited.

I: What were you anxious about? And what were you excited about?

RODNEY: You start thinking about, alright, what people are gonna think...It's risky. Cuz you put yourself out there. It's like steppin' off a ledge.¹⁸

THOMAS: I couldn't sleep all night...It was just that anxiety mixed with dread. Like still, I had no idea what it was gonna look like in print or how it was gonna be perceived.¹⁹

FLORA: Like, okay, now I wait. Because you don't know. You really don't know.

I: Were you worried?

¹⁷ Bowles, "Representation," 78.

¹⁸ Interview by author, November 11, 2009.

¹⁹ Interview by author, March 5, 2010.

FLORA: I wasn't so much worried as more anxious. You know, more sort of anxious than anything else. There's always a part that's like, "Wow—whatever I said, no matter how good I thought it was, this could be –"²⁰

NEELA: A little scared to see it. A little scared if they ran my photo with it.²¹

PATRICIA: Umm, pretty close to dread. Expected the worst, hoped for the best. Again, a calculated risk.²²

As I have discussed at length in earlier chapters, often much of this anxiety stemmed from concerns about the coverage's potential repercussions for subjects' reputations or goals. But underlying this was a sense of having given control of one's own presentation of self over to a reporter and not knowing how she would represent it back to the world. As Colleen summed it up,

COLLEEN: It was exhausting and it's a risk. Because you have no—ultimately your words are out there and you've given them to somebody. And they can do with them what they want. And there you are, and that's a very scary thing! [laughs] It's very scary to give your words to somebody else.²³

This heightened anticipatory feeling was followed, for many, by an ineffable sense of strangeness and surreality upon seeing the story in print or on television for the first time:

CHRIS: Yeah, it's just weird to see yourself in the newspaper.²⁴

PAUL: To sum up it was pretty weird, seeing it be such a big deal, seeing my name in the paper, hearing my name on the news is kinda strange²⁵.

ANNIE: Yes, it was a little weird. A little surreal. Like, seeing my photo in there. Seeing my name. Like, "Here I am! In the paper!" You're used to reading articles about other people, not about yourself. And so it's like, "Oh! That's kinda weird. I am in the paper!"²⁶

²⁰ Interview by author, March 12, 2010.

²¹ Interview by author, March 23, 2010.

²² Interview by author, May 3, 2010.

²³ Interview by author, November 9, 2009.

²⁴ Interview by author, January 6, 2011.

²⁵ Interview by author, January 4, 2011.

²⁶ Interview by author, August 29, 2010.

KIM: It's kinda weird to see yourself on TV. Like, you see yourself differently when you're on TV and it's kinda like, "whoa! That's me? That's the way I really look and that's the way I really sound, on TV?"²⁷

This reaction, whether subjects were seeing themselves in print or on television, was one of the most consistent currents in my interviews—at least as salient for many of my interviewees as accuracy, or anything else about the actual content of the coverage. As I have suggested, understanding one's self as an object is nothing new, and neither is seeing one's self in object form. But if this general experience is so familiar, why is this particular variant of it so strange?

For one thing, seeing an object representation of the self may be similar to seeing one's self in a mirror, but it differs in some key ways, a point several interviewees made explicitly.

I: You said the first time you saw it it was pretty cringe-worthy.

BILLY: Yeah. I don't see myself very often. The mirror can only give you so much. And then when you realize, "Oh, that's what they see when I'm—I didn't realize." Yeah, so it's weird. It's funny, it's almost like being detached from yourself...It was almost as if somebody had painted a picture of me and it just didn't look right. But it was a huge picture and it was, like, at my memorial. And I'm like, "Aach!" But y'know, it's like, that's me. So it was weird to have to come to terms with the fact that that's what you look like. On a mass communication.²⁸

Billy had a hard time pinning down why exactly he felt like cringing every time he looked at—or even thought too hard about—the profile of him in the southwestern paper. He spent a lot of time in our interview trying to unravel his mixed emotions about it, and this quote is noteworthy because of the blend of total recognition—he knows that is he in the representation, it is what he "really" looks like to other people—and nonrecognition—he does not recognize himself in this presumably "real" version, but he is being publicly documented in this way, so it must be so. And yet...it's just off somehow.

Dissecting this further, the first thing he feels is a greater distance from his object-self than he does when he looks in the mirror: "It's almost like being detached from yourself." This

²⁷ Interview by author, November 3, 2009.

²⁸ Interview by author, July 28, 2010.

may be due to a number of factors, including the object's having been rendered by a third party and appearing in a novel context, and not the least of which is the mere fact of seeing a static representation, frozen in time and space, rather than a reflection that responds immediately to one's every twitch and turn. Whatever the source, Billy feels that when he sees his photo and name in the paper he is seeing himself from the outside, as others see him.

Moreover, this, he assumes, is what he "really" looks like. The removal of agency that we associate with objectification in the negative, reductive sense is also to a degree the source of another common assumption about many object versions of ourselves: that, stripped of self-interest and subjective perspective, they are more true to reality than our own perceptions—that they are, in the most basic sense of the word, "objective." The potential for any representation to truly provide an objective view of the world may have been discredited in many professions and academic disciplines, but that seems to have little bearing on our general practice of turning to representations of ourselves, especially photographs and other mechanically produced representations, to find out something about our "real" selves—the selves others experience—that is otherwise inaccessible to us. As I discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, the fact that this particular representation is being presented in the news and was rendered by a presumably impartial, professional, third party further imbues the object with a kind of authority that may increase this belief that it is showing us as we really are.

This helps explain why my interviewees spoke about the period leading up to seeing themselves in the news with such a mix of curiosity, excitement, and anxiety: seeing ourselves from the outside, in new contexts and from new angles, holds the promise of self-revelation. It also feels, obviously, intensely personal, and can be nerve-wracking. The stakes are higher than when we simply see a snapshot of ourselves taken by a friend at a party, because this revelation of what we're "really like" will occur before a very large public. As Billy points out, "it was weird to have to come to terms with the fact that that's what you look like. On a mass communication."

Many of my interviewees, including Billy, said one of their first reactions to the news coverage was not to be critical of how well or badly the reporter had done his or her job, but to be critical of themselves. As Ray put it, seeing himself on television felt like facing an unwelcome truth: "You're like, "Ugh. Who's that thinning-haired, middle-aged guy?" Yeah, it's awful. It's brutal. 'Cause it's just like, you're face to face with it, you know, you still have this myth about who you are."²⁹

Faced with their own images, but at a farther remove than they were used to, many said they found themselves nitpicking their own appearance or quotes to an uncomfortable degree, especially when photos or video were involved. While some were relieved and pleased, even that reaction seemed to confirm that the revelation of what they "really" looked or sounded like was a major interest or concern for them, and the far more common reaction was cringing, critical, and self-conscious:

DEANNE: When I saw myself on TV, first of all, again, I hate how I looked. I'm SO hypercritical of how I look and how I sound.³⁰

I: Yeah; and what was it like to hear yourself?

FATIMA: Um, I hate my voice. [laughs] I feel like I sound rough and manly, and I talk too much.³¹

NORMA: [the reporter] was like, "Didn't you like the photo?" And I go, "He couldn't have picked a worse one, you can see all my [tummy] rolls!" I said, "It made me look fat!" I mean, that's literally the first thing I thought.³²

MANUEL: You know, when they take pictures you don't know how you're going to come out. But I always consider myself looking a lot better than that picture. I was still shaken up by [the trigger event], to be honest with you. Maybe that's why. But I don't know. I always felt like I'm a lot better looking than that guy.³³

²⁹ Interview by author, January 4, 2011.

³⁰ Interview by author, October 14, 2010.

³¹ Interview by author, October 5, 2010.

³² Interview by author, March 2, 2010.

³³ Interview by author, January 8, 2011.

Some seemed more susceptible to this self-criticism than others, and of course the degree to which the subject found himself dwelling on how he “really” looked or sounded depended on how extensive his role was in the story; those merely quoted did not seem as afflicted by the need to self-criticize, perhaps because, given their limited role in the story, they did not imagine that the viewing audience would judge them harshly. For those who did feel extremely self-critical, this imagined audience clearly played a part. Not only were they faced with a representation that presumably showed them how they appeared to others, they found themselves imagining all of those others seeing and responding to it:

PETE: If it was a great picture of me I would've gone, “Oh, now, that's cool.” But I was lookin' at it, I was like, “Uggh, who wants to be lookin' at this? I guess that's what I really look like!” [laughing] I says, “Do I really look like that?!³⁴”

I: I guess the first thing you saw was probably the big picture. What did you think of it?

BILLY: I was like, “I need a haircut.” Or like, “I shouldn't have worn that.” Critical. Hyper [critical]. I don't mind being photographed, but when it's on that level, it's weird. Because people judge you. There's no like, judging system where people can “like” or “dislike” you. But I know people are looking at it and they're like, “Who's this guy?”

Interviewees like Pete and Billy described a self-objectification process in which they were faced with an example of how one person saw them (the journalist) then imagined this rippling out in the world in the minds of judgmental others.³⁵ Moreover, some interviewees—like Manuel, who feels he is better looking than that guy in the photograph—or Pete, who questions whether he really looks like that—said they wanted to believe the representation did not truly resemble them...but it was clear that outright denial was difficult. I am not referring to accuracy of quotes or factual information shared in the interview; as I explained in the last chapter, many subjects felt confident denying these were correct. But descriptions and photographs of themselves were harder to challenge, largely because interviewees seemed to

³⁴ Interview by author, October 21, 2009.

³⁵ “Self-objectification” in the feminist scholarship refers to a tendency, primarily found in women, to continually imagine what one looks like to others: “Feminist theorists have argued that the sexually objectifying experiences encountered by girls and women in their day-to-day environments lead them to internalize this objectifying gaze and to turn it on themselves. Girls and women come to view themselves from the vantage point of an external observer and engage in chronic self-policing.” *Self-Objectification in Women: Causes, Consequences, and Counteractions*, 1st ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011).

distrust their own ability to judge these; they knew they could not see themselves “objectively”—that is what they were turning to the object-version for, after all. Indeed, I got the sense that for some, the unflattering nature of a quote or description felt not like a reason to reject it as inaccurate, but a confirmation of its truth, a corrective to what Ray described as “the myth of who you really are.”

Representation and the fractured self

Seeing a version of the self that is simultaneously unfamiliar and apparently objective or true can certainly provoke mixed emotions, but I am not certain it gets to the bottom of the strangeness people seemed to feel at seeing themselves in the news. Yes, their reaction was partly to feel detached and critical. But it was also related to the sense, which I have begun to sketch above, of having lost control of something that should have remained tightly in their grasp, and this is what I want to turn to next.

As noted already, one reason subjects appeared to be so sensitive to the details of how they were personally being represented—how flattering the photo was, how well the chosen quotes seemed to reflect on them—was because they imagined an audience that was constructing an identity for them from the details that were included. This is the second sense in which they had given up control over their presentation of self: first, they handed it over to the reporter; then they sat back, basically helpless, and imagined others interpreting it, reacting to it, and judging it. This, too, is a very personal, and, for many, disquieting aspect of the process, and to understand it better it is helpful to return once more to the idea of the self as both subject and object.

In order to function in the world it is important, despite my awareness of my coexisting-but-distinct object and subject selves, that I maintain a sense of a unified, coherent identity.³⁶

³⁶ Scholars across the disciplines have argued that the struggle to maintain this coherence is a problem that surfaced with modernity: as social life became increasingly partitioned and individuals traveled farther afield over the course of their lives, each social space appeared to demand a slightly different

There are many theoretical models to choose from to try to get to the bottom of what is so potentially disarming about seeing one's self in a public representation, but I find narrative psychologist Dan McAdams's way of understanding identity especially useful, because he breaks it down into separate but interdependent unifying processes within the subject and object selves. In his formulation the subject self, the I, is *inherently* unifying; not a noun, but a process of integrating experience from the subject's point of view, which he calls "selfing:"

Human experience tends toward a fundamental sense of unity in that human beings apprehend experience through an integrative selfing process. The I puts experience together—synthesizes it, unifies it—to make it "mine." The fact that it *is* mine—that when I see the sunset, I am seeing it; that when you hurt my feelings, those were *my* feelings, not yours, that were hurt—provides a unity to selfhood without which human life in society as we know it would simply not exist.³⁷

Failure to locate subjective experience within the self is rare, the sign of a serious psychological problem like severe autism or multiple personality disorder—illnesses in which failure to develop a unified sense of the self as a subject may prove an insurmountable barrier to integration into society.³⁸ The challenge for most of us lies in our effort to develop a coherent sense *not* of the self as subject, but of the self as object—not the "I," but the "me" that I present to the world. Citing Goffman and others, McAdams notes that, unlike the inherently unifying

version of the self, which had previously felt coherent simply by virtue of remaining in one village and being known to all villagers for a lifetime. The question of how a unified identity can be maintained in a far more complex post-industrial society has therefore preoccupied a number of prominent social theorists, who argue that the illusion of a non-fractured, coherent sense of self is perpetuated and maintained by social processes that continually name and identify an individual as a single entity. Jen Webb notes that how exactly this works is a subject of debate among scholars: Foucault argues that public documents play a major role in naming and authorizing a single identity for each person; meanwhile Althusser traces this to ideology, which "interpellates," or names us. See Webb, *Understanding Representation*, 70. Meanwhile, psychologists emphasize the unifying mechanisms within the individual (see Oyeserman, "Self and Identity."). At the same time, some social theorists, focused on the post-modern period argue that fragmentation, and not cohesion, is the defining condition of the era. Gergen goes so far as to argue that this fracturing of the self leads to the annihilation of the authentic self altogether. Robert Jay Lifton responds that people are far more adaptable than Gergen and others give them credit for: yes, in a post-modern context individuals must be able to alter themselves as conditions require, but they do so using symbolizing practices and coherent life stories (much like those McAdams posits, which I detail in this chapter). Kenneth J Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000). Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*, University of Chicago Press ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

³⁷ McAdams, "'The Case for Unity in the (Post)Modern Self: a Modest Proposal,'" 57.

³⁸ McAdams, "'The Case for Unity in the (Post)Modern Self: a Modest Proposal.'" 57.

psychological process of developing and maintaining a sense of the self as an I, “There is no psychological law that says that the me must be a unified or unifying thing.”³⁹ Rather, I may present a different me—what Goffman would term a “face”—depending on the context in which I find myself: the student me, the teacher me, the yogi me, the daughter me, and so forth. This flexibility, or available repertoire of various mes that I (for it is my subject self that manages the mes) can deploy in different contexts, is essential for successful impression management in social life.⁴⁰ As such, I am never eager to give up control of a given me, nor is it pleasant to find myself in a situation where I am uncertain of my audience, because this interferes with my ability to adopt the appropriate presentation of self.

But, of course, the news process robs the I of its ability to present a me appropriate to a given context. First, the me will obviously be generated by the journalist, the result of a series of decisions about what to include, exclude and emphasize.⁴¹ Even if the journalist and the subject’s ideas about which “me” to portray align—and it is quite likely that they will not—the resulting representation will likely feel partial and reductive to the subject. As Billy summed up the issue, “And then it’s like, ‘Yeah, that is me. But.’ And it’s like, there’s no but. It is me. But then again it’s not because it’s only a thousand words. And how can you really put a word count on a person’s life?”⁴²

But that is not the end of it. Social media scholars have emphasized how people strive to compensate for “context collapse” and “invisible audiences” online, which make it difficult to present a distinct and preferred me to each separate reference group, since the boundaries

³⁹ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁰ Goffman, “On Face-Work”; McAdams, “The Case for Unity in the (Post)Modern Self: a Modest Proposal.”

⁴¹ Bowles, “Representation,” 72.

⁴² Interview by author, July 28, 2010.

between them tend to crumble and who they are is never clear anyway.⁴³ But public representations like those in a mainstream news story combine context collapse with the usurpation of the me-construction that is normally the jurisdiction of the subject. In other words, if context collapse is a problem when you are self-broadcasting on Twitter, because it is difficult to adjust the me in question for a broad, unknown audience, it is an even greater problem when someone else is broadcasting you. First, the “me” in question will not be generated and controlled entirely by the subject, and next that “me” will be presented to a broad public, not necessarily the narrow one for whom it might be more appropriate or preferred. Indeed, part of Billy’s discomfort stemmed from being featured in the newspaper for his work as a budding comedian, a persona that felt incompatible with the one he adopted at his day job in the stock room at a department store:

BILLY: After the interview came out the people at [department store] put it up on the bulletin board at work in the break room, and I didn’t go to the break room for like, a week or two after that, because I don’t like to have the conversations about it. It’s like an intimate peek into my world, and so I didn’t want the people at work thinking they could just ask me about stuff, because you know...having an article in the paper is kind of an important thing. Y’know, in a person’s life. But I don’t know how to tell the 65-year-old woman who works customer service, who’s on break at the same time I am, what it all means, and how I’m doing comedy and trying to justify why I dropped outta college to try to do this. So I just avoided the break room altogether.⁴⁴

According to McAdams, the second duty of the subject vis-à-vis this arsenal of mes, in addition to choosing and presenting each one in an appropriate context, is to generate a sense of coherent identity among them. This is done through the creation and maintenance of personal

⁴³ Findings show that those broadcasting on Twitter, for example, usually develop an image of the audience, albeit one primarily made up of strangers, and they adjust their presentation of self accordingly. See Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd, “I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience,” *New Media & Society* (July 7, 2010), <http://nms.sagepub.com/content/early/2010/06/22/1461444810365313.abstract>. For discussions of both “context collapse” and “invisible audiences” see boyd, “Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics.”

⁴⁴ Interview by author, July 28, 2010.

life narratives—Ray’s “myth of who you really are.”⁴⁵ These narratives provide the connecting tissue that makes sense of what would otherwise feel like a distressingly fractured public self. Essentially, I have a running life story in my head that connects the daughter me to the student me to the teacher me, and so on. Being represented in the news product has the potential to distort or destabilize this personal, unifying narrative because one of the mes, over which the subject may or may not feel much ownership, is standing in for the whole. This is why the descriptors, quotes, and details matter so much, especially to the subject himself: they are the clues readers will use to reconstruct him, and the result is unlikely to resemble the unifying identity narrative he has composed for himself.

Whether the audience is *actually* doing this is of little matter; the destabilizing sensation comes from the subject’s imagining the audience doing it. Tim, for example, described the weirdness of seeing himself depicted as a “math whiz” in the paper.⁴⁶ Yes, he and his wife run a tutoring business and sometimes he helps out with the teaching, but he’s hardly a math genius. His was not a distressing case because he did not feel like the characterization reflected poorly on him—but it wasn’t *him*, and it was strange to imagine people would think it was. For some subjects it was not a single misrepresentative-feeling descriptor, but the selection of decontextualized quotes and details included in the article, that seemed to paint a picture that did not look or sound as familiar as it should have:

THOMAS: I think reading my own quotes is very strange. Like, it’s my own words, but [sounding quizzical] it’s not in my voice? There’s something very...disconnected about it all. And that was a little jarring. It was just a little strange from that standpoint. To be like, “Those are my words, but that doesn’t—that’s not my voice.”⁴⁷

Seeing one’s self represented in a public forum like the news is not strange simply because it means seeing one’s self from a distance, but because that particular self is partial,

⁴⁵ McAdams, “The Case for Unity in the (Post)Modern Self: a Modest Proposal.” Robert Jay Lifton concurs: “the symbolizing self centers on its own narrative, on a life story that is itself created and constantly re-created.” Lifton, *The Protean Self*, 30.

⁴⁶ Interview by author, November 10, 2009.

⁴⁷ Interview by author, March 5, 2010.

often not felt to be familiar, but nonetheless is imagined to stand in for the whole in the minds of a largely faceless audience. So we can begin to see how the representational product may always seem at least somewhat alien to the subject when he initially sees it, and how that alien may appear to take on a life of its own (or spawn alien babies) as he imagines audience members reconstructing in their minds an image of him based on this, necessarily selective, representation.

The Uncanny

Although little has been written about the phenomenon of confronting one's own representation specifically in the news, the strange sensation it often evokes has been discussed by a number of theorists focused on photography, and their insights are revealing here.⁴⁸ They note the inevitable sense of distance—and difference—between the viewing self and the object-self when we see ourselves in a photo; all remark on some version of the “that’s me—but not me” sensation. This can lead to all kinds of disconcerting feelings, which theorists variously trace to questions about ownership (that is me in the photo—but is the photo actually mine, the photographer’s, or the public’s?),⁴⁹ location (where is the “real” me? Here in my head or in the photograph?),⁵⁰ and forceful appropriation (“To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed”).⁵¹

These are all versions of the same idea that the concept of the self as a unified, coherent entity under the subject’s full control is unsettled by the confrontation of the self in a

⁴⁸ See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Reprint. (Hill and Wang, 2010); Bowles, “Representation”; Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 1st ed. (Picador, 2001); Webb, *Understanding Representation*.

⁴⁹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 13.

⁵⁰ Webb, *Understanding Representation*, 81.

⁵¹ Sontag, *On Photography*, 14.

photograph that can be seen, circulated, and used by others. There is a sense of loss of a part of the self, but also a loss of the illusion of coherence and control. Moreover, seeing one's self in a photo may elicit an acute feeling that something once private (the subject self), which perhaps should have remained private, has been made public. As the infinitely quotable Barthes points out in *Camera Lucida*, "The "private life" is nothing but that zone of space, of time, where I am not an image, an object."⁵² In other words, a photograph that represents me can be understood as a material expression of myself as a public entity, insofar as it is only in the public eye that I become an object at all.

Much of Barthes's famous essay is devoted to grappling with the emotions and aesthetics evoked when a viewer sees a photograph, whether of himself or a loved one, but he acknowledges that he is writing at a moment when photography's strangeness—including its manifestation of the ancient preoccupation with encountering one's double—has been somewhat obscured by familiarity:

For the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity. Even odder: it was *before* Photography that men had the most to say about the vision of the double...for centuries this was a great mythic theme. But today it is as if we repressed the profound madness of Photography: it reminds us of its mythic heritage only by that faint uneasiness which seizes me when I look at "myself" on a piece of paper.⁵³

The idea of facing off with our own double is a singularly creepy one, and it is partly this, Barthes argues, that haunts us when we see photographs of ourselves. The idea of the double has long been associated with death⁵⁴—this is part of the "great mythic theme" to which Barthes refers—so it should come as no surprise that both Sontag, in her acclaimed essays on the topic, and Barthes, associate photography with death: Sontag with murder, since she dwells

⁵² Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 15.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁴ Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny' .," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, 1919, 210–211; Dolar, "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night": Lacan and the Uncanny," 13–14.

on the violent appropriation aspect of the process,⁵⁵ and Barthes with the way it recalls the presence of something now absent: when we face photos of ourselves we are encountering not only a specter of ourselves from a previous moment to which we can never return, but a specter of our own death in the future, since this is what the process recalls: I see a version of myself I will never be again; time is passing; soon I, too, will cease to be.⁵⁶

All of this may sound inapplicable and exaggerated at a time when photography is ubiquitous and an individual may well see multiple pictures of himself every day, to the point where they hardly register as remarkable in *any* way, much less as unsettling harbingers of one's own death. But for many of us that disquiet may linger just beneath the surface; tweak the encounter in almost any way and I *do* feel unsettled; if, for example, the photo captures an occasion of which I have no memory (an example Barthes suggests),⁵⁷ or captures me from an unfamiliar angle, or appears in a context I am not expecting. If the recognition of myself is slightly delayed, or if I am seeing myself in a new light, there it is again—that strange curiosity mingled with recognition and nonrecognition.

While I do not mean to suggest that seeing one's self in the news product is analogous in every way to seeing one's self in a photograph, I think the comparison is fruitful for several reasons. First, there is some obvious overlap in the experiences: often newspapers include photos of subjects, and obviously, TV is image-based. As I have discussed already, confrontation with images of themselves was a major component of many of my interviewees' experiences, and one that was clearly quite salient to them. But secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the feeling of seeing one's photo as described by Barthes and Sontag rings true to my interviewees' experiences as they described them to me, whether they were talking about

⁵⁵ Sontag, *On Photography*, 14.

⁵⁶ This is my own summary interpretation of Barthes's musing on death in photography in *Camera Lucida*. Since the book is a series of reflections more than a single coherent argument, it should be said that Death – which Barthes capitalizes—is a constant theme with multiple variations; precisely how a photograph evokes—or invokes—Death is not always clear, but what is clear is that Barthes is certain that it does.

⁵⁷ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 85.

seeing photos of themselves, or their representations in print. The strange sense of something private having been made public; the weird sensation of seeing themselves as objects; the feeling of lost control over that object self—these were all consistent themes in my interviews. Whatever the precise explanation for the feeling, it is probably best described as “uncanny” in all the maddening, hard to pin-down senses of the term Freud identifies in his famous essay by that name.⁵⁸

In what is either a great literary feat or simply an inadvertent illustration of a key feature of the concept, Freud can’t quite capture the ghostly feeling he is trying to define. He begins with a series of definitions of the term, and a survey of its counterparts in other languages; this yields the insight that an *unheimlich* or uncanny feeling can be produced by that which, like the German term “*heimlich*” (“homey,” more or less), is somehow simultaneously itself and its opposite, both familiar and unfamiliar at once. He notes that “something which ought to have remained hidden, but has come to light,”⁵⁹ whether in the resurfacing of repressed childhood fears (like the fear of losing one’s eyes, discussed in his famous analysis of Hoffman’s “The Sandman”) or apparent confirmation of ancient beliefs presumably surmounted by modern man (like the evil eye), might be another partial definition of the uncanny.

But, failing to capture all instances of this mysterious, disquieting sensation to his satisfaction with these definitions, he goes on to describe multiple examples, each yielding another layer to the concept: objects that make us question whether they are alive or dead, such as automated dolls or ghosts; events or objects that confound our distinction between imagination and reality; our own doubles or any indication of them.⁶⁰ Indeed, the “That’s me!—

⁵⁸ Freud, “The ‘Uncanny.’”

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁶⁰ Freud’s concept has been resuscitated recently in studies of computerized animation and robotics, specifically animation that is uncomfortably lifelike but retains some of the lifelessness of an animated figure. Finding that animation that falls into this “uncanny valley” makes viewers uncomfortable, frightened, and even repulsed, filmmakers in some cases have intentionally opted to make likenesses appear a bit less human than is technically possible. See, for example, Jamie York, “Hollywood Eyes

but it's not me," formulation described by scholars discussing the mirror phase and photography—and my interviewees discussing their experiences—may be as good as any summary of the sensation Freud is describing: I am faced with something that is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, alive and dead, private, but come to light.

Not all of my interviewees found the experience of seeing themselves in the news strange and disquieting: it may well be that some are, as Freud notes, more sensitive to the uncanny aesthetic than others.⁶¹ Moreover, it seemed that the more experience the individual had in seeing himself in a particular published format, the less susceptible he was to the uncanny effect; perhaps with exposure we can get used to the particular equilibrium between the familiar and unfamiliar we feel when we see ourselves in a particular form or context. But unsettle that delicate balance by altering the experience in any way and the uncanny may peak out from under the bed again. If every encounter with one's own photo, voicemail message, or journalistic representation does not produce a twinge of the uncanny—although for many of us, even in this day and age, it may—alterations in the context or medium in which the representation is located, or other small changes that make the by-now-familiar encounter with one's object self seem strange and new again, may increase the likelihood that it will elicit this strange, disorienting sensation.

I would venture that this can happen if something occurs to make the object seem either more or less familiar than we have come to expect. For many, seeing one's self in the news is itself novel; the product *qua* consumer product, the multilayered process necessary to create it, and the sense that it is public and available to the world can all make the object seem more removed from the subject-self than we are accustomed to—hence, uncanny. But variations on this process can make the object-self seem even more unfamiliar than usual. A number of my interviewees remarked on how bizarre it felt to see themselves in publications with which they

Uncanny Valley In Animation □: NPR," *NPR.org*, March 5, 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124371580>.

⁶¹ Freud, "The 'Uncanny' .," 194.

had not personally communicated, in other parts of the country or the world. This can happen when stories are picked up by other publications and re-presented, without the subject's having been contacted:

I: And what was that like, watching yourself being quoted by these other publications that you hadn't talked to?

DEANNE: Weird. Weird. Yeah. Seeing myself in the publications I had talked to did seem strange, but it was like, okay, I talked to them. Again, I knew what I was doing. To see myself quoted in a little newspaper online in Alaska?! I'm like—with someone in Alaska reading my name, and reading the story. Who are you? Like, why?⁶²

Several had not agreed to speak to any reporters at all and had the uncanny experience of later seeing their story in the paper anyway, as though their object self had escaped them completely and was putting on a public show of its own:

BARBARA: They were showing me on *Fox News*, which I don't know where they got the footage, but they got the footage of me at an event speaking...I never talked to them or anything like that. And to see—I catch myself speaking, and it's just on there for a second or two, and you see your face and you hear your voice and it's just—it's just—weird. Because you know that millions of people have just seen this. And you're going, "Wow!"⁶³

The more unfamiliar the object-version seems, the more uncanny seeing it is likely to feel. But in Barbara and Deanne's comments we can also find evidence of the opposite argument: the uncanny feeling can also be exacerbated when the object version seems all too familiar; not because we recognize ourselves, which goes without saying, but because the object behaves a bit too much like it has its own agency—like a subject. Lacan specifically located the uncanny in the gap between the subject and object: after the mirror phase we grow comfortable with the idea of this divide, and when something appears to occupy, neutralize, or minimize that space—effectively, if the object gets too close—an uncanny feeling can arise.⁶⁴ If, for example, my mirror image winks at me of its own accord, this gap between my object and subject selves is threatened. My object-self is now unbearably close to my subject self; I'm

⁶² Interview by author, October 14, 2010.

⁶³ Interview by author, May 6, 2010.

⁶⁴ Dolar, "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night": Lacan and the Uncanny," 13.

disoriented, startled, frightened. If my object self is out there, the last thing I want is for it to appear to have a life of its own.

Again, this is a problem with photography, but also news: it produces object versions of ourselves that can be published in unfamiliar contexts, owned by faceless others, circulated, recontextualized, and interpreted. This interpretation and circulation in a sense reanimates the object in ways beyond our control that can feel alarming, if not outright threatening. As Barthes puts it:

I foresee that I shall have to wake from this bad dream even more uncomfortably; for what society makes of my photograph, what it reads there, I do not know (in any case, there are so many readings of a face); but when I discover myself in the product of this operation, what I see is that I have become Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person; others—the Other—do not dispossess me of myself, they turn me, ferociously, into an object, they put me at their mercy, at their disposal, classified in a file, ready for the subtlest deceptions.⁶⁵

What's So Special About Being in the News? Fame, Status, Generativity, and Evidentiary Force

Thus far much of what I have argued about seeing one's self in the news product could likely be said about other forms of representation as well: it is a literal manifestation of the subject/object split and produces a product, an object-version, of the individual represented that will have a degree of autonomy from the subject. This makes it possible for the subject to then confront his object version—to see himself from the outside, as Other—and this can produce a sensation best described as uncanny. But when I asked interviewees to compare seeing themselves in the news to other forms of representation they had experienced, they were usually adamant that seeing their name or photo in a newspaper article, written by a professional reporter and accessible to thousands if not millions, felt different from coming upon their picture in an old yearbook, or being tweeted about by a friend. Some of the same feelings—uncanniness and loss of control of one's own image, for example—were exacerbated

⁶⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 14.

for some in the news process, while others described additional feelings, like acute vulnerability or pride.

Being in the news feels different from being represented in other formats and contexts because it *is* different. Before returning to my subjects' reactions to seeing themselves in the news, it is helpful to identify some of the characteristics that subjects felt set it apart from other representational experiences with which they were familiar, because these characteristics profoundly influenced their reactions. The first distinction is that when you appear in the news you are one of a chosen few: because there is limited space in the news product, being chosen to be depicted there, especially for a private citizen, is to be singled out from the crowd. And not only have you been chosen from the masses for this particular distinction, the masses will see you: the audience for this particular form of representation is much larger than most interviewees had experienced before by other means, and quite likely larger than they would ever experience again.

Although not all my interviewees appeared in publications with the circulation of *The New York Times*, it is worth emphasizing that the mere combination of being one of a chosen few and having a huge audience differentiated the news from most other forms of representation interviewees had experienced—even in today's web 2.0 environment with its much hyped opportunities for self-publication and self-broadcasting. The feeling of having been chosen for a rare distinction—to which many testified—is contingent on spatial limitations and other barriers to inclusion in the news product: as soon as the medium expands to potentially include everyone, being selected for representation there ceases to feel like a form of special recognition. Despite the proliferation of reality shows thrusting non-public figures into the public eye and the occasional meme featuring an ordinary Joe that goes viral, being seen by a vast audience remains a pipe dream for most citizens. As I discuss in detail below, being one of a select few

and being seen by many are the components of fame, and my interviewees were highly aware of this when they opened their morning paper to find themselves in it.⁶⁶

Moreover, inclusion in the news is special not just because you are one of a chosen few, but because of who is doing the choosing. An additional factor that makes being in the news novel for many is that the representation is being constructed by a third party. And not just any third party: a representation professional. While other forms of representation available to ordinary citizens may involve some form of human intervention to generate the product—the person who takes the photo, for example, or myself when I create a Facebook profile—it is very unusual for many of us to have a third party size us up and use her professional acumen to generate a more involved interpretation of us. In this sense being turned into a news object is more like having your portrait painted—or being photographed by a professional art photographer—than like taking a picture of yourself with your computer.

Here I have to acknowledge that my findings appear to somewhat contradict journalism scholarship that documents journalists' declining authority.⁶⁷ But at least within the narrow confines of their experience as news subjects, my interviewees absolutely thought of journalists as having a great deal of authority and power in several respects: they were paid professionals who presumably had some sort of expertise; they had large, well-known institutions behind them; and perhaps most relevantly, they were in the highly privileged position of addressing a large public and choosing which citizens would appear before that public. Journalists were understood to be the gatekeepers to this particular form of fame and influence,⁶⁸ and being chosen by them for representation made the experience both more novel and more fraught.

⁶⁷ C.W. Anderson, "Breaking Journalism Down: Work, Authority, and Networking Local News 1997-2009," Dissertation (Columbia University, 2009); Matt Carlson, "Rethinking Journalistic Authority," *Journalism Studies* (2011): 1-16.

⁶⁸ In his book on the history of fame Braudy writes of newly anointed professional journalists' role as bestowers of fame, "Critical to the dissemination of such fame was therefore these new professionals on the American scene—the journalists almost immediately nominated themselves as intermediaries between their readers and those they wrote about...like so many Dantes deciding who should be

This is partly because journalistic authority contributes to the news's perceived evidentiary force. I will return to this in the conclusion of this chapter, but for now it will suffice to say that not only were my interviewees aware that a large audience would see them in the product, they were fairly sure that audience would believe what was said about them there—that readers and viewers would take the news as a kind of evidence or proof of something that really happened. This belief in the evidentiary power of the news, combined with the news's high barriers to inclusion, the size of its audience, and its fleet of anointed representation professionals made it a unique representational process and product in the minds of my subjects. This combination of factors affected subjects' reactions when they saw how they were represented in a number of ways, as detailed below.

Fame

One of the most common reactions my subjects expressed, in addition to the uncanniness discussed above, was a kind of immediate, kneejerk thrill at seeing themselves in the paper or on TV. As always, this depended on the trigger; for subjects named in traumatic or humiliating stories, this flash of excitement and positive feeling did not occur, and for those who were more accustomed to appearing in the news (neighborhood activists for example) this was significantly dulled if not completely eliminated. But for almost everyone else, there was clearly an element of excitement and, well, fun. Even subjects who appeared in stories that were far from light and fluffy admitted to having felt this. Take Wendy, for example, who appeared in a story about her opposition to the building of a cancer survivors' park in the southwestern town. She was passionate about the issue because her mother had died of cancer the year before. And yet:

I: When you saw your name in the paper, what was that like?

WENDY: It's neat. There's a little rush. [laughing] If you sound good! So that was fun. Y'know, it was just fun.

I: It's interesting that there can be that fun feeling when there's kind of a lot of gravitas about the issue, but there can still be –

WENDY: Yes, there is. Like [squeals a bit] Ooh! Ooh! When I saw it [my reaction] was more—juvenile is the word that comes to my mind. Like [excited, childlike voice] “Look! There’s me!”⁶⁹

It is always hard to say *why* something is fun exactly, but many interviewees seemed to tie it to the feeling of being, however briefly or undeservedly, a little bit famous, the object of more attention than they usually received:

I: So what do you think is exciting or fun about this, exactly? I mean, is it possible to analyze what it is –

MARCEL: It’s narcissism. Like, it’s exciting to see yourself in different places, or like, “I’m on TV!” Or it’s like, y’know, the fact that people see you. That’s fun. The word that’s coming to mind is celebrity, but it has nothing to do with real celebrity. But I feel like there’s something about that. This idea that if you show up on this thing, and then you show it to your friends, it’s like, this way of getting noticed. In a different way than you’re noticed usually.⁷⁰

If we define fame as social psychologist Brim does in his work on the “fame motive,” it is essentially the condition of being discussed and recognized by strangers.⁷¹ For an ordinary person who sees himself in the news, the awareness that in that moment many strangers are, however fleetingly, seeing him or reading about him is an unusual feeling, and one that may appeal to different personality types to different degrees, depending on the circumstances.⁷² But that fame in and of itself, regardless of how it is achieved, has become a socially valued attribute in the contemporary U.S. context (if not most of the world) has been extensively documented,⁷³ and few citizens would be unaware that it is considered socially desirable. For many subjects,

⁶⁹ Interview by author, July 26, 2010.

⁷⁰ Interview by author, February 11, 2010.

⁷¹ Orville G Brim, *Look at Me!: The Fame Motive from Childhood to Death* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

⁷² *Ibid.*; David Giles, *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000).

⁷³ On the psychology of fame see: Brim, *Look at Me!*; Giles, *Illusions of Immortality*; Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); William Josiah Goode, *The Celebration of Heroes: Prestige as a Social Control System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown*.

seeing themselves in the news product is likely at least a little bit gratifying for that reason alone, and more so since, even in a day and age when the barriers to some modest fame may have been lowered, it remains elusive for most non-public figures. This, too, was clearly part of what subjects felt was fun and exciting about the moment of seeing themselves in the paper: they felt it was hard to get in, something many, despite their efforts, would never achieve. This feeling was immediately confirmed by their reference groups:

RODNEY: It was surreal. It was interesting, because I had coworkers like, "How did you get in the paper?! That's crazy!"⁷⁴

MIKE: I had one friend who immediately said, "I hate you." I said, "Why?" He said, "I've been trying to get a story in *The Times* for two years. Lo and behold, you just walk in the door."⁷⁵

JON: There was a lot of questions, "How did you get in *The New York Times*?" We got that a lot. [in hushed, awed voice] "I mean, *The New York Times*!"⁷⁶

Undoubtedly, for some this sense of having been chosen for a rare distinction was augmented if they felt the outlet was particularly prestigious or had an especially large audience, but this was not a feeling that was limited to people who appeared in *The New York Times* (Rodney, for example, appeared in a small article in *The Daily News*), and for some of my subjects the *Times* itself was not a familiar outlet, nor one they considered particularly prestigious. Nonetheless, it felt like an accomplishment to have been named there or in any news outlet at all, and many interviewees said that one of their first reactions was a flash of pride. Here, again, interviewees noted that the trigger matters a great deal: obviously, you do not want to be chosen for this particular honor if you have done something deemed socially unacceptable such as committing a crime;⁷⁷ but unless the trigger itself reflected poorly on the subject, being plucked from the crowd to be represented was seen as a kind of honor. There was

⁷⁴ Interview by author, November 11, 2009.

⁷⁵ Interview by author, November 2, 2009.

⁷⁶ Interview by author, November 26, 2009.

⁷⁷ See Chapter Seven for a discussion of stigma in the news.

a sense that, having “made the news,” one had “made it” in the way one might make it as a starlet in Hollywood.

The downside—or the uncanny side—of feeling like many people are talking or thinking about you may be a sense of vulnerability or acute self-consciousness. As discussed in the previous section, this is a feeling that can be evoked by many confrontations with one’s object-self, but I believe it is exacerbated when one sees one’s self in the news, because (usually)⁷⁸ the confrontation with the object-self occurs at a moment when it is simultaneously available for possession, examination, circulation, and potential ridicule by a relatively enormous number of strangers. It’s me...but it’s not me. And it’s certainly not mine. As Emma noted in the epigraph to this chapter,

EMMA: When I first saw it I kind of got almost an adrenaline rush, because it was front page above the fold. So it was like, “oh my God! What have I done?” I got nervous. I got nervous about, “Are people going to recognize me?” I still worry about it. I still worry about, “are people judging me?” And if people disapprove of what I did, how will that affect how they relate to me?

I: is that something that had crossed your mind before the article came out?

EMMA: Well, I thought about it. I think you can think about things like that and you can’t really imagine how it’s going to be until it actually happens. I felt very exposed.⁷⁹

Status conferral

Being chosen to be in the paper, interviewees explained, conferred not just fame, but importance; it made them feel legitimized and validated. Again, this appeared to be a result of subjects’ sense that there was limited space in the product and that professional gatekeepers had singled them out for special attention:

ALEGRA: I don’t really keep up on the news that much, I really could’ve cared less about *The New York Times*, that doesn’t phase me, y’know. But I guess it is a really big

⁷⁸ In some cases the journalist may read the subject parts of the story over the phone before it goes to print. This happened to a number of my subjects but only in one case did the subject say the reporter read him the entire final version of the story before it was published. He still found it strange to actually see the published version in print.

⁷⁹ Interview by author, August 4, 2010.

newspaper, from what I'm understanding now. So just for me to get into it means, I guess, I'm important somehow.⁸⁰

JESSICA: I didn't know if it was gonna be interesting enough for them to put it in the paper or on tv or what have you. But it was exciting.

I: *Why would you say it was exciting?*

JESSICA: I don't have a background being in the news. I think a lot of people, if they get their picture in the paper, that's a good thing...It says that it's an act that was interesting enough for somebody to write about it and for it to get in the paper. Because not everybody has an article in the paper about them. So it was great.⁸¹

ISABEL: It's the fact that *The New York Times* thought we were a worthy story. Y'know? They thought that our dedication to this school was important enough for an entire city to read. Y'know? I think that's what it was. It was that they thought we were important enough to be an article.⁸²

Again, Alegra and Isabel are speaking about *The New York Times*; but Jessica was talking about *The New York Post*; no doubt the degree of prestige an individual subject associates with a particular outlet will affect how they feel about being included in it, but it would be a mistake to assume that only so-called elite publications are felt to confer importance and special recognition.

To feature or simply name someone in the news is to direct the gaze of the world at the object in question: the choice alone to focus on them, even briefly, anoints them with credibility and status. Lazarsfeld and Merton identified status conferral as one of the key social functions of the mass media in an influential essay written over sixty years ago:

The mass media bestow prestige and enhance the authority of individuals and groups by *legitimizing their status*. Recognition by the press or radio or magazines or newsreels testifies that one has arrived, that one is important enough to be singled out from the large anonymous masses, that one's behavior and opinions are significant enough to require public notice.⁸³

⁸⁰ Interview by author, October 30, 2009.

⁸¹ Interview by author, October 9, 2009.

⁸² Interview by author, October 18, 2010.

⁸³ Emphasis theirs. Lazarsfeld and Merton, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action," 233.

Taking up the concept years later, Simonson described status conferral as enveloping subjects in a “metaphorical aura, thereby making them newly available sources of confidence.”⁸⁴ This aptly describes my subjects’ feelings of general increased authority and legitimacy after being in the news, which they felt regardless of whether or not they were being recognized for a particular achievement in the article. Some even explicitly compared it to being given an award:

I: Can you think of another experience that is at all similar to being featured in the news?

ALEGRA: Hmm. Probably like an award ceremony or something, y’know, where you have to go up onstage to get an award or something. Because you’re in front of people and in the spotlight, I guess.⁸⁵

ANNIE: [the article] might not be exactly what I wanted. But y’know, still, it’s like at least somebody’s recognizing what I do and that I’ve worked really hard to get this far in life. It’s almost like a little bit of reward, y’know? Like somebody recognizes it. It’s not like I won the Nobel Peace Prize or anything, but like, y’know, it’s like your boss coming by and being like, “Here’s a bonus. You did this. Good job.”⁸⁶

As I will discuss in the next chapter, the status boost became especially clear to many subjects when they began to get feedback from others: formerly distant bosses suddenly wanted to chat or long-lost friends seemed eager to return to their orbit. But many subjects said they felt it immediately, even before having it confirmed by their reference groups, which suggests it is a phenomenon with which they were familiar enough—even if they had not personally experienced it before—that they could anticipate the approval and increased respect they would receive from others. For example, Thomas, a performer with a congenital illness who was profiled in *The New York Times*, described waking up at five in the morning to buy the paper at the deli, then “dancing in the streets” after he read it:

THOMAS: You have to understand that I am in an image-conscious, image-based industry. So to see myself depicted really positively that large, I think not only would people in the industry respond well, but just people in general. You throw somebody up on television and suddenly they’re different. You put somebody in the newspaper, and

⁸⁴ Peter Simonson, “Mediated Sources of Public Confidence: Lazarsfeld and Merton Revisited,” *The Journal of Communication* 49, no. 2 (1999): 113.

⁸⁵ Interview by author, October 30, 2009.

⁸⁶ Interview by author, August 29, 2010.

suddenly for a brief period of time they have this energy around them that *crackles*. There is a sense of fame...Fifteen seconds. Whatever. But it *does* exist. And I feel it personally, too. Something lifted in me. I was abuzz. And it felt *great*.⁸⁷

Technically, status and fame may be slightly different, insofar as the latter merely requires that strangers recognize you, and the former that they defer to your tastes and opinions as having a degree of legitimacy the anonymous among us simply do not have. But in practice these two overlap a great deal and may not be easily (or usefully) distinguishable; obviously celebrities and their endorsements are often treated with a degree of deference, regardless of how they achieved fame. And when it comes to how fame and status affected subjects' feelings about being in the news there is probably little distinction between them: both gave subjects a sense of pride, in some cases a sense of self-consciousness, and for a few a feeling that it was ill-deserved. But even those who felt ambivalent were aware that a kind of socially-validating (and socially-validated) aura suddenly emanated from them, whether they felt they deserved it or not. As Mike summed up his feeling of enhanced status after appearing in *The New York Times*, "one's credibility grows by one's association...You're somebody."⁸⁸

Being depicted in the mass media, in other words, anoints you as an official "person of interest": one deserving of public attention. As this phrase, with its criminal connotations, reminds us, status conferral has a negative converse: while one's status will increase even if the content of a news story is not particularly flattering, if the trigger or the coverage is extremely *unflattering* or casts the subject in a socially unacceptable role, he will not become a "newly available source of confidence"⁸⁹ but a newly appointed object of ridicule and shame, dragged out of the crowd for all to see, by a third party who is apparently a specialist at discerning who merits that treatment. I take this up at greater length in the next chapter, but it is relevant here because the same combination of factors that make seeing one's self in the news a source of

⁸⁷ Interview by author, March 5, 2010.

⁸⁸ Interview by author, November 2, 2009.

⁸⁹ Simonson, "Mediated Sources of Public Confidence," 113.

thrilling pride for some can also elicit horror, fear, and humiliation if the circumstances and details of the representation are less favorable. As one of my pilot study participants noted, “That’s not fame, that’s notoriety.”⁹⁰

But for all those who appeared in the paper for reasons that were not deemed immediately socially reprehensible, status conferral and a taste of fame were powerful countervailing forces to any disappointment they felt about the actual content of the article in question. It may have felt weird or uncanny, but it also felt good. On balance, seeing themselves in the news was gratifying for many people, and even those who strongly disliked the content of the article went out and bought extra copies to commemorate the time they made the paper.

Generativity

Before moving on, there is one more dimension of the experience that some interviewees associated with being named in a highly visible product they perceived as relatively permanent—a sensation that I think could best be described as existential. Barthes argues that the essence, or *noeme*, of a photograph is “that has been.”⁹¹ While one may quibble over accuracy of photographs, especially now that their digital manipulation is so easy, they still often function as proof of the existence of their referent in a particular time and place. It follows that upon seeing a photograph of one’s self, “I was here/there,” will be a basic response. Once more I do not claim to make an absolutely analogous claim about the news, but interviewees did variously claim that seeing themselves in print and on television had a similar effect of somehow affirming their presence, or even their existence. Several subjects noted this quite explicitly:

SHAUNA: It gives you validation, in a way, of your existence, on a larger scale than just your friends, your family. It’s not necessarily other people seeing it, it’s just the fact that print, in a way, can be forever almost. And so having your name there, shows that yes, I was here at some point. It makes your existence, which is such an intangible thing...a

⁹⁰ Interview with author, March 18, 2009.

⁹¹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 77.

tangible thing. There's my name. Like, "Here I am." Even for my own benefit I can look at it and it's like, "No, no, I am real." ...I guess for me, what I probably enjoyed most about seeing my name was just realizing that, okay, I did live, I was around, and here's documentation of my existence. Y'know?⁹²

The desire for individuality—variously referred to as “self-realization,” “individuation,” or “self-actuality” has been a consistent strain in the work of personality theorists and psychologists over the last century.⁹³ Brim breaks this down in simple terms into the twin sensations of uniqueness and presence: “I am me” (different from all other people, but similar enough to be socially accepted by them) and “I am here.”⁹⁴ Based on my interviewees’ descriptions of the experience, being named in a news product seems capable of confirming both of these: I am obviously unique and special because I have been chosen from the crowd for a highly valued position in the limited space of the paper. And it’s clear that I really exist: not only do I see myself in the product, others are seeing me there, thinking about me, and reacting to me.

In his book on the psychology of fame, *Illusions of Immortality*, David Giles suggests that the desire for fame may be related to the concept of generativity—the urge to live on after one’s death.⁹⁵ Indeed, a number of interviewees explicitly stated that they found being in the news gratifying not just because it felt like an affirmation in the here and now, but also a documentation of their existence that would live on in the future, as a part of the historical record. Those who emphasized this seemed to especially associate it with print:

⁹² Interview by author, September 16, 2010.

⁹³ This is a point made by Brim, *Look at Me!*, 58; For examples see: Abraham H Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth; the Struggle Toward Self-Realization*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1950); Carl Jung, “The Stages of Life,” in *The Portable Jung* (New York: Viking, 1961).

⁹⁴ Brim, *Look at Me!*, 58.

⁹⁵ Giles, *Illusions of Immortality*, 44.

BILLY: There's something about being in print. It's a very...it's a print thing, you can look it up online or find a copy of it in the paper, y'know, in 10 years, and I'm still there.⁹⁶

Evidentiary force

Interviewees associated another kind of affirmative power with the news as well, not of their own existence, but of events as they had occurred. They noted that seeing events—especially out-of-the-ordinary events—they had experienced in the news somehow made them “more real”:

I: When you saw these articles that were written about you, did that make it seem more surreal or less surreal?

BETH: No, more real. It made it seem more real. It's like having a thought in your head, It's like having a thought in your head that you would never want anyone to hear—and everyone has thoughts like that, whatever they are—printed in the newspaper!⁹⁷

Again, some associated this feeling specifically with print:

ALEGRA: Um, no, it still feels strange. It feels more real. That it's really me, because I'm actually reading proof that everybody's saying this about me, so. Putting it on paper and in words gave it a more clear picture, I guess.

ANNIE: I think it's just a lot more real when it's in print. It's more like, “Yeah, I really am in the newspaper. This is being sent out. People read this! It's not like some web page that ten people look at, somebody's blog, and that's it, y'know. So. Yeah, that was both more exciting and more surreal. When I saw it in the paper.”⁹⁸

Some said they had been eager to see their own stories in the news partly because they were hoping to find out more about what “really happened.” This was a recurring theme especially among victims or witnesses of breaking news stories, who often only knew what had happened from their own perspective and were eager to learn, for example, what caused that plane to go down, or who their shooter was:

EVE: I wanted to go back and see what happened. I wanted to see what the facts were, what they were saying about it, because I still didn't know a lot of the facts. There are still times when I think, “Oh my goodness, this happened in my life, and my life went

⁹⁶ Interview by author, July 28, 2010.

⁹⁷ Interview by author, December 17, 2010.

⁹⁸ Interview by author, August 29, 2010.

on, but it still happened, and it was so big that the impact still occurs to me every day. So going back and reading it over and over, or looking at it again just says to me, yes, this really happened to you. And yes, it was a miracle.⁹⁹

In other words, ubiquitous surveys claiming to document declining trust in journalism notwithstanding,¹⁰⁰ my interviewees spoke of and treated the news as a representational product that was intended to document reality, and they generally believed audiences would do the same. Although I do not doubt that public opinion of the press *in the abstract* has declined over the last several decades, in the course of my interviews I became increasingly skeptical of these surveys' ability to assess what they at least implicitly claim to, which is the degree to which people actually believe and act on what they see in the news on a daily basis, as opposed to whether they say they do when questioned about it. Survey respondents' tendency to self-report what they believe are socially desirable answers is a much acknowledged issue in sociology, and my sense, given that interviewees often began and ended our meetings with short screeds against the media's credibility that did not at all align with their behavior described during the meat of the interview, was that at the current moment many people feel it is socially undesirable to describe themselves as trusters or believers of the news.

I was told repeatedly that "people" in general believe what they see and hear in the news, although interviewees often excluded themselves from that assessment; they tended to think of themselves as more wary and critical than the hypothetical average news consumer they were imaging.¹⁰¹ But even those who said in our interview that they felt a deep distrust of the media tended to refer uncritically to other news stories they had seen or heard—they may indeed have distrusted the specific outlets, or the news in general, in theory, but this did not

⁹⁹ Interview by author, November 16, 2010.

¹⁰⁰ These are extremely common. For example, see *Press Widely Criticized, but Trusted More Than Other Information Sources*, Views of the News Media: 1985-2011 (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, September 22, 2011), <http://www.people-press.org/2011/09/22/press-widely-criticized-but-trusted-more-than-other-institutions/?src=prc-headline>.

¹⁰¹ This tendency is common enough to have its own name, the "third-person effect in communication." W. Phillips Davison, "The Third-Person Effect in Communication," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47 (1983): 1–15. Schudson describes it as the "assumption that gullible others, but not one's own canny self, are slaves to the media," Michael Schudson, *The Power of News* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 121.

appear to stop them from believing many of the basic facts they saw reported in the mainstream press. Despite protestations of the news's bias and unreliability, many interviewees' *actual use* of the news conformed with their assumptions about how others would use it, which is to say, as a reliable source of information.

While writing as a medium may not automatically have the power to verify existence that a photograph has, in the minds of my subjects the genre of journalism (if we can really call it a genre) appeared to share with photography at least some of what Barthes calls "evidential force."¹⁰² I am not arguing that news is somehow inherently objective or truthful, nor making any claim about how journalists work to bolster that perception. Rather I am simply arguing that subjects believed, based on personal experience, that news products had an evidentiary value or function—essentially that they would act in the minds of the audience as a kind of proof of something that happened—and of course this affected their responses to seeing themselves in those products.

One irony of this evidentiary power is that news subjects are in a perfect position to discover that, despite the audience's belief that it somehow captures "what really happened," actual news coverage is always partial, not infrequently deficient, and often arbitrary—if not technically inaccurate—when compared to the actual lived reality of events. But this recognition that news's evidentiary function is at least partially built on sand does not diminish its influence on what news subjecthood feels like, because what matters is not whether the news succeeds at documenting reality but whether one believes it functions that way in the minds of the audience. It is partly this belief that makes the moment of seeing one's object-self feel so critical, and often so uncanny. It is not just a matter of being seen by a vast number of strangers, but also being presented in a context and in such a way that those strangers are likely to believe what

¹⁰² Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 88–89. John Carey coined the term "willed credulity" to describe a reader's powerful desire to believe anything billed as "reportage." He argues that "reportage," a term which implies either first person experience of events described or something very close to it, and which arguably includes most news as well as memoir and literary nonfiction, is assumed by the reader to be very close to reality, and that this is the source of much of its power and immediacy. John Carey, "Reportage, Literature, and Willed Credulity," in *New Media Language*, ed. Jean Atchinson and Diana M. Lewis (London: Routledge, 2003), 57–64.).

they see, read, and hear of you. Combined with the quality of basic objectivity we often associate with object-versions of ourselves, this can have the unsettling effect of infusing a person's representation with an evidentiary power that his subject self, with all its messy self-interest and distorting emotional baggage, can never have. Obviously, if the subject feels the representation resembles him only poorly or not at all, this can cause problems, because it will be taken to be true, despite his protestations.¹⁰³

This feeling of being displaced by a media-generated imposter can wreak havoc on one's sense of self even when the representation is flattering, as one of my interviewees, a hero cop, explained. A personable, well-adjusted man, he said he enjoyed the attention as he was paraded by the NYPD in front of the national media for his role in helping to avert a major terrorist attack. Like other interviewees, he said, at first, "It was fun. It's nice getting recognition." But after a few days of constant media attention, dinner with the mayor, a call from the president, congratulations from all quarters, and seeing himself celebrated as a hero in the national and local media, he found himself depressed. No doubt many factors contributed to his sudden breakdown, not least of which was sheer exhaustion from all the attention, and the gradual realization that he came very close to dying in the events that made him a hero. But he believed that the source of his depression, confusion and distress was seeing himself over and over in the media and knowing that the hero image wasn't really him:

KEITH: I'm being paraded all over the city. Y'know? Then you get quiet time and the id and the ego start playin' ball in your head. I don't feel like superman, but everyone's telling me I am. "I'm a normal guy." "No, you're not." "I'm Keith." "No, you're not!" It's like I'm on 'shrooms. I find myself every night at three in the morning staring at my refrigerator. "What's going on? What the fuck is going on in my life? This is really fuckin' weird." I think the media caused this. Depression set in. For no fucking reason. I'm like, depressed?! What am I depressed for? Why am I here at three in the morning, staring at the refrigerator and crying? This is really fucking weird. And it was the battle in my head between being superman and "No! I'm not superman." But everybody tells you you are. You're torn between what the media says you are—and meanwhile I'm still the guy that yells at his dog and you know, fights with his wife and y'know, road rages

¹⁰³ I go into greater detail in the next chapter about subjects discovering, to their dismay, that their friends and acquaintances believe even published accounts that contradict their personal knowledge of the subject's character. For a first-hand account of the phenomenon see "On being Sound-Bitten" in Todd Gitlin, *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives*, 1st Holt pbks. ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books: Henry Holt and Co, 2007).

on the way home and probably drinks too many beers. But I'm still Keith. And it was really weird. Everything was going cool with it, until one day I'm driving in, listening to the radio. I'm almost at work, and I'm like [mimes tears suddenly coming down his cheeks] I'm like, "What the fuck?! What is this?" I pull over and I just start "whoosh" [mimes torrential crying].¹⁰⁴

For the first time in his life Keith was confused about who he was. Or, better put, he knew who he was, and he knew that the guy he was seeing in the media was not him—but everyone else seemed to believe it was. Confronting object versions of ourselves, as discussed in the opening sections of this chapter, often has the potential to disquiet or destabilize us. But for a subject, seeing an unrecognizable self in the news can take this to a new level because not only is he likely accustomed to looking to the news for documentary evidence of reality, he is surrounded by reference groups that are treating this new object-version of him as just that.

Obviously, opening the paper or turning on the news to find an unrecognizable object-self is particularly distressing if the story depicts you as having behaved badly or committed a crime. This combines the surreal sensation of being accused of criminal behavior with the reality-making process of being depicted in the paper:

I: When you saw the articles, what was your reaction to them?

RICH: I was shocked! It had me listed as an ex-con. I've been workin' since I was thirteen years old! Whaddaya mean "ex-con?" I'm like, "What the hell?!" ...

I: Well, did you have the thought, "That's not me?"

RICH: Yeah, of course I had the thought! I knew! But it was! They were sayin' it was me. But it's not! No! I didn't do it! I didn't do it. I was fixin' the fuckin' boiler! I felt violated!

*It was wrong. It was wrong. It was wrong.*¹⁰⁵

Rich was lucky that the stories reporting rape and kidnapping charges against him—charges that were later dropped—did not include photos. While the evidentiary function appears to be primarily associated with the genre of news in general—as opposed to other representational genres that are perceived as more fictional or interpretive—within the genre, differences in media did matter to interviewees. Visuals were generally perceived as having what I would describe as a more indisputable evidentiary value than text, which bears out

¹⁰⁴ Interview by author, November 5, 2010.

¹⁰⁵ Interview by author, March 11, 2010.

Barthes' and other photography theorists' remarks on the subject.¹⁰⁶ Once more, this makes visual representations of oneself both fascinating and high-stakes: the photo promises to show you as you really are—or really were in that moment—but also is extremely difficult to negate or deny should it not match your self image or your sense of what really happened. I can deny that I said a quote that appears in print, but if I see a video or hear a recording of myself saying it, well, there's the proof—my object self proves my subject self wrong, at least in the eyes of others.

Conclusion: The credibility paradox

This brings me to the central paradox of news subjecthood. Because it provides a platform for individual private citizens to be chosen for public display by an authoritative third party, the news has the power to bestow fame, status, and credibility on individuals, three qualities of incalculable social value. If one is eager to publicize a venture, speak out about an issue, or simply call attention to one's self, this combination is like gold. You cannot attain it via advertising, because self-promotion lacks the credibility of promotion by a seemingly impartial third party. You can only very rarely attain it via social media for the same reason, and because the social media audience will likely be a fraction of even a small news outlet's.

But—and here's the rub—this triple whammy of fame, status, and credibility can only be attained by giving up control of your own message to a news outlet, then sitting back and hoping they produce a version that meets your expectations. This can be terrifying, because even if the representation falls short, it will be credible and widely seen. You must agree to be made into an object that, once published, will take on a life of its own as it is circulated, commented upon, and interpreted by strangers. As discussed in previous chapters, one's news appearance can be beneficial even if the representation is disappointing or inaccurate, often because the status boost and publicity are so incredibly valuable. On the other hand, a

¹⁰⁶ Gitlin, *Media Unlimited*.

representation that emphasizes all the wrong things, disseminates misinformation, or depicts you in a negative way can be damaging in ways that are difficult to rectify. In extreme cases, like Rich's, it can feel like an evil double is wreaking havoc on your life, leaving you to pick up the pieces.

The next two chapters are about just that: repercussions of news appearances and how people manage them. One of the reasons the moment of seeing themselves in the paper or on television was so weighty for some interviewees, thrilling for others, and for many a morass of mixed feelings, was due to their anticipating and worrying about these repercussions. Many subjects' initial reactions to seeing themselves in the news were subsequently affected—sometimes affirmed, sometimes altered—by the feedback they received from others and the way the coverage reverberated in their lives.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Feedback From Others: Reputation, Status and Stigma

When I asked Michelle, whose controversial lawsuit was featured in several articles, what role the news coverage would play in her memory of the episode five years down the line she responded, “The hate messages and the *consequences* of the media stuff—that will play a big part. But just the media itself? Not so big.” Her response encapsulates one of the main differences between the ways journalism professionals and news subjects think about news production. While the former tend to consider publication the culmination of the process, for the latter it is usually the *effects* of the story, measured primarily by feedback from other people, that are the whole point of agreeing to be in the news in the first place and the primary gauge by which they judge the overall experience. After all, many of the trigger-specific goals subjects hope to achieve with their news appearances, such as raising awareness about an issue or generating publicity, as well as more abstract goals like fame and status, are measurable only in terms of audience reaction. Moreover, since, as we saw in the previous chapter, seeing yourself in the news can be jarring in ways that range from the odd to the existential, subjects often seek out feedback from their reference groups to determine not only whether the coverage met their goals, but also how well they came across and whether the coverage had effects on their reputations that they need to address.¹

In this chapter I explore audience feedback, focusing specifically on how interviewees used it to judge whether an article had enhanced or damaged their status in the eyes of others—how it helped or hurt their reputations. Although the mass media’s ability to confer status has been broadly accepted since Lazarsfeld and Merton first identified it as one of the media’s key social roles,² it can be difficult to measure, since changes in status are indicated by shifts in regard or attitude toward people or objects depicted in the mass media, which is hard to trace.

¹ Pritchard, “Why Unhappy Subjects of News Coverage Rarely Complain.”

² Lazarsfeld and Merton, “Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action.”

News subjects' stories about changes in how their reference groups treated them before and after their news appearances provide new and valuable evidence of how status conferral by the mass media actually plays out in the real world.

But status has an ugly converse in stigma, which the news media can also bestow with alarming efficiency. The processes of status- and stigma- conferral by the news operate somewhat differently: as we saw in Chapter Six, being named in the news media, regardless of editorial content, is itself a status-conferring process, whereas the media's role in stigmatizing an individual is usually to amplify a pre-existing or potential stigma, especially behavioral deviance. Yet, as I explore in depth below, despite their differences, status- and stigma- conferral by the news media can both have profound effects on an individual's reputation and, insofar as reputation is a key determinant of social inclusion, on his or her whole life.

Reputation

*Cassio: Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself and what remains is bestial.*³

*Iago: Reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving.*⁴

-Othello, Act II, sc. iii.

Especially in cultures that prize individualism, the ability to disregard other peoples' opinions about us can seem to be a virtue. But that kind of social insouciance, attractive precisely because it is so rare, may be more foolhardy than courageous. Insofar as reputation can be defined as the public perception of an individual's trustworthiness and, even more generally, moral worth,⁵ an intact, undefiled reputation is often a *sine qua non* of social and

³ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, The Pelican Shakespeare AB10 (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958), 77.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nock defines reputation even more broadly as "a shared, or collective, perception about a person." Steven L Nock, *The Costs of Privacy: Surveillance and Reputation in America*, Social Institutions and Social Change (New York: A. De Gruyter, 1993), 2. By choosing to define "reputation" as it is used in common parlance, to refer to the way people are perceived in their social worlds, I am intentionally distancing

economic inclusion.⁶ Social scientists have long argued that others' judgments of us help us develop our self-concept—this is Cooley's aptly named "looking-glass self."⁷ Since reputation is precisely that which is "forged when people make judgments based upon the mosaic of information available about us,"⁸ it acts as one of these mirrors by which we form an understanding of who we are, and it can have profound effects on how, and how positively, we think about ourselves. As such, the loss of a good reputation can lead to such a reduced sense of self-worth and to exclusion from so many basic human interactions that one may well conclude with Cassio that, "what remains is bestial."⁹

Given the social and psychological value of a good reputation, it is little wonder we want to have as much control over our own as possible. But that control will always be limited: efforts to manage available information about ourselves often fail, and how that information is judged is even more difficult to control. So that scoundrel Iago is also right: reputation is "an imposition," bestowed on us by others. And insofar as it may be based on information we feel does not accurately represent us, we may well feel it is unwarranted: "got without merit and lost without deserving."¹⁰

myself from the definition the term has taken on in online commercial contexts to refer to a single quantifiable measure of user satisfaction with a particular vendor or individual, based on reviews it/he/she has received from clients. I appreciate the utility of these measures and acknowledge their relationship to the perception of overall trustworthiness I am describing, but this commercial definition reduces "reputation" entirely to its economic element, and I want to emphasize that in the broader social context (of which the virtual world is a part) reputation is sacred because it is used to judge one's fitness not only for economic transactions but for social inclusion overall, of which economic participation is only one facet.

⁶ Daniel J Solove, *The Future of Reputation: Gossip, Rumor, and Privacy on the Internet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 30–31.

⁷ See Charles Horton Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order*, Schocken Paperbacks SB72 (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 184.

⁸ Solove, *The Future of Reputation*, 30.

⁹ Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, 77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

As unjust as this may appear when we think in terms of our own bruised reputations and limited power to mend them, for reputation to fulfill its social role as a tool whereby individuals' fitness for participation in transactions of various kinds is judged, it is absolutely essential that reputation *not* be entirely determined by the individual in question.¹¹ Reputation, like the news and other forms of public information, loses credibility when the subject has total control over the content. This becomes clear when we think of how we rely on the reputations of others. If we want to hire someone, be it a plumber or a nanny, her advertising materials may alert us to her existence, but they provide little reliable information about her actual skill and trustworthiness; for this we turn to customer reviews and client recommendations, which would plummet in value if we found out they were written by our potential employee herself.

And insofar as reputation is a trust-assessment system whereby those who are deemed untrustworthy are marked as such, it is a tool for the continual affirmation and maintenance of social norms and order.¹² Of course these norms are historically contingent and differ across cultural contexts and communities, but there are few more effective ways to ensure compliance with basic shared values than reputation: community members monitor themselves, since a damaged reputation can bring with it not just emotional but also economic distress, and they continually monitor others for signs of untrustworthiness as well.

It probably goes without saying that appearing in a news story has the potential to affect one's reputation. Although the underlying triggers of some news stories pose a more obvious reputational threat than others, any public appearance by an individual can at least potentially have an impact on that public's perception of him. In the most straightforward way, a news

¹¹ Solove, *The Future of Reputation*, 11, 31.

¹² As Francis Fukuyama observes, "Trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of members of that community. Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1995), 26; Solove, *The Future of Reputation*, 31.

story quickly becomes a part of the “mosaic of information available about us,”¹³ on which our reputations will be constructed.

Goffman’s work on stigma provides a helpful theoretical framework for dissecting this process further.¹⁴ In most of his writing Goffman is so focused on how individuals change in different social contexts—how they adopt different faces and roles as appropriate—that he rarely addresses that which remains constant from one encounter to the next, dismissing the idea of an unchanging, “authentic” self in favor of these situationally appropriate performances.¹⁵ But when confronted with the question of how stigma clings to some individuals as they move through the world, he must contend with the fact that people somehow transition from one encounter to the next and are perceived as having a unified identity—others still recognize them—and often they are perceived as having at least some unchanging characteristics.

To explain how this works, Goffman develops the idea of the “identity peg.” This is a unique feature—usually a person’s name, it could also something else, like his visage—which is used by to identify him across social situations. With the identity peg as a kind of base,

The individual can be differentiated from all others and...around this means of differentiation a single continuous record of social facts can be attached, entangled, like candy floss, becoming then the sticky substance to which still other biographical facts can be attached.¹⁶

¹³ Solove, *The Future of Reputation*, 30.

¹⁴ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, 1st Touchstone ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986).

¹⁵ To my knowledge there is no point in any of Goffman’s major works in which he indicates that there might be an authentic, enduring, unique self beneath the faces or roles one performs as situationally appropriate. In *Stigma* he appears quite disdainful of the idea, noting that the term “unique” when applied to individuals, “is subject to pressure by maiden social scientists who would make something warm and creative out of it, a something not to be further broken down, at least not by sociologists.” He goes on to say that when he speaks of “personal identity” he does not have this in mind at all. *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

Social facts are clues to an individual's abiding characteristics: qualities associated with him, but also information about his unique history.¹⁷ When we meet a new person, we get to know him by learning about the social facts that cling to him and form the unique biography that adheres to him as he moves through the world. This combination of identity-peg-plus-social facts is what Goffman calls "personal identity." It has nothing to do with a person's "authentic" self, rather it is best understood as a practical or even administrative tool for tracking and distinguishing among individuals; it plays a crucial role in social life, but also in a state's monitoring of its citizens. As I will discuss further in the next chapter, an Internet search using a person's name as the peg around which to gather social facts (including articles) about him is a perfect metaphor for, and literal manifestation of, the biography-building process Goffman is describing here.

It is important to keep in mind that the social facts that make up an individual's personal identity are not neutral. They form the basis of judgments that can be made about the individual, which are often moral in character¹⁸—in other words, although Goffman does not use the term, they form the basis of the person's reputation. According to Goffman, these social facts can include status and stigma symbols, markers interpreted as indicating deeper characteristics that are not immediately visible. Status symbols, which he also calls "prestige" symbols, are those that enhance one's esteem in the eyes of the world, and stigma symbols are those that not only diminish it, but mark a person as unfit for social inclusion.¹⁹ A stigma symbol might be something immediately evident on an individual's person—a physical deformity, for example—or it might be a blight on his history that can be hidden or discovered,

¹⁷ Ibid., 43. Here Goffman departs from Durkheim's more famous definition of "social fact" in Emile Durkheim, "What Is a Social Fact?," in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. W.D. Halls (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1895), 50–84.

¹⁸ Goffman, *Stigma*, 71.

¹⁹ Ibid., 43.

such as evidence of a past crime or other behavioral deviance. Similarly, a status symbol could be an expensive article of clothing or a celebrated past accomplishment.

So how do news articles fit into this model? When a person is named in the news, the article becomes a social fact that clings to him, but it also documents and announces other social facts. As Goffman notes specifically about public figures, “Where an individual has a public image, it seems to be constituted from a small selection of facts which may be true of him, which facts are inflated into a dramatic and newsworthy appearance, and then used as a full picture of him.”²⁰ In other words, being in the news will elevate individual social facts about a person to greater prominence, such that those may appear to dominate his publicly perceived biography. Recall from the last chapter that this was part of what made seeing oneself in the news so uncanny—a sense that the audience would be constructing a complete picture of oneself from so few, not-necessarily-representative bits. Goffman appears to be arguing that this is, in fact, what happens. To this we can add that, as we also saw in the previous chapter, news, whether deservedly or not, is often perceived as a more credible purveyor of information about individuals than many other genres, so the social facts conveyed in the news are likely to loom large not only because prominently displayed to the public, to the exclusion of other social facts about the individual, but also because, unlike rumor and other potentially reputation-affecting information, news facts are often perceived as reliable.

Moreover, news articles, like other social facts, have the potential to confer status and stigma; in fact, they are especially effective at doing so. This is because news, like reputation in general and status and stigma in particular, can be understood as a tool for the maintenance and affirmation of social norms; along with status conferral this is one of the key social roles Lazarsfeld and Merton ascribed to the mass media in their famous essay on the subject.²¹ This is also part of what James W. Carey means when he suggests that we consider communication in

²⁰ Ibid., 71.

²¹ Lazarsfeld and Merton, “Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action,” 235.

general and journalism in particular not only in terms of what information it transmits, but also as a ritual in which we might “view reading a newspaper less as sending or gaining information and more as attending a mass, a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed.”²²

The individuals mentioned in the news are key players in this norm-enforcing ritual. I am not the first to make this point: As Tuchman points out, in the news, “[ordinary] people are presented symbolically. Not only are they garbed in the clothing appropriate to their occupation, but also nonlegitimated individuals are made to typify all members of their particular group or class.”²³ By “nonlegitimated” she means not sanctioned by those they are made, by journalists, to represent in the news product. These people may also supply new information—they are witnesses or can testify to the impact of events on their lives—but above all they are symbols of other plain folks coping with similar situations.²⁴

Here Tuchman was focused primarily on witnesses and people-on-the-street, but ordinary people *featured* in the news play a slightly different symbolic role: unlike powerful people whose every mundane move may be considered newsworthy, ordinary folks are usually only featured if they have done something out-of-the-ordinary.²⁵ These are our criminals, victims, heroes, innovators, entrepreneurs, and freaks. While, like witnesses or random people-on-the-street, they may participate in the delivery of new information, they are also being held up for public display in a ritual whose broader social significance may be best understood not as a transmission of specific new information, but as a demonstration of what behaviors and characteristics are worthy of public celebration or condemnation. As Peters, and later Simonson,

²² James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 1–36.

²³ Tuchman, *Making News*, 122.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁵ As Gans puts it, “The Unknowns who appear in the news are, by most criteria, an unrepresentative lot.” Gans, *Deciding What’s News*, 15.

have pointed out, in this sense mass media is a straightforward “derivative of ancient institutions of publicness,”²⁶ such as those in Greek and Roman antiquity in which, “only highly valenced objects [were] paraded before the people,” whether in a shaming or honorific capacity.²⁷ Held up for this public display, news subjects themselves are often made symbols of good and bad behavior. And, as social artifacts that document this and cling to the subject’s name, the resulting news articles are often ready-made markers-of and vehicles-for status or stigma.

Below I explore in greater detail how status and stigma conferral played out in my interviewees’ lives after they appeared in news stories. While these may seem abstract concepts, easier to discuss in theory than to trace in real life, they are clearly visible in the repercussions felt by subjects themselves, largely in the form of explicit feedback they received from their reference groups, as well as more subtle changes they noticed in the behavior of those around them.

Status

Recall Lazarsfeld and Merton’s description of status conferral by the mass media:

The mass media bestow prestige and enhance the authority of individuals and groups by *legitimizing their status*. Recognition by the press or radio or magazines or newsreels testifies that one has arrived, that one is important enough to be singled out from the large anonymous masses, that one’s behavior and opinions are significant enough to require public notice.²⁸

²⁶ Simonson, “Mediated Sources of Public Confidence,” 113.

²⁷ John Durham Peters, “Historical Tensions in the Concept of Public Opinion,” in *Public Opinion and the Communication of Consent*, ed. Theodore Glasser and Charles T. Salmon (New York: Guilford Press, 1995), 7.

²⁸ Emphasis theirs. Lazarsfeld and Merton, “Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action,” 233.

Communication scholars, following Lazarsfeld and Merton's lead in applying the term "status conferral" to the mass media's ability to bestow an aura of credibility²⁹ or confidence³⁰ on those it features, are departing somewhat from more traditional sociological definitions of status, which almost always refer to the relative positions of groups or individuals in an established social order.³¹ Lazarsfeld and Merton seem to have in mind something closer to the popular definition of the term as an individual's "value and importance in the eyes of the world."³² An appearance in the mass media, after all, may not indicate exactly to which status group one belongs, but it certainly tells everyone in the audience that you are important. And even these less strictly hierarchical definitions of status imply, to borrow Veblen's term, "invidious comparisons" with other individuals;³³ our status will always be high or low relative to others with whom we are comparing ourselves at a given moment, whether they be only those with whom we are co-present, our broader peer group, our whole community, or society at large.

²⁹ James B. Lemert, "Two Studies of Status Conferral," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 43 (March 1966): 25–94; James B. Lemert and Karl J. Nestvold, "Television News and Status Conferral", 1970, <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/detail?accno=EJ034106>.

³⁰ Simonson, "Mediated Sources of Public Confidence."

³¹ Discussions of the status of individuals usually refer to their belonging to one or another of these status groups—such as "higher professionals" in Tak Wing Chan and John H Goldthorpe, "Class and Status: The Conceptual Distinction and Its Empirical Relevance," *American Sociological Review* 72, no. 4 (August 2007): 512–532., for example—although they may also explore how individuals within smaller communities and groups position themselves in an understood hierarchy, "associated with prestige and deference behavior" within that particular group. Bernardo A Huberman, Christoph H Loch, and Ayse Onculer, "Status As a Valued Resource*," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (March 2004): 103. Even Goffman at times uses the term to refer to a "well-organized social position", hence his acknowledgement that "prestige symbol" may better capture the general esteem he wants to convey when speaking of social facts that lend a rosy glow to their bearer, than "status symbol" which suggests a more formal position on a social ladder. Goffman, *Stigma*, 43; Erving Goffman, "Symbols of Class Status," *The British Journal of Sociology* 2, no. 4 (December 1, 1951): 294–304.

³² Lazarsfeld and Merton, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action."

³³ "The term is used in a technical sense as describing a comparison of persons with a view to rating and grading them in respect of relative worth or value—in an aesthetic or moral sense—and so awarding and defining the relative degrees of complacency with which they may legitimately be contemplated by themselves and by others." Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, New ed. (Dover Publications, 1994), 22.

For my purposes, status is one facet of reputation, and refers to a generalized level of esteem or importance, relative to others, that is afforded the individual by a particular community or a broader public. And just as having a positive reputation more generally stands to improve one's prospects for participation in all manner of social activity, so having one's status improved in the eyes of the world has profound social value. And, also like a positive reputation, having high status affects how we think about ourselves. Alain de Botton captures this well: "If our position on the ladder is a matter of such concern, it is because our self-conception is so dependent upon what others make of us. Rare individuals aside (Socrates, Jesus), we rely on signs of respect from the world to feel tolerable to ourselves."³⁴

The idea that status is communicated and evaluated using symbols and signs that attach to individuals, whether or not they are intentionally displayed, is consistent across the literature: status exists as a social phenomenon only insofar as it is communicated and perceived via symbols and markers of various kinds.³⁵ Scholars further agree that status is measured and expressed differently according to culture, community, group, and even situation, and that status symbols likewise differ: while expert knowledge may improve an individual's standing in social group A, in social group B prestige of birth or the consumption of expensive goods may be of primary importance in determining esteem.

³⁴ Alain De Botton, *Status Anxiety*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), viii.

³⁵ Since Veblen's 1899 classic *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, many scholars have focused on consumer products as forms of status display, including Laurie Simon Bagwell and B Douglas Bernheim, "Veblen Effects in a Theory of Conspicuous Consumption," *The American Economic Review* 86, no. 3 (June 1996): 349 and Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, Theory, Culture & Society (London; Newbury Park, Calif: Sage, 1991). But many other aspects of social life, including language, etiquette, and entertainment choice have also been analyzed by scholars as markers of status. See, for example, Cas Wouters, "Etiquette Books and Emotion Management of in the 20th Century: Part One: The Integration of Social Classes," *Journal of Social History* 29, no. 1: 107–124; Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, "Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore," *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 5 (October 1, 1996): 900–907.

However, *some* symbols, like wealth and education, are likely consistent across many contexts.³⁶ Indeed, Lazarsfeld and Merton are suggesting that an appearance in the mass media is a status-conferring process recognized across situational barriers—presumably by the entire mass audience.³⁷ And it follows that the news artifacts produced in this process have the potential to live on as status symbols, associated with the individuals they mention, quote, or feature. When a news article calls attention to us and we post it somewhere, whether in the window of our local business or on our Facebook wall, we are trafficking in these symbols.

In the previous chapter I broke down the status conferral function of the news media into the constituent elements my interviewees themselves most emphasized: (1) being plucked from the crowd, (2) for display before that crowd, (3) by an authoritative, highly credible third party. Others have theorized status conferral by the mass media somewhat differently.³⁸ But however one breaks down Lazarsfeld and Merton's status conferral concept, the key to the phenomenon, which has been heavily emphasized by many communication scholars, is that it operates independently of editorial endorsement; in other words, it is not *content* of a given news story, but the fact of having been chosen to appear in the news at all that confers status.

Status Findings I: When content doesn't matter

³⁶ Alice E. Marwick, "Becoming Elite: Social Status in Web 2.0 Cultures," Dissertation, New York University, 2010), 143, <http://www.tiara.org/dissertation/index.html>.

³⁷ Simonson interprets Lazarsfeld and Merton as making exactly this point: "Whereas Weber recognized only lifestyle, education, prestige of birth, and occupation as the sources of social status, by 1948 it was clear to Lazarsfeld and Merton that mass media should also be added to the list." Simonson, "Mediated Sources of Public Confidence," 112.

³⁸ In a theoretical reflection on status conferral by the mass media in general (as opposed to my empirical study of status the news in particular) written in the late 1990s, Peter Simonson described status conferral by the mass media as a "value added" process, in which he identified four value-adding properties of an appearance in the media (which are overlapping and only analytically separable), which add layers of status: the public nature of the display; the qualities (such as prestige and credibility) of specific media outlets; the co-presence of famous people; and "the material aspects of communication technologies." *Ibid.*, 113. Since I did not isolate any of these variables and instead looked at the experience of being in the news as a whole, I cannot speak to their relative importance; my interviewees provided some evidence for all four of these aspects playing a role, and more research would be helpful to study each in greater depth.

As I explained in the previous chapter, many of my interviewees anticipated that appearing in the mass media would enhance their status among their reference groups. Some subjects immediately sought feedback from others to help them assess their news appearance, or simply because they thought it would be fun to share their brief brush with fame. But many, especially those who were prominently featured, did not have to: they were immediately besieged by calls, emails, and comments from loved ones, associates and even strangers. In many cases the feedback was not only positive, it was excitedly, proudly so, and included not only explicit remarks but actions: parents bought multiple copies and called everyone they knew, friends got in touch from all over the world, and coworkers, including superiors, seemed to go out of their way to mention the article. For many, this was one of the most salient and memorable parts of their experience making the news. Being flooded with positive feedback, after all, can not only convince a subject that his appearance in the news was successful, whether at accomplishing immediate goals or boosting his status in the eyes of the world, it can also go a long way toward convincing him that any flaws or errors he perceived at the outset were, in fact, quite minor.

But many noticed something strange about the congratulatory feedback. As Rodney recalled of being featured in *The Daily News* about the financial hardships his family faced after he was laid off as a public school substance abuse counselor:

RODNEY: Mom saw it first. She called, she was like, "I bought seven copies of the article and I'm so glad you had a good shirt on."

I: So she was proud of you.

RODNEY: Right. But in a weird type of a way because it wasn't like a when-you-just-won-a-gold-medal article. It was an article that—we were just like, "Here's our situation."³⁹

In other words, Rodney, and many of my other interviewees, experienced exactly the kind of status conferral Lazarsfeld and Merton predicted: they were being congratulated for having made the news at all, regardless of what the story was about. This was the first of two categories of positive feedback my interviewees reported and is best encapsulated by the

³⁹ Interview by author, November 11, 2009.

comment, “Congratulations, I saw you in the news!” which was heard over and over by my respondents, in some cases for weeks, or even months, following their news appearance, accompanied by little or no reference to what the story was about.

That this was the main feedback received by subjects who were simply quoted or briefly interviewed about fluffy or non-controversial topics is probably unsurprising. It is perhaps more striking that many subjects who were quite prominently featured felt the positive responses they received had nothing to do with the content of the story, and this was even more remarkable among subjects who felt strongly that the content was either unworthy of congratulations or outright embarrassing. Tim, for example, hated The *Daily News* article he felt erroneously portrayed his business as suffering due to the harsh economic climate; no, it did not exactly reflect poorly on the services he was providing, but the article was rife with errors, and surely running a struggling business is not, in itself, socially desirable. Yet he, too, was on the receiving end of congratulatory feedback:

I: What were the reactions of the people who saw it?

TIM: I don't know if they read it carefully. 'Cause they're like, "Hey! I saw you in the paper. I saw you in *The Daily News*." But it wasn't like, "Man, that was a rough article." It was 'cause they saw us. I guess they saw our picture. So I don't even know if they read the article. It was a congratulatory kind of a thing.⁴⁰

Other interviewees were congratulated for appearing in stories about being unemployed, potentially evicted, and victims of violent crimes. In some cases they described initially being congratulated in what appeared to be a knee-jerk response, followed quickly by an awkward semi-retraction after the person read the article and found out that the story actually documented an unfortunate event. But these cases make it clear that the default assumption among interviewees' families and friends was that being chosen for a newspaper article was an accomplishment.

One could ask whether friends, family and acquaintances were simply responding to the *novelty* of seeing someone they knew in the news—is this really a response to the person's

⁴⁰ Interview by author, November 10, 2009.

increased status or just the unusual nature of the experience? Certainly this critique has merit in some cases, but mere novelty fails to explain the, often extreme, lengths subjects' reference groups went to in order to contact them, publicly associate themselves with them, or promote their news appearances. Moreover, reference groups tended to treat these appearances not as mere remarkable occurrences, but as achievements to be commended. Interviewees described receiving calls from people they had not seen in years, sometimes from foreign countries; others said their contacts went out of their way to spread the article among their own reference groups, often via social networking tools, playing up their own connections to the subject as though status conferral were, in fact, contagious. As Simonson suggests, status has an aura, and others are drawn to its glow.⁴¹

And the status effect can be reaffirmed not just by individuals, but also by institutions. Several interviewees (including a college student and a college professor) were baffled to find that their institutions re-circulated references to their news appearances in official school documents, like packets of press clippings, newsletters, or school newspapers, as though they were noteworthy achievements that reflected well on the school. Shauna, the college student, felt her article was an embarrassingly obtuse treatment of social life on college campuses, and that her quotes cast the school in a negative light. And yet:

SHAUNA: My school has a thing where apparently they scan all the papers, and they're like, "Shauna [last name] a senior, was featured in *The New York Times*." You know, it had nothing to do with my major, or nothing to do with the department, and teachers are coming up to me and showing me the clipping, this one professor sent out a mass email, and I thought it was completely unnecessary...

I: Were they mostly congratulating you just for having made the paper, or were they even referring to the content of the article at all?

SHAUNA: No, it definitely had to do with the fact that my name was in the paper, because I don't think anyone who read the article would be like, "Yeah!"⁴²

Similarly, the professor felt her quote, about her area of expertise, was too brief and insubstantial to be at all noteworthy, yet she noted the status effect among her colleagues:

⁴¹ Simonson, "Mediated Sources of Public Confidence."

⁴² Interview by author, September 16, 2010.

BELLA: It was interesting because nobody referred so much to what I had said, which in fact I hadn't said much of anything, but what was clear to me was that just having your name in *The Times* meant something.

I: *What kinds of feedback were you getting?*

BELLA: Oh, it was positive. "Oh! I saw you in *The Times*." It was like people wanted to say, "Oh, I saw you in *The Times*." ...I made it onto the Monday "cite" list or something.

I: *This is the press clippings for the week?*

BELLA: Yes! And I made it to there. It was because of being in *The Times*. And nothing I'd ever done before ever got me there, but that one little nothing statement, which I think we can both agree was a nothing statement, got me there.⁴³

Status findings II: When content DOES matter

Insofar as all of the enthusiastic reactions discussed above were largely unrelated to the information relayed in the article, they are evidence of the kind of status conferral described by Lazarsfeld and Merton in which the process of public display by the news media elevates the individual in the eyes of the world. We can also understand that form of status conferral as a component of Carey's ritual function of journalism in which not the information conveyed but the ceremony of the display is what matters: news subjects are paraded before the public and the parade itself conveys that they are worthy of celebration.

But I also found that it is an oversimplification to say that status conferral is *entirely* unrelated to what the story is about. I found that content did matter in some cases, and it did so in two ways. First, as I stated above, part of the news's function is to amplify and spread pre-existing social facts or symbols. These can be status- or stigma- conferring in their own right. Although most of my interviewees described evidence of status conferral, those who did not were presented in stories that displayed them as behavioral deviants—criminals, mostly. In these cases, story content obviously affects how status is or is not conferred: when the individual is paraded before the people for having been involved in criminal activity, certainly a message is sent that his behavior is important enough to warrant public attention, but it hardly follows that this will translate into either increased credibility (as Lazarsfeld and Merton

⁴³ Interview by author, November 29, 2010.

indicate),⁴⁴ or increased public confidence (as Simonson's model suggests).⁴⁵ Quite the opposite, in fact: while an aura of notoriety and awe may linger about him, the individual is being displayed as a stigmatized, and therefore socially unacceptable, figure, one whose actions or associations make him unfit for inclusion—someone to be avoided. So while Lazarsfeld and Merton emphasize that status is conferred regardless of editorial endorsement, we can more precisely say an appearance in the news media enhances status *except* in cases in which the content is interpreted by the audience as overtly stigmatizing. I discuss these cases at greater length in the next section.

Secondly, in cases in which the story reflects very positively on the news subject, status conferral is over-determined by both process and content. Interviewees who experienced this kind of status conferral described receiving feedback that addressed not just their having made the news, but also how they came across in the story or the information it conveyed—in other words, responses that were content-specific. These cases included those in which subjects were depicted as exceptionally good at their jobs, involved in exceptionally worthy endeavors, underdogs made good, and performers of heroic deeds. In some of these cases the underlying facts, quite apart from how they were presented in the story, may have had the potential to confer status, but the news story announced those facts to the world. A heroic act, for example, may be personally gratifying in itself, but it does not become a status-conferring event unless it is known. Journalists also have the power to frame an otherwise unremarkable story such that an individual comes across as deserving of special admiration, and in many cases it is hard to identify whether the underlying trigger events or the spin on them is the source of the additional prestige. The key point, however, is that in these cases the editorial content contributes to the enhancement of the subject's status.

⁴⁴ Lazarsfeld and Merton, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action."

⁴⁵ Simonson, "Mediated Sources of Public Confidence."

Isabel, for example, was quoted prominently in a *New York Times* story about the school where she teaches, a story that enthusiastically praised the teachers' ability to improve struggling students' performances on standardized tests. She immediately felt relieved when she read the article—there had been no guarantee when the reporter spent the day in her classroom that the resulting piece would reflect well on the school. And after the accolades started rolling in from people who had known her at all stages of her life, including her immediate boss, the school principal, she concluded that being named in such a story functioned like a publicly-bestowed reward for all her hard work:

ISABEL: It sort of felt like a reward....from then on we started getting more sort of recognition from [the principal], which was good...

I: Is there anything else that could've happened that would have gotten you that amount of positive attention?

ISABEL: I don't think so. Because let's say I got some sort of promotion to this great position that a third-year teacher would never have. Who would know? It's that everyone knew...And it's funny because even now, almost a year later, I still get people being like, "Weren't you in *The Times*?" ...

*I: So that was one category of feedback: was straight up, "Saw you in *The Times*?"*

ISABEL: "Saw you in *The Times*. Good job." ...Then there were a couple that were like, "So proud of you." "Proud of my family." And close friends were like, "We're so glad that your hard work is paying off. You're being recognized. Your school sounds like a great place to work."⁴⁶

In cases like this one it is impossible to separate the status conferral that is operating independently of editorial content and that which is tied to it; clearly both contributed to Isabel's reference groups' reactions. As she rightly points out, her work may have been praiseworthy before, but without a news article about it, no one would have known. Being a schoolteacher is not, in the U.S. context, generally considered a high-status job, but having one's work framed positively in a major news outlet confers status in a ritual sense—this person is worthy of notice and attention—but also in a transmission-of-information sense—this person is especially good at her job.

Meanwhile, other subjects did not experience being in the news as an enhancement of their own status so much as a legitimation of their condition or situation. I interviewed a

⁴⁶ Interview by author, October 18, 2010.

number of unemployed people who were featured in stories about different aspects of the economic crisis, as well as several whose businesses were threatened in some way. These cases were noteworthy because I had expected them to have qualities of stigma, since unemployment can have stigmatizing effects;⁴⁷ and yet, with one exception these subjects received an outpouring of sympathetic, respectful offers of help; commendations for speaking out about their situations; prayers; and general sympathy. Rodney, whose mother was so proud she bought seven copies of the article, was featured in a *Daily News* story for having been laid off as a substance abuse counselor. The reaction was overwhelmingly positive, but not in a way that necessarily suggested his credibility or authority had been enhanced; rather the article presented him as having legitimate problems, worthy of public attention and support:

RODNEY: What happened was that I got a lot of calls from individuals saying, "here's some opportunities coming up you should check this out now," versus, if you had just got laid off, and you gotta reach out to your friends. The reverse happened and my friends were reaching out...

I: So most people who mentioned it to you were referring to what was in the article. As opposed to "Congratulations, you made the paper."

RODNEY: Right.

I: Or did you get some of both of those?

RODNEY: No, There was really no "congratulations" because it's not really a "congratulations" type of article. It was an "Oh wow, how can I help?" type of thing.⁴⁸

In these cases editorial support for the subject mattered a great deal: Rodney and others like him were presented as victims of processes beyond their control, and therefore not responsible for their conditions. As I will discuss further below, perceived accountability matters a great deal in stigmatization processes, and articles that exonerate subjects instead of blaming them for what might otherwise be considered a discrediting condition may reduce the likelihood that the coverage will have stigmatizing effects, and increase the likelihood that subjects will experience at least some status effects instead.

⁴⁷ Goffman, *Stigma*, 4, 17.

⁴⁸ Interview by author, November 11, 2009.

Further research isolating different variables and specifically comparing them could shed more light on to what degree different audiences perceive specific outlets, technologies, and the co-presence of celebrities as more or less status conferring, as Simonson predicts they are.⁴⁹ But I do want to emphasize that my interviewees whose primary reference groups read *The Daily News* got every bit as much praise for having made that paper as those who made *The New York Times* whose primary reference groups read and admired that paper; for others, an appearance in *The New York Post* carried a great deal of weight with their friends and family. The key point here is that, as indicated in the opening of this section, status conferral is not something that is inherent in a given outlet or technology, but rather a matter of perception on the part of the audience. While appearing in the news may be a phenomenon regarded as status-conferring by the American public in general, the ability of the individual features of any given news appearance to further increase one's status will vary greatly, depending on how one's reference groups feel about those features.

That said, I would venture that in the eyes of most audiences status conferral increases in proportion to the amount of news hole devoted to the subject, and leaps to a whole new level when the subject is pictured (the larger the picture the better) or featured in a supplementary online video. Several of my interviewees were surprised to receive feedback from others who seemed to think the story was entirely about them, when they felt they had played a fairly minor role. They concluded it was probably because their picture was *the* visual accompaniment to the article. As Leyla noted, "I feel like the photo of me kind of made people talk to me as though it was about me, and MY story. If I could have changed that I think I would have, because it put the focus in the wrong place."⁵⁰

As Leyla's quote suggests, status conferral does have some downsides. For one thing, it can distract readers from other aspects of the story that subjects feel are more important than

⁴⁹ Simonson, "Mediated Sources of Public Confidence."

⁵⁰ Interview by author, February 18, 2010.

their own role in it. For another, some interviewees, especially those who were heavily featured in celebratory stories, found the amount of attention—although uniformly adulatory—overwhelming and stressful. And as with fame,⁵¹ status conferral may cue backlash from one's reference groups that can range from good-natured teasing aimed at preventing the attention from going to the subject's head, to outright resentment at the subject's presumed good fortune. Some interviewees said they felt jealousy radiating off coworkers who might have been the recipient of the same attention had the chips fallen differently. And, as I will discuss in the next chapter, becoming a celebrated (or not-so-celebrated) public figure in the news today often carries with it the onus of being the subject of online reader commentary, which can quickly take a negative turn.

But disadvantages aside, in theory, those with higher status find opportunities open to them that otherwise would be unavailable, and some of my subjects experienced exactly this. Some received job offers or invitations to speak at events; those featured as "experts" found they were approached by other media outlets for their now-legitimated expertise; and many felt they were generally treated by their contacts as worthy of a level of attention and deference they had not received before. Tracking the long-term effects—or lack thereof—of status conferred by a particular news appearance would require a longitudinal study (which mine was not), but it is important to keep in mind that these could be social, such as increased name recognition and professional opportunities, but they could be psychological as well. When I asked Mike if he had any concluding thoughts about having appeared in a *Times* article he responded, "No, other than having all of your grown kids totally proud of you."⁵² There may be little more gratifying than that.

At the same time, while the long-term effects of status conferral *may* extend far into the future, there is experimental evidence suggesting that, sad to say, status-enhancing events are

⁵¹ Brim, *Look at Me!*, 42.

⁵² Interview by author, November 2, 2009.

far more quickly forgotten than stigmatizing ones.⁵³ For subjects who found themselves at the center of a whirlwind of attention from reference groups and media professionals, one of the more notable and, for some, disconcerting, aspects of the phenomenon was how quickly it died down. But even as the cameras and calls fade away, token reminders that one has been anointed as worthy of public attention may linger. Husband and wife Jon and Jane described both of these phenomena in the aftermath of *The New York Times* article about eviction threats to their small business:

JON: It's just like, wow, it's like a tornado comes running through and then it's quiet.

JANE: I don't know, I think I have a slightly different take on it than you in that regard. I don't feel like it's gone away. Because every single person that we meet or talk to is like, "Oh, you're that guy," or "Oh, I read that." I don't think people have forgotten it yet.

JON: They might not have forgotten it, but the mad press rush thing was a bit of a tornado.

JANE: Yeah. It was a total tornado.⁵⁴

Stigma

Although many social scientists since Goffman have explored stigma, his 1963 book on the topic remains a core text, in part because it can be read as an exhaustive definition of the term.⁵⁵ He begins by noting that the Greek word "stigma" originally referred to marks literally inscribed on individuals, "to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. The signs were cut or burnt into the body and advertised that the bearer was a slave, a criminal, or a traitor—a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public places."⁵⁶ The term has come to indicate a feature, attribute or behavior that is so deeply discrediting it throws into question an individual's fitness for social inclusion, if not his full

⁵³ Jeffrey Rosen, "The Web Means the End of Forgetting," *The New York Times*, July 21, 2010, sec. Magazine, 37, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/25/magazine/25privacy-t2.html>.

⁵⁴ Interview by author, November 16, 2009.

⁵⁵ Goffman, *Stigma*.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

humanity.⁵⁷ The stigmatized individual loses respect in the eyes of the world, often to the point of being shunned or treated as unclean; on a status ladder, he clings precariously to the lowest rung.

Goffman identifies three main categories of stigmatized persons: those with physical disabilities, members of marginalized groups, and behavioral deviants whose actions indicate “blemishes of individual character.”⁵⁸ All bear signs or symbols (sometimes visually apparent, but often carefully concealed) that, when known, reveal that the individual currently or formerly failed to fit into standardized categories of the moral or simply expected.⁵⁹ In other words, while status is measured relative to others, stigma is measured relative to a generally agreed upon norm with which all individuals in a community are expected to comply in order to be considered full-fledged members. And even when noncompliance with these basic norms is not an individual’s fault and should not logically be interpreted as a sign of a moral failing (as with, for example, a physical disability) through an often unconscious process of attribution, people associate the stigmatizing feature with a host of moral lapses and imperfections, often to such a degree that the stigma and all it suggests about the person’s character come to dominate the way the person is perceived.⁶⁰ The markers or symbols of stigma therefore operate as detectable indicators of something dark and dangerous lurking beneath the surface; hence, when known, these markers can become a major blight on an individual’s reputation. Scholars seem to agree that, as with status, although stigma is culturally and contextually determined, there are likely markers and symbols that will be read as stigmatizing across contexts.⁶¹

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁸ Goffman, “Symbols of Class Status,” 4.

⁵⁹ Irwin Katz, *Stigma: A Social Psychological Analysis* (Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1981), 1.

⁶⁰ In *Social Stigma: The Psychology of Marked Relationships* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1984).

⁶¹ Goffman, *Stigma*, 4; *Social Stigma*, 5.

And the literature suggest that stigmatized persons may be marginalized because they imperil our sense of physical security (as with violent criminals),⁶² or, more consistently across categories, they threaten our sense of moral and social order: by falling outside social norms or boundaries they threaten their very integrity.⁶³ Although most research on stigma has focused on two of Goffman's three categories of stigmatized persons—marginalized groups (especially particular racial or ethnic groups) or those with physical disabilities⁶⁴—in a discussion of how individuals are overtly stigmatized in the news, behavioral stigma is perhaps the most relevant,⁶⁵ and it is important to note that this kind of stigma differs in some key ways from the other categories. First, behavioral stigmas are *explicitly* moral in character; while it is certainly true that once we discover someone has engaged in criminal or deviant activity we may extrapolate irrationally and unjustifiably about his other characteristics, this is far less of a categorical leap than imputing various failings of character to someone who is sitting in a wheelchair. Indeed, while studies have indicated that the reaction to stigmatized individuals, especially those with disabilities, is less fear and disgust, as was once assumed, than ambivalence—a mix of pity for the afflicted with more negative feelings⁶⁶—that is not the case for behavioral deviants, who are often seen as wholly accountable for their marginalized condition.⁶⁷ Experiments indicate that people seen as blameworthy for their stigma are subject

⁶² *Social Stigma*, 68.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 89; Katz, *Stigma*, 3.

⁶⁴ For a review of the literature see Jennifer Crocker and Diane M. Quinne, "Psychological Consequences of Devalued Identities," in *Self and Social Identity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 124–141; Katz, *Stigma*.

⁶⁵ I do not mean to suggest that stigmatization processes of minority groups or those with disabilities do not continue to take place in the mainstream media, including the news. But insofar as current U.S. journalistic conventions dictate against openly depicting individuals in these groups as deserving of public criticism and ridicule (precisely because they are widely understood to be unfairly stigmatized historically in the U.S.), that more subtle form of stigma perpetuation by the news media is less relevant to my discussion.

⁶⁶ Katz, *Stigma*, 5.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

to more punishing treatments than those who are not because, simply put, we feel they deserve it.⁶⁸ However, evidence further indicates that even *acquitted* criminals are considered defiled and to-be-avoided,⁶⁹ which suggests that, like the irrational associative processes that lead us to respond with avoidance to the person in the wheelchair, the response to behavioral deviance is not *entirely* a matter of simply fitting a social punishment to a perceived crime; mere proximity to the realm of behavioral deviance, rather than actual guilt, may be enough to stigmatize an individual in some cases. This is supported by evidence that, just as one can enjoy the benefits of another's enhanced status, one can be stigmatized by association: friends and family of a criminal are likely to be treated as similarly unclean.⁷⁰

One of stigma's key features is that it can, to varying degrees, be hidden, and because it can be so damaging when known, it is of great benefit to the stigmatized individual to conceal or downplay his stigma as much as possible.⁷¹ For just as high status opens up opportunities and can improve one's self-concept, so being stigmatized "reduces [one's] life chances"⁷² and can distort one's sense of self.⁷³ Here, too, behavioral stigmas differ from other kinds because they are the least immediately visible, pertaining to one's recent or long-past actions, rather than displayed on one's physical person.⁷⁴ These are not stigmas that are performed or revealed automatically in interpersonal interactions as, for example, one's stutter or minority status might be. Thus other pathways of communication become especially relevant to how behavioral stigmas are connected to individuals and revealed to others.

⁶⁸ *Social Stigma*, 57.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 71; Goffman, *Stigma*, 30.

⁷¹ *Social Stigma*, 29.

⁷² Goffman, *Stigma*, 5.

⁷³ *Social Stigma*, 109.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 42–43.

While the mere fact of being in the news is not, in itself, stigma-conferring—quite the opposite, as we saw above—insofar as particular deviant behaviors can be stigmatizing, the news acts as a megaphone to call attention to that stigma, and makes it a part of the public record, a social fact that adheres to the individual's public biography in ways that it might not otherwise have done. Working as a prostitute (one of Goffman's favorite examples of behavioral stigma), may be largely concealable and compartmentalizable for the actor, but it quickly becomes difficult to hide if written up in the local paper, at which point it becomes a known social fact about the individual that sticks and forms part of his or her personal identity and reputation. Goffman argues that for such a publicly stigmatized figure to escape this dehumanizing fate it may be enough to move to a new town where his or her biography is unknown; as I will discuss in the next chapter, this is a less viable option in today's media environment, as both identity pegs and social facts, including news articles, increasingly sprout and spread online.

Goffman notes that appearing in the news for deviant behavior can be particularly stigmatizing because not only is the discrediting mark being announced to the world, it comes to stand in for one's whole character.⁷⁵ This is particularly likely and unfortunate when, through news reports "notoriety is acquired due to a brief and uncharacteristic, accidental event which exposes the individual to public identification without providing him any compensating claim to desired attributes."⁷⁶ Not only is the news appearance itself reductive, often excluding the perpetrator's more savory characteristics altogether, the news cycle provides little opportunity for redress later, at least for ordinary citizens whose news appearance is anomalous. Other scholars have noted that for public figures it may be possible to atone for behavioral stigma through equally public acts that appear to reaffirm their morally upstanding

⁷⁵ Goffman, *Stigma*, 71.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

character.⁷⁷ But as Goffman's remarks highlight, private citizens rarely have access to an ongoing public forum to make amends for deviant behavior.

Although he does not dwell on the unique qualities of news as a genre, Goffman is on to something when he implies that the daily news is not a format that lends itself well to the kind of nuanced understanding of immoral acts necessary for overcoming our negative response to behavioral stigma. As an intellectual exercise one might compare news reporting of criminal activity to the way behavioral deviance is treated in other genres that, however improbably, inspire not stigma but sympathy for the deviant characters, and ask how they do it. To turn to one extreme comparison, classical tragedy as defined by Aristotle in his *Poetics* leads the audience to identify and sympathize with even those characters who murder their children and marry their moms, a feat accomplished by presenting a flawed-but-not-inherently-evil protagonist whose pathway to violence and destruction is complex and driven by circumstance.⁷⁸

While one cannot deny that *long form* journalism has the potential to reveal complex histories and circumstances that problematize the knee jerk stigmatization of behavioral deviance, that work takes time, space, and thinking outside the normal journalistic archetypes that dictate how most daily news on criminal and otherwise socially disruptive behavior is reported.⁷⁹ And there is little reason to believe that nuanced articles that partially—or even

⁷⁷ *Social Stigma*, 43.

⁷⁸ De Botton, *Status Anxiety*, 147–155.

⁷⁹ One can fruitfully compare, for example, *The New York Times*' initial story about the suicide of Rutgers freshman Tyler Clementi after being spied on in a homosexual liaison by his roommate, 18-year-old Dharun Ravi, with the *New Yorker* story about the same incident a year-and-a-half later. While the first depicts Ravi and an accomplice as hateful bullies who drove an innocent man-child to his death, and no doubt inspired hatred in the hearts of thousands of readers, the *New Yorker* story acts as a kind of corrective, drawing on text messages and other electronic correspondence to paint a picture of three complex individuals, none of them a devil or a saint. Lisa W. Foderaro, "Invasion of Privacy Charges After Death of Tyler Clementi," *The New York Times*, September 29, 2010, sec. N.Y. / Region, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/30/nyregion/30suicide.html>; Ian Parker, "The Story of a Suicide," *The New Yorker*, February 6, 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/02/06/120206fa_fact_parker.

wholly—exonerate bad behavior are more likely to expunge one’s stigma than an actual legal acquittal does; as Goffman points out, those who are no longer technically marked as stigmatized simply pass into a different, state: formerly stigmatized, therefore never entirely clean.⁸⁰

Stigma Findings

Not all of the negative or critical feedback my interviewees received should be classified as evidence of stigma. Some appeared in articles on controversial topics, which predictably elicited antagonistic responses to their views or actions, while others mentioned the occasional, random-seeming critical comment on some small detail of the coverage. And as noted above, others noticed negative reactions, whether good-natured teasing or more mean-spirited remarks, from their reference groups, which seemed to be backlash from the status conferral they had enjoyed. But some interviewees described receiving feedback assailing their characters or suggesting they were not fit members of society, based merely on the information conveyed in the coverage, and these cases strongly resembled the stigma process Goffman describes. Again, these were cases in which not an isolated aspect of the subject’s news appearance, but his overall moral worth was being called into question.

Helen, who found her reputation on campus badly damaged by a provocative—and inaccurate—quote attributed to her in an article about university social life, captured this distinction well. She, more than others quoted in the article, was immediately criticized by her university newspaper, and weathered a hailstorm of digital feedback from both acquaintances and strangers castigating her for her failure to live up to the most basic standards of decency. She noted that others who were quoted in the article did not seem to suffer from the same degree of criticism:

HELEN: I think my scenario was different from theirs because Kara said what she did and she got a lot of harsh backlash, but at least [the article] doesn’t make her personally

⁸⁰ Goffman, *Stigma*, 9.

look bad. This is like, my personal morals in question in *The New York Times*, which so many people are reading.⁸¹

As Helen is pointing out here, stigma, far more than status, is traceable to the editorial content of the story. While it is certainly the case that some triggers are stigmatizing regardless of whether they are depicted in the paper or not, the news announces a stigmatizing event and an individual's involvement in it to the world. And framing, tone, and many other details of the coverage can augment or downplay stigma. Thus, as I discussed in the previous section, even subjects who were presented in roles that might have stigmatizing potential, such as owners of suffering businesses or unemployed workers, often still received positive responses to their articles because they were not depicted as accountable for their circumstances.

Even within the same article one can find this distinction. While Rodney and Daniel were both depicted in the same article on financial hardships endured by laid-off workers, Rodney received an outpouring of admiring and supportive feedback. Daniel, who, it must be said, was much less heavily featured, so the status conferral effect did less to countervail the potentially stigmatizing content, was also depicted as having been fired, rather than laid-off, from a previous job. He felt it was an important distinction, since being fired implied he had done something to deserve it, and he felt the feedback he received focused on the negative:

I: Did you start hearing from people who had seen it? Did you get any feedback from other people?

DANIEL: Yeah, from my old school.

I: What did they say?

DANIEL: "Mr. Daniel, you didn't get fired!" [sounding dejected] I'm like, "I know. I know."

I: Did you get any positive feedback from people?

DANIEL: No.

I: Really? So no, "Good job, you made the paper?"

DANIEL: No. None of that. That's why I refused to even put it up or show anybody. Because I'm just disgusted.⁸²

Part of what was so painful about Daniel's experience was that he felt the article negatively impacted his standing in the eyes of people who knew him, and he received no

⁸¹ Interview by author, May 21, 2010.

⁸² Interview by author, November 25, 2009.

positive feedback to counterbalance this feeling. Indeed, among my interviewees who received feedback that seemed to indicate they had been stigmatized, the effect was markedly lessened by two factors: if the negative feedback was primarily from strangers while one's immediate reference groups remained supportive or unaffected, and if the negative feedback from some in the audience was countervailed by positive responses from others. Those who appeared in controversial stories, for example, often described a wide variety of reactions from audiences, ranging from vicious *ad hominem* attacks to enthusiastic praise, and while the former may seem to indicate that the subject was seen as stigmatized in the eyes of some, the latter, especially if it came from the subject's key reference groups, prevented him from feeling he had been truly marginalized by his community.

Recall from earlier chapters that Michelle and her husband were featured in the southwestern paper, and later, a major national outlet, because they were suing a local religious organization for illegally building a place of worship in a residential neighborhood. The article circulated within the worldwide community of practitioners of the religion and she found herself subject to threatening messages and phone calls, both from within that community and from other readers. Not only was she afraid for her safety (she was aware of at least one video online that seemed to incite violence against her), it was crushing to see signs that the coverage, which she felt was absurdly inaccurate, might be affecting her reputation in all the ways she had feared:

MICHELLE: I have gotten hate messages on Facebook from people as far away as Canada, and as close as here in [town]. I've been called at my work and harassed by reporters. It hasn't been fun...It was very frightening. And it was heartbreaking to me to be portrayed as a racist. For me and my husband to be portrayed that way. I'm not going to lie: it was disturbing to me, it hurt me, to be called that. Some of the messages that I got on Facebook were just like I was some bigot from [home state]... they were trying to paint this picture of me that I was just intolerant. And it was really difficult, because I don't want that to be my reputation!⁸³

⁸³ Interview by author, January 8, 2011.

On the other hand, she took comfort in the comments people posted in response to both articles, many of which supported her position: “When I read horrible things about me it was painful, but there were also positive things. Like when somebody was on our side, so it was helpful in that regard.”⁸⁴

Even more importantly, her friends and family were openly supportive; in their responses it was particularly clear that even in coverage of controversial issues, status conferral continues to operate, at least among those who agree with your views or know you well:

MICHELLE: My friends saw it and were like, “Oh my gosh!” Or they’d see the article online and I got e-mails. But the contact that I got from people who I knew was supportive. “I saw you,” like, “wait go on the Court of Appeals win.” “Hopefully this will be over for you guys.” That kind of thing. From somebody I knew it was never negative it was like, [sounding excited] “Hey, I saw you! Oh my gosh!” That kind of thing.⁸⁵

As Michelle’s experience illustrates, being on the receiving end of hateful *ad hominem* attacks is obviously unpleasant under any circumstances, but when it comes as a result of one’s participation in a controversial event or issue, subjects are often aware from the outset that people have strong, differing opinions on the topic, and this awareness can help them prepare somewhat for these responses. Moreover, they often receive just as many positive comments from those who agree with their position, which are a comfort in their own right, and a further illustration that the source of the hateful attacks is a matter of opinion rather than an unforgiveable violation of a social taboo. And finally, I would not classify Michelle’s article as having had severely stigmatizing effects because the negative feedback was from strangers, and although this can be deeply distressing in the short term and, as I will discuss in the next chapter, it can haunt a person online for a long time to come, she did not notice a change in the behavior of her primary reference groups—people who already knew her—after the article appeared.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Only a few people in my sample described repercussions from having appeared in the news that I would describe as unqualified evidence of severe stigma. In these cases the subjects were not simply associated with a view that some segments of the population interpreted as indicating an ethical lapse or moral failing, they were depicted as having violated major social taboos. And they subsequently experienced changes in the way they were treated by friends, family, and colleagues, to such a degree that their quality of life in the short or long term was dramatically affected. Most of these were stories in which the subject was accused of a crime. As discussed above, these are clear examples of behavioral deviance, itself stigmatizing, being broadcast to the general public.

It is perhaps more alarming that articles can be stigmatizing within certain social contexts when they portray a subject not as having acted in a discrediting way, but simply as holding what are interpreted as morally questionable views on an issue. Helen, who I mentioned previously in this section, was simply quoted in an article about social dynamics on college campuses. Her quote, which she felt was taken out of context, was subsequently interpreted by many readers as an endorsement of women tolerating infidelity. She received a barrage of disapproving digital feedback and criticism from the school paper, where she worked. The criticisms were not of the issue or of her point of view, but of *her*: first, she was attacked as a woman of loose morals, and second, after she responded that she had been misquoted, she was called a fool for having been taken in by the reporter even though she had journalism experience.

HELEN: Facebook messages from random people, mostly, across the country. Not even at [her school], like, across the country. Really mean things, like, "Oh my god, you are disgusting. I can't believe you go to school with me, you have the lowest standards ever!"....

I: So then you said that Monday was pretty much the worst day of your life.

HELEN: Yeah, it was...the [school] newspaper was just really mean to me about it. The editor blogged about it and she was like, "It's so disappointing to me because she's a writer: she should've known this was gonna happen."... I got that line, [with a disapproving, judgmental tone], "Oh, you're Helen K? I saw your quote," that happened for about 2 months after the article.

I: And so what is that? Is that a disapproving tone?

HELEN: Oh yeah! [again, with the disgusted tone] “I saw your article. Wow, you’re a slut!”⁸⁶

While the bulk of the responses were from strangers, many were from people on her own campus accusing her of reflecting poorly on the school, so they were hard to dismiss as irrelevant to her sense of self. And it was particularly painful to feel the school newspaper staff was throwing her under the bus. By writing a column in response she was eventually able to shift at least the campus-wide discussion away from her own morals toward journalistic ethics and the perils of being quoted in the news. But it was still a painful experience, one that was continuing to follow her months later when we spoke.

But negative repercussions are even more difficult to manage when the article depicts the subject as having been accused of a crime. Three of my respondents found themselves in this position: two were falsely accused and later had the charges dropped against them, and one was guilty and had entered a plea deal. But all experienced lasting stigma. Rich, for example, was arrested for kidnapping a politician’s wife.⁸⁷ To this day he has no idea how he got caught up in the whole saga: cops knocked on his door in the middle of the night and took him away in handcuffs to be arrested in a different neighborhood, for a crime against a woman he had never met. Eventually, the charges were dropped for lack of evidence, but not until after the arrest had been written up in several small local papers. The ramifications were devastating. He lost his job and has not found work since. But the most painful part of the whole experience was seeing how quickly his family and friends changed their opinions of him. A niece who had lived with him in the past believed the article; his brother scolded him for reflecting poorly on the family name and potentially damaging his—the brother’s—business. And while one could certainly argue that the articles—which contained errors that made the charges seem even worse than they were—were just reporting the arrest, which was itself the true stigmatizing marker, as Rich points out, if not for the articles, *no one would have known*. Not the arrest itself

⁸⁶ Interview by author, May 21, 2010.

⁸⁷ Interview by author, March 11, 2010.

but others' reactions to it were what had derailed his life and alienated him from those around him, and these were a direct result of the news coverage. At the time we spoke he was still trying to figure out how to piece back together his former life.

Beth felt strongly that, even though she had undeniably committed a white-collar crime, as in Rich's case it was the news coverage that stigmatized her. She had fairly good evidence of this: when charges were initially pressed against her, the basics were reported in the local paper of the large city where she lives. She sensed some strange looks from those who knew her after that, which was distressing, but not irreparable. Even after she agreed to a plea deal and testified against another player in the case—a testimony in which she was advised by her lawyer not to defend herself from questions that painted her as a conniving, gold-digging tramp because it was not her trial after all—she saw little indication that word of her crime had traveled beyond the courtroom. There were no reporters in attendance and no one outside her immediate family seemed to know what had happened.

It was not until several months later, around the time of the other perpetrator's sentencing, that a scathing article appeared in a major national paper, apparently based largely on transcripts from the trial, which depicted her as having intentionally lured the man into committing the crimes for which he stood accused. The change in her social circle was precipitous:

BETH: After the first [article] I was still invited to Christmas. Did they think I was the greatest person in the world? No. But you know, I still came to Christmas. I still was there with the family. They looked at me a little funny. But the second article...it is as if a nuclear bomb went off in my life. First of all, I've gained a hundred pounds from the whole thing. And that's only in about maybe two years. Secondly, I was always the first person invited to every party. I mean, I've lived here all my life. I know every single person—I mean, this is my world. I know everybody. It was as if every single person I ever knew died.⁸⁸

Part of what struck her as strange about her experience, but which is perfectly in keeping with what we know about behavioral stigma as a moral phenomenon, was precisely

⁸⁸ Interview by author, December 17, 2010.

that the first articles, those that dryly announced her indictment to the world but did not include the salacious back story, had so much less effect on her reference group's opinion of her. It was only with the publication of the second round of articles, those that depicted her as having behaved in a way that was underhanded not just legally but also morally, that everyone seemed to drop off the planet. As she put it, ironically, "The morality stuff is the stuff that stuck more. And if you think about it, that's not even the illegal stuff."⁸⁹

As a result of the news coverage she had to move her children to a new school; her husband's family disowned her and pushed him to divorce her; all she wanted to do was move; she considered suicide. For a long time, she just hid from everyone—not that anyone wanted to see her anyway:

BETH: My husband's stupid family. I'm dead to them. And they've written off my kids, they've written off anything that has anything to do with me. To all the people [in the neighborhood] I'm just this pariah. I'm just this total, total pariah. And I don't even know myself.

As Beth knows well, being shunned by one's social circle can have deeply scarring effects on one's self concept: if reputation is a social mirror that helps us determine who we are, a reputation distorted by stigma truly is like a funhouse mirror—little wonder Beth has trouble recognizing herself. In an effort to start life anew, she is pursuing a new career in a new city and, as I discuss in the next chapter, she has taken steps to conceal the online trail of the story. But she is haunted by fears that she will be found out by the new people she encounters: new friends, new colleagues, and potential employers. In this way, too, she perfectly resembles one of Goffman's stigmatized figures. She may not already be discredited in her new social circles, but she will always be discreditable.⁹⁰

Ultimately, the experience was so traumatic that Beth concluded:

BETH: My entire life died. This was a death. I mean, I've had a daughter die. This was a death. This was a death of my life. You have to go through the whole grieving process: shock, denial, all those things...And just like with a death, the only thing that cures—not

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Goffman, *Stigma*, 4.

cures—but the only thing that makes you ultimately recover from losing a loved one is time. And not “recover” but survive it.

I: Well, how do you think your experience would have been different if there had been no press coverage?

BETH: That’s what killed me.

While in Beth’s case one could argue that she herself was responsible for the source of the stigma she endured—which she acknowledged in our interview— she is not wrong here: had others not known about it, which they did only because of the news coverage, both she and her family would have suffered far less. As her experience illustrates, the news has the potential, unleashed in full force on ordinary individuals only when they have behaved in ways deemed socially reprehensible in the highest degree, to operate much like traditional shame punishments: “Tattoos, brands, signs—these mark a person as having a deviant identity, and their role historically has been to announce that spoiled identity to the world.”⁹¹ The problem with shame punishments, as legal scholars have noted, is that there is no guarantee that they will be in proportion to the crime—and often they are not.⁹²

The mere reporting of potentially stigmatizing behaviors does not *inevitably* lead to stigma or punishing responses; editorial content that is nuanced and presents the perpetrator as a complicated figure in complex circumstances can even elicit the sympathy Aristotle associates with classical tragedy. Emma, for example, was profiled in the southwestern paper after she euthanized her critically ill husband. Some of the comments she read online were critical, but she was amazed to see other readers come to her defense. But this made sense, because the article itself depicted hers as a tragic love story: husband taken ill, nursed by his loving wife until a barebones healthcare system and bad luck simply took their toll on her psyche, as they would on anyone’s. This, the article seemed to imply, could have happened to any of us, and the online comments reflected a compassionate reading: “I hope someday someone will love me

⁹¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, First ed. (Princeton University Press, 2004), 230,235; Solove, *The Future of Reputation*, 95.

⁹² Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 234; Solove, *The Future of Reputation*, 95.

as much as she loved him," read one astonishing comment. To which another replied, "So do I."⁹³

Of course, some crimes probably lend themselves to this sympathetic treatment more than others, and no one could deny that the exigencies and scarce resources involved in daily news production make this extremely difficult to pull off every time. But given the potential for articles to inflict stigma disproportionate to a crime, perhaps more nuanced reporting of behavioral deviance, especially when all the facts of the case remain unknown, should be an ongoing goal.

⁹³ Citation withheld to protect interviewee's anonymity.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Online Effects: Making the News in a Digital Age

I: When you guys agreed to do the article, did it occur to you at that point that it was something that was gonna be online?

JANE: You know, it's funny 'cause I sit all day looking at The Times online but I didn't really think of that aspect of it, I thought of the print newspaper. Right? I mean, you too?

JON: Right, yeah. The print newspaper. I had no idea.

JANE: Which is crazy. I'm telling you, I spend 8 hours, 10 hours a day with The New York Times website up in my face.¹

Many of my interviewees were first contacted by reporters online. They responded to follow-up questions using digital tools of various kinds, researched reporters by Googling them, read their own articles online, and circulated the coverage via social networks. While their embrace of social media varied, none were complete technological neophytes, which made it all the more surprising that about half the people in my sample said they did not consider the fact that the article would appear online when they agreed to give an interview. This was even the case for some who, like Jon and Jane, are habitual readers of the online version of the newspaper in question.

The other half of my sample immediately assumed the article *would* appear online, but the number that did not is remarkable: the most basic properties of the Internet—persistence, replicability, scalability, and search²— which basically mean that more sortable information is easily accessible, for longer, to a far larger audience than ever before, combine to alter the implications of appearing in a news story, in some ways significantly so. Whether they anticipated it or not, effects of online publication and circulation shaped how my interviewees experienced becoming subjects in the news, and for many these new aspects of the phenomenon were among its most salient.

These effects may soon be easier to anticipate, as the default imagined newspaper in the minds of more readers takes on a digital form, its properties intuitively accepted as part of the way information flows today. But many of my interviewees were still astonished to see the

¹ Interview by author, November 16, 2009.

² boyd, "Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics," 27.

speed with which articles traveled; the ease with which readers around the globe could respond to them directly; the way articles snowballed to other online forums and became fodder for extensive commentary; and the degree to which an appearance in an article could completely alter their online reputation. Below I detail each of these phenomena, and explore my interviewees' various strategies for managing the online ramifications of appearing in mainstream news stories. But first, understanding how appearing in the news today differs from in the past requires understanding not only how technical affordances alter the flow of news articles, but also how social trends change the value and meaning of those flows in an individual's life. The three socio-technical trends that I find most valuable for understanding my interviewees' experiences are (1) the pressure to curate a coherent online identity, (2) the vast expansion and diversification of an individual's reference groups, and (3) the development of new status symbols.

Three Dynamics That Affect What it Means to Make the News in a Digital World

1. The pressure to curate an online identity

Early Internet scholars who focused on how individuals presented themselves online often emphasized that people could present completely different versions of themselves— invent whole new identities, in fact, in different online spaces.³ This was a contributing factor in a number of prominent social theorists' visions of the postmodern self's fracturing into many hard-to-manage versions, or its ability to adapt and reinvent itself over time.⁴ Looking back on this scholarship now, it seems clear that it did not anticipate the degree to which digitization and online publication of information would penetrate all aspects of social and economic life,

³ Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 255–269; Helen Nissenbaum, "A Contextual Approach to Privacy Online," *Daedalus* 140, no. 4 (2011): 38.

⁴ Lifton, *The Protean Self*.

nor what a key role search engines would play in organizing it.⁵ While it is certainly still possible to play with avatars and invented identities in isolated contexts online, so much information that is pegged to our legal names is now published to the Internet by default, and so many social and professional processes increasingly rely on that information to assess and evaluate us, it is quickly becoming impractical to opt out of curating a single, coherent online identity that will be deemed, at the very least, innocuous across social and professional contexts.⁶ At best, cultivating an attractive online identity can add significant value to one's personal brand, translating into social, cultural, and financial capital.⁷

While the affordances of the Internet make it possible and easy to collect information about individuals, the mounting pressure on them to maintain a clean online reputation or to actively cultivate a personal online brand is not purely a result of technical feasibility, but should be understood as a continuation of social and psychological trends associated with changes in the labor market that pre-date the Internet, even as they find their culminating vehicle in its unprecedented tools for self-promotion.

Social theorists trace the growing emphasis on self-promotion in the labor market to different periods. Some tie it to the rise of commodity markets, with their new emphasis on exchange value: just as the value of products is divorced from their use value, so too are workers, no longer born into feudally-fixed social and professional positions, increasingly prized for how well they convince and persuade others of their worth.⁸ Other theorists stress

⁵ Jeffrey Rosen makes a similar argument in Rosen, "The Web Means the End of Forgetting," 33), but does not emphasize the key role that search engines play in limiting individuals' freedom to continually reinvent themselves.

⁶ For example, a 2010 Microsoft Research survey found that 75% of recruiters and human resources professionals in the U.S. reported that they were required to do online research on candidates using search engines and other tools, and 70% of these said they had rejected candidates because of information discovered in these searches (reported in *Ibid.*, 32).

⁷ Alison Hearn, "Meat, Mask, Burden," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8, no. 2 (July 1, 2008): 204.

⁸ See Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself; an Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961), 69–70. Economist Ernest Sternberg explains the process as a progression from the early Renaissance period (and before) in which one's place in the socio-economic landscape was fixed for life,

the increasing prevalence, by the mid- 20th century, of white collar and service industry work, in which physically alienating drudgery was replaced by an emotionally alienating form of interpersonal labor, in which one must constantly manufacture, perform, and sell a personable, cheery version of the self.⁹ But the precise impetus and timing of the trend is less relevant here than the consensus that, even pre-Internet, as labor was increasingly commodified and prevailing forms of work changed, the ability to display an attractive personal image grew in value, until, by sometime in the mid- to late-20th century, it displaced technical skill as the worker's most important asset. As Fromm put it as early as 1947, "success depends largely on how well a person sells himself on the market, how well he gets his personality across, how nice a 'package' he is."¹⁰

Contemporary scholars have taken up this line of reasoning, arguing that the post-modern marketplace, characterized by flexibility, entrepreneurship, networked organization, and sustained job insecurity,¹¹ leads to an ever greater emphasis on self-promotion for success, culminating in what Alison Hearn has called "the branded self," which is largely cultivated,

to the Romantic period when, although greater flexibility than before obtained, performing well meant demonstrating upstanding moral virtues, like diligence, that were supposed to be models for society rather than personal tickets upward in the system. The Modern era, with its Taylorite methods of managing workers for maximum efficiency was based on the idea of rational approaches to work in which outputs could be mathematically calculated and a manager's main job was to maximize efficiency of workers, who had to be, above all, efficient. But as markets in all ways became more flexible it was increasingly important for workers to demonstrate effectiveness almost entirely through performing specific *roles* well, rather than performing actual *skills* well. Indeed, increasingly this became the *only* way their work was assessed and assessable. This image-based measure of one's work is what Sternberg calls "phantasmagoric labor," meaning based entirely on images ("Phantasmagoric Labor: The New Economics of Self-presentation," *Futures* 30, no. 1 (January 1998): 3–21.). For a broader historical look at the transition from a pre-market economy, in which work was seen as but one aspect of a broader social world, to a market economy in which man was primarily valued as a laborer, see Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, 2nd ed. (Beacon Press, 2001).

⁹ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar; the American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951); Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

¹⁰ Fromm, *Man for Himself; an Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, 70.

¹¹ See the work of Boltanski and Chiapello, and David Harvey, for discussions of these defining characteristics of the post-modern workplace. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (Verso, 2007); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1990).

curated, and consumed online.¹² She emphasizes that this is not just a tool for success in the job market, but a distinct form of labor, which,

involves the self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries...its goal is to produce cultural value and, potentially, material profit.¹³

The tools now exist for individuals to self-brand and self-promote as never before, and we are under increasing pressure to do so, not only because of social and labor trends that have been leading in that direction since the serf left the manor, but also because search engines will generate default online identities for us if we do not shape them ourselves. Since search engines are increasingly used to quickly assess an individual's background to evaluate him in various ways, at least minimal management or curation of our online reputations becomes a necessary defensive measure, even for those of us uninterested in aggressive marketing of the self. For the less tech-involved among us, the first hurdle is to make sure something is there to curate. As a recent *New York Times* article put it, "If you don't brand yourself, Google will brand you'...Or perhaps even worse, will nothing pop up? Not being online today is akin to not existing."¹⁴ Indeed, it may well be that the complete *lack* of an online identity is more of a red flag today than one that is slightly tarnished, especially for young people. The absence of an online record about you means either that you have done nothing others deem worthy of recording, even when the barriers to doing so are practically zero, or that you are such a social or technological misfit you have never posted anything about yourself. Who wants to hire someone like that?

¹² Hearn, "Meat, Mask, Burden"; Andrew Wernick, *Promotional Culture: Advertising, Ideology, and Symbolic Expression* (London: Sage Publications, 1991).

¹³ Hearn, "Meat, Mask, Burden," 198.

¹⁴ Tugend quoting from Sherry Beck Paprocki and Ray Paprocki, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Branding Yourself*, Original. (Alpha, 2009); Alina Tugend, "Putting Yourself Out There on a Shelf to Buy," *The New York Times*, March 28, 2009, sec. Your Money, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/28/your-money/28shortcuts.html>.

2. Infinite reference groups

Other scholars have focused less on trends specific to the labor market, and more on how individuals try to navigate the crowd more generally in a rapidly urbanizing world. In an influential essay written in 1979, Warren Susman compared self-help literature from the late 19th century, which highlighted the cultivation of a morally upstanding character, with that of the teens and 1920s, which emphasized the calculated construction of a likeable, outstanding personality.¹⁵ As Susman summarizes, “The problem is clear. We live now constantly in a crowd; how can we distinguish ourselves from others in that crowd? While the term is never used, the question is clearly one of life in a mass society.”¹⁶

He goes on to explain that the real difficulty lies in simultaneously standing out from the crowd while appealing to it,¹⁷ a challenge shared with self-branding, and one that can only become more daunting as the crowd to which one is simultaneously comparing oneself and attempting to appeal grows in size and diversity. Successful self-branding and reputation management require knowing your audience, which is increasingly difficult to do since audiences for any specific bit of information online are largely invisible, and technically limited only by their access to an uncensored Internet.¹⁸

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the idea that a person’s self-concept is based at least in part on how he imagines others are judging him—what Cooley refers to as the “looking-glass self,” and Mead attributes to our ongoing internalization of the “generalized other”¹⁹—is a fairly well established idea; this is essentially the definition of a reference group, one of the

¹⁵ Warren I. Susman, “Personality and Twentieth-Century Culture,” in *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, ed. John Higham and Conkin, Paul K. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 221–226.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁸ boyd, “Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics,” 34–35.

¹⁹ George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, Works of George Herbert Mead; V. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 154; Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order*, 184.

social sciences' key terms.²⁰ While Cooley and Mead were not making claims restricted to their time periods, others have argued that the forces associated with capitalism and the growing crowd gave rise to a prevalent character type more explicitly concerned with the opinions of others, as a driving force in their daily lives, than in previous eras. Unlike more inner-directed types, David Riesman argues, the "other-directed" man of the mid-20th century relies not on a few great men to guide him, but on "a veritable Milky Way of almost but not quite indistinguishable contemporaries."²¹ While his less crowd-oriented predecessors were guided by an internal gyroscope in their decision-making, the other-directed man relies on a figurative radar to pick up signals from those around him, including those to whom he is indirectly connected through the mass media. He then uses these signals to make adjustments not only to his actions but to his aspirations and assessments of himself.²²

It follows that changes in the means of communication, which alter the array of people to whom an individual can compare himself and connect at any given moment, will likely affect how individuals conceive of themselves. That communication technologies are deemed revolutionary partly insofar as they lead to qualitative and quantitative changes in the way individuals relate to and imagine others is not a new idea,²³ and that one's reference groups expand tremendously online is, likewise, hardly an extreme claim. But it is important to add that although these imagined communities of judgmental others may be invisible most of the

²⁰ "This term refers to a 'collectivity' that an individual uses either to evaluate their own position—a comparative reference group—or to set norms and standards of behavior—a normative reference group. In either instance, the group only needs to be an imagined collectivity of the individual and does not necessarily have to be an actual collection of interacting individuals." (*The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.credoreference.com/entry/cupsoc/reference_group).

²¹ David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd, Revised Edition: A Study of the Changing American Character* (Yale University Press, 2001), 138.

²² Riesman, Glazer, and Denney, *The Lonely Crowd, Revised Edition*.

²³ For just a few key examples, see Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-modern Europe*, 1st pbk. ed. (Cambridge, England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place*.

time, many of them are also connected to the individual via a communications infrastructure that makes it possible for them to contact the individual directly at almost any moment, and vice versa. As I discuss later in this chapter, some of my interviewees experienced precisely this, as strangers from around the world sent them messages after seeing them in the news. But whether members of a given individual's massive anonymous reference group do reach out and touch him is actually less important than the growing sense on the part of everyone involved that this is possible. Suddenly the "generalized other" seems alarmingly particular and proximate.

I am not sure what happens to an individual's self-concept when his reference groups radically expand to include (potentially) everyone with an Internet connection and all those people can (potentially) talk back to him—or at least make him aware that they are watching—but it seems highly unlikely that this has no effect, and we can speculate based on some of the theories discussed above. While Riesman's argument has been reductively interpreted as a whole-hearted lament for a more inner-directed man, he is actually more ambivalent than such readings give him credit for: the other-directed person is far more worldly, broadly empathetic, and sensitive to his surroundings than his blindered progenitors. Perhaps we can look forward to an extension of these capacities.

On the other hand, we could also imagine a bleaker outcome. Kenneth Gergen argues that the post-modern man's comparison with near-infinite others results in "the expansion of inadequacy," and although he was writing in the early 1990s, his observations anticipate today's networked world: "The range of one's friends and associates expands exponentially; one's past life continues to be vivid; and the mass media expose one to an enormous array of new criteria for self-evaluation."²⁴ This sense of comparison with others can surely only be augmented with the Internet, since it multiplies our connections with strangers, yet in ways that seem strangely intimate.

²⁴ Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 76.

And this obviously relates to the challenge of curating a socially acceptable, appealing online identity—socially acceptable and appealing to whom? The combination of expanding reference groups with the growing need to self-promote seems fraught with contradictory pressures. In a sense, the looking-glass online is one in which everyone is not only an imagined, if not literal, judge/consumer of the market-oriented, branded self, but also an imagined, if not literal, rival, if not for a specific outcome, then certainly for attention from the crowd: our consumer-rivals, too, are selling themselves. At the same time they are so many and varied, little wonder if disorientation is the primary outcome.

Indeed, Fromm, whose market orientation is a more uniformly cynical portrait of contemporary character than Riesman's, observes,

The degree of insecurity which results from this orientation can hardly be overestimated. If one feels that one's own value is not constituted primarily by the human qualities one possesses, but by one's success on a competitive market with ever-changing conditions, one's self-esteem is bound to be shaky and in constant need of confirmation by others.²⁵

Furthermore, while Fromm conceived of the marketing orientation as partly a compulsion to continually change oneself to appeal to others, today online what we have is the pressure to self-brand, which requires consistency.²⁶ When combined with the basic properties of the web (such as search) that make jettisoning old baggage and starting anew nearly impossible, malleability and reinvention of the self—which would enable better compliance with ongoing demands of the personality market—become increasingly difficult. This is another fundamental contradiction: you have to appeal to a revolving and growing crowd of imagined others, but sorry, you've only got one shot to get it right. Some theorists argue that, given the degree to which social technologies are forcing into view previously separate identities, the pressure to present a single, respectable self must give way to a growing norm of tolerance for

²⁵ Fromm, *Man for Himself; an Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, 72.

²⁶ As Sternberg stated in 1998, what he refers to as "phantasmagoric labor" or the work of presenting an appealing image, "does not entail a fracturing of self. Rather, aspirants to economic success must have a stronger and more determined sense of self than ever before, since they must strategically adapt persona to meet market demand." Sternberg, "Phantasmagoric Labor," 3.

multiple, at times seemingly contradictory, identities in each person.²⁷ Perhaps it will. But we are still in a transitional moment and these new norms have not yet taken hold. In the meantime, lack of success in the online reputation game may not feel like a failure of just one iteration of the self, easily shed, but rather as an indictment of something far more unique and permanent.

3. *Changing status symbols*

And the ways we measure success are also changing. Digital technology has erased many of the barriers that once separated people by social status and were thereby used to measure it. The power to address the crowd was once its own status symbol, limited to the wealthy or powerful. Meanwhile, geographic boundaries have long divided those with elite social status from those without, with access to the former carefully regulated and restricted only to a select few.²⁸

Frictionless, instantaneous digital communication does away with many of these physical and symbolic status barriers. As has been much noted and celebrated, web 2.0 technology alters them dramatically by reducing publication costs to virtually zero. And it is now relatively easy to digitally access people formerly separated from us not just geographically, but socially. While powerful or famous people may not read their own email or tweet for themselves, the technical process of sending them an email or a tweet is exactly the same as contacting anyone else.²⁹ And many other outward signs of status morph in a virtual

²⁷ Samuel Gosling, a University of Texas, Austin psychologist who studies self-presentation on Facebook has made this point, noting, "I have to find a way to reconcile my professor self with my having a few drinks self... You see your accountant going out on weekends and attending clown conventions, that no longer makes you think that he's not a good accountant. We're coming to terms and reconciling with that merging of identities." Quoted in Rosen, "The Web Means the End of Forgetting," 45.

²⁸ Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place*, 169–172.

²⁹ One of my interviewees, a professor at an Ivy League university who is widely considered world-class in her field, called this to my attention when, unrelated to our discussion about her news appearance, she mentioned that she had received a call from a community college student who had found her name online and needed help writing an essay. The student had, admirably, gone right to the top, but the

environment as well: qualities of one's physical presentation that might be used to project status or stigma are suddenly greatly diminished, if not completely invisible. This includes not only physical comportment and style of speech, but also clothing and other forms of conspicuous consumption that have long served as tacit markers of status in face-to-face interactions.³⁰

While there is much to celebrate here, it is also undeniable that differentiating oneself from others in an environment in which everyone can participate is exceedingly difficult. Partly because the barriers to publishing today are dramatically lower than ever before, the glut of available information online creates an attention economy in which the competition is unflinching and fierce. And since many old ways of standing out from the crowd are no longer available or are less potent online, those status symbols that *do* translate particularly well to online environments take on greater importance, even as new ways of measuring and displaying status are created.

For example, appearing in a news story has been a status symbol since long before the Internet, but it is one that transfers extremely well to the online environment and, I would venture, gains power there. Sharing news stories online is easy. They are automatically pegged to the identities of all those they mention by name, and they are branded as legitimate sources in an environment in which authorship and legitimacy is often difficult to determine. Because appearing in a news article is itself status conferring, and articles and video clips from news broadcasts can quickly become symbols that circulate fluidly online and engender discussion, they lend themselves especially well to a social environment scrambling for reliable ways to determine who matters and who does not.

Moreover, in an environment where winning attention is so difficult, doing so is increasingly seen as a marketable skill in itself. Appearing in a news story gains value because it immediately increases one's visibility online, with the potential to spillover into many other

professor was a bit surprised to find herself in the position of tutoring a student who would never have navigated the physical and symbolic barriers to her ivory tower office in a pre-internet period.

³⁰ Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

online spaces, in the form of blog mentions, Twitter followers, Facebook friends, and so forth. Some Internet scholars have argued that having a large, visible online network is not a good measure of one's actual prestige or influence,³¹ but it is still perceived as a sign of status in some circles.³² I would venture that indications of online influence, for which having a sizable audience is a prerequisite, if not proof, will spread and become a more universal marker of status as even more activity takes place online and standing out there becomes even more difficult.

A number of new Internet tools anticipate and facilitate this trend. Using algorithms that calculate not simply the size of a person's social networks, but his impact on them (as measured by how often he engages, receives comments, retweets, is retweeted, and so forth), they rank his "online influence" on a scale from one to a hundred, issuing a score that invites comparisons with others in his immediate field and beyond.³³ Having tweeted precisely once in my life (a tweet I promptly deleted), I cannot say I was shocked to be unceremoniously told by one of these sites that I have a "low level of influence," but I still felt an acute sense that I was

³¹ For an example of an empirical study proving this point, see Meeyoung Cha et al., "Measuring User Influence in Twitter: The Million Follower Fallacy," in *International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*, 2010, https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=http://an.kaist.ac.kr/~mycha/docs/icwsm2010_cha.pdf&pli=1.

³² Marwick makes this point in her ethnographic work on the San Francisco technology scene. Shirky makes a broader claim, arguing that in the current media environment, receiving attention from more followers and readers online than one can reasonably contact in return constitutes fame and, therefore, status. Alice E. Marwick, "Becoming Elite: Social Status in Web 2.0 Cultures." Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, 90–96.

³³ The most well-known of these is klout.com (accessed June 15, 2012), where the splash page modestly states, "Klout: the Standard of Influence, est. 2008." When an individual signs up for Klout she gives it access to any of a number of her social networks (the more, the better for her klout), and the algorithm calculates how many people she influences, how much, and the impact of her overall network. Klout "partners" with companies who want to use these influencers to publicize their products, by providing them with, for example, names of the top 10 people most influential and relevant to their brand so the company can invite them to try their product for free, no strings attached. Of course the hope is that these influencers will then Tweet about and otherwise promote that product. Other similar sites include Kred.com (accessed June 15, 2012), which markets itself as the most transparent of these sites because it is not secretive about how it is calculating influence, and Peerindex.com (accessed June 15, 2012), a British version.

underperforming at a game I had not even realized I was playing. The site—Klout.com—reassures me that “everyone has influence”—but some clearly have more than others.³⁴

The three social dynamics discussed above obviously interrelate in many ways. Creating a solid online reputation with a large audience of followers is both a means to enhance one’s status and, once accomplished, a signifier of it: acquiring and influencing an audience has become a distinguishing, celebrated, and highly marketable skill, not just for public figures, but for everyone. In other words, it is so hard to stand out in a world of near-infinite competition that you stand out by standing out. Meanwhile, co-presence with a vast array of invisible (but always potentially visible) others can compel even those averse to invidious comparisons to measure themselves against multitudes. These dynamics help form the social context in which my interviewees found themselves making the news. Below I explore in detail how their experiences were affected by the technical affordances of online publication.

Findings: Online Reputation and the Architecture of the Internet

(Potentially) vast audiences

Newspapers, like other print materials, have long been passed around and read by people who did not actually buy them, but geographical constraints inhibited their movement; while you could mail a clipping or an entire newspaper to someone far away, this was a clunky process compared to today’s frictionless online sharing via email, blogs, and social networks.³⁵ Most newspapers facilitate this process by offering the option to email or post a given article with the click of a button, and article sharing via email and social networks has become an

³⁴ Klout.com, accessed June 15, 2012.

³⁵ According to David Paul Nord, “Historians have generally assumed that each copy of a newspaper or magazine in this era was read by quite a few people.” *Communities of Journalism: a History of American Newspapers and Their Readers*, *The History of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 181. By the late 1700s in the United States it was, “a common practice...for private correspondents to include newspapers in their letters to friends in other parts of the country.” Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: a History of American Civic Life*, 1st pbk. ed. (New York: Martin Kessler Books, 1999), 68.

increasingly common practice.³⁶ When an individual's name actually appears in an article, it can spread very quickly through his own social networks, whether he himself puts this in motion or not. Some interviewees described receiving feedback from contacts around the world before they themselves had even read the article, but many began the process by posting the article to Facebook, Tweeting it, or emailing their entire contacts list. Some even said this kind of sharing was so easy it felt almost obligatory. Dara, an eighteen-year-old college student who made the news in multiple outlets in New York when she was rescued after fainting onto the NYC subway tracks, said of posting the article on Facebook: "I felt like I had to. I was on the news. And it was becoming a bigger and bigger deal. And I kinda thought it was amusing. Like, the picture in *The Post*, all this random fame. I could put it on my Facebook, y'know? It's easy to do."³⁷

Meanwhile, other news outlets and blogs of all stripes may pick up the article as well, sharing it with their own audiences in whole, part, or remixed form. That articles spread to other outlets, like newspaper sharing, is not a new phenomenon, but online the kind and number of forums that repurpose news articles in all manner of ways has multiplied exponentially, introducing them to audiences that might not have come across them in the original context. All the while, news aggregators of various kinds—which are completely new digital tools with no obvious pre-Internet corollary—direct non-habitual readers of particular newspapers to specific articles as well. And whereas daily news articles were once relegated to musty archives, difficult to access or navigate, that process has been dramatically streamlined in online archives and search engines, so even articles that do not initially spread like wildfire can see their audiences continue to grow quietly into the future. It is too early to say for how long most of my interviewees would see signs of their articles continuing to reach new audiences in the future, but several, for whom months or even years had passed since their news appearance,

³⁶ *Facebook Is Becoming Increasingly Important* (Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, May 9, 2011), http://www.journalism.org/analysis_report/facebook_becoming_increasingly_important.

³⁷ Interview by author, March 10, 2010.

reported that they had indeed seen evidence that people continued to run across it via Internet searches, a phenomenon I discuss in greater detail below.

All of this has the potential to increase visibility for any given news article far beyond what it would have been in a pre-Internet media environment. This change is perhaps most striking when the source is a single article that resonates with the public and goes viral. Helen, in one of the most extreme examples in my study, was quoted in a controversial article on college social life in *The New York Times*—the kind that reaches the top of the “most emailed” list and is picked up by multiple other outlets, discussed at length on blogs and in reader comments, and shared extensively among readers’ social networks. Since she had not anticipated that the original article would be so controversial, and since she felt she came across very badly, she was disconcerted to find herself, a twenty-one-year-old college student, in the national spotlight as a result of a single quote.

It is obviously not the case that every news article goes viral; most do not. Audience size will depend on many factors, not least what the article is about, whether it resonates with the public, and what outlet published it in the first place. But the fundamental point is that the *potential* audience for any given news story today is dramatically larger than in a pre-Internet era—which has upsides and downsides. For those hoping to raise awareness or generate publicity, or those who especially enjoy public attention, the more the better. But even for them it can be overwhelming. Harry, a professional magician who appeared in an article that was picked up all over the world, said it was cool to see the article in different languages and to know people across cultures were seeing it, but it also made him “feel a little scared.”³⁸ This online contagion can exacerbate the anxiety or sense of vulnerability elicited by what, for many, already feels like a process that is at once intimate and public—and alarmingly beyond their control.

³⁸ Interview by author, September 20, 2010.

Barrage of direct feedback from known entities – and strangers

Almost all my interviewees received not only phone calls but also direct digital communications via email, text messages, or social networks. As I discussed at length in the previous chapter, much of this feedback came from friends, family and acquaintances, and often consisted of just a brief, congratulatory acknowledgement of the news appearance. I would speculate that news subjects today receive more of this friendly feedback from personal contacts than in the past, simply because today's communication tools make it so easy to send a quick message.

A more striking, qualitative difference between being a news subject today and during the pre-Internet era, however, lies in the amount of direct feedback from *strangers*, in some cases from all over the world, that my interviewees described receiving. Many private citizens are now easy to locate online via a simple Google search, and their contact information, especially through social networks like Facebook and Twitter, is likewise just a few clicks away. After seeing their names in news articles I located most of the participants in this study by using these same tools. Interviewees, many of whom said they had not been expecting any or only minimal feedback, described receiving direct messages from strangers via all of these avenues, as well as phone calls from distant readers who had found their numbers easily online.

Receiving direct messages can, unsurprisingly, feel intimate, which can make them all the more satisfying when they are positive, such as when strangers reach out to express solidarity, support, or agreement with one's views. As Dara noted, "It felt good to have your friends support you. It got a little bit annoying because I got so much more feedback than I expected. But it was kinda nice having friends you haven't talked to say, 'I care about you,' y'know?"³⁹

In some of the most dramatic cases, interviewees felt they saw a whole new community emerge through these responses where none had existed before. Thomas, a performer with a

³⁹ Interview by author, March 10, 2010.

congenital illness who was featured in *The New York Times*, said he was touched and humbled by the positive feedback he received from others with the same condition, eager to share their own stories, clearly thrilled to find a role model:

THOMAS: The response was so overwhelming. Over email and Facebook. My god, it was just so many people responding in such a positive way. And from this country, from Europe, from Asia. From all over. I think people hadn't ever quite seen a story like this before. And I knew personally, for myself, I've been hunting for a role model for quite some time. And I didn't really have anyone that was quite like me to look up to and shape my path after. And suddenly I was getting all these emails about "my six-year-old son," my "nine-year-old daughter." "Thank you. Thank you for sharing, thank you for telling." It was just this sort of overwhelming positive wave. Which was great. And that was really difficult to sort of keep up with.⁴⁰

Ivan got news attention from around the world for rescuing a child from a burning building. For him, the direct feedback he received from appreciative audiences was a highlight in an otherwise overwhelming and disruptive event in his life:

IVAN: Oh, I had, what, 200 voicemail messages, I couldn't keep up with it. I had messages on Facebook from Nigeria, Malaysia, Germany, Canada, of course Romania, Greece. I made the TV in Saudi Arabia.

I: What did people say?

IVAN: Oh, it was beautiful. The words that came out of their mouths. And I responded to all of them individually. It took me a while. But anybody that gets up, from their TV, to go search for me on their computer and send me a message deserves my answer back. That's a lot. I thanked them for acknowledging a good deed.⁴¹

Although both Ivan and Thomas acknowledged that keeping up with all the digital feedback was something of a time drain, overall they found the positive responses from strangers gratifying, and responding to them worth the effort.

But people motivated to contact complete strangers after seeing them in articles usually do so because they had a strong reaction, and other interviewees received direct feedback from strangers who disagreed with—or simply disliked—their quote, point-of-view, life choices, or something else about them, whether directly related to the content of the article or not. This is likely a greater risk for those who appear in stories that strike a public nerve, as Helen learned

⁴⁰ Interview by author, March 5, 2010.

⁴¹ Interview by author, November 12, 2009.

quickly on the day her article was published. She recalled, “Sunday I was at home and I got this Facebook message from this random girl at [her college]. Who, I have no idea. And she was like, ‘I cannot believe you said that.’ She was like, ‘I don’t know you, but you should be ashamed of yourself. You are disgusting, you give us such a bad name.’”⁴²

Public figures may be accustomed to such direct personal criticism, and it seems likely that with experience one could learn to downplay it. Although all of my interviewees were private citizens, those who were more accustomed to addressing the public—neighborhood or political activists, for example—seemed less surprised to get direct feedback, and better able to simply dismiss the negative. But for the majority, who were appearing in the news for the first or second time, this was an unanticipated part of the experience that, even when the messages were positive, highlighted one of the oddities of being in the public spotlight today: the audience may remain largely invisible, but any one of those audience members could directly contact you with a response. Given that the audience could be potentially enormous, this can add to the thrill of public display—or the anxiety of public exposure.

Online commentary: being discussed by others

The proliferation and ease of online commenting options available to audience members also increases the likelihood that any given news subject will become fodder for a very visible kind of public discussion. News stories have long been the stuff of public conversation, but today many of these discussions are asynchronous, between strangers who will never meet, made visible to the public, and archived for future audiences. While seeing oneself represented in audience commentary shares some characteristics with seeing oneself in the original coverage, including the potential to inspire the creeping sense of uncanniness discussed in Chapter Six,⁴³ many subjects found it even more bizarre to see themselves talked about in these other forums because they had not anticipated it, and because, since the discussants were

⁴² Interview by author, May 21, 2010.

⁴³ See Chapter Six for a discussion of the uncanny effect of seeing oneself in the news.

usually complete strangers, the representation felt even more distant from the subject than the news coverage itself.

The amount of commentary a given article receives will vary a great deal depending on what the article is about, the outlet, and many other factors—some articles simply gain little traction with the online public. And when commentary is available, news subjects' reactions to it vary as well. While some interviewees were unaware of online discussions of their articles, and others made a point of avoiding them, most respondents said the temptation read them was simply too great. Not reading online comments is akin to not listening when people are discussing you in the next room: you may know nothing good will come of it, but it is very hard to walk away.

And in many cases, interest in reader comments went beyond mere curiosity. Recall from earlier chapters that news subjects are often so deeply implicated in the trigger issue itself, the interview process, and the strange pressures of being represented before the public, that they do not trust themselves to assess the coverage on their own. So they turn to their reference groups, which, we can now add, increasingly include not only people they know personally, but others who are visible in online spaces—in this case, those who choose to make themselves visible by commenting publicly on news stories. Although these are usually strangers the news subject will never meet, they become key points of reference partly for that reason: they seem more objective than friends and family. Their opinions can also carry great weight because, unlike the direct responses discussed above, these comments are public, and often appear right underneath the article itself. As such, they have the potential to influence other readers' interpretations of the article and the subject's role in it.

And again, my interviewees noted advantages and disadvantages to this new phenomenon. As Colleen, a career educator featured in an article about a controversial issue in New York City schools, pointed out, even when the commentary was not uniformly positive it could be informative and interesting:

COLLEEN: It's not like the [print-only] city paper, where somebody reads it and puts it down. Now people can respond. And the response is mixed, but in some ways it's kind of exciting because there's a conversation and you're in it. The conversation is about what you're doing. And there are gonna be people in support of it, there are gonna be people who are detractors. But in either case people who are genuinely interested and have not decided will be part of the conversation and they can decide what they think about it.⁴⁴

As Colleen indicates, it can be thrilling to be part of a public conversation, even as its object, and public reaction made visible in reader discussions can help subjects assess how well the article achieved goals such as raising awareness or dispelling myths. This can be especially useful for activists, as suggested by Patricia, a Tea Party leader:

I: Why did you want to read those [reader comments]?

PATRICIA: Of course I'm curious as to "How is this movement affecting other people in this country? What are their thoughts?" I always want to understand, "How are other people thinking?" ...I wanted to know, does this article do any harm to our movement? That's really what I was looking for. Did it help us or did it hurt us?⁴⁵

As I have discussed in previous chapters, effects of articles are often more salient to subjects than the details of the coverage itself, so perhaps it is unsurprising that sometimes those effects—in this case, readers' reactions as seen in their online commentary—can change a subject's opinion about an article, even reversing his interpretation altogether. Some interviewees—again, this was especially true for those associated with hotly debated issues—initially felt their article was fair but changed their minds when they saw readers repurpose details in it to criticize their cause, or interpret the entire article as evidence against them. Patricia, for example, did not love the *New York Times* article in which she was quoted about the Tea Parties in the first place, but, based on the reader comments, she concluded that it had savagely smeared one of her colleagues, which had not occurred to her before:

I: Was it the way she herself was represented that bothered you—or?

PATRICIA: It was the way she was represented and obviously the way it came across, because the comments were all about what a horrible lady she was...And I guess I

⁴⁴ Interview by author, November 9, 2009.

⁴⁵ Interview by author, May 3, 2010.

didn't react as ferociously to her quotes until I saw the comments. From how other people responded to the article.⁴⁶

Tellingly, Patricia blamed the reporter for having quoted her colleague in a way that inspired critical comments, rather than the commenters for having interpreted the quotes in a negative light—even though she had not initially found the quotes offensive herself. This was by no means universal in my sample; some blamed commenters, not reporters. But it is notable that either is a possibility, even if the subject's initial response to the reporter's work was a positive one.

On the other hand, being fodder for discussion and commentary about an article can also boost an individual's status by increasing his visibility and overall digital footprint. While news articles are inherently status conferring,⁴⁷ one of the ways status may mount even more for a given article is by making the "most emailed" lists hosted by many news websites; gaining steam in aggregator sites that depend on reader ratings (like Digg⁴⁸ and Reddit⁴⁹); and generating extensive online discussion across social networks and other forums. And the more an article is linked to, cited, excerpted, and commented on, the better it will perform in a Google search, which further increases its visibility. As long as the article is not stigmatizing, subjects who ride this wave can benefit as well, since, as discussed in the previous section, online visibility and influence are becoming measures of one's standing in the world.

But, like expanding audiences in general, this is a viral effect over which the subject has basically no control at all, and being the subject of so much online attention and discussion has some fairly serious downsides. Audience commentary is often not subject to journalistic conventions limiting overt opinion and speculation—on the contrary, these are encouraged by

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ See Chapter Seven for a full discussion of the status associated with "making" the news.

⁴⁸ <http://digg.com/>, accessed June 15, 2012.

⁴⁹ <http://www.reddit.com/>, accessed June 15, 2012.

the format. Although news outlets moderate comments to varying degrees and many prohibit obscenity and abuse, many of my interviewees felt comments they saw on news sites were inappropriate, whether simply petty and irrelevant to the story at hand, or outright mean-spirited and bigoted.⁵⁰ Furthermore, whatever the regulations for managing comments on mainstream news sites, many subjects described seeing comments on other sites that had more lenient policies or none at all, and when describing audience comments they often did not distinguish between the different forums in which they had read them. It seems that, for some news subjects, being publicly insulted at all is more salient than precisely where the insult took place.

In fact, my interviewees varied a great deal in the degree to which they took petty or vicious attacks in the commentary to heart. While some said they were able to quickly dismiss them precisely because they were so stupid and unrelated—“little kid talk” as Oliver put it⁵¹—others found them painful, especially when they touched on a pre-existing sensitivity or attacked subjects’ ethics and morals; it is much easier to dismiss someone who criticizes you for eating tuna than someone who calls you a liar or a slut. A number of subjects who received nothing but supportive feedback from friends and acquaintances were very hurt by critical feedback from these strangers, in some cases to such a degree that they said it made them regret agreeing to cooperate with the reporter in the first place. Carmen, for example, was the victim of an unsolved crime that was featured in *The Daily News*:

CARMEN: Then I started reading comments on *The Daily News* that people were writing and they were being assholes about it. They were saying I made it up. That my boyfriend had done it and I was blaming it on somebody else. That since I’m Spanish it looked like I was letting some drug dealer into my house. When I read those comments I started regretting [appearing in the article].⁵²

⁵⁰ Psychologist John Suler has dubbed online commenters’ tendency to be less constrained by the niceties of interpersonal interaction than they would be offline the “online disinhibition effect.” John Suler, “The Online Disinhibition Effect,” in *The Psychology of Cyberspace*, 2004, <http://www-usr.rider.edu/~suler/psyber/disinhibit.html>.

⁵¹ Interview by author, June 18, 2010.

⁵² Interview by author, May 25, 2010.

As Carmen's comment suggests, minorities probably have a rougher time of it than white men in this regard, as commenters in some forums seem to seize on anything in the article that can be reshaped into a racial or misogynistic slur. For subjects already feeling overwhelmed by the attention they were receiving from the article itself, these comments were, at times, the last straw. Unlike critical messages sent directly to news subjects, these messages are public, so they can be embarrassing even if they seem absurd, and subjects found themselves with few viable options for addressing them. Some described feeling tempted to dive into the fray to post comments in their own defense, and a few actually did, but no one seemed to conclude this diminished their feelings of impotence and humiliation.

These public discussions about news articles can foment more critical direct messages, and vice versa, and when an article generates a lot of discussion, the distinctions between these private and public comments start to blur:

HELEN: I read *The New York Times* comments about the story and it was maxed out. The comment area. That was the worst feeling ever. I remember I started crying when I was reading the comments. Because it was just like, "How does Helen K go to school?!" Like, "She's so dumb, she doesn't have standards." ...And then people would Twitter me back and be like, "No wonder you're single!" like, "You're that desperate?" It just makes me so mad because my dream was always to go to [this college] and I had to work really hard to get there. So for the [college] community to ridicule me was really hard. And some of the comments on *The New York Times* were from [my fellow] students, like, "Wow, I'm ashamed that you go to this school with me." ...Once I read the comments it actually made me feel dumb, like, "Wow, I should've actually seen this coming." Y'know? It made me question myself, even.⁵³

Helen's quote highlights a few key points about reference groups and audience commentary. First, suddenly her immediate reference group has vastly expanded to include everyone who has commented on the article, and all the other readers she can imagine who might be judging similarly. Yes, she is still most bothered by the comments from her classmates, but the other comments factor into how she imagines she appears in the eyes of the world as well. And her last observation is particularly telling: sometimes reading comments leads subjects to question not only their original interpretation of the article, but their own abilities

⁵³ Interview by author, May 21, 2010.

and perceptions. Helen struck me as confident and capable—as will be clear from her response to *The New York Times*, discussed below, she is no shrinking violet. If the sheer number and negativity of the comments made her doubt her reality, the rest of us may have little hope.

Being Googleable

As I argued in the last chapter, since our reputation is one of our most valuable and personal assets, we are deeply invested in maintaining it as much as possible and will feel personally wounded should it take a hit; but, to paraphrase Goffman's observation about our public face, it is only on loan from society: our reputation is constructed from judgments our community makes of us, based on social information, including articles, about our past deeds and enduring characteristics.⁵⁴

It follows that changes in information flows will alter this process. Here it is helpful to return to Goffman's idea of the identity peg.⁵⁵ Recall that this is a unique marker—most often a person's name, but it could be his social security number or photographic image—to which social facts and symbols stick, forming a unique biography that others can recognize and evaluate against norms and expectations, thereby composing an identity and reputation for him. As our methods of preserving, sharing, and pegging information to individuals change, the ways these judgments are formed and the strategies individuals use for trying to manage them will change as well. As Goffman explains,

Once an identity peg has been made ready, material, if and when available, can be hung on it; a dossier can be developed, usually contained and filed in a manila folder. One can expect that personal identification of its citizens by the state will increase, even as devices are refined for making the record of a particular individual more easily available to authorized persons and more inclusive of social facts concerning him.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*, 1st Pantheon Books ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 10.

⁵⁵ Goffman, *Stigma*, 56–57.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 57–58.

While Goffman was writing a half-century ago and he is focused in this quote on “authorized persons,” this sounds a lot like Internet search. Searching for individuals online is a literal version of this process of collecting social facts tied to the person by an identity peg, which is usually his name but more and more in the future will also be his face.⁵⁷

Typing an individual’s name into a search engine to produce a snapshot of his biography and determine his trustworthiness for all kinds of social and economic interactions is an increasingly common tool in private and professional life in the developed world. While constructing an individual’s reputation was once a process carried out by a geographically circumscribed community of people who knew that person and pieced together available information about him over time, which was then judged against shared norms, online an individual’s reputation is often assessed by strangers who know only his name, search for him, and make a judgment based on the information aggregated by an enigmatic algorithm. In the past, people with spoiled reputations had the option of moving to a new area, perhaps haunted by the ever-present possibility of being found out.⁵⁸ Today being found out is a virtual certainty, and moving to a new town will do little to help. The growth of an industry of online reputation consultants, such as Reputation.com, who will, for a fee, clean up one’s search results by diluting damaging information and (when possible) removing it, is a direct result of this new socio-technological phenomenon.⁵⁹

It is also key here to note that, because mainstream news organizations already have much larger audiences than many other types of online publications, they tend to perform very well in searches. Although Google is famously tight-lipped about its algorithm, PageRank, it is no secret that it uses a weighted measure of links to a given page as an indicator of popularity

⁵⁷ Already Facebook includes an application, Photo Finder, that lets members use facial recognition software to search Facebook for photos of anyone on their contact list. In the near future, facial recognition software will likely enable users to plug images into Google and search for individuals that way, rather than by name. Rosen, “The Web Means the End of Forgetting,” 35.

⁵⁸ Goffman, *Stigma*, 77–78.

⁵⁹ <http://www.reputation.com/>, accessed June 15, 2012.

and credibility,⁶⁰ which generally leads the search engine to reward mainstream media sites (which are linked-to extensively by others) with higher rankings in search results. Moreover, news organizations often invest at least some resources in search engine optimization to better take advantage of search as a way to direct readers to their sites, which further increases articles' visibility in these rankings.⁶¹ While the visibility of a news article in a Google search for a given individual's name will depend on many factors, including how much information is already available on the web about that person and when the story appeared, a high profile news story in which the individual is named stands a very good chance of being visibly linked to him online, and playing a powerful role in shaping his reputation, for a very long time, and across community boundaries.

This may sound ominous, and it certainly introduces new layers of risk to the phenomenon of news subjecthood, but since appearing in news articles can also confer status (as can increases in one's online visibility and influence) some interviewees found the appearance of a news article when they Googled their names a welcome novelty. For a few, appearing in a news article was the first time *any* social fact appeared when you searched for their name, and almost all noticed a change in their search profile after their news appearance. Many were pleased: not only did they feel any increase in their visibility online could be helpful, they rejoiced to have flattering articles shape their public image.

But some had mixed feelings about their new Google-search-selves. Even when an article did not reflect poorly on a subject, having it redefine his online identity—especially when it depicted an anomalous or otherwise unrepresentative event—could still feel strange:

DARA: For a while [before the news articles] if you Googled me, you'd come up with me in different fashion shows or me and my art, me in an interview about my mom's

⁶⁰ Tom Seymour, Dean Frantsvog, and Satheesh Kumar, "History Of Search Engines," *International Journal of Management and Information Systems* 15, no. 4 (Fourth Quarter 2011): 52.

⁶¹ Andrew Chavez, "How Does Search Engine Optimization Affect News Organizations," *Explorations in New Media*, May 14, 2010, <http://explorations.community-journalism.net/>.

business, so stuff like that. It was a nice depiction of me. But now you Google me it's like, "Girl faints on subway," y'know? And I'm like...okaayy.

I: *Not exactly the web reputation you were most hoping for.*

DARA: Yeah.⁶²

Dara's complaint is one that has been leveled against Wikipedia as well: information included in a profile may be technically accurate, but overemphasis of minor details can distort the overall picture.⁶³ But at least in Dara's case the distortion was not outright damaging. For Liana, whose quote on a single news broadcast about her brother's murder was picked up by many other news outlets and became fodder for a firestorm of negative commentary online, Googling her own name quickly became a painful reminder of traumatic events, and she worried about how it would affect her future:

LIANA: I wanna go to law school, but then I was just like, "Oh my gosh; I'm gonna be some kind of big attorney one day, you'll Google my name and this story's gonna come up. Like, my family, when we're choosing a doctor we Google the doctor to see if there are any negative comments, y'know what I mean? So I just feel like your name will be there but it'll be there for the wrong reasons."⁶⁴

While it is always hard to predict the long-term ramifications of the Google effect, Liana is probably right to be concerned. When people who do not know us well, or only know our names, Google us, it may be out of idle curiosity, but it is often out of instrumental curiosity: they are trying to decide whether or not to engage with us in some way, be it as an employee, a roommate, a date, or in any of myriad other potential social and economic relations. This is a straightforward, if streamlined, way we rely on reputation to determine trustworthiness. Since the researchers may know little or nothing about us besides what appears in an online search, what they find there may be their entire basis of assessment. As Helen put it:

HELEN: Even today I messaged someone about housing in DC and they're like, "Oh! Are you the Helen K from *The New York Times*?" ...It still comes up and I still get random Facebook friend requests from really creepy people.

⁶² Interview by author, March 10, 2010.

⁶³ Rosen, "The Web Means the End of Forgetting"; Jaron Lanier, "Digital Maoism," *Edge: The Third Culture*, May 30, 2006, http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/lanier06/lanier06_index.html).

⁶⁴ Interview by author, April 28, 2010.

I: Do you think that's because people are Googling you?

HELEN: Yeah.⁶⁵

Since hot-topic articles are often picked up by other outlets in their entirety, or in excerpts on other blogs and websites linking back to the original, and each of these may spawn additional online publications and commentary, a Google search for a subject's name after appearing in such an article may return several pages of nothing but references to that article, and this may continue for an indeterminate amount of time after it is first published. This can be disconcerting to say the least:

PATRICIA: And then I Googled my name a week after that article came out and I don't know how many times my name popped up just because of that one article. I mean, that one article got picked up on 20 other newspapers, and so each one of those newspapers referred to my name, too... I was just shocked at the number of times it was listed in Google. I had expected it, but not quite to that extent.⁶⁶

It is hard to say how far into the future an article will be linked to a given person's name because there are so many factors involved in determining this, including, as noted earlier, how much other material about the person appears online in the interim, and how much additional commentary is generated by the original article. But it is premature to think they will disappear quickly; in the same conversation Patricia mentioned an article from over ten years prior that still appeared when you Googled her name.

And news articles may be especially influential on a subject's online reputation not just because they occupy a lot of space in his search results, potentially for a long time, but also because they have credibility relative to other information online of more indeterminate or unfamiliar provenance. Despite proclamations to the contrary by scholars and survey respondents, as I argued in Chapter Six, there is good reason to believe mainstream news articles are still used by many members of the public as credible sources of information. These articles carry the imprimatur of their outlet, and of the journalistic establishment more

⁶⁵ Interview by author, May 21, 2010.

⁶⁶ Interview by author, May 3, 2010.

generally, and on the Internet, where so much un-sourced material flows freely, these familiar stamps of credibility may take on new weight.

This adds to the problem of trying to extricate oneself from an unfortunate news mention. At this stage in the Internet's development, much related to individual privacy remains unregulated,⁶⁷ and it is often very difficult to have undesirable material about oneself removed, as recent stories about the travails of people trying to erase nude photos and past errors illustrate.⁶⁸ These individuals have little legal recourse, especially if the information is true. But it is particularly difficult to erase one's name from a mainstream news article, and nearly impossible to get a whole article removed from the web. These are not embarrassing artifacts posted by lone, vengeful individuals, after all, but the work of powerful institutions whose reputations depend on their not capitulating to the whims of their sources. This means news subjects are forced to manage the repercussions as well as they can. In the next section I explore two approaches to doing so, which occupy either end of the spectrum of reputation management strategies my interviewees described: (1) leveraging the benefits of appearing in a status-conferring article and (2) managing the effects of appearing in a stigmatizing one.

Managing reputational effects

Self-branding: leveraging the status of appearing in a news article

Appearing in a favorable (or even just non-stigmatizing), news story is especially beneficial to those who already have a brand they are trying to promote—or know they want to create one. Interviewees who had poured time and resources into promoting themselves or a venture in the past found that a news appearance suddenly boosted visibility in ways they had

⁶⁷ Nissenbaum, "A Contextual Approach to Privacy Online," 42.

⁶⁸ Nick Bilton, "Erasing the Digital Past," *The New York Times*, April 1, 2011, sec. Fashion & Style, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/03/fashion/03reputation.html>.

not been able to accomplish by themselves via social networking tools and other P.R. techniques, and they were well positioned to take advantage of it. Colleen, for example, an administrator at a new private school in Manhattan, said she and her colleagues had struggled to publicize their school through direct mail to parents and parent organizations, but the—not entirely favorable—article in *The New York Times* changed everything.⁶⁹ They were flooded with inquiries from interested parents, which was Colleen’s entire goal for agreeing to the “excruciating” eight hour interview process, and once the article was posted online it became an ongoing, highly credible promotional tool they could post to their website, and which curious parties could always find on their own. She explained, “That was another thing; if you get an article in *The Times*, you got an article in *The Times*. If anybody wants to know anything about you they can go to the article.”

Others took this a step further by strategically targeting a specific audience and sending it the article. Billy, a rising standup comedian who was featured in the southwestern paper, explained he was using the same techniques he had used before to promote himself, but the article added value to his self-produced materials precisely because he had not written it himself.⁷⁰ When he emailed nightclubs he hoped would book him in the future, he sent along the article as a kind of testimonial, the online equivalent of framing a review of his business and hanging it in the window.

Mike combined all these techniques to leverage an article to build his brand. He was trying to restart a consulting business he had left years before, and although he had joined several social networks to try to multiply his contacts and increase visibility for his fledgling enterprise, he was frustrated to see how quickly his efforts stagnated. As he explained it, “Even though I was a major player in this particular category of consulting, 2009 is not 1994, and it’s a

⁶⁹ Interview by author, November 9, 2009.

⁷⁰ Interview by author, July 28, 2010.

different world out there now, and the capacity to differentiate yourself in the world is a lot harder.”⁷¹

He started a blog to establish an online presence, but was getting little-to-no traffic until he appeared in an article in *The New York Times* about older adults using social networking tools. The article was not about his business per se, but his name was all over it, along with a huge picture. Moreover, the portrait the article painted of him perfectly matched the brand he was trying to create: old school, yet tech savvy. He emailed links to all his contacts, posted the article to his blog, and used his social networks to distribute it. And he saw traffic to his blog increase “from zero to sixty” right away:

MIKE: So I would say, having this [article], it says I’m not the sixty-two year old guy with the white beard, I’m modern. I’m contemporary. Is this a direct lead to a contract? No, but it is a direct lead to my blog site, on which there’s also even a feature that says, “Look, I got in *The New York Times*.” Y’know, I’m a player...And what’s nice is it’s a crossover because on the one hand I’m very old guard, and on the other hand I’m very new guard. All at the same time.⁷²

Mike harbored no delusions that he could have achieved the same level of exposure and status on his own; as he pointed out, there are fewer and fewer ways to set yourself apart online, and appearing in a *New York Times* article confers a kind of status that translates well even today:

MIKE: I mean, in this case it’s the newspaper of record. You’re being put in an elite class. Even if it’s only for a moment. But, the social media was supported by *The Times* rather than vice versa, even though they were inextricably linked. I think the social media cares about the imprint of something like *The New York Times*....I think one’s credibility grows by one’s association...Those things still matter. And there are less and less of them.⁷³

Mike’s experience highlights the continued and, in some ways, enhanced, importance of the mainstream media in a world in which everyone can participate in social networking and other forms of publishing online. As Mike points out, while in *theory* networks can continually grow—which is what you want if your goal is to gain professional opportunities—this growth

⁷¹ Interview by author, November 2, 2009.

⁷² Interview by author, November 2, 2009.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

can be very hard to achieve once your network includes all the usual suspects. The mainstream media can differentiate among the masses, boosting visibility and status of the select few. And those who are eager to leverage this increased visibility can position themselves to take advantage of it using digital tools.

The scarlet letter in a global village: managing online stigma

Promoting status-conferring articles online is relatively easy. Containing stigmatizing articles online is much harder; the online reputation defense business is booming for just that reason. The difficulty of erasing information online can be partly explained by the properties of the web described at the outset of this chapter: the information is archived by default, replicated almost as automatically, and spreads far and wide, potentially before the subject is even aware that it is out there. Thus, even if a correction, clarification, or—extremely rarely—a retraction occurs on the original site, the uncorrected article usually remains alive and well in other online contexts, and many readers will never be aware of the correction at all.⁷⁴

Since removing an article whole cloth is almost never an option, for many new subjects the only viable strategy is to try to cover its traces in their search results—which most of my respondents did not have the technical know-how to do. Rich, for example, was arrested for the kidnapping and assault of a local politician's wife.⁷⁵ The charges were later dropped, but not until after the arrest was written up in several small local newspapers. Of course these were all available online and, as is often the case when low-profile people are acquitted or set free before trial, there was no follow-up article clearing his name. By the time he told me his story three years later he had not been able to get another job. He was convinced, partly because at least one potential employer had told him so, that his bad luck on the job market was entirely due to

⁷⁴ There is ample reason to question whether corrections of errors or misperceptions actually do much good even when known. For example, Nyhan and Reifler found that corrections to misperceptions about charged political issues not only had little impact on readers' misperceptions, they sometimes reinforced them (Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* 32, no. 2 (June 2010): 303–330. And, as discussed in Chapter Seven, even acquitted criminals continue to suffer effects of stigma (*Social Stigma*) 57.

⁷⁵ Interview by author, March 11, 2010.

this blight on his past, which was evident to anyone who Googled his name. It did not help that prior to the arrest Rich had had no online presence to speak of—with his steady work as a handyman he had never had the need—so there were no other social facts available about him to offset the impact of this apparently deviant behavior:

RICH: I've never had a problem getting a job in my life. All of a sudden, I can't get a job. I'm a nice guy, I'm personable. I've got skills, I've got references. I got everything. I'm getting a second interview, you know, okay. Third interview, all of a sudden they get cold...I know the reason why I wasn't getting these jobs... is people Google people! It was page one [in the search results]!...It wrecked my life, yeah. It wrecked my life.

Rich's story is Kafkaesque not only because of the original arrest, which he is still mystified to explain, but because of his sense of complete helplessness and confusion over how to manage his online reputation in the wake of these events. Like the protagonist in Kafka's *The Trial*,⁷⁶ Rich felt he was being persecuted by a complex authoritarian system that was largely hidden from view, as impossible to combat as it was destructive. At the time of our interview he was considering hiring a professional to help him manage this problem. When I asked another interviewee, accused of raping a minor before the charges were dropped, how he felt about the article showing up in a Google search for his name, the news came as a surprise to him. He was one of my only interviewees who had not thought of this before I mentioned it, and one who will probably be dealing with the most stigmatizing effects. As he and Rich both illustrate, many private citizens are ill prepared to anticipate or manage their online reputations effectively under any circumstances, let alone the most adverse.

Beth offers an illuminating counterexample.⁷⁷ A self-described "techie geek," she was in a good position to manage her online reputation herself when she was faced with a major blight on it: Recall from the previous chapter that she was accused of a white-collar crime that also involved alleged adultery. She was still awaiting her own judicial proceedings when we spoke, but she had testified against another character in the drama as part of a plea deal, and her

⁷⁶ Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1955).

⁷⁷ Interview by author, December 17, 2010.

testimony had provided fuel for humiliating, and ultimately quite stigmatizing, articles in some major papers. Beth, who is married, watched in horror as her husband's family begged him to divorce her and lifelong friends spurned her. Hers was a classic example of how behavioral deviance could have stigmatizing effects.

Part of her effort to rebuild her life, which also involved pursuing her education in a different town, moving her children to a new school, and beginning a whole new career, involved trying to muffle the damaging material online. The article had been picked up by several major outlets and gotten a fair amount of play on finance blogs, where she had been called all manner of degrading names. In all, the news article and its repercussions took up multiple pages in her Google search results, including the entire first page. So she took steps to hide her connection to the story as much as possible: she bought URLs using several different iterations of her name and created a series of blogs and websites, then created dummy sites that linked back to them, thereby improving their ranking in her search results. The goal, of course, was to populate those search results with neutral material that would water down the negative, a technique favored by the reputation defense business.⁷⁸ It helped that she had a fairly common name; she hoped that by adding enough other material to her online profile, people would assume the damaging information was about someone else. And her efforts at diluting the stigmatizing material were fairly successful:

BETH: It didn't eliminate everything, it's just that it's mingled in, y'know, it's sprinkled in. Like, on the first page there's I think, five Beth [last names]'s that I got up there that are perfectly respectable, or say nothing...And then if you go a little deeper there's a LOT more shit about it. A lot about the bad stuff. But I was worried about the first page impression more than anything else....You can do it if you try. But.

But: it takes a lot of effort and a fair amount of technical know-how. Beth was quick to point out that her efforts limited the harm, but did not completely eliminate it. As she rather

⁷⁸ Bilton, "Erasing the Digital Past."

despairingly summed it up, “It used to be that if something bad would happen time *would* heal everything. Now it’s forever!”⁷⁹

When the accuracy of an article is not in dispute—as it was not in Beth’s case, since she could not deny her guilt—the subject has little choice but to do what she did: try to minimize its visibility online, primarily by tricking the search engines. The game changes somewhat when the subject feels the original article was, in fact, inaccurate, and traces the stigmatizing effects he or she is suffering to the error. None of my interviewees actually took steps to initiate a defamation suit—too expensive, too much hassle—but Helen probably came the closest. Recall that her quote, in a *New York Times* article about social dynamics on college campuses, was widely interpreted by her immediate reference groups, as well as strangers across the country, as morally reprehensible. She felt strongly that the quote, while technically accurate, was taken so far out of context it took on the opposite of her true meaning.

Since the article itself was at issue, she went directly to the source to request a correction. First the reporter, then his editor declined to alter the story. As the ripple effect online worsened, she and two other students, also angry about their quotes, drafted a letter describing in detail how they had been misrepresented by the reporter and sent it to all of the major publications that had picked up the article, as well as some prominent blogs that traffic in media criticism. As Helen explained, the goal of the letter was partly the same as Beth’s: to dilute the results when you searched for her name:

HELEN: Because the main concern was I needed something else to pop up when you Google my name. At that point it was just the article over and over and over again. But I was like, ‘If someone reprints this letter then my name will show up with that, at least.’”⁸⁰

Only one of these media criticism blogs published their letter, but that turned out to be enough. The letter itself got quite a bit of attention—the *New York Times* reporter responded on

⁷⁹ Interview by author, December 17, 2010.

⁸⁰ Interview by author, June 17, 2010.

the same blog, and the comments section exploded—and lo and behold a clarification appeared on *The Times* website soon after. It helped that the underlying events were not nearly as stigmatizing as in Beth's case—a morally questionable remark is not likely to be as damaging to one's reputation in the long-term as committing a crime—but Helen was sure that the steps she had taken to repair her reputation had helped: if you searched for her name now you not only found the original article, but the entire history of how she had fought Goliath and won. But she, like Beth, had no delusions about the degree to which this had erased the problem. She concluded, "The problem is never gonna be resolved because when you Google my name it comes up a zillion times. On blogs and stuff, which don't have the clarification. Like, I'm working at [company] this summer, and that came up in my interview."⁸¹

Conclusion

Appearing by name in a news article today is different from in the past for all of the reasons discussed above. It is hard not to conclude that it is riskier. While the actual audience for any given article may remain small, the potential audience is always unfathomably huge; we still know relatively little about how long an article will remain prominently attached to a given individual's name; and, short of hiring a professional consultant, there are few viable options for managing how prominent a role a given article plays in shaping your online identity.

Having observed a number of journalism ethics courses at Columbia Journalism School over the last several years, I believe it is fair to say that many young journalists, even those who have grown up with the Internet, like many news subjects, do not immediately consider the digital implications of naming an individual in a news story. Nowadays these should not be the *last* ethical questions considered by journalists when dealing with private citizens, but some of the first. A recent article in *The New York Times* about early onset puberty in young girls, in which the featured child's full name was used and intimate details of her body's development

⁸¹ Ibid.

discussed, comes to mind as an example of a story that may do an important public service, and would once have been quickly forgotten, but will likely now have long-term effects on the child's life.⁸² Were these considered by the adults involved? As long as there is reason to believe that many news subjects will not themselves consider the possible long-term implications of having a news story linked to their name, or their child's name, online, especially when stories could potentially have stigmatizing effects, I believe journalists have the responsibility to discuss these with potential news subjects. Furthermore, the potential long-term effects of appearing in an online news story should be recognized by journalists as legitimate reasons for subjects under some circumstances to be granted anonymity.

It is, as always, tempting to overemphasize how common the negative scenarios are, and I want to resist that temptation. Many of my interviewees still had very good experiences overall and were happy to have an article linked to their name online. Some benefited greatly from it. That said, I believe to "really know what you are getting into" when you agree to an interview with a reporter today means understanding that the worst case scenario—that the article will figure prominently in your online identity for the rest of your life—is a very real possibility. Leyla's example is a good one to follow: When I asked how she felt about the prospect of a controversial article in which she appeared following her online for a very long time, she responded, "I don't think I would've done it if I weren't prepared for it to be part of my history forever."⁸³

⁸² Elizabeth Weil, "Puberty Before Age 10: A New 'Normal'," *The New York Times*, March 30, 2012, sec. Magazine, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/magazine/puberty-before-age-10-a-new-normal.html>. Prior to the publication of Weil's story, the public editor had addressed the issue of naming children, spurred by reader outcry following a story about very young children being sued, in which the children were named. After laying out the arguments for and against naming children in potentially stigmatizing stories, he concluded that it usually adds little to the story, and that, "*The Times* should update its thinking to recognize the harsh effects of the electronic age." As noted, this article appeared prior to the one I cite, suggesting that either no such change occurred as a result of the public editor's determination, or that articles about health, however intimate their details, are not considered potentially stigmatizing by *The New York Times*. Arthur S. Brisbane, "Names in the News, Before They Can Read," *The New York Times*, November 13, 2010, sec. Opinion, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/14/opinion/14pubed.html?ref=thepubliceditor&pagewanted=all>.

⁸³ Interview by author, February 18, 2010.

CHAPTER NINE: Conclusion

Like the young Aztec men and women selected for sacrifice, who lived in delightful ease and luxury until the appointed day when their hearts were to be carved from their chests, journalistic subjects know all too well what awaits them when the days of wine and roses — the days of the interviews — are over. And still they say yes when a journalist calls, and still they are astonished when they see the flash of the knife.

—Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*.¹

I began this study with a working hypothesis that all news subjects would feel at least uncomfortable, at worst seriously distressed, by how they had been depicted by journalists. Underlying this expectation was an assumption—which I did not even realize I was making at the time—that their primary interest would be in the content of the published news story, and how well or badly it represented them. I also assumed they would unreservedly blame their discontent on the journalists involved. I realize now to what a great degree I had allowed my expectations to be shaped by Janet Malcolm’s framing of subjects’ experiences in *The Journalist and the Murderer*.² Her argument that subjects are invariably suckered by journalists into behaving naively in interviews, only to be shocked, humiliated, and outraged when they see how the journalist portrayed them later, had blinded me to the possibility that the experience of being a news subject might stretch beyond the parameters of the interaction with the journalist, or even the published content of their stories.

In fact, one of the first things I noticed when I began interviewing news subjects was the difference between how they framed the issue and how Malcolm did: they thought of their interactions with journalists and the coverage that resulted as parts of a broader saga in which they had taken part, and which included the events leading up to and following publication of an article or newscast. Although their exchanges with reporters affected their expectations for the news coverage and often made an impression in their own right, subjects judged how they were represented in the final product based on many more criteria than just what had

¹ Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, 144–145.

² Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*.

happened in the interview stage. In some cases, the coverage itself paled alongside the newsworthy events that inspired it or the effects of that coverage on subjects' lives. If forced to choose a single variable that the majority of my interviewees considered *the* most important in determining what the experience of being in the news was like, it was the trigger that set the process in motion, not their relationship with the journalist or any other aspect of the news production process that happened later. As discussed in the introduction and throughout the text, the trigger dictates how invested the subject is in the whole news process and his hopes for the content—not only what it will include, and what his role in it will be, but what effects it will have.

And effects are very, very important. These, too, mostly fall beyond the parameters of Malcolm's story, but I found them absolutely crucial to how my interviewees understood and evaluated their experiences. Most news subjects care about how they are represented by journalists because of the potential effects the representation may have on their reputations and goals. Certainly subjects are often curious about how the journalist will depict them as well, and their initial, private reactions may be cringing and self-critical. But articles and newscasts do not appear to subjects in a vacuum—they are not standing alone before a funhouse mirror. If they have very strong reactions to the coverage it is almost always because they are concerned about how others will interpret it, act on it, and judge them based on it. Any discussion of journalism subjects will be incomplete and distorted if it fails to take into account how essential a role these imagined and actual effects play in subjects' understanding of this experience.

Subjects mostly measure these effects based on feedback from others. This, too, Malcolm hardly touches, but it was extremely important to my interviewees. They used responses from their reference groups—which included strangers who used digital tools to contact subjects directly or comment on stories online—to assess how the story was received, and to gauge any impact on their goals and reputations. This included the degree to which the article had enhanced or damaged their status. The status conferred by a news appearance is another factor that, though given short shrift by Malcolm, I found to be of prime importance. It was not only a

motivator for participation in the news, but also one of the most noticeable and welcome effects of an article—to such a degree that it often overshadowed what subjects had previously perceived as defects in the coverage.

So Why Do Subjects Who Should—Or Do—Know Better Still Agree to Talk to Reporters?

This is the first half of the question Malcolm leaves open at the end of her book, with the brilliant sentence that serves as the epigram to this chapter. After arguing throughout the text that subjects do not fully understand the risks of cooperating with journalists, she concludes that really, on some level they *do* know what they are getting into—and yet they still “say yes when the journalist calls.”³ I think she is right about this: I found that subjects were, at least in theory, aware of many of the risks involved in agreeing to speak to reporters, but opted to proceed with interviews despite them. Malcolm finds this unfathomable in the end. Little wonder, since the only motive for subjects’ eagerness to engage with writers that she discusses at any length is the psychological benefit they get from confessing or confiding in apparently sympathetic reporters.

If this were, in fact, all subjects stood to gain from agreeing to a journalistic interview, she would be right—given the risks involved, it would seem a lousy deal. However, my findings suggest that Malcolm severely underplays the potential benefits to news subjects of speaking to journalists, which go far beyond the immediate psychological and emotional rewards of the interview stage. Perhaps this oversight is due to her rather narrow focus on the parts of the process in which the journalist directly participates, which is understandable since, as a journalist herself, she is coming from that perspective. But while the enticement of speaking to journalists was undeniably a factor in my interviewees’ decisions to participate in the news process, it was only one factor among many.

As discussed in Chapter Two, interviewees, based on their relationships to the triggers in question, formed goals for the news coverage that included raising awareness about issues,

³ *Ibid.*, 145.

witnessing, publicizing their ventures, repairing their reputations, and reaping the emotional satisfaction of being, however briefly, a little bit famous. In terms of anticipated psychological benefits, I would say for most of my interviewees, the expectation of positive feedback and increased status was a much greater enticement to speak to reporters than the immediate rewards they might gain from talking to an attentive listener in the interview itself. Malcolm does briefly acknowledge that a desire for publicity may motivate subjects,⁴ but she (and, I believe, much popular discourse about people who seek reporters' attention) reduces this to a self-serving drive for personal fame. While the fame motive may drive some news subjects and appeal to many,⁵ this characterization overlooks the many legitimate reasons people seek publicity, not just for themselves, but for issues, opinions, and efforts they care about. It does not necessarily follow that such goals are invariably self-aggrandizing or self-absorbed. Even the goal to enhance one's status in the eyes of the world, upon reflection, cannot be easily dismissed as indicative of some kind of narcissistic character or impulse: status is a vital social currency; its pursuit, or at least maintenance, probably an essential social skill; and, not just news appearances, but much of what we do in public, affects it in some way.

Another reason subjects agree to speak to reporters despite the apparent risks—and a reason they may be well-justified in doing so—is that the chances of it working out in their favor are simply greater than Malcolm depicts them. Perhaps because she focuses on an exceptionally unhappy subject—recall that her protagonist sued his biographer for depicting him as a psychopath after pretending to believe him innocent—but she quite dramatically overstates how often news subjects are dissatisfied with their coverage. The majority of my interviewees felt the experience overall had been a positive one—even though many of those same subjects identified inaccuracies in their stories or, if given the chance, would have altered some aspect of the coverage in some way. This was often because, just as they had hoped it

⁴ Ibid., 58.

⁵ Social psychologist Orville Brim conservatively estimates that two percent of the U.S. population is actively driven by fame, although he cautions that people likely underreport this on surveys, and a much larger percentage at least fantasizing about being famous. Brim, *Look at Me!*, 22–33.

would, the coverage met their goals. In many cases, desired effects were forthcoming, even as subjects *also* reaped the psychological benefits of interacting with sympathetic reporters.

The disparity in their access to a broad audience is the source of the undeniable power imbalance in the relationship between journalists and their subjects. This inequality is starkest at the writing stage, when the journalist has the final say about how the subject's story is told to the public. Here Malcolm is absolutely correct: the journalist-subject relationship is inherently imbalanced since one person is going to be doing the writing while the other sits back and hopes for the best. Unlike public officials and other "elite" subjects who actually have a lot of power in this relationship to even the scales, ordinary people often have few resources at their disposal to make up for the structural inequality in the relationship, and journalists have little at stake professionally if they mislead or misrepresent them. As I pointed out in Chapters Three and Four, there are also many material factors in the interview stage that can be understood as giving the advantage to a professional journalist over an inexperienced subject.

But even if we acknowledge these inequalities built into the relationship, it is an error, as some of Malcolm's fellow journalists have argued in their own defense, to say all journalists take unscrupulous advantage of them.⁶ Many of my interviewees had only praise for the reporters who had written their stories, describing them as professional, friendly, and sympathetic; some even considered them friends—and this was *after* the story had been published. Although some interviewees had very negative experiences, as I discuss in the next section, only in a small number of cases was this because they felt misled or betrayed. Although a different sampling procedure might have yielded more subjects who felt journalists had abused their power,⁷ it is simply hyperbole to say this is inevitable—rather like claiming every businessman is corrupt.

⁶ Gottlieb, "Dangerous Liaisons: Journalists and Their Sources."

⁷ See Appendix A for a detailed description of my methods and sample.

My findings also suggest that the feeling Malcolm variously describes as the “shock”⁸ and “astonishment”⁹ that subjects do sometimes (not “always,” as she claims)¹⁰ feel upon seeing the final product is often not strictly a result of their having expected something different based on their interactions with the journalist. Yes, expectations do play an important role, and these are often formed during the interview. But for many of my study participants, seeing themselves as objects in a work of journalism was inherently uncanny, even if the representation met or exceeded their expectations. As explained in Chapter Six, not only did news subjects find their object-versions at once undeniably familiar and eerily foreign, but also the very object-ness and placement in the news of these representations infused them with truth claims that subjects could not make for themselves, and could only with difficulty debunk or deny. That their object-versions had more evidentiary force than their subject-versions may have added to peoples’ sense of having given up control over something precious, which, as I discuss below, is another crucial aspect of this phenomenon. But the fundamental point is that this uncanny feeling at seeing the final product often operates independently of any reportorial decisions made by the journalist. For many subjects, seeing themselves in the news is jarring and weird, no matter the details of their depiction.

And I found that many subjects, contrary to what Malcolm’s subject-as-vengeful-victim character would suggest, were aware of these distinctions. They did not all automatically blame reporters if they were unhappy with the coverage. As discussed in Chapter Five, some took responsibility for errors; others said they understood how mistakes had occurred and simply forgave reporters for them; and some traced their discontent to other causes, like their own aversion to attention or the uncanny sensation described above. These were not the litigious frenzies one would expect from reading Malcolm’s book.

⁸ Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

In fact, all but one or two people in my sample said they would be open to cooperating with reporters in the future. Even some of my interviewees who had had bad experiences said they would risk it again, in hopes the result would be more positive the next time. This may seem reckless, but again, I think it is hard to overemphasize the degree to which being featured, or even just named, in the mainstream media can be emotionally and practically gratifying for ordinary people under many circumstances. The potential benefits are so great they may be worth the risk not just once, but many times over. Here I think Malcolm and other media professionals may be especially prone to overlooking just how rare it is for most people to have access to this broader public; unlike journalists themselves, most of us cannot tell our own stories to a broad audience, but must instead depend on others. Contrary to what web 2.0 proselytizers would have us believe, this continues to be true, because what matters in this calculation is not whether the subject is technically capable of publishing his story without the aide of a journalist or mainstream media institution, but whether anyone will see it. When it comes to accomplishing many of the goals discussed in this study, audience size is everything.

Take Jeffrey MacDonald, the convicted murderer at the center of Malcolm's own book. When he agreed to let Joe McGinniss write a true crime novel about his murder trial, he hoped it would help exonerate him—at least in the public eye, but ideally in a courtroom as well. It is hard to imagine a more compelling reason. And even though that relationship ended about as badly as possible, with McGinniss portraying MacDonald as a cold-blooded killer, MacDonald continued to engage with reporters. This baffles Janet Malcolm,¹¹ and she uses it to support her argument that the compulsion to confide in journalists is overpowering. Although MacDonald is eager to cooperate with her as well, as she documents in *The Journalist and the Murderer*, she refuses to take his bait and write the exculpatory sob story he is clearly hoping for. But MacDonald never stopped interacting with reporters and it appears he has finally met his goal:

¹¹ She notes, "Perhaps even more striking is MacDonald's continuing and, under the circumstances, crazy trust in the good intentions of journalists. To this day he continues to give interviews to journalists, continues to correspond with them, continues to send them material...and does everything he can to be helpful to them, just as he did with McGinniss." *Ibid.*, 34.

Errol Morris, whose critically acclaimed documentary the *Thin Blue Line* helped clear a wrongly convicted man in the late 1980s, just published a book of very persuasive investigative journalism making the case that MacDonald did not receive a fair trial.¹² MacDonald's case was already set to come before a judge again in 2012 based on new evidence, but his lawyers have publicly stated they hope the Morris book will have some influence in their favor.¹³ As they know, winning in the court of public opinion is no small matter, and this is something few ordinary people—convicted criminals or not—can do on their own.

In sum, subjects agree to interviews despite the risks because the potential benefits are far greater than Malcolm gives them credit for, as is the likelihood of being portrayed to their satisfaction—or for even an initially unsatisfactory article to ultimately have very satisfying effects. At one point she notes that, “Yes, a subject may occasionally grudgingly concede that what has been written about him isn't bad, but this doesn't make the writer any less a thief.”¹⁴ This characterization completely removes subjects' agency from a process in which they are actively involved and invested, even if they must gradually cede control over their stories to journalists. In the end, I think a more apt and, frankly, fair, characterization would be that journalists are like salesmen, hawking audience reach in exchange for control over subjects' stories. Even though it may seem to an outside observer that the subject is underselling, many of my interviewees found it a deal well worth striking, and few regretted the decision.

¹² Dwight Garner, “‘A Wilderness of Error,’ by Errol Morris, on the MacDonald Trial,” *The New York Times*, September 10, 2012, sec. Books, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/11/books/a-wilderness-of-error-by-errol-morris-on-the-macdonald-trial.html>.

¹³ Morris has said he did not have a strong personal relationship with MacDonald, but MacDonald did cooperate in the research for Morris's book, including at least one phone interview and one live interview. Meanwhile, one of MacDonald's lawyers recently detailed in *Forbes* his hope that Morris's book will help lead to his client's exoneration. Emily Bazelon, “Errol Morris V. Janet Malcolm,” *Slate*, September 13, 2012, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/interrogation/2012/09/errol_morris_takes_on_janet_malcolm_in_a_wilderness_of_error_.html. Silvergate, “Jeffrey MacDonald, Innocence, and the Future of Habeas Corpus - Forbes.”

¹⁴ Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, 14.

Why Would Subjects Who Should—Or Do—Understand That They Are Giving Up Control of Their Stories *Still* Sometimes Feel Betrayed and Disappointed?

This is the second question implied by Malcolm's concluding lines: Why do subjects, who know what they are in for, still feel "astonished when they see the flash of the knife?"¹⁵ I found that subjects under some very specific circumstances do feel betrayed. This occurs when subjects, looking back, believe journalists intentionally led them to expect an angle to the coverage (what I called a "story frame") that they, the journalists, never really intended to use. This is problematic because, as discussed in Chapter Four, subjects adjust their behavior in interviews based on what kind of story they believe the journalist is planning to write. If a subject later discovers he was wrong about this, he may feel he was not given a fair chance to present himself and his views advantageously during the interview, and may react with anger or disappointment at the coverage.

But I have also argued that subjects in daily news stories feel outright betrayed far less often than Malcolm suggests. There are several reasons for this. First, as explained in the previous section, many subjects were satisfied with both their coverage and with their interactions with journalists. In some cases the goals of the journalist and subject aligned completely, such that the article felt to the subject like a genuine collaboration—a feeling that was not undone, but corroborated, by the published work. And, perhaps in the majority of cases, even when the coverage was not exactly what subjects would have preferred, it still at least minimally met their immediate goals and did not damage their reputations. Obviously, people are unlikely to feel betrayed if the coverage meets or exceeds their expectations. Second, since the feeling of outright betrayal is predicated on feeling misled by the journalist during the interview stage, even those who were later disappointed by the coverage rarely felt "betrayal" was an accurate characterization of their feelings. As discussed in Chapter Five, on accuracy, and Chapter Six, on existential effects of seeing oneself in the news, subjects' reactions to how they were represented ranged all over the map, but only in a small percentage of cases did they

¹⁵ Ibid., 5.

directly trace their negative reactions to having been intentionally misdirected by a reporter in the interview stage. Those in my sample who had the most painful experiences were actually those who were, at least initially, written about without their consent for crimes they either committed or were accused of committing. In other words, although they felt the coverage was unnecessarily punishing, its stigmatizing effects were primarily traceable to the nature of the trigger and not their having felt seduced and betrayed by journalists.

All of that said, in a minority of cases in my sample subjects did feel misled and betrayed by journalists, and it is true that they deserve special attention—as worst-case scenarios. Those who felt they had been intentionally manipulated into misrepresenting themselves so that the the journalist could miscast them fit this bill, as do subjects who felt the reporter had told them outright she was sympathetic to their perspective, only to write an article subjects felt was neutral or hostile to their point of view. In most of those cases the interviewees had a lot invested in the news coverage as a means to an end: they wanted to address the public about issues they felt were important, and to influence public opinion about them, and they felt their reputations hung in the balance. Led in their encounters with journalists (they felt) to believe the reporter was on their side of the issue, they later felt they had been unfairly lulled into complacency in the interview, and that they could have better presented their sides of the story (or opted out of the interview altogether), had they better understood what kind of article the journalist was writing.

To explain how this kind of misunderstanding can occur, Malcolm offers only an unappetizing (or appetizing, if what you are in the mood for is a delicious story) mixture of subjects' blind self-absorption and journalists' myopic self-interest. In what seems to be a concession that this is not really an explanation at all, the book's concluding lines leave the question open, and I think we can consider several different, more satisfying, explanations for how a subject could wind up feeling the journalist had intentionally misled him, each of which place varying degrees of responsibility on the journalist and the subject respectively.

In the first scenario, which corresponds to the one Malcolm sketches as being the norm, the journalist either actively encourages, or knowingly does not dissuade, the subject from expecting a very different story from the one the journalist is writing. Extrapolating from my findings, I would speculate that if only a small percentage of news subjects actually feel betrayed by journalists, then in only a small percentage of *those* cases does the journalist intentionally misdirect the expectations of the subject. The fact of the matter is that, especially in many stories about ordinary people, journalists simply have little to gain by misleading their subjects about the story they are working on. While they may not be entirely forthcoming about the details, it is really only outright misdirection that usually leads subjects to feel betrayed later, and that, I believe, is rare.

A second scenario places the blame more squarely on subjects' shoulders: there is no reason to dismiss the possibility that some subjects are simply blind to all indications that journalists are not planning to write the articles they are hoping for, or simply allow themselves to believe journalists will produce their ideal coverage, with no encouragement from the journalists at all. As I argued in Chapters Three and Four, many people are attuned to cues from journalists during the interview indicating which story frame the journalist intends to choose, but not everyone is equally good at reading them, nor equally intent upon it.

A third possibility is that, if a journalist does give off cues during the interview that the story will be one thing and it turns out to be another, it can be fairly easily explained by either what we know about journalistic routines, or what we know about what Hochschild and others have called "emotional labor."¹⁶ Either provides a more nuanced alternative to the easy conclusion that the journalist was deliberately deceptive or the subject merely oblivious. While journalists writing under time constraints often do fall back on fairly predictable structures for

¹⁶ Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*.

their stories and archetypes for the characters therein,¹⁷ it is equally true that many kinds of stories develop and change as the reporter does the work of, well, reporting. This can mean that subjects interviewed near the beginning of the process are speaking with a reporter who has in mind a story that later turns out to change organically, as the journalist finds out more information and rethinks her story frame in light of it. To a subject unfamiliar with this process, it may well appear that the journalist has misled him deliberately—when really she just changed her mind.

And if that does not appear to be the case, sociologists researching emotional labor in the service industries offer an intriguing alternate explanation. As Hochschild argues in her work on flight attendants, some kinds of work require a kind of “deep acting,” in which the worker actually has the emotions and thoughts of the character she is performing, and, in fact, must do so in order to do her job well.¹⁸ For these workers, maintaining their professional faces, to return to Goffman’s vocabulary, requires that they not only behave but *feel* whatever is necessary during the interview to get the best, most useful information from the subject. While this explanation may not be satisfying to those who want to see this as a purely rational process in which all actions are deliberate, I believe it provides a valuable framework for thinking about journalists’ behavior in the interview stage that acknowledges (as I believe Malcolm does not to the degree she should), that there are many shades between complete sincerity and outright deception. A journalist may indeed feel everything she is projecting in the interview—at the time.

When it comes to daily news subjects, I believe the feeling of being exploited is probably more common than the feeling of being betrayed Malcolm emphasizes far more—although at times she seems to conflate these. The distinction I would make is that, while betrayal necessarily involves disappointment in how one is represented in the final product, one can feel

¹⁷ Many media sociologists and academics in other disciplines have made this point, but some of the most venerable are; Robert Darnton, “Writing News and Telling Stories,” *Daedalus* 104 (Spring 1975): 175–194; Gans, *Deciding What’s News*.

¹⁸ Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*.

exploited by the process, and by the journalist, without taking issue with the final product at all. Although her main case study is one of betrayal, and her most famous statements are about that, at least in the afterword to *The Journalist and the Murderer* Malcolm does try to make this distinction clear, noting, “The moral ambiguity of journalism lies not in its texts but in the relationships out of which they arise—relationships that are invariably and inescapably lopsided.”¹⁹

In that vein, a number of my subjects, especially those who had been at the center of large stories and hounded by many insistent journalists, said they felt not that journalists had misled them, but rather that they had self-servingly and unfeelingly taken their stories in order to profit from them. Again, this feeling of being exploited was not a reaction to the way the subject had been represented in the product, or really anything about the content of the coverage; subjects of major, life-altering news stories often barely register the details of specific articles or newscasts. Rather this feeling was tied to a sense that their stories, which they had freely given, were being used for someone else’s gain, and was exacerbated when journalists descended in pushy, competitive groups, or made what subjects felt was little effort to get to know them. In the more extreme cases, which, interestingly, included all of the “heroes” to whom I spoke and several other people who had been involved in big, celebrated news events, this started to feel like an eerily personal violation. I believe this is partly because the process of becoming a news subject requires gradually—or, if the trigger is a sudden event, abruptly—giving up control over your own story and your own public persona, which, for many people, and for many reasons that do not necessarily have to do with their relationship to particular journalists, elicits strong feelings that are hard to anticipate, and even harder to cope with if they surge in the wake of an already overwhelming event in the subject’s life.

Although not everyone had a strong negative reaction to it, almost all of my subjects at one point or another mentioned this sense of giving up control over their story to someone else, and I got a strong sense that even for those who anticipated it, the actual *feeling* was still

¹⁹ Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, 162.

unexpectedly potent. I believe this gets to the core of why some subjects, even if they rationally understand what they are getting into when they agree to speak to reporters, may have powerful negative reactions afterwards. With apologies for the blunt analogy, deciding to give up control over one's own story, with all its implications for one's reputation and public persona, is a bit like deciding to give up a baby for adoption—the sort of experience for which we may intellectually believe ourselves fully prepared, but cannot fully comprehend on an emotional level until the moment we must hand off something that feels profoundly, organically *ours* to someone else. This could partly explain why even people who seem like they should know better, like journalists, may be at least as likely as anyone else to cry foul if they find themselves thrust into the media's spotlight: understanding the process inside and out does not necessarily buffer the subject from the strange feeling of having something ripped out from inside him, especially if he suspects that others will profit from it. This feeling may or may not be lessened (probably most often not) by the subject's awareness that the journalist is doing a lot of work to refashion his story into something that is more the journalist's than the subject's. The fundamental point, from the subject's point of view, is that the story began as his own.

Again, it is important to stress that this feeling of discomfort at having given up control over his story may be exacerbated by what the subject feels is a disappointing or inept portrayal, but may well have little to do with how he is represented in the final product at all. Nonetheless, I would speculate that this feeling of anxiety might sometimes manifest as anger against journalists. My interviewees who felt exploited by the many reporters who were hounding them for their stories expressed a kind of diffuse anger at “the media” in general, but I would hypothesize that subjects of long-form narrative journalism of the kind Malcolm bases her conclusions on, would be more likely to direct their frustration at the one journalist appropriating and capitalizing on their story. In an example so over-the-top it would satisfy even Malcolm herself, the subject of another wrongful justice tale by Errol Morris, the convicted murderer at the heart of his award-winning documentary, *The Thin Blue Line*, was freed from life in prison largely thanks to Morris's work. The subject later sued Morris in a dispute that he

insists was not over profits, but over the rights to his life story.²⁰ Malcolm's hyperbolic language may not accurately represent many aspects of subjects' experiences with the news process, but the indignation and sense of violation some subjects, under some circumstances, feel at having their stories used by others she captures perfectly. Journalists may not be con men or thieves, but subjects may still feel they have been robbed of something precious.

Even if this happens only in a fraction of cases involving ordinary news subjects, and more often when they have been subjects of very personal, long-form pieces where a lone journalist becomes an easy target for their frustration, it may be a more disturbing conclusion than Malcolm's own, because it means subjects could react very negatively even when the journalist's rendering of their story is unassailable in terms of accuracy. These cases were not the focus of my research, but I would suggest that if, as I hypothesize, when subjects feel angry about how they have been portrayed it is often traceable, at least in part, to their sense of having had their public presentation of self usurped by another, it would be in journalists' best interest to be as sensitive as possible to this when interacting with them. Our stories and our reputations are sacred stuff.

But overall, I found my subjects more self-aware and more resilient than Malcolm portrays them. Even those who had felt badly burned by their news coverage were making

²⁰ As the subject, Randall Dale Adams later explained it to a reporter, "After my release, Mr. Morris felt he had the exclusive rights to my life story. He did not. Therefore, it became necessary to file an injunction to sort out any legal questions on the issue. The matter was resolved before having to go before a judge. Mr. Morris reluctantly conceded that I had the sole rights to my own life. I *did not* sue Errol Morris for any money or any percentages of *The Thin Blue Line*, though the media portrayed it that way." Morris recapped the episode thus: "When he [Randall Adams] got out, he became very angry at the fact that he had signed a release giving me rights to his life story. And he felt as though I had stolen something from him. Maybe I had....I can't say that I was just a pure do-gooder. Yeah...I was determined to get him out, and I was lucky to get him out in three years rather than ten. But as a filmmaker I also had a propriety interest in releasing a film, and making this film and producing a work that could be shown in theaters." Brian Bull, "A Conversation with Errol Morris," *WPR News*, Wisconsin Public Radio, July 2, 2004, <http://www.wpr.org/news/errol%20morris%20iv.cfm>. Danny Yeager, "72 Hours Away From Execution: Danny Yeager Interview Randall Dale Adams," *The Touchstone*, Summer 2000, <http://web.archive.org/web/20010222154607/http://www.rtis.com/touchstone/summer00/06execut.htm>.

every effort to move on with their lives. As discussed in Chapter Eight, online archiving that makes articles available long after their publication, and search engines, which link them to subjects' names, can make this more difficult. It is important to remember that stigmatizing effects of negative news coverage are often out of proportion to the crimes and misbehaviors that caused them, and these effects can be more lasting now than ever before. But in most cases moving on after detrimental news coverage is far from impossible, partly because even though this is a significant event in many peoples' lives—many interviewees were not just willing, but eager, to talk about the time they made the news, and many had carefully saved the clippings—it was far from their only concern. It seems in most cases people deal with being represented—or misrepresented—remarkably well.

So what explains the discrepancies between Malcolm's findings and my own? There are the obvious differences in our foci: I studied daily news stories; her key examples are long-form profiles, in which the level of intimacy between journalist and subject, and the potential for betrayal, are probably greater. As I noted in Chapter One, while I acknowledge this difference, Malcolm invites critique despite it, by explicitly making claims about all journalism. In the end, the mundane, academic explanation for our different conclusions is simply that her sample is too small, and she relies on what we could call a limit case—the most extreme example of the phenomenon being studied—to support sweeping conclusions of exactly the kind one cannot safely make based on a limit case.²¹ She chooses as her focus what she acknowledges is “a grotesquely magnified version of the normal journalistic encounter,” one in which the subject

²¹ Limit cases can be used to draw inferences about less extreme cases only if the extreme case is the *least* likely place one would expect to find the phenomenon in question—see Errol Morris example above. If even under the least likely circumstances something occurs, we can reasonable hypothesize that it will occur under more favorable circumstances. Thus, if even subjects who were freed from prison thanks to how they were represented in a work of nonfiction resent their authors' appropriation of their stories, we can reasonable guess that in cases where they are more negatively represented and the effects more damaging, they will likely feel the same if not more so. What does not work is when the limit case is the most likely place to find the phenomenon you are looking for; then you can deduce nothing about less favorable cases. That MacDonald got angry after being led to believe he would be depicted as an innocent victim only to find himself depicted as a psychopath is completely predictable, and suggests nothing about other, less extreme cases.

felt so badly burned he sued his biographer, and the behavior of the journalist so egregious five out of six jurors concluded he had defrauded his subject, a convicted murderer.²² This kind of case makes for superior journalism, but is a lousy basis for generalization.

Put in less academic terms, I agree with Errol Morris's recent critique that Malcolm was seduced by narrative.²³ He criticizes her for being so persuaded by McGinniss's preexisting version of events that she was blind to convincing evidence that MacDonald had, as he claimed, received an unfair trial and may well have been innocent. I believe one could easily counter this by simply noting, as Malcolm herself probably would, that that was not the story she was writing. Her interest was the relationship between journalists and their subjects, not MacDonald's guilt or innocence. No, the narrative Malcolm was seduced by was her own. That journalists are invariably con men luring unsuspecting subjects into a kind of trap makes an irresistibly good story with a neat, morally satisfying conclusion: the dynamics of the relationship may be irreparably unfair, but at least she clearly identifies the victims, and administers a smarting blow to their abusers by calling journalists out for the criminals we have long suspected them to be.²⁴ As Malcolm points out, the characters that journalists create to populate their narratives are often intentionally "drawn with much broader and blunter strokes, are much simpler, more generic (or, as they used to say, mythic) creatures than real people."²⁵ Her subjects and journalists fit this description. It may well be that Malcolm did not intend her sweeping statements to be taken literally—although they frequently are, so I stand by my critique—but rather as a provocation to prompt journalists to reflect on an area of their craft in which greater reflection is probably warranted, and certainly could not hurt. In that respect *The Journalist and the Murderer* has been an unqualified success.

²² Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, 20.

²³ Brooke Gladstone, "Just the Facts, Please," *On the Media*, September 21, 2012, <http://www.onthemedial.org/2012/sep/21/>.

²⁴ Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

And its endurance as a modern classic may be partly explained by the fact that, as a morality tale with journalists cast as con men and subjects their unsuspecting victims, it provides a welcome catharsis to an American public with a deeply entrenched attitude of distrust toward institutions in general and “the media” in particular. But, perhaps counter-intuitively, I believe the journalist-as-seducer-and-betrayer myth suits the needs of the journalism community as well. Despite protestations from individual journalists that the description is absurd or exaggerated, it suggests an enterprising cynicism toward one’s subjects that has a definite appeal in a profession that prides itself on remaining impartial, if not outright adversarial, towards its sources and subjects. It is true that this self-concept is largely built on the idea that the fourth estate should be holding to account powerful public figures, not the ordinary folks discussed in this study. And, in practice, journalists do seem to behave differently with each: many of my subjects described friendly, collaborative encounters with journalists and felt the coverage suited their needs well. But although to a broader public, and certainly to my interviewees, such descriptions speak well of the press, the fact remains that most journalists would be mortified at the suggestion that they had “collaborated” with a subject on an article, ordinary Joe or not, and in many cases would question whether they had somehow failed in their duty to remain neutral if the subject were too pleased with the coverage—if, for example, they felt as Mike did that the journalist, “could have been [his] PR department, for god’s sake.”²⁶ While journalists may reject the idea that they actually *are* con men, the idea that their subjects would feel that way about them after seeing the published story is a welcome alternative, at least in the abstract, to being thought of as a friend or partner, which, within the profession, may connote a kind of credulous gullibility toward one’s subjects. In short, the fear of being taken in and manipulated by subjects pervades the profession; better to be the seducer than the seduced.

Moreover, the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, when *The Journalist and the Murderer* first appeared, were, by many accounts, a moment when an attitude of ironic detachment had

²⁶ Interview by author, November 2, 2009.

saturated political reporting, and probably the journalism profession more broadly, even as the political press was acutely aware of its own symbiotic relationship with the political establishment.²⁷ Scholars trace the rise of this show of practiced cynicism to various factors, including a post-Watergate sense of distance-from and superiority-to other institutions; changing ownership structures and the rise of infotainment; and a growing anxiety among journalists about being manipulated by an increasingly effective political spin machine.²⁸ Of these, Gitlin's argument that during this period journalists' outward shows of ironic skepticism were partly a response to their uncomfortable suspicion that they were being manipulated routinely by their powerful sources—a case of the lady protesting too much—is especially applicable here. As he puts it, “in this setting, cynicism and gullibility are two sides of the same coin.”²⁹

But what led to the prevalence of this exaggeratedly cynical attitude is less important than the fact that it coincided with (and possibly contributed to) the American public's growing disgust with the fourth estate during the period when Malcolm's book was published.³⁰ An environment composed, on the one hand, of a public increasingly turned off by what it saw as a distant, mocking, arrogant press, and on the other, a profession eager to see itself as a kind of positive converse of that—skeptical, enterprising, and savvy—sounds like fertile ground for Malcolm's argument to flourish: it simultaneously provides satisfaction to those hoping to see journalists get their comeuppance, and a confirmation of journalists' tough guy self-image at a

²⁷ Carey, “American Journalism On, Before, and After September 11”; Todd Gitlin, “Blips, Bites & Savvy Talk,” *Dissent* 37, no. 1 (January 1990): 18–26.

²⁸ For an array of explanations for the increasing prevalence of this cynical, or at least, distant and ironic, attitude (most of them combinations of the factors I describe) see: Carey, “American Journalism On, Before, and After September 11”; Gitlin, “Blips, Bites & Savvy Talk”; Jay Rosen, “‘We’ll Have That Conversation’: Journalism and Democracy in the Thought of James W. Carey,” in *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, ed. Eve Stryker Munson and Catherine A. Warren (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 191–206; Michael Schudson, “The Problem of News in Our Day: Recent Changes in Journalism,” in *The Sociology of News* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 90–114.

²⁹ Gitlin, “Blips, Bites & Savvy Talk,” 20.

³⁰ Carey, “American Journalism On, Before, and After September 11”; Schudson, “The Problem of News in Our Day: Recent Changes in Journalism.”

time when it was under threat. Some media critics contend that among journalists this attitude of detached cynicism—what Jay Rosen has called “the church of the savvy”—thrives unabated today in journalism culture, despite undeniable blows to the business side of the profession.³¹ Others talk about threats to the press’s authority at a time of economic upheaval and massive competition for audiences.³² Either, I believe, makes the inflated, mythic narrative Malcolm provides more appealing than ever. Since public opinion of the press also shows no sign of a rebound, there is good reason to expect her narrative to endure well into the future, hyperbole and all.

The draw of an appealing narrative is a necessary driver of journalistic work. For our part, social scientists are certainly not immune to the temptation to tell a satisfyingly straightforward story, complete with familiar, but larger-than-life characters. The problem is that, for all it may excel at capturing deep, emotional truths, in Charles Tilly’s memorable words, “In most circumstances, standard storytelling provides an execrable guide to social explanation,” because real life and real people rarely fit uncomplicatedly into character types or cause-and-effect relations.³³ This is partly why we rely on systematic methods—tedious coding of thousands of pages of transcript for example. By forcing us to constantly re-confront what our very real, and stubbornly complicated, subjects are telling us, these methods help us resist the seduction of too neat a narrative. Even now I find Malcolm’s mythic journalist and subject so enthralling, so alive in my imagination, I feel a twinge of guilt at having placed them side by side with real people and watched them start to melt under the glare of more systematic study.

³¹ Jay Rosen, “Karl Rove and the Religion of Th Washington Press,” *Pressthink*, August 14, 2007, http://archive.pressthink.org/2007/08/14/rove_and_press.html; Jay Rosen, “This Is Part of What’s so Insidious About Press Savviness: It Tries to Hog Realism to Itself.,” *Jay Rosen: Public Notebook*, December 20, 2009, <http://jayrosen.posterous.com/the-savvy-press-and-their-exemption-from-the>.

³² Anderson, “Breaking Journalism Down: Work, Authority, and Networking Local News 1997-2009”; Matt Carlson, “Rethinking Journalistic Authority,” *Journalism Studies* (December 9, 2011); Jill A. Edy and Shawn M. Snidow, “Making News Necessary: How Journalism Resists Alternative Media’s Challenge*,” *Journal of Communication* 61, no. 5 (2011): 816–834.

³³ Tilly goes on to explain of standard storytelling that, “Its directly connected and self-motivated actors, deliberated actions, circumscribed field of action, and limited inventory of causes badly represent the ontology and causal structure of most social processes.” Charles Tilly, *Stories, Identities, and Political Change* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 35.

After all, that a journalist and a con man have much in common makes a far better story—the kind that earns the status of a modern classic—than the claim that a journalist is a lot like a salesman or a flight attendant—the stuff of dissertations.

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APPENDIX A: Research Design and Methods

For before the more usual sort of research can begin, we must confront the prior task of thinking about something that has been the object of surprisingly little previous thought.

-Arlie Hochschild, *The Unmanaged Heart*¹

This study provides a preliminary map of terrain vivid in popular imagination, but little charted by scholars. In such exploratory efforts it makes little sense to develop hypotheses from existing literature and then test them—there simply is not enough existing literature to justify doing so. Instead my study was designed “to point, to illustrate, and to comment,” and to unearth hypotheses ripe for future investigation.² As is always the case with qualitative research, especially more exploratory efforts like this one, I made many choices along the way that could have been made differently, and these undoubtedly affected my conclusions. Below I explain how I designed and carried out my research so my findings can be read in light of those choices.

Research Design

When I explain my research to non-academics the first question they ask is how I chose my interviewees. Their intuition that this matters more than almost anything else is absolutely correct. How do you study a phenomenon that is simultaneously extremely common—thousands of people wind up in the news every day—and yet so obviously defined by the specific circumstances of each case? There are seemingly innumerable variables that could affect a news subject’s experience—and seemingly innumerable news subjects. Where to even begin?

From the outset I knew it would be impossible to create a statistically representative sample, because defining the total population of news subjects is impractical. Exploratory studies and phenomenological inquiries often rely on purposive, or theoretical (also called

¹ Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 12.

² Ibid.

“judgment”), sampling.³ Purposive sampling essentially involves deciding what questions you want to answer, then seeking out people you believe can best answer them. As theories begin to emerge, subsequent participants are chosen to explore those theories until “theoretical saturation” is achieved—meaning nothing new is really being discovered.⁴ Since this study is both exploratory and phenomenological, purposive sampling seemed the best approach.

Sampling

I began in Spring 2009 by conducting a pilot study of 10 people drawn from a convenience sample of anyone I could get my hands on who had been in a news story in print or on television. It was a fairly homogenous group—mostly white, middle class, well-educated people, and almost all had been fairly happy with their news coverage. What did emerge, however, was that the nature of the news story itself—a combination of the underlying events or issues and the role the subject played in the story that came out of them—was very important to the subjects, so I determined that incorporating as much variety as possible in this area would be essential for my sample.

I also realized I wanted to focus on newspapers, for several reasons. First, from a purely practical standpoint I knew I would be combing through the news product to find potential interviewees and it was much easier to do this with print than with television or radio. Second, many people who appear in newspapers subsequently appear on television and radio, largely because, as has been well documented, the broadcast media get many of their story ideas from newspapers.⁵ So I knew that if I contacted people I saw in newspapers they might be able to talk about and compare their experiences across a range of media. Newspapers were also undergoing rapid and unpredictable changes, so I felt like it was now or never—not only

³ Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 182.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 471; Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 700.

⁵ “How News Happens,” *Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism*, January 11, 2010, http://www.journalism.org/analysis_report/how_news_happens.

because print newspapers in many markets might soon disappear, but also because I suspected subjects would have interesting insights about those changes.

In order to keep the sample manageable, I decided to focus on specific publications in specific geographical areas. Since I live in New York City, it made sense to focus on news subjects who had appeared in newspapers there, so that I could do most interviews in person. I wanted to include some variety in the types of publication—my pilot study informants (and commonsense) seemed to suggest that being in an elite national publication like *The New York Times* might differ from being named in a more New York-focused tabloid like *The New York Daily News* or *The New York Post*. So I decided to divide my sample between those three papers, although a few interviewees also volunteered to speak about their experiences appearing in smaller area publications like *The Brooklyn Eagle*. I conducted these interviews between October 2009 and December 2010.

The New York media environment is quite anomalous compared to the rest of the country; the mere fact that it has three large newspapers—one elite national paper and two high circulation tabloids—sets it apart.⁶ For the sake of comparison I therefore wanted to interview some subjects who had appeared in a media environment more similar to those found in the rest of the country. I chose a mid-sized (population approximately 800,000), one-newspaper southwestern city. I traveled there in July / August 2010 and December 2010 / January 2011 to complete interviews with people who had been named in that newspaper.

Although including as much variety as possible in the type of story was my top priority, at the outset I also hoped to include variety in other areas, so that I could take them into account as I made subsequent sampling decisions. I began by speaking to people of all ages and backgrounds who had been in as many different kinds of stories for as many different reasons as possible. As my sample grew, data indicated that the nature of the news story itself was, as

⁶ According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations, weekday circulation for the six month period ending March 31, 2012 for these papers was: 1,586,757 for the *New York Times*, 579,636 for the *New York Daily News*, and 555,327 for the *New York Post*. *U.S. Newspaper Circulation*, New York Newspaper Circulation Search Results (North America Audit Bureau of Circulations, March 31, 2012), <http://abcas3.accessabc.com/ecirc/newssearchus.asp>.

my pilot study results had suggested, one of the most important variables affecting news subjects' experiences. As such, my sampling became more purposive: increasingly I chose subjects based entirely on the kind of story in which they had appeared and their role in it.

My other primary concern was to avoid selecting only for unhappy news subjects. This has been done in the media accountability literature, as I discussed in Chapter Five, and anecdotes of news subjects burned by the media dominate the popular discourse on this topic. But since one of my main questions was whether or not people do, in fact, invariably dislike their coverage and feel misrepresented, I obviously needed to recruit a swath of the population for whom I did not already know that to be the case. When I contacted people I had no idea if they were happy with their coverage or not, having only seen them in the paper—although based on the articles I was looking at I certainly had my suspicions.

Locating and contacting potential participants

I identified a few potential participants by advertising on Craigslist and through personal contacts, but I found most by combing the newspapers daily and then searching for subjects' contact information online. I learned quickly that tracking down and contacting people who were named in news articles is extremely challenging. This may be especially true in large metropolitan areas like New York, with huge populations and few listed phone numbers. I relied heavily on the Internet to locate people, especially social networking sites like Facebook, but many potential interviewees were disqualified because I simply could not find contact information for them. This was especially the case for people with common names about whom few additional details were included in the article—I soon stopped even including them in my list of potential contacts.

Once I had identified contact information for potential subjects I either called or, more often, emailed or Facebook-messaged them inviting them to be interviewed for my study. For reasons I detail below, I contacted each person at least two weeks after their article was printed. I always explained that I was a Ph.D. candidate studying the way the press functions, and

invited them to participate in a study about people's experiences being written about in the newspaper. If they did not respond initially, I made two more attempts to contact them before removing them from the pool.

The final sample

The sample that emerged is detailed in Figure 1 at the end of this Appendix. In the end I conducted a total of eighty-one interviews. Sixty of these were with sixty-two people who appeared in New York-area newspapers.⁷ These were fairly evenly distributed between those I contacted because I saw them in *The New York Times* and those named in the two tabloids (combined), although many subjects appeared in more than one of those outlets in addition to multiple others, in some cases on television and radio (see Figure 1, columns 2 and 3). Likewise, of the twenty-one respondents in the southwestern city all had been named in the local daily paper, but some also appeared in other media, including the city's alternative weekly and TV or radio news programs. While my primary goal was to include as much variety as possible in the type of coverage—amount of coverage, type of story, and role in it—across the different outlets, the sample did include a variety of demographic backgrounds, as indicated in Figures 2-6 at the end of this Appendix. These figures are not as accurate as I would like because only sixty-five of my eighty-two interviewees completed the demographic survey, but I include the graphs here to show that respondents were fairly well distributed across most categories, except race/ethnicity, where, at least among survey respondents, whites were over-represented (Figure 6). Measuring how news subjects' demographic backgrounds affected their experiences ultimately was not the focus of this study, although in the preceding chapters I occasionally noted when subjects themselves introduced age, race, or other traits into the discussion as relevant to their understanding of their own experience, or when I felt they were crucial to understanding my findings.

⁷ Two of the interviews were with couples in which both people had been named in the same story.

Subjects also varied in their amount of previous media exposure, as indicated in column 6 of Figure 1. While public figures like government officials, prominent business leaders, and celebrities were deliberately excluded because being in the news is a commonplace for them, participants included small business owners, activists, and performers who are not household names; in other words, people for whom being named in the paper is still out-of-the-ordinary, but not necessarily entirely novel. Other subjects had been in the news only once or twice before, if at all. Again, in the main text I tried to highlight where these differences seemed especially relevant to how subjects behaved or interpreted their experiences.

Did I reach theoretical saturation? For my immediate goal of sketching out the stages and identifying the main themes in this process I believe I did. Theoretical saturation is a more arbitrary designation than it sounds—there's always a chance that one more interview will yield a blinding insight. In a sense, I was more guided by Latour's practical observation that if you begin to follow the thread of any social phenomenon you could go on forever, so you had better stop when it is time to write your dissertation.⁸ But the complexity of the topic, and the many variables that could be studied in greater depth, cry out for future exploration.

Interviewing

All interviews were semi-structured, meaning I tried to get everyone to cover roughly the same territory, but gave interviewees a lot of latitude to emphasize what was important to them about their experiences (see Appendix B for the interview schedule). I met participants in person whenever possible, at a time and location of the interviewee's choosing, including in cafes, work places, and homes, and did interviews by phone only when absolutely necessary, primarily for geographic reasons: subjects mentioned in *The New York Times*, especially, live all over the country. I recorded all interviews, which ranged from forty-five minutes to four hours, depending mostly on the extent of the subject's experience and how talkative he or she was. No

⁸ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-network-theory*, Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

one received material compensation for their participation, although I paid when I met people in cafes or restaurants.

I always began by asking subjects if they had ever been in the news prior to their recent experience. This gave me a sense of how novel this was in subjects' lives and whether they had had especially positive or negative dealings with the press in the past. I then transitioned by asking them to, "tell me about this experience," at which point some subjects launched into lengthy chronological descriptions covering most of the material I would have asked about anyway. Others zeroed in immediately on the most salient or memorable aspects of making the news. Whatever the subject's response to the initial question, beginning in such a broad, open-ended way helped me to understand what subjects cared about before imposing my own interests on them. I then asked more detailed questions covering their entire stories, from the events that had led them to be in the news in the first place, through their interactions with the journalist, how they felt about the final article, and any feedback or repercussions that occurred as a result. Whenever possible, I brought copies of the articles in question so that, after discussing their experiences at length from memory, subjects could look over their articles and make any additional observations. This helped people recall the details of the printed stories, as well as various other aspects of the experience that had not bubbled up in their memories before.

Although I contacted the individuals based on the stories in which I saw them—the "primary story" in Figure 1—often they were eager to speak about *other* experiences they had had appearing in the news, whether for the same trigger but in other outlets, or for completely different triggers at some point in the past (see Figure 1, columns 3 and 6). This meant my 81 interviews included references to many more than 81 instances of being mentioned in a news outlet, and that my findings do not lend themselves well to even the simplest forms of quantification. This was initially disappointing because I found it unwieldy, but since participants consistently wanted to talk about their other experiences being in the news, and the

whole point of the study was to understand what was salient to subjects themselves about this experience, it seemed ludicrous to muzzle them for the sake of a tidier study.

Field Notes, Survey, and Data Analysis

At the end of our conversation, I asked everyone to complete a brief questionnaire on their demographic information and media use—questions better suited to a survey than to in-depth discussion (see Figures 2-6).⁹ Immediately following the interview, I wrote up a summary narrative of the person's experience, along with field notes identifying main themes that had arisen in our conversation, and my general impressions of their experiences and our interactions.

I followed a basic grounded theory approach when analyzing my interview data, meaning I transcribed all interviews, identified themes and coded for them, juxtaposed segments according to code, developed theories about how they related to one another, and chose exemplary quotes to illustrate these themes.¹⁰ In many studies it may make sense to only transcribe the relevant sections of each interview; for a study like this one, in which a major point of inquiry is how much importance people give to different aspects of the experience they are describing, I found that I almost always needed to transcribe the whole discussion. I transcribed 71 interviews myself and had to outsource the final ten due to time constraints and a scorching case of carpal tunnel. This yielded approximately 2000 pages of single-spaced transcript. As time-consuming and often tedious as I found the transcription stage, it was also invaluable for familiarizing myself with the data: I wrote continuous notes and memos about emerging themes, many of which later became codes in the coding stage. I also found that after

⁹ As noted earlier, only 65 of 82 participants completed the survey. This low response rate was due to my emailing the survey to people I interviewed by phone or, in a few cases, when I had forgotten or run out of time to give it to them in person. People who received the survey by email predictably completed it at a lower rate than those who I asked to fill it out in person.

¹⁰ Barney G Glaser, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory; Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1967); Anselm L Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998).

listening attentively to each interview I could often hear the speaker's voice in my head when I looked over the transcript, which was helpful for retaining those nuances of meaning often lost in translation from talk to text.

I used the software program ATLAS.ti to put transcripts into categories and to assign codes to segments of text in those transcripts. The program makes it easy to sort by code, so with the click of a button I could see all quotes related to each code in a single document. The coding stage was also very time-consuming but obviously invaluable for developing hypotheses and becoming, as the name "grounded theory" suggests, ever more immersed in the data. At this stage, too, I took ongoing notes about emerging thoughts and connections.

Given the complexity and richness of interview data, especially in large projects like this one, I was acutely aware of the temptation to develop theories too quickly and to glean from the material only quotes that might support those theories—rather like a journalist searching for quotes to support a fully developed thesis. A journalist friend has called this the "Mad Lib effect,"¹¹ but it might be more generously labeled "the expectancy effect."¹² I did not start drafting the actual text until I had systematically analyzed all of the data in order to avoid this, although to some degree as one develops hypotheses along the way this is not only inevitable but also intentional. Nonetheless, efforts to be as systematic as possible, like a formal coding process, set qualitative social science apart from journalism, even if the difference is only one of degrees. These differences may matter even more when the processes of journalism are precisely what are being scrutinized.

The quotes chosen for inclusion in the text have been minimally edited to remove verbal ticks and turn fragments into sentences. Any other cuts (usually made for length) have been indicated by ellipses. I was very careful to avoid distorting the subject's meaning within a

¹¹ Katherine Fink, personal communication with author, Fall 2011.

¹² The expectancy effect is defined as "the tendency for experimenters to obtain results they expect, not simply because they have correctly anticipated nature's response but rather because they have helped to shape that response through their expectations." R. Rosenthal and D.B. Rubin, "Interpersonal Expectancy Effects: The First 345 Studies," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3 (1978): 377.

quote, or choosing quotes the emphasis or decontextualization of which I felt would misrepresent the subject's experience as he told it to me.

Anonymizing

Interviewees all signed a consent form in which I promised confidentiality and anonymity. Some social scientists criticize this practice, arguing it provides more protection to scholars than their subjects,¹³ but I found it helpful to be able to give those assurances to my interviewees. As discussed in greater detail below, promising anonymity helped me create an important qualitative difference between subjects' experiences participating in my study and being in the news, and I do believe it made some people more comfortable speaking to me. While some said they would not mind being identified by name, others had recently been burned in the news process and said they welcomed the chance to speak openly without worrying their words would be linked to them in a public document.

At the writing stage I discovered that anonymizing without sacrificing the detail of respondents' stories was tricky because, even though I gave everyone a pseudonym, they had all appeared in publications that were readily available online, so too detailed a description of their stories could identify them. In some places in the text I was deliberately vague about details or altered identifying factors (in one case, gender) that I thought could be used to identify participants, always trying hard to avoid unnecessary distortion while preserving the richness of their stories.

Sample biases and lacunae

Targeting specific individuals, rather than groups of people who share common traits or who can all be approached in the same place, makes recruiting participants both arduous and inefficient—this is less like shooting fish in a barrel than trying to hook a series of specific, one-

¹³ See, for example: Mitchell Duneier, *Sidewalk*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 347–348.

of-a-kind fish. As such, even getting 83 respondents was quite challenging and I was not eager to reject anyone who came forward willing to be interviewed. So, while a certain discrepancy between the sample frame (those identified and solicited for participation in the study) and the actual sample (those who agreed to participate and did so) is very common in both quantitative and qualitative studies, this one may have especially suffered from it: I did not have a wealth of potential participants that I was willing to turn away in favor of people who fit less-represented categories. For example, the final sample was heavy on unemployed people who had appeared in stories about the recent economic crisis, but short on people associated with crimes. The former had the time to participate in my study, while for obvious reasons it was harder to recruit the latter. Accessing accused and convicted criminals was especially difficult, since those currently in the justice system were mostly unavailable, and IRB restrictions prevented me from contacting actual inmates. In the text I tried to be as explicit as possible about these weaknesses when I thought they were most relevant.

One might wonder if people who had had very negative experiences interacting with the press were disinclined to participate in my study, which would mean unhappy subjects were also under-represented in my sample, despite my efforts to prevent this. This is a valid question and, while possible, it is hard to know the answer without being able to somehow measure the frequency of disenchantment with their coverage in the entire population of news subjects. One could just as easily predict that people who had been burned by the media would want to speak out so others might learn from their experience, and a number of my participants said exactly that. I also spoke with a number of people who declined to participate, and of these only two said it was because they had had a bad experience with the media. Other decliners gave completely different reasons for not participating, and although I do not know why those who did not respond to my messages chose not to participate, one cannot assume it was because they felt mistreated by the press.

An area in the sample that probably varied more than would have been ideal was how much time had lapsed between when the subjects' stories had been published and our

discussions about them. I quickly found that contacting people too soon after an article came out was impractical: they almost always declined to be interviewed, because they were still dealing with the aftermath of the trigger and/or the news coverage of it. Subjects who had appeared in the news only a day or two before were also unable to speak much about repercussions, so after a few misfires I learned to wait at least two weeks before contacting each person. However, in many cases a month or more had lapsed before we actually sat down to an interview, and in several cases (these were the few that were recruited via my personal contacts or Craigslist) the primary story we were discussing had come out multiple years before. Obviously, this introduces the troubling issue of memory.

On the one hand, I was able to gather valuable information about what was important to subjects about this experience based on what they were and were not able to remember after some time had passed. For example, that a number of interviewees did not remember whether or not there were errors in their articles at all, but recalled in detail their interactions with reporters or the reactions of their reference groups was a noteworthy finding. On the other hand, the fact that the amount of time varied among my respondents made comparisons complicated, and those for whom a lot of time had passed predictably remembered fewer details than those for whom the memory was fresh. In my analysis I tried to compensate for this by not making claims about, for example, salience of some aspects of the experience over others if I thought the mere passage of time was a plausible explanation for why the subject was fuzzy on certain details or had forgotten them altogether.

But if the sample was especially biased in one direction I believe it was toward those with a prior interest in journalism, whether because they had previous experience interacting with the media, had formally studied it, had worked in the media industry, or were simply intrigued by it (some of this is reflected in Figure 1, column 6). It may be hard to avoid self-selection based on interest in the topic under investigation, especially when participants are asked to donate at least an hour's worth of time and energy to a stranger for no material compensation. Nonetheless, if, as was my impression, my subjects had given more thought to

the journalistic process or had more experience interacting with it than the general population, it undoubtedly affected my findings and must be taken into account in their assessment.

Pros and Cons of Interviewing

After considering various methods for studying this phenomenon I decided to focus exclusively on in-depth interviews for mostly practical reasons. My primary interest was how individuals actually feel about, and make meaning of, their experiences, and since I knew there were a huge number of variables that could affect that experience, I wanted to study as large a sample as was feasible, so I could begin to understand that range. I considered trying to design a study that would somehow place me in proximity to newsworthy events so I could combine observation with interviewing subjects before and after the news story appeared, and I still think this approach would yield fascinating results. But I did not find it practical given my time limitations and goal of collecting as many subjects' stories as possible.

No doubt there are many other ways this phenomenon could be studied as well. But the great advantage of semi-structured in-depth interviews, especially when researching a topic that has been little studied, is that they allow the interviewee to guide the conversation and, if necessary, reframe the questions or reject them altogether. This also helps the researcher realize when she has been asking the wrong questions based on preconceived ideas that may seem intuitive but are often (as in my case) based on the literature. For example, as I discussed in Chapter One, I was surprised to find that some subjects spent much more time talking about the trigger events that led to their appearances in the news than they did discussing the actual news content. This helped me realize that for many news subjects trigger events matter more than the news coverage, a finding that was utterly counter to my expectations and would have escaped me completely had I simply designed a survey asking them to react to the story content.

That said, the main drawback to studying anything based entirely on interviews and not, say, participant or ethnographic observation, is that the researcher is limited to what people say happened, and what they say they thought or felt about it. This is hugely problematic, even

when the goal is to capture subjective experience because, as sociologists have long noted, there is a vast chasm between what people say they think and do, and what they actually think and do. There are, of course, many reasons a person might say something that does not “accurately” represent their own experience (whatever an accurate version of subjective experience is exactly): faulty memory, concerns about maintaining face, wanting to please the interviewer, and so on. I was, of course, aware of this before I began my study, but became even more acutely so when I interviewed people together (two interviews were with couples in which both husband and wife were mentioned in the story), or when I interviewed multiple people who had been named in the same story. In both interviews with couples the participants corrected one another’s memories or contested each other’s versions of events, and the results were so fascinating it made me wish all my interviewees had a “fact checker”—or better said, a “fact-problematizer”—on hand to question their observations, even about their own thoughts and experiences. Another telling moment came when I interviewed a woman about a controversial article, and she told me that one of the other key players in the article was a pathological liar. I found her very convincing; I was also scheduled to interview the accused liar the following day.

Of course this brought home yet again that anything any of my interviewees was telling me could be pure or partial invention. Although I had no way to know for sure about this, as in all interactions, there were little cues that helped guide me along the way. One of the most common reasons people misrepresent themselves in interviews is by over-reporting what they believe to be socially desirable traits and under-reporting socially undesirable ones,¹⁴ and indeed, at times I got the impression that, intentionally or not, people were telling me things they thought I wanted to hear, or that they hoped would cast them in a favorable light. For example, as I noted in the main text, over the course of this study I became increasingly convinced that many interviewees believed it was not socially desirable to be perceived as a credulous or naïve news consumer. Some undoubtedly went out of their way to distance

¹⁴ Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 236–238.

themselves from such a characterization, even when details of their accounts suggested it might fit.

So How Is This Different From What Journalists Do?

I was also drawn to interviewing because in some ways it recreated one of the central dynamics I was studying. Part of what I discovered in the course of my research, however, was that while I was certainly recreating *some* of the dynamics of the journalistic encounter, there were important differences as well, differences that turned out to be central to my subjects' experiences being in the news.

First, some of the similarities: For most of my subjects, being solicited by a graduate student for participation in a study was a novel experience, much like being contacted by a reporter for a news story. Whether they interpreted this novelty favorably (as a curiosity, interesting opportunity, or serendipitous chance), or more negatively (as suspicious, or intrusive), it undoubtedly affected their reaction to my request for an interview. For many of those who agreed, I sensed that, as is often the case when subjects agree to a journalistic interview, the opportunity to do something they did not do every day was part of the appeal.

The generation of a kind of temporary pseudo-intimacy in the encounter is another similarity. There was no doubt that for at least some of my interviewees, the opportunity to tell their stories to an interested listener was very appealing. And while some of the interviewing techniques of journalists and social scientists may differ, certainly both capitalize on their subjects' eagerness for attention, and tend to play that up as much as possible by expressing rapt interest. As I discussed at length in Chapter Three, journalists are often trained to do this. For my part, having spent hours completely enthralled by my subjects' stories, and having listened to many hours of myself interviewing them, I can honestly say that I *was* genuinely hanging on every word—at the time. I never feigned sympathy I did not feel, but listening back to the recordings I also find moments when I laughed a little louder at a joke than I might under other circumstances, or let certain differences of view (especially political) slide for the sake of

not alienating my subject. To what precise degree I was being genuine is impossible even for me to say, and whether I was acting more “deeply,”¹⁵ than a working journalist who is just trying to get a story I will leave for another study. The relevant point is that I certainly engaged in generating an intimacy in the encounter that was conducive to getting the subject to talk, often about feelings or experiences they might have hesitated to share with others, so that I could use their input for my own project. This certainly recreates the uneven power structure discussed in my analysis of the journalistic interview, which is probably the most important feature that my interviews had in common with those conducted by journalists.

But although there were areas of overlap, there were important differences as well. The design of a systematic study necessitates systematic interviewing: few journalists would ask eighty-three people the same questions in more or less the same order, for example. Nor would they transcribe and code every word; I simply had far more time to spend soaking up interviewees’ stories and analyzing them than most journalists normally would, especially those working for daily newspapers. Another crucial difference between my project and theirs was that since I promised anonymity and a guaranteed readership of about five people, the opportunity for public address or public display before a large audience—the primary reason most news subjects agree to interviews with journalists—was off the table. This reduced subjects’ concerns about effects and repercussions in ways that I believe affected how they behaved with me. While at times I felt ridiculous promising anonymity to people who had already been named in multiple news outlets and, in some cases, seen by millions, in the end I am very glad I did it. If the power balance between subjects and those who write about them is inevitably uneven (as I argue it is), because only one party will ultimately write their version of events, one way to try to reinstate a bit of equilibrium is to protect subjects from repercussions of stories written about them, but over which they have little control. This of course creates all kinds of problems as well, not least of which is the lack of verifiability and accountability that

¹⁵ Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*.

comes from reliance on anonymous sources—as both journalists and social scientists have extensively argued. But for the purposes of this study I believe it was the right choice.

Figure 1.1 Final Sample, New York City

1. Pseudonym	2. Primary outlet in which story appeared	3. Other mass media main story appeared in (not including blogs or social networks)	4. Story type	5. Subject's role in story	6. Other experiences with media discussed in interview
Albert	NYD	print, TV	accident	secondary figure/victim	
Alegra	NYT	print, TV	health	central figure/patient	in local newspaper, as a teen athlete
Barbara	NYT	print, TV, radio	sociopolitical issue	secondary figure/activist	frequent news appearances since becoming her local Tea Party president; one other human interest newspaper article
Bella	NYT	print	arts/technology	secondary figure/expert	an appearance in Italian local news (TV and paper); also publishes academic work often
Beth	other (WSJ)	print	crime	central figure/perpetrator	
Bradley	NYT	print, TV	accident	secondary figure/witness	in local newspaper, as a teen athlete
Bridget	NYP	print	civic issue	secondary figure/issue rep	occasionally acts and models; used to work in Internet marketing for ABC News and Reuters
Carmen	NYD	TV	crime	central figure/victim	in TV news as a child
Caty	NYP	print, TV	business	central figure/business owner	occasional TV appearances as an expert chef
Colleen	NYT		education	central figure/school administrator	several appearances in print for her work as an educator
Daniel	NYD		socioeconomic issue	central figure/unemployed person	cable TV talk show for his work as an educator
Dara	NYP	print, TV	accident	central figure/victim	several appearances in local TV and print news as a child
Dave	NYT		science	central figure/scientist	several appearances in print and TV for work as a scientist

Figure 1.1 Final Sample, New York City

1. Pseudonym	2. Primary outlet in which story appeared	3. Other mass media main story appeared in (not including blogs or social networks)	4. Story type	5. Subject's role in story	6. Other experiences with media discussed in interview
Deanne	NYT	print, TV	crime	secondary figure/witness	worked in media marketing for CBS and Reuters
Dudley	NYP		accident	secondary figure/witness	reviewed a few times in print for work as an actor
Eve	NYT	print, TV	accident	secondary figure/victim	
Fatima	NYT	radio, TV	sociocultural issue	central figure/issue rep	in local newspaper article for social issue, several years before
Flora	NYT		social issue	central figure/activist	writes articles for the Haitian Times, had just taped a reality cooking show when we met
Frank	NYT		sociopolitical issue	secondary figure/expert, activist	has appeared frequently in TV and print news in his 35 yrs as an activist; hosted a regional news talk show
Gina	NYP	print	crime/judicial	secondary figure/juror	
Harry	NYD	print, TV	human interest	central figure	appeared on one episode of a reality show; occasional news mentions for his performing career
Helen	NYT	TV	sociocultural issue	secondary figure/issue rep	
Hilda	NYD		social issue	secondary figure/person-on-the street	
Ira	NYP		human interest/technology	central figure/tech user	former magazine associate editor; now freelance magazine and web writer
Isabel	NYT	print, TV	education	secondary figure/teacher	one prior appearance in the NYT real estate section

Figure 1.1 Final Sample, New York City

1. Pseudonym	2. Primary outlet in which story appeared	3. Other mass media main story appeared in (not including blogs or social networks)	4. Story type	5. Subject's role in story	6. Other experiences with media discussed in interview
Ivan	NYD	print, TV	accident	central figure/hero	
Jane & Jon	NYT	print, radio	civic issue	central figure/business owner	occasional news mentions for his work, including in the NYT 10 years before
Jay	NYT	print, TV	accident	secondary figure/hero	one brief article in the NYT one year before
Jessica	NYP	print, TV	socioeconomic issue	central figure/unemployed person)	
Jim	NYT	print, TV	science	central figure/scientist	local newspaper as a kid
Jonathan	NYT		sociocultural issue	secondary figure/issue rep	
Karen	NYT	print, TV	crime	central figure/victim	a few local news mentions for work
Keith	NYP	print, TV	crime	central figure/hero	
Kim	NYT	TV, radio	socioeconomic issue	central figure/unemployed person	
Leyla	NYT		labor issue	central figure/whistleblower	periodic quotes in print for her work as an activist for a decade
Liana	other	TV	crime	secondary figure/family member of victim	
Lucy	NYD	print	health/judicial	central figure/plaintiff	
Lynn	NYD		health/human interest	central figure/patient	several family members briefly appearing in various news outlets
Maggie	NYD		socioeconomic issue	central figure/unemployed person	appeared in local newspaper 60 years before for winning a freckle contest

Figure 1.1 Final Sample, New York City

1. Pseudonym	2. Primary outlet in which story appeared	3. Other mass media main story appeared in (not including blogs or social networks)	4. Story type	5. Subject's role in story	6. Other experiences with media discussed in interview
Marcel	other (NJ paper)		sociocultural issue	central figure/issue rep	appeared as man-on-the-street in recent local TV news
Mike	NYT		human interest/technology	central figure/tech user	periodic news appearances for former career as CEO of natl. company
Monica	NYT		sociocultural issue	secondary figure/issue rep	college reporter; one appearance as a kid for a local lifestyle article
Neela	NYP		sociocultural issue	secondary figure/representative	appeared in the Washington Post years 10 years before
Niki	NYD		health/human interest	central figure/patient	had several letters to the editor printed in her hometown paper
Norma	NYT	TV	sociopolitical issue	central figure/activist	
Oliver	NYP		arts/human interest	central figure/artist	periodic media appearances to promote his work as a performer; one quote several years before in the NYT
Ori	NYP		accident	central figure/witness	occasionally in the news as a kid in Israel
Patricia	NYT	print	sociopolitical issue	central figure/activist	several appearances in local media for Tea Party events; one unrelated print article from over a decade before that still comes up when she googles her name
Pete	NYP		business	central figure/victim, whistleblower	one letter to the editor printed in Newsday 10-15 years before
Rich	other (Brooklyn Eagle)	print	crime	central figure/accused perpetrator	
Riva	NYT		sociopolitical issue	secondary figure/expert, activist	Some local and occasional natl. news for her activism

Figure 1.1 Final Sample, New York City

1. Pseudonym	2. Primary outlet in which story appeared	3. Other mass media main story appeared in (not including blogs or social networks)	4. Story type	5. Subject's role in story	6. Other experiences with media discussed in interview
Rodney	NYD		socioeconomic issue	central figure/unemployed person	
Ruby	NYD	print, TV	accident	central figure/victim	appeared in Jet magazine in the 60s for her work as a director
Shauna	NYT		sociocultural issue	secondary figure/issue rep	college reporter
Sloan	NYT		crime/judicial	secondary figure/juror	
Stephen	NYD		real estate	central figure/home owner	one mention in the NYT the year before; periodic reviews for his work as an actor
Susan	NYT	print, radio	environment	central figure/witness, activist	a few mentions in various media for work as a film curator
Tanya	NYT	print, TV	accident	secondary figure/hero	
Thomas	NYT	TV	arts profile	central figure/artist	periodic reviews for his work as a performer, including one the year before in the NYT
Tim	NYD		socioeconomic issue	central figure/business owner	quoted in some parenting magazines about his tutoring business

Figure 1.2 Final Sample, Southwestern City

1. Pseudonym	2. Primary outlet in which story appeared	3. Other mass media main story appeared in (not including blogs or social networks)	4. Story type	5. Subject's role in story	6. Other experiences with media discussed in interview
Annie	SWP		science profile	central figure/scientist	two local TV news spots in another town, for work in prior job
Billy	SWP		arts profile	central figure/artist	reviewed several years before in the local alt weekly for work as a comedian; one brief appearance on Comedy Central also several years prior
Chris	SWP	TV	crime	central figure/accused perpetrator	name mentioned periodically in local paper, as teen athlete
Chuck	SWP	TV	crime	secondary figure/witness	in local TV news as witness to a crime 20 years before; also mentioned in a book length historical account of a major accident
Elena	SWP		civic issue	secondary figure/activist	periodic appearances in local TV and newspaper for her long career as a neighborhood and Hispanic activist
Emma	SWP	radio, TV	crime	central figure/perpetrator	
Gail	SWP		civic issue	central figure/activist	periodic appearances in local TV and newspaper neighborhood activism and work in the arts
Jody	SWP		civic issue	secondary figure/medical expert	periodic appearances in local TV news as a medical expert
Manuel	SWP		crime	central figure/hero	several news appearances in 60s and 70s

Figure 1.2 Final Sample, Southwestern City

1. Pseudonym	2. Primary outlet in which story appeared	3. Other mass media main story appeared in (not including blogs or social networks)	4. Story type	5. Subject's role in story	6. Other experiences with media discussed in interview
Michelle	SWP	TV	judicial	central figure/plaintiff	photo in hometown newspaper as a child
Nancy	SWP		civic issue	secondary figure/activist	several news appearances as an activist, once in a home and garden story in the local paper
Natasha	SWP		civic issue	central figure/whistle blower	several mentions in local papers over the course of her life for political activities as a teen and work as an adult
Nikhil	SWP		health	secondary figure/medical expert	several local TV and newspaper appearances as a medical expert
Paul	SWP		crime	central figure/victim	no mentions by name, but spoke about an error-filled news account of an attack on his base in Iraq
Quinn	SWP		health	central figure/patient	former model; once in local TV news for helping save a car crash survivor
Ray	SWP	print, TV	civic issue	central figure/business owner	occasional local news mentions for his food truck business, and also his work as a musician
Robert	SWP		science profile	secondary figure/scientist	local TV appearance about work; hometown newspaper appearance many years before
Shannon	SWP		professional profile	central figure/worker	used to work in the music business, so interacted with journalists on behalf of musicians

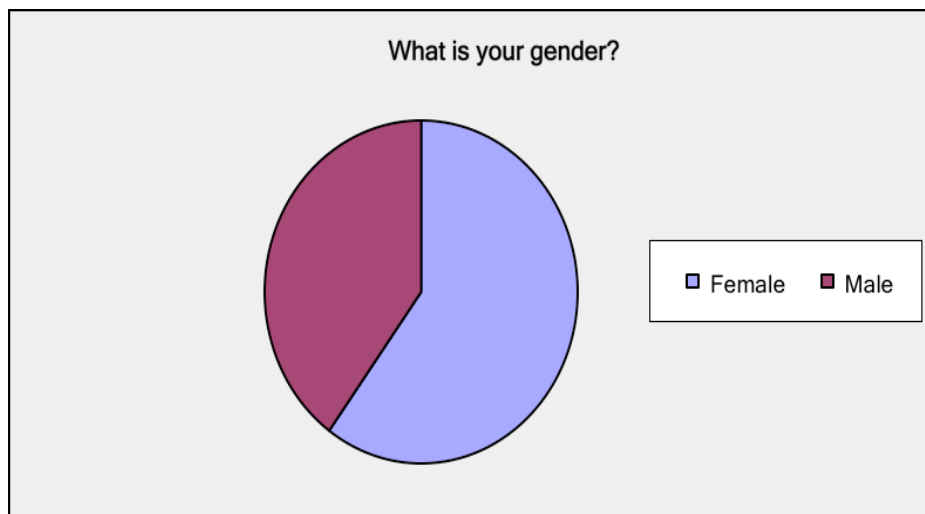
Figure 1.2 Final Sample, Southwestern City

1. Pseudonym	2. Primary outlet in which story appeared	3. Other mass media main story appeared in (not including blogs or social networks)	4. Story type	5. Subject's role in story	6. Other experiences with media discussed in interview
Shannon	SWP		professional profile	central figure/worker	used to work in the music business, so interacted with journalists on behalf of musicians
Sophie	SWP	TV	sociopolitical issue	secondary figure/activist	named in her father's obituary in the local newspaper
Vernon	SWP		civic issue	central figure/activist	profiled in the newspaper of another town several years before; local TV appearances as a child advertising his father's clothing store
Wendy	SWP		civic issue	central figure/activist	pictured on the front page of her hometown paper as a college student

Key

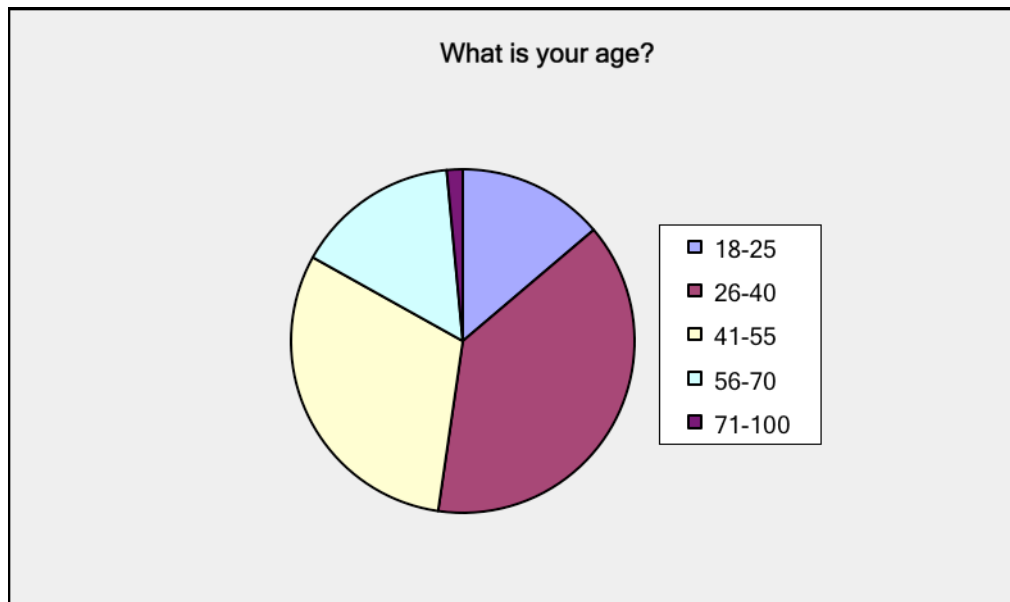
AP	Associated Press
NYD	<i>New York Daily News</i>
NY1	<i>New York One</i>
NYP	<i>New York Post</i>
NYT	<i>New York Times</i>
SWP	Southwestern paper
UWS	<i>Upper West Side</i>
WSJ	<i>Wall Street Journal</i>

Figure 2. Gender of Interviewees



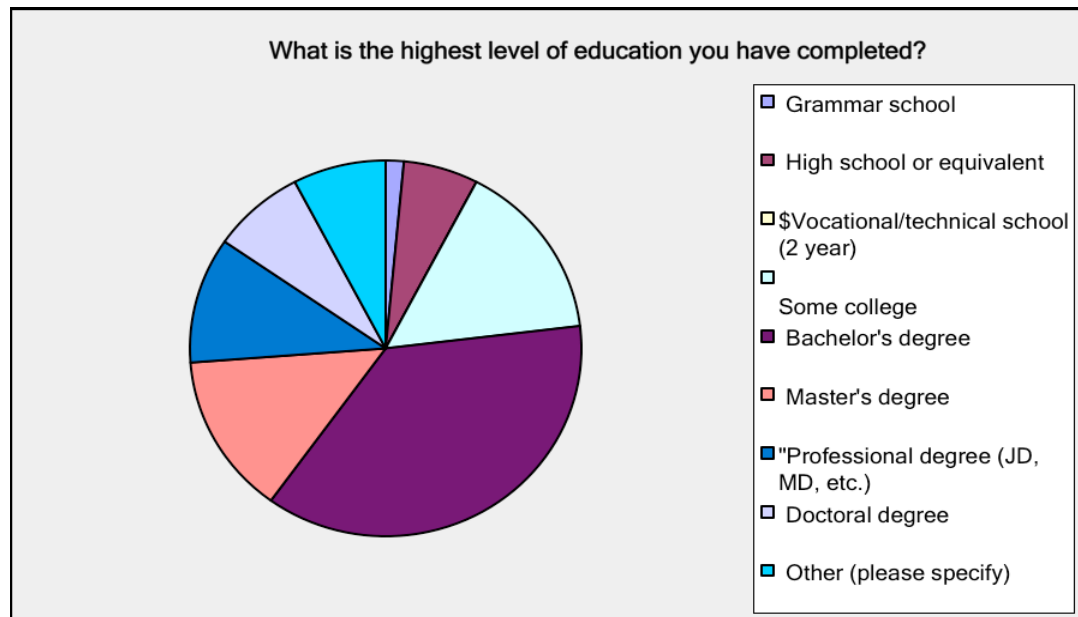
Answer Options	Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Female	Female	60.0%	39
Male	Male	40.0%	26
<i>answered question</i>	<i>answered question</i>	65	65
<i>skipped question</i>	<i>skipped question</i>	0	0

Figure 3. Age of Interviewees



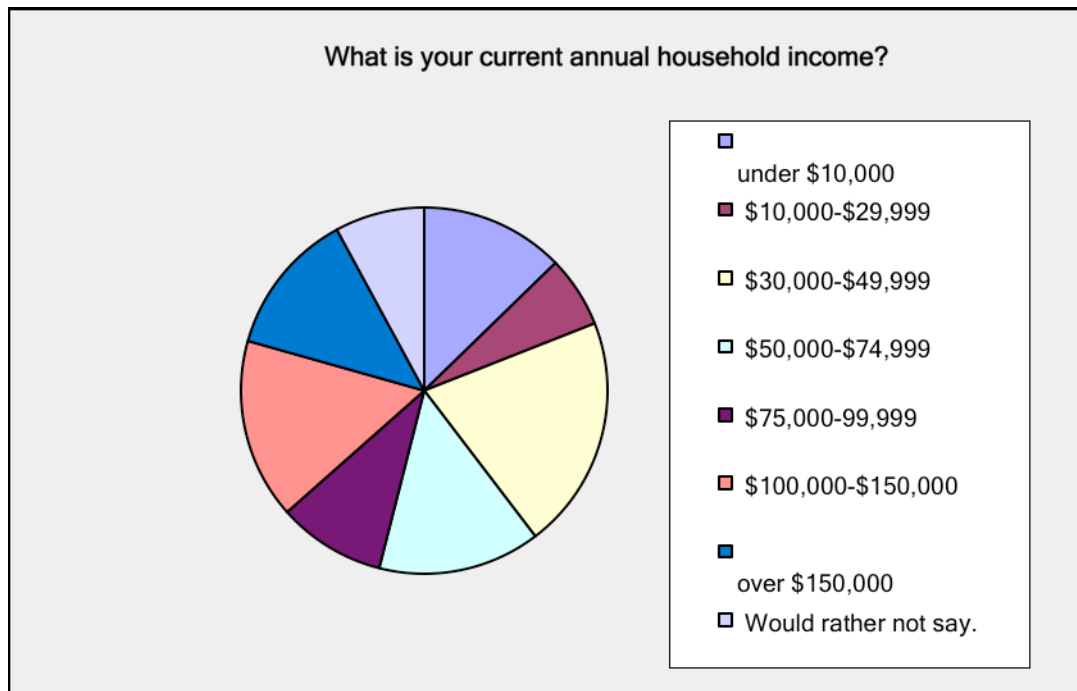
Answer Options	Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
18-25	18-25	13.8%	9
26-40	26-40	38.5%	25
41-55	41-55	30.8%	20
56-70	56-70	15.4%	10
71-100	71-100	1.5%	1
<i>answered question</i>	<i>answered question</i>	65	65
<i>skipped question</i>	<i>skipped question</i>	0	0

Figure 4. Education of Interviewees



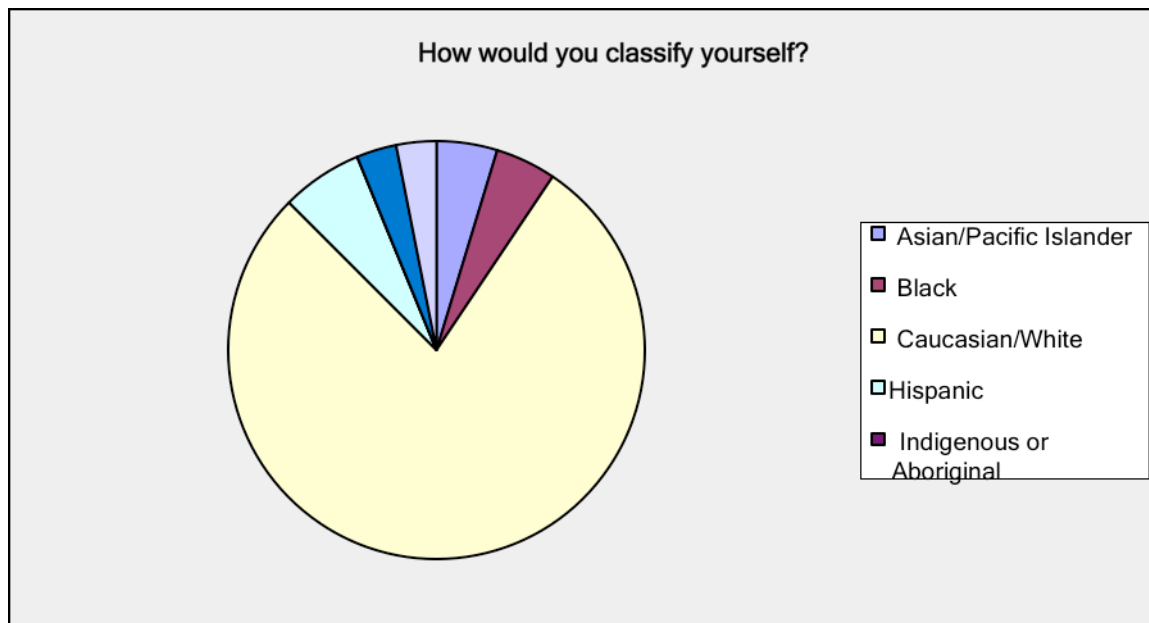
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Grammar school	1.5%	1
High school or equivalent	6.2%	4
Vocational/technical school (2 year)	0.0%	0
Some college	15.4%	10
Bachelor's degree	36.9%	24
Master's degree	13.8%	9
Professional degree (JD, MD, etc.)	10.8%	7
Doctoral degree	7.7%	5
Other (please specify)	7.7%	5
<i>answered question</i>		65
<i>skipped question</i>		0
Number	Response Date	Other (please specify)
1	Nov 12, 2010 11:48 PM	military (coast guard) captains school
2	Nov 10, 2010 2:39 PM	2 year community college degree
3	Apr 28, 2010 6:25 PM	MFA, a terminal PhD equivalent
4	Apr 12, 2010 3:28 PM	Associates IT
5	Nov 15, 2009 3:54 PM	Associate's degree (2 years)

Figure 5. Income of Interviewees



What is your current annual household income?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
under \$10,000	12.7%	8
\$10,000-\$29,999	6.3%	4
\$30,000-\$49,999	20.6%	13
\$50,000-\$74,999	14.3%	9
\$75,000-99,999	9.5%	6
\$100,000-\$150,000	15.9%	10
over \$150,000	12.7%	8
Would rather not say.	7.9%	5
<i>answered question</i>		63
<i>skipped question</i>		2

Figure 6. Race/ethnicity of Interviewees



Answer Options		Response Percent	Response Count
Asian/Pacific Islander		4.7%	3
Black		4.7%	3
Caucasian/White		78.1%	50
Hispanic		6.3%	4
Indigenous or Aboriginal		0.0%	0
Latino		0.0%	0
Multiracial		3.1%	2
Other (please specify)		3.1%	2
<i>answered question</i>			64
<i>skipped question</i>			1
Number	Response Date	Other (please specify)	Categories
1	Oct 20, 2010 11:30 PM	North African	
2	Mar 4, 2010 3:49 PM	Jewish	

APPENDIX B: Interview Schedule

Previous experience

Had you ever been in the news before? What was that like?

Had you ever had the opportunity but turned it down?

General

So, tell me about this experience.

Getting in the News

Can you walk me through the events leading up to your being mentioned / profiled / quoted?

How did the reporter or news organization get in touch with you?

What did you know about what the story was going to be about? What gave you that idea?

Motivations

What were your initial thoughts when you were asked to participate in the news? Do you remember how you felt? Did you have any qualms?

Did you discuss it with anyone else?

Why did you agree to be quoted / profiled / mentioned in the news?

Is there any type of story for which you would not agree to talk to a reporter?

Expectations before the interaction with the reporter

Before you spoke with the reporter, do you remember what you were expecting the interaction to be like?

Before your interaction with the reporter, did you imagine what the story might be like or what your role in the story might be? Can you describe it?

Interaction with the reporter

Can you walk me through your interaction with the reporter?

Was the interaction what you expected or did anything about it surprise you?

What were your thoughts or feelings about the interaction / interview while it was happening?

Was there anything that you did not want to answer or talk about?

At the time (or right after the interview, before seeing the story) was there anything you wished you hadn't said or that you wished you had said differently?

After the interaction with the reporter, how did you feel about it? What were your thoughts or feelings about your contribution?

Expectations after the interaction with the reporter

After the interview, did you imagine what the story would be like? Can you describe what you were expecting?

What were you thinking or feeling after you spoke with the reporter but before you saw the final story?

Did you tell anyone to look for you in the news? Who?

Reaction to the Story

Did you see/hear/read the story? When? Where were you?

Do you remember what your immediate reaction was? Over the course of the day or the next few days, did your feeling about the story change?

Did you refer anyone you knew to the article/story you were in after it came out? What did you tell them?

Did you think the story was accurate? Why or why not?

Was it different from what you were expecting? In what way?

What kind of feedback did you get from other people?

Any other repercussions from the story?

Is the story available online? What are your thoughts about that? Did that occur to you when you gave the interview?

If you had the chance to write the story yourself, what would you do differently?

If they did not like the story or felt it was inaccurate:

Did you do something to try to set the record straight? Why or why not?

Comparing to other experiences

Can you think of another experience that was similar to this one?

Have you ever had information published about you in a different format? How was this similar or different from that experience?

Do you publish things about yourself online? Do other people publish things about you there?

How was this similar or different from that?

Future

Would you agree to do this again?

Would you do anything differently?/do you have any regrets?

What advice would you give someone you cared about who was approached by a reporter?

In 5 years, how do you think you'll look back on this experience? What role do you think the press will play in your memory of this?

[esp. for traumatic events] How do you think your experience of this event would have been different if there had been no press involved?

News Use and Perception of the News Media

Do you think this experience affected your way of thinking about this news outlet in particular?

What about the news media in general?