ACCIDENTS, SCANDALS, AND ROUTINES: RESOURCES FOR INSURGENT METHODOLOGY

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News is the information which people receive second-hand about worlds which are not available to their own experience. Out of a vast "glut of occurrences," a relatively few happenings are translated by mass media into things "fit to print," i.e., *the* important things worthy of constituting our conceptions of the community, state, nation, and world in which we live. News, and the process through which it is produced, determines the experience of publics; it is an important source of whatever ideological hegemony exists in a given society; those who make the news are crucial actors in making publics what they are.

The power of the media to create experience rests on what we'll term the "objectivity assumption," to which almost everyone pledges allegiance. This assumption has it that there is indeed a world "out there" and that an account of a given event reflects that world, or a piece of it, with some degree of accuracy. The "objectivity assumption" states not that the media are objective, but that there is a world out there to be objective about. Operating on the "objectivity assumption," lay people read a newspaper or listen to a news broadcast with the aim in mind of finding out about the world which is described in the produced account. People, in other words, read newspapers to find out about an assumed objective state of the world. Sociologists in their work on power, on the media, and in their methods of content analysis, usually do much the same thing.

It's all very reasonable, to be sure, but there is an alternative possibility. Newspapers, instead of reflecting a world out there, might reflect the practices of those who have the power to determine the experience of others. Harold Garfinkel[1] has made a similar point about clinical records which he investigated. Rather than viewing an institution's records as standing for something which happened, as sociologists typically do, Garfinkle saw in those records the practices of people who make records: the hedges they play, the short-cuts they take, the theories in their heads, the purposes-at-hand with which they must deal. In other words, there are "good organizational reasons for bad clinical records." And those "good reasons" spell out the social organization of the clinic.

We think that mass media should similarly be viewed as one big, bad clinical record. Our present interest, however, does not lay in an opportunity for name-calling criticism, but rather in a possibility for understanding how the product comes to look as it does. We want to study media in order to see in them the methods through which the powerful come to determine the experience of publics. We look for the methods which accomplish ideological hegemony by examining the records which are produced.

We conceive of people doing news as people who are guided by a purpose at hand. In trying to explain what news is, we must meet the challenge of explaining how it is that certain phenomena are included as news while an infinite array of other phenomena are ignored. The traditional view, held by those who rely on the "objectivity assumption," inevitably falls back on the notion that some things are just more *important* than others. This, of course, begs the question: what determines what is or is not important? For our own answer, we begin by invoking the concept of selective perception from psychology. Selective perception teaches that individuals, when faced with a glut of stimuli in perceptable space, confront an analogous challenge in terms of discriminating the important from the trivial. The creation of a meaningful field of perception requires that this selection be accomplished. That accomplishment is carried out through *purposiveness*. We discriminate chairs from other surrounding matter because of the recurrent need to sit. Carpenters discriminate among woods and eskimoes among snows. In all instances, the motive for discrimination and for meaning creation is present need. And since needs and purposes are not the same from one individual or culture to another, so it is that the meaningful worlds of individuals and cultures differ.

A sense of history, of community, of nation is created in the same way: purposes at hand carve up the *temporal dimension* of the perceptable field in order to make certain occurrences more important than others. When something happens which a given observer thinks is so important that *others* should hear it, he spreads the word—and that means there is *news*. We thus make news because *we* think something is important.

The summary of all this is that what is or is not news depends upon what we want others to think; and what we want others to think is guided by what we anticipate the consequences will be to our purposes. Thus, the newspaper and TV newscast are the results of purposive activities of certain actors who are trying to determine the experience of others. This purposiveness may be crude and transparently "selfish," or

it may be absolutely unconsciously purposive and be viewed as "objective," without bias, and so forth. But all such newsmaking must emerge in some way from certain practical goals, simply because there is no other viable explanatory mechanism for the production of creative meanings.

We have inventoried three separate kinds of news events: Routine Events, Accidents, and Scandals. These differ in the ways in which the purposes of some people function to get them across on the printed page and in the newsbroadcast. We want to describe them here in order to help provide some alternative imageries which insurgent scholars and citizens can use to see the social system in the news. We will take up each in turn.

Routine Events[2]

> Definition: Routine Events are deliberately promoted occurrences which were originally deliberately accomplished by the promoter.

During the Santa Barbara oil spill in late January, 1969, President Nixon made an inspection tour of certain beaches and subsequently announced to the nation that the damage caused by the blow-out had been repaired. He did not announce that the stretch of beach he inspected had been especially cleaned for his arrival, while miles north and south of him remained hopelessly blackened. Let's take another example, drawn from the other side of the world: The supposed Gulf of Tonkin attack of 1964 by the North Vietnamese was promoted as a public event through news releases, press conferences, briefings, and speeches; it served to legitimize the escalation of American involvement in the Vietnam War.

These are examples of *routine events*, which partake of the most managed features of news-making. An individual or group promotes one or more of its activities as newsworthy because it is useful for them to do so. If that news is subsequently adopted by the media, we must assume then that they, also, have a use for publishing it. We learn from these events what others intend for us to learn: nothing hostile to the purposes of the event-makers, nothing useful to groups with conflicting purposes and interests. Public politics, public events, and what we read in the newspaper is in large part dominated by this type of event. Murray Edelman (1964) describes the dominance of routine events as the "symbolic use of politics":

> Basic to the recognition of symbolic forms in the political process is a distinction between politics as a spectator sport and political activity as

> utilized by organized groups to get quite specific tangible benefits for themselves. For most men most of the time politics is a series of pictures in the mind placed there by television news, newspapers, magazines, and discussions. The pictures create a moving panorama taking place in a world the mass public never quite touches, yet one its members come to fear or cheer. They are told of legislatures passing laws, foreign political figures threatening or offering trade agreements, wars starting and ending, candidates for public office losing or winning, decisions made to spend unimaginable sums of money to go to the moon. . . . Politics is for most of us a passing parade of abstract symbols. (p. 5)

Not only is routine event-making the standard fare of the mass media; it also provides the "data" for sociologists investigating the social structure. Edward Banfield, for example, in his classic study of community power, employs a decisional case study method in endeavoring to discover who influenced the outcomes of six "key" issues in Chicago (Banfield, 1962). He selects the issues which received the widest coverage in the media and assumes these to be synonymous with "key" political issues, uncritically letting the organized ways in which events get done determine his subjects of study. Consequently, the very "issues" Banfield studies are issues simply because his respondents made them such by promoting them as routine events, as material to fill the media's "news hole" and the public's mind. No contrast is made between routine events in the news and those events which Edelman considers to constitute the nonsymbolic political sector where tangible resources are actually distributed by and among members of the elites. No suggestion is made that what is published is done so for purposes that might have nothing to do with any "objective" importance or newsworthiness, if seen from other possible standpoints. Lost in this type of research are the ways in which powerful event makers are able to have their public agendas adopted by the media through their organized promotional activities (cf. Boorstin, 1961). Lost also is what Bachrach and Baratz (1962) term the "second face of power," the ability to create an event or public issue and the ability to prevent other options, activities, decisions, etc. from being publicly debated.

It is certainly not by chance that the kinds of issues to which we typically have access are of the sort which Banfield studies; e.g., where to locate the next branch of the University of Illinois or the next convention center. These are the kinds of issues which are deemed safe for public consumption, the kinds which will not significantly upset, challenge, or change the larger contextual basis of political life in America. They constitute, for the most part, all the news that's fit to print.

A routine public issue might best be described as *an event about which the elites divide*, where there is an agreement to disagree, because the stakes—although possibly important to some people—do not involve any critical restructuring of the social system and thus represent no threat to existing orders of power and privilege. When there exist competing definitions of events among powerful parties, or when an event can serve competing purposes, there is an *issue*. Since members of the elite disproportionately have the power to make all events, they also have disproportionate access to creating issues. He surfacing of public issues, especially through routine events, should thus be seen by critical content analyst or newspaper reader as inherently trivial, useful only as an index of splits among the routinely powerful.

Less powerful groups can have radically different uses for events; and they too try to cause issues to surface on the basis of positions, which if taken seriously, question basic socio-political structures. But by virtue of their lack of power, they must typically assemble themselves in an inappropriate place at an inappropriate time in order to be deemed "newsworthy." The fact that they are forced to resort to spectacular displays, e.g., sitins, allows those with easy access to the media to respond to the "inappropriate" display rather than to the questions which underlie it.

Thus, routine events are planned as events by those who have both a use for them and the ability to promote them as public. To select the media's "key events" for study is to employ a consensus methodology (cf. Young and Lehman, 1972); the researcher uncritically adopts a sample of events which fits the publicity needs of some small groups of people as his study topic.

Accidents

> Definition: Accidents are unplanned occurrences which are promoted by a party other than the agent who inadvertently caused the underlying occurrence.

Accidents—occasions in which miscalculation or mistake leads to a breakdown in our conception of order—are specifically antithetical to the interests which produce routine event-making practices. Accidents are embarrassing; an accident occurs when those who were parties to an occurrence never intended to have that occurrence become a public event. Oil companies never intended, in drilling for oil, to cause a huge blow-out at Santa Barbara; those who designed our emergency alert

system never intended for that system's total incompetence to be demonstrated through a false alert; those who built and deployed hydrogen bombs never intended for several to be "lost" in the Spanish countryside. At least in their early stages, accidents transcend and render inoperative the managed and contrived nature of routines. Nobody who ordinarily makes news is ready; the stories aren't straight; powerful people screw up. The accident's inherent features many problems for those who ordinarily make public events; their capacity to define the public agenda to serve their own interests and purposes is inhibited.

Moreover, the very appearance of accidents and the fact that large numbers of people often witness their direct consequences (oil on beaches, dead sheep strewn across two Utah valleys) demand that the media provide some minimal event-coverage. If they did not, censorship would be blatantly obvious. This would be inimical to the media's aura of objectivity which it needs to maintain and to its role definition as a mere reporter of what's "really happening," rather than as an active participant in the generation of news. Thus, in the case of accidents, the media become an ally, though often a reluctant one, and a resource for groups with competing uses for events (including sociologists seeking a radical perspective on the structure of American society).

The accident, quite unlike the routine event, provides access to normally obfuscated political structures—to decision-makers, to decision-making processes, and often to the private domains of individuals (e.g., Ted Kennedy at Chappaquidick Island) which in everyday life are kept far removed from the public events sector. The accident can serve as a high-powered microscope, a resource for generating information typically prevented from public consideration. If Banfield had selected his "key issues" on the basis of news surfacing as accidents, he (or some more reputable scholar) might have come away with other conclusions about power in American society.

Thus, as Molotch (1970) has described in a previous paper, we gain from the Santa Barbara oil spill a rare view of the oil companies' marriage to the federal government and the effects of that marriage upon local communities. We see how the latter come to be dominated by private decision-making in corporation board rooms and in the office of the Department of the Interior. As upper middle and upper class Santa Barbarans struggle to be heard, to gain access to key decision makers, they gained even more direct information about power in America and about the inefficacy of local protest. The discrepancy between pronouncement and practice on the part of corporate and federal officials was poignantly illustrated. Though the goal of getting oil

out of Santa Barbara was thwarted, the President of the United States, heads of government departments, and corporations magnates stood naked before both investigators and citizens, and to a much lesser extent, before the country as a whole.

Similarly, we have been assured for years about the effectiveness of our early warning defense system. And yet, at the North American Air Defense Command located in Colorado Springs, Colorado, on February 21, 1971, an accident occurred which exposed the irrelevance of public assurances. Two IBM tapes hang on the wall there, one tape containing the code word for a real alert, the other a test tape. Twice each week the test tape is put on the teletype which automatically assumes control of the AP and UPI wire services. At 6:30 a.m. on that day, the operator mistakenly grabbed the tape for a real emergency alert. Since no procedure had ever been established to handle a false alert, a full forty minutes passed between the beginning and the end of the alert, a full forty minutes passed between the beginning and the end of the alert. The error was compounded at the local level: for example, in one place, paper was jammed in the teletype ticker, so the message was never received; in another, the broadcaster said he "just couldn't summon the courage to tell everybody there was a national emergency" and the message was not broadcast; in another, where the ticker is located in the basement, no one checked the wires until five hours after the alert had passed.

Were that to have been a real alert, it would have failed. Without the accident, no one would have realized how "unsafe" we all are, despite the rhetoric of public officials. The accident provided a view that contrasted sharply with previous speeches, press releases, and pronouncements.

A final example of the accident may be instructive. Dugway Proving Ground, located near Denver and Salt Lake City, spans one million acres. It is one of six military chemical and biological warfare installations where several different kinds of chemical and biological warfare weapons are tested, ranging from nerve gas and defoliants to synthetic versions of rattlesnake venom and Bubonic plague.

On March 13, 1968, a test involving the spraying of nerve gas "VX" from a jet airplane at a height of 150 feet was done. The objective was to determine "how the gas distributes itself in down winds between 5 and 25 miles per hour" (Hirsch, 1969; 13). As one of the planes zoomed up after a trial run, a valve on the two high explosive dispensers failed to snap firmly shut. The gas poured out, was picked up by winds, and was carried as far as 45 miles from the target area.

Within the next week 6400 sheep were dead. Two veterinarians called to the scene to assist ranchers suffered temporary illness. Although there were no other known effects on humans (the falling night snow of March 13 brought the gas to the earth and the combination of the hour and inclement weather kept exposed populations indoors), dead carcasses were clearly visible to citizens, reporters, Army personnel, and investigators; and the pictures which appeared in the press could not be obliterated with a slogan eliciting symbolic support against the "Reds." It was clear to all that chemical and biological warfare weapons could accidentally affect U.S. citizens as well as purposely destroy Communists.

These examples point out that, for social scientists, accidents provide a convenient resource for gaining entrance into unstudied and often hidden features of politics in America. Especially in the earliest stages of an accident, we have found few prohibiting factors to research save the ability to get a scene when an accident abruptly occurs. By virtue of the accident's internal characteristics, we can employ a case study technique which here becomes an insurgent methodology. That is, we now have access to an array of events and issues which defy the programmed character of routine events.

The situation changes, however, after the initial event, as those in power—e.g., the oil companies in the case of the oil spill, the defense department in the case of the false alert—seek to regain control of the event-making process.

One of the most important routinizing tactics is the deliberate complication of the issue so that final responsibility for the cause of the event is ambiguous. This was the strategy in the nerve gas case. For several months after the sheep carcasses were found, the Department of Defense, the U.S. Public Health Service, Utah State Departments of Health and Agriculture, as well as local scientists, conducted tests to discern the cause of death. The local scientists were positive that nerve gas "VX," sprayed accidentally from the plane, was responsible. But the other agencies first suggested that there was only an accidental correlation between the gas tests and sheep deaths; they searched for other causes—in poisonous plants, pesticides, and diseases, to name a few. When these tests proved negative, the Army advanced a multi-cause theory. They said that a variety of reasons were probably responsible, of which the nerve gas may have been one.

In routine events it is at best difficult, at worst highly arbitrary, to try to separate key background decision making from the cloaking activities of the elite; that whole scene has been neatly packaged for public

consumption. With accidents, on the other hand, because the perpetrators are caught off guard, routinizing can occur only after the event and must be superimposed upon the consequences which have already been felt. Thus, we can directly observe endeavors to normalize the accident and to recapture hegemony on the part of the powerful. We can isolate, study, and publicize them for what they are: attempts to cover over the possible long-range ramifications of the accidents' relevations.

We can also use this understanding to study the way in which information is controlled in the first place. The tactics which actors use to normalize troublesome events are just more transparent examples of the everyday procedures of creating routine news.

In the accidents we have studied so far, one of the more exciting findings is that citizens are able to make connections between interest and power, between big business and governmental regulators. From these connections they can critically understand the discrepancy between public and private politics, an understanding heretofore restricted to the "insider." What citizens seem to lack, however, is the ability to move from what they learn from a specific accident to a more general conceptualization about how the entire society works. That linking activity is the work of the sociologist. Thus, the accident is a potential mobilizing force for publics which, after more work on the sociologist's part, might develop into a blueprint for change. As one Santa Barbara resident remarked:

> We, the people can protest and protest and it means nothing because the industrial and military junta are the country. They tell us, the people, what is good for the oil companies is good for the people. To that I say 'like hell'. . . .

Contrary to popular belief everyday people who have access to the necessary information are all too willing and able to draw the logical connections and to act on the basis of that knowledge. It is not that the issues are too complex for "mundane minds"; rather, the issues themselves are strategically complicated, and the thesis of the "dumb citizen" is itself an ideology for keeping publics at a distance.

Of course, accidents do not always mobilize vast groups of people for mass action. But they do provide some insight into the conditions under which a population can be roused. The fact that people do not overtly confront the perpetrators of an accident is an event in itself and should be contrasted with its opposite—where groups seize upon the accident's mobilizing potential. Such a contrast can pinpoint some

of the obstacles which must be faced in trying to summon a mass movement for social change in the society.

For example, unlike Santa Barbarans, Utah citizens did not undertake an overt struggle against the Defense Department. While local elites in Santa Barbara were deeply involved in promoting the spill as a national public event and issue, local Utah elites were at best ambivalent in their response. The difference in attitude is to be found in the economic circumstances of the respective areas: Santa Barbara reaps few benefits from oil drilling in the channel; but the Utah economy is dependent on the Department of Defense and its hundreds of millions of dollars. Utah local elites could not afford to promote the occurrence as a public event; the local citizens had no difficulty in comprehending the predicament—that their lives are daily endangered by the hand which feeds them.

Scandals

> Definition: A scandal involves a deliberately planned occurrence which is promoted by a party different from the occurrence's agent.

The third type of event, the scandal is a kind of mixed case in our typology. Here are a few examples:

On May 1, 1971, an announcer at a local California radio station reported that Governor Ronald Reagan paid no state income taxes the previous year. The information was revealed through a "leak" in the confidential files of the Franchise Tax Board. For the next several days, this story was widely discussed, by newspapers and other media, by political opponents of Reagan, and by those on the left. It was a paradoxical revelation since the Governor was constantly on the warpath against cheats, rip-offs, hippie students, welfare recipients, and since he had opposed income tax withholding because, he said, "Taxes should hurt."

On the national level a similar type of event occurred on June 15, 1971, when *The New York Times* published an excerpt from the 47 volume secret study of the origins of the Vietnam war. In the next three weeks eight more excerpts were printed. Shortly after the publications began, however, the stories on the Pentagon Papers were in part overshadowed by the complex court battles which were taking place over the fact that a leak had occurred, over the right of the newspaper to print such government documents, and over the possible danger to national security posed by the publications. As typically occurs with acci-

dents, the powerful were attempting to routinize the event by transforming the issue into one more compatible with their own purposes and fitting their own perspective on what is newsworthy, interesting, important, i.e., on what is "news."

Like the routine event, but unlike the accident, a scandal is planned, not by the central party involved, however, but by an informer—usually some sort of insider. Like the consequences of accidents, scandals can also be embarrassing: they provide insight into normally protected structures and activities. Reagan lost, at least temporarily, some of his support as a result of the publication of his tax status; and from the publication of the Pentagon Papers, U.S. involvement in Vietnam became suspect. The scandal also allowed for issues to be raised concerning classification of government documents, freedom of the press, and private decision making in the execution of national policy.

What makes the scandal a type of event in its own right is the way in which it becomes a public event. Scandals involve persons who have at least some access to private sectors and who, for one reason or another, provide out-groups with information about that private sector. Scandals require "leakers" or "informant"; thus, they are contingent upon some dispute or disagreement among persons who are supposed to operate in substantial harmony. The scandal can only emerge when some insider is pissed-off or when some insurgent manages to be placed inside; and it can occur only if the media is willing to be a party to the exposure. The amazing thing about the Pentagon Papers, then, is not that Presidents tell lies, but that *The New York Times* was willing to expose that fact.

Nevertheless, scandals provide many of the same resources and research advantages as do accidents. We suggest a similar program of study: use scandals to accumulate otherwise obfuscated data about individuals, groups, and decision-making activities; attempt to pull together information gained from many scandals; try to draw profiles about the typical scandal, where it occurs, how it runs its course; make the resultant material and analysis available to groups who typically are unable to gain a foothold into the private political arena and who are working to contrast routine events with alternate conceptions.[3]

Discussion

We can summarize: News is a constructed reality; newsmaking is political work. There does not exist "out there" a set of objectively important events waiting to be picked up by the mass media. Rather,

newsmaking is a process whereby certain actors are able to create and thus to manage the news—"manage" in the largest sense. That is, individuals and groups do many things; those in powerful positions make many decisions. Only a small part of those are done with the intention of making news. Typically, activities are promoted as public events because they serve the actors' purposes or goals, while simultaneously these actors prevent any activity which would be inimical to their purposes from becoming a public event.

"Important" events are totally contingent on the makers' purposes at the time. Activities which are not promoted as events are *important* for keeping private although other groups may, of course, have use for those activities as events. Importance or "fitness," then, is conditioned and constituted by the relative positions of the actors; there are as many versions of "important" as there are variations in actors and actors' situations. When there are inconsistent versions among those with sufficient power to have media access, there is a public issue.

Similarly, the media is not an objective reporter of events but an active player in the constitution of events. Through their selection, they help to create public events. Their goals—profit, image, power—lead them to constitute events for news coverage. If they habitually cover the same kinds of events, made by the same small groups of actors, it is not because the latter are intrinsically more newsworthy. Rather, coverage is given to those actors whose goals and purposes correspond with those of the media. For newsmen, objectivity is, as Tuchman (1972) notes, "strategic ritual."

This work of selection and transformation by the actors and media, respectively, should be viewed as two levels of creative filtering which determines what becomes news and thus what we, as readers and researchers, have access to. Events and information hostile to the status quo are structurally blocked. To read the newspaper as a catalogue of the important happenings of the day, or to use the newspaper for selecting subjects of study, is to be duped into accepting as reality the political work by which events are constituted. Only by the accident and the scandal is that political work transcended, allowing access to "other" information and thus to a basis for practical action which is directly hostile to those groups who typically manage the public political stage.

A corresponding research activity involves investigations of how we as insurgent sociologists and as people seeking a radical transformation in society can best use accidents, scandals, and routines for our purposes. At least we have a new way to read papers and hear news broad-

casts, as well as a new way to select research topics and do content analyses. More ambitiously, following T.R. Young (1972) and activists like Jerry Rubin, we suggest the possibility of the sociologist as methodological promoter of accidents and scandals—someone who does what can be done to upset routine news-making, simultaneously contributing to social reconstruction and gathering data on the impediments to such reconstruction.

Notes

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1. Harold Garfinkel, "Good Organizational Reasons for Bad Clinic Records," Chapter 6 in *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

2. Following Molotch (1970), Manela (1971) has developed a typology of events using similar terminology. Manela treats events as objective phenomena which are typed according to how well they fit or fail to fit established routines of formal organizations. Our treatment and purposes are distinct from Manela's, although certain intriguing parallels exist.

3. There is a fourth type of event which logically flows from our schema: the serendipity event which takes place when a non-deliberate occurrence is deliberately promoted by the occurrence's agent. Put in informal language, a serenditipity event involves making hay out of what was accomplished accidentally, but without admission that there ever was an accident. Unfortunately, because of the very fact that a serendipity event is deliberately promoted in ways identical to the routine event, it is usually impossible to know in a given case whether or not the precipitating occurrence was accomplished purposively. It is for the reason of its invisibility that we treat serendipity events as a residual category, largely unretrievable to investigation.

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