THE ARTEFACTS OF NEWS

OF RUBBISH DUMPS, PLAYS, WORK, AND "THE FIRST DRAFT OF HISTORY"

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Abstract

News is a contraction of two words: "new things." And news is the report of those "new things." These reports over time can themselves become artefacts. Historians, anthropologists, sociologists – along with journalists – study news. In different ways and via a range of media, dramatists, paleo-anthropologists and poets also pinpoint – sometimes *en passant* – the production, transmission and impact of news. Here we look at the seemingly unlikely "cross-fertilisation" of these remarks, and pick up points made by newsmen working at speed to capture "a defining moment," a story and its impact.

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Introduction

This paper looks at news – news over time and news in time and space. News as, by definition, ephemera, whether personal and private, or a product, a story, an account, seemingly obsolete once related, or in today's parlance converted into "historic data," sometimes within one to two minute(s) of first being processed, relayed and disseminated. Today's multinational multimedia news agencies count their competitive advantages over rivals in seconds – Reuters measures its performance against DJ and Bloomberg's in minutes and seconds; but in some cultures and personal relations, the mere observance of a prolonged silence is itself "news" – or is it information?

Let me first say what I shall not do. This is not about content analysis, or about academic studies monitoring news flows, national or domestic. It is not a review of recent academic literature of the subject. It is not really centred on work on artificial intelligence, cognitive sciences, the knowledge industries, or even information science. It is more by way of an odyssey; a reflexive essay about whether what I have been doing over the past few years really makes sense. I am a historian by training, have been a journalist, work in Paris and London, and have studied international news agencies for many years.

How does one study news over time? Is it a vain exercise?

It *is* possible to study news-management, news-values, the production, selection and distribution of news; how news is "doctored" or manipulated. Many have done this. It is even possible to study the promotional rhetoric that accompanies news: "breaking news," "news updates," or "news sidebars," among others. The terminology of journalism, of news-professionals, with its "news-feeds" and "media-outlets" helps create – some tell us – a world of "news-addicts," "news-freaks," or "news-junkies." Internet day-traders and nano-second whiz kids are News-Movers and Shakers writ large. Informed decision-making and catastrophic decision taking sometimes go cap in hand.

But how to study news *per se*, in the abstract? The exercise may seem futile. News is, by definition, ephemeral; once imparted, divulged, or related, news is stale – as the French say, "*nouvelles défraîchies*." News as a perishable commodity, with an intrinsic value that is depreciated once public – made known to others – is probably one of the "angles" which best repays examination. This angle is taken by some, but relatively few, of the pieces collected by Howard Tumber (1999) in his very useful *News: A Reader*. About 377 years ago, in 1626, in London, the playwright Ben Jonson produced his comedy, *The Staple of News*; a flop at the time, this satire nonetheless pinpoints both the notion of news as a commodity, and that of an attempt to exercise a commercial (as opposed to a political or ideological) control of the supply of news. I shall argue that the *theatre* is a medium that enables one to get a handle on news – in ancient Greece, as in seventeenth and twentieth century Britain. This, however, is not a sufficient answer to the issue of how to study news over time. There is no hard and fast answer.

News : Topoi and Tropisms

But there is, I would argue, some point in considering the prevalence of the term in late twentieth and early twenty-first century discourse and how today's

rhetoric about news, information, knowledge, intelligence and data is transposed on previous cultures and civilisations. And, just as we often perceive other cultures in our own terms and languages, it is possible to study professional newspersons' and academic analyses of key international media outlets as if we ourselves were anthropologists from another time and place. Later I will indicate the Stakhanov-like pressures in the production, selection and processing practices in Reuters, and analyses of products, output, services, conducted at speed, that news-purveyors generate in-house, day by day, or rather news-cycle by news cycle, during the past ten years.

I am not so much concerned with news manipulation by politicians. Napoleon put this succinctly; he told his censors and police officials: "Every time news unfavourable to the government arrives, it should not be published until such time as we are so sure it is true that there is no point in releasing it because everyone knows it already"(Bellanger 1969, 552). I *am* concerned with news as a vital (staple) commodity for newspersons, the media, governments and finance – and for the circles or *milieu*, the "audiences," "publics," and "markets" they purport, or are held, to serve. I *am* concerned, in part, with what I shall baldly call the "kill the messenger" school: the argument whereby those who convey bad news are held responsible for the content of their news. There are countless examples of this in Greek tragedy, and, of course, in modern times. The disreputable, shady collective *persona* of news journalists ("hacks," "dogs," or "rats" partly stems from what seems to be an ancestral suspicion of the bearer of tidings (be they good or bad). The phrase, "it is too good to be true" encapsulates this, as does Coleridge's apt line about not so much the wish to believe than "that willing suspension of disbelief" for the moment. Coleridge was writing here about poetry, "poetic faith. " I would add the same "suspension of disbelief" holds for the theatre – the attitude one has today when the lights go down and the performance begins.

There is another point I should make at the outset. Writing in 2003, from the comfortable vantage point of Paris and London, I would like to take two seemingly unrelated developments in conjunction. One is the "high-profile" rhetoric during the last forty years or so about information society, knowledge industries, data streams, or news flows. These have become a cultural artefact of modern developed societies and, I would argue, cause further semantic confusion in an already polysemic universe. The other relates to initiatives aimed at celebrating the concept of news and the media as a paradigm, a hallmark, across time and space. Here, I have two U. S. projects in mind: Mitchell Stephens' *History of News* (1989), and the Newseum set up by the Freedom Forum near Washington during the mid-1990s. I am both indebted to, and keep my distance from, the findings presented by Stephens in his *History of News*, and in the Freedom Forum's *News History Content Book*.

Let me move on to what I shall call "the problem of metaphors and analogies." Archaeologists love rubbish-dumps just as paleo-anthropologists like fossils. And pre-historians note how the human mind is enamoured of metaphors and analogies (Mithen 1996). Certainly journalists find them a useful writing skill (I sometimes find it useful to think of journalists as "hunter-gatherers"). Partly because news is apparently "here today, gone tomorrow" or rather "in the next second," I take (a possibly perverse) delight in monitoring how archaeologists and anthropologists use words such as *data*, *event*, *information*, or *knowledge*. These specialists

have often little or only fragmentary evidence, and make as much of it as they can, extrapolating intelligently. By contrast, students of the media and of the news flow (itself a metaphor), suffer from an "information overload. Information technology and computer programs help the archaeologists make constructs; this may affect the language they use when they publish their findings. For instance, a respected study, translated from the German, published by the University of Chicago in 1993, is entitled, *Archaic Bookkeeping: Writing and Techniques of Economic Administration in the Early Near East*. In the section preceding "the emergence of writing," there is an analysis of how the seals and tokens under study are artefacts that serve as "indicators of early preliterate information storage" (Nissen, Englund and Damerow 1993, 18). "Information storage and retrieval" is, we all know, one of the "key buzzwords" of librarians, data specialists, and computer programmers, during, say, the past two decades. At this stage, I would simply note that specialists – or their editors and publishers – write phrases such as "preliterate information storage," "the Renaissance computer" (Rhodes and Sawday 2000), or "the Victorian Internet"(Standage 1999). Metaphors and analogies are part and parcel of a modern discourse aimed at articulate, literate (sometimes computer-literate and Internet-literate) society. One should welcome their use even if, at times, they raise more questions than they provide answers. It just so happens that they cause a host of difficulties for those who study information, news, and data.

For example, in French there is something of a problem with *événement* (event) and *avčnement* (advent; the coming to pass). The latter has connotations – both religious (Christ, the Messiah) and political (the advent of King X to power). The former is used by the celebrated paleo-anthropologist, Yves Coppens, to describe "the decisive event" in the emergence of modern man 3, 500. 000 to 2, 500. 000 years ago; "*l'événement de l'(H)Omo"* and refers both to skulls found in the Omo valley in Ethiopia and to the "descent" of the larynx sufficiently far down the throat for a range of vocal sounds to become possible, and by way of consequence – "in the fullness of time" (if one may dare use the term) – consciousness, tool making, organised society and communication (Coppens 2000, 51). Another example: the M.I.T. professor, Steven Pinker, writes in the best-selling *The Language Instinct*: "Journalists say that when a dog bites a man that is not news, but when a man bites a dog that is news. This is the essence of the language instinct. Language conveys news" (1994, 83). We may all know this hoary Anglo-American adage. My point here is that it just so happens that the terms we use to discuss communications are so much in use by other specialists with a telling turn of phrase, and also by media professionals, that clarity is difficult to obtain at all times.

Many of the writings – academic studies, novels, journalistic pieces – that discuss, directly or obliquely, the mechanisms and the concept of news, look to the history of signs, the media, the encoding, transmission, relaying, and delivery of messages, both for private and public use. I shall not do otherwise, but the keyword I would stress is *urgency*. This is not the same as speed. Urgency reflects "intent" – whether on the part of the person or persons who send(s), transmit(s), relate(s) or deliver(s), or those who "eagerly " expect or "fearfully await" the news. And urgency is linked to the transient, ephemeral nature of the news story.

Similarly, "story" presupposes a product(ion), or a narrative form. You tell a story to someone – to yourself, to another, who may (or may not) number one or

countless millions. Hence the anguished debates about the relation between "stories" and "history" – stories, accounts, reports – and also about presentation to audience(s), public(s), or market(s). There is a tension between presenting factual information in an orderly manner – the (Western) journalistic canon of the 5 Ws and the inverted pyramid is, in a way, a throwback to Quintilian's rhetoric of circumstances (who, what, where, when, how, and possibly, why) – and the mode of address, like narrative styles: to sound convincing does not necessarily mean to tell the truth.

Born in London in 1946, I was brought up in a BBC radio, and then television culture, where one could hear the seemingly final and definitive statement: "Here is the News." As if there could be no other. It had the ring of finality, of narrative closure. This would not last. *Une nouvelle chasse l'autre,* say the French. The news agenda is not the same for all, at the same time, and across the world. Today, the split screen on a Bloomberg or Reuter terminal, or even on your "basic" TV set (tuned to CNN, for example), relates – in words, digits and "pix" – several stories at the same time (via side-bars, "biznews," or "sports update". There are times when one over-riding event *is* cathartic, all-exclusive; the early hours (Eastern Daylight Time) of the morning of 11.9 were such a catharsis in the United States and much of the western world (early afternoon in Paris and London). Two generations earlier, for "Brits" and "Americans," Dallas on November 22, 1963 and the assassination of John F. Kennedy, was another such a catharsis: to learn, to be (partly) in the know, to follow, to seek up-dates, was to be part of a collective all-encompassing community, or at least some *felt* this. Untold writings and utterances explore this.

Research into News Agency Archives: How to Stand Back and Consider "Breaking News" Over Time

Let me pursue this brief biographical explanation of what I am looking at: much of what I study is based on research centred on Reuters and Agence France Presse, i.e. the organisations founded in London in 1851 by Paul Julius Reuters (1816-99), a German Jew, and in Paris in 1944, respectively. The French agency, AFP, in some ways, continues the tradition of a major French presence in international news, dating from the early 1830s, when Charles-Louis Havas (1783-1858), latter a competitor and one-time partner of Reuter, founded an agency close to the central post office and stock exchange in Paris. Between 1875 and the early 1930s, the major U.S. news agency, Associated Press (a newspaper cooperative, founded in New York in 1848), was what one might call an awkward partner of Havas and Reuters. In fact, all three, and various other "allied agencies" – sometimes known as a cartel or ring – often had strained relations. All were commercial organisations concerned with their own standing and competitive positions and entered into "ring arrangements" so as to reinforce their respective positions in their major domestic markets.

This is well known; I mention it to explain how, in recent years, I've tried to match research into news organisations based on public and private archives with three other concerns: (1) attempts, often based in the United States, to present or re-present the history of news – I am thinking here primarily of the aforementioned book by Stephens and the Newseum initiative of the newspaper industry via the Freedom Forum at Arlington, VA; (2) an enquiry into what might (preten-

tiously) be termed the *artefacts* of news – writings, stretching far back in time and space, that throw light on what, at this stage, I will call "the alchemy of news" (a phrase used by Marc Paillet (1974); and (3) the literature (a) in or about the media, (b) in professional and industry bodies, or (c) academic efforts about news as a product, the formatting of the output of news purveyors (*les fournisseurs*) to media and non-media clients worldwide. "Information overload" or "the future of news, " and "How much information?" are titles of some of the reports or monographs thus encountered.

All this is by way of preamble. I should now explain from what angle I shall approach the discussion of news. I am concerned here with how three very different types of text that I will bring together in a rather improbable, possibly off-putting manner – help capture the *urgency of news.* They are:

(1) Play*s,* dramas dating back to about 500 B.C. in Greece;

(2) Correspondence, unearthed by archaeologists in Upper Mesopotamia, extending back to around 1750 B.C., belonging to what one specialist appositely called "the other half of history," i.e. history between the emergence of writing and before Herodotus, Thucydides, and others, helped define the emergence of history from myth, that is, before the Greek, Roman, Jewish, and later Christian "traditions;"

(3) Quality control reports, however unlikely in this context, located in various computer disks of the London-based Reuters news agency that I have consulted over the past ten years.

However disparate, all texts, I would argue, capture the urgency, transience, and fragmentary nature of news, and the care paid to maximising its impact. News is, however briefly, for some, all-important. Let me first single out the possibly most unlikely of the three texts.

Mari, located on the Euphrates 3, 700 years ago, was a power-centre, whose archives have partially survived: some of the cuneiform tablets which have survived were actually called *sa hamatim* – in French, *tablettes de hâte* – tablets written hastily, for urgent despatch, to convey news fast (in Sumerian, and more often – to judge from most of those that have survived, in Akkadian). Similarly, the word *kallam* relates to the messenger moving at speed, the "reed-pen" used to inscribe on clay signs that had to be distinct and written fast, and to the notion of speed itself. Information, intelligence, and news – sought at a premium by the mighty and by merchants – were seen as vital staples. The notion of merchants being among the best and earliest informed, was already current (Durand 1997, 559).

Intelligence, information – and the necessary networks to obtain and assess both – are also pinpointed by specialists of Phoenician cultures: *tamkarrum* is an Akkadian word for the businessman *par* excellence. Merchants and power were associated, but I have not seen (second-hand) evidence of the use of prior intelligence by merchants in *The Ancient Near East* (Aubert 1993). Even when one moves on to the Greeks – both, those who seemingly imported and then lost the Phoenician alphabet and then others, who further simplified and propagated what was to be the basis of the "modern"(i.e. post eighth (?) century B.C.) alphabet – one must note that Greek writings are mostly hostile to or disparaging of money and commerce and follow the points made by Sian Lewis:

> *We are accustomed to think of news as something that happens all the time, and which needs constant monitoring, but news is in fact what happens when an event is reported, not the event itself … . There is no Greek word for news as such, or for a newsworthy event; instead words focus on process.* Ta kaina, *new things, or* kaina logoi, *new stories, are reported, but the primary word is* aggellô, *I report, and its cognates. To bring news is to bear a message or report, and the advent of news is described impersonally:* êggeilen, *it was reported. An* aggelma *is both news and a message – clearly the act of reporting is what creates news. ... Greek vocabulary for news does not distinguish between truth and falsity –* phême, *common report, is not intrinsically less trustworthy than logos, story or* epistolê *(message): the distinction is one of source. A newsmonger, one who makes up news, is in Greek a* logopoios, *a fabricator of stories. ... A* logopoios *is not necessarily a liar* (Lewis 1996, 4-5).

Demosthenes condemns newsmongers, because they are plausible and authoritative and therefore dangerous.

Here, clearly, we are on familiar ground. The lexicon of news, as perceived in "the West," stems from the Greeks. Specialists of the Ancient Near East and of Greece and Rome also refer frequently to "media," or rather to "the medium of" prose, stone, verse, or paint. Today still, to state perhaps the obvious, the artist expresses himself through "the medium;" some even dare to say, "the English language is the major medium of international communications."

News – the contraction in English of "new things," and reports about them – is seemingly by definition *a*-historic. Which is perhaps why attempts to write the history of news often seem doomed to failure, or at best, to a feeling of frustration – on the part of the author or of the reader. I propose rather to work like a surgeon making an incision. I select minute accounts about how correspondents, dramatists, or newsmen dissect the news process and its impact.

Let us turn to etymology first. "Words are our raw material and we have to be very careful how we craft them. They have to be clear and make sense, and they have to refer to a fact on the ground in a totally unbiased, objective, non-evaluative way." This phrase stems from the computer keyboard (we can no longer say "pen") of a New York based quality controller of the Reuters Americas service. It is particularly apposite when one studies "news." "Information," "historic data," but also – "tidings," "reports," "stories," a "piece," an "account," a "short subject," and a host of related terms – emerge when one studies "news." Indeed, "language" and the complex inter-relations between time and space, rumour, fame/notoriety (real or perceived) and fact, media/vector, message/messenger, and public figure among the ingredients under review.

There is at times something immensely reassuring about the news categories listed by the Reuters and Havas agencies in the 1880s. This – they write to their allied agencies and their own correspondents – is what we require from you:

> *To agents and correspondents; In consequence of the increased attention paid by the press to disasters etc., of all kinds, agents and correspondents are requested to be good enough, in future, to notice all occurrences of the sort. The following are among the events which should be comprised on the service: Fires, explosions, foods, inundations, railway accidents, destructive storms,*

earthquakes, shipwrecks attended with loss of life, accidents to war vessels and to mail steamers, street riots of a grave character, disturbances arising from strikes, duels between, and suicides of persons of note, social or political, and murders of a sensational or atrocious character. It is requested that bare facts be first telegraphed with the utmost promptitude, and as soon as possible afterwards a descriptive account, proportionate to the gravity of the incident. Care should, of course, be taken to follow the matter up (Read 1999, 101).[1]

Such circulars, instructions, are legion. These are the earliest recorded sets, as far as I know, to figure in the Reuters and Havas archives. News agency manuals and style books, and similar documents in, and sometimes published by, a host of international news organisations, are valuable artefacts about the perceptions of news held by industry professionals. I shall use some of this material later. But, at this stage, I am concerned with how to establish a lexicon, a set of writings about the alchemy of news, and the relations between the protagonists of an event, the message and the messenger, and the context of the impact of the account. And here, I go far back in time and space and centre on the notion of "protagonists," "language," and "coinage" – common currency. To simplify, at this stage, we shall distinguish what might be called the Jewish-Christian, Greek and Roman heritage, and what Marc van de Mieroop calls "the other half of history" – civilisations before explicitly dated, i.e. historical documents (often located in what the Greek would call – and we follow – "*Mesopotamos*/ia").

Protagonists, Language, Coinage

The term "protagonists" is redolent of the theatre. The *dramatis personae* of a news story often include today, as in the Greek theatre, a "walk-on" part for the messenger. In Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles, as in Shakespeare and Molič̌re, reflections on language, the medium, the message, its impact, and the ways of conveying it, are legion. Consider this extract from Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1589-1593?, III, ii) :

Enter Speed: How now, signior Launce ? what news for your mastership?

Laun: With my master's ship ? Why it is at sea.

Speed: Well, your old vice still; mistake the word.

What news, then, in your paper?

Laun: The blackest news that ever thou heard'st.

Speed: Why man, how black?

Laun: As black as ink.

Speed: Let me read them.

Laun: Fie on thee, jolthead; thou canst not read.

Speed: Thou liest, I can...

A host of figures in Shakespeare refer to news, often in short scenes, that primarily help move the action on, and often in disparaging, allusive terms: since the Greeks, "killing the messenger," holding him responsible for what he relates, also

seems suffused by a concern to discredit the agent, the purveyor of momentous news.

In *The Merchant of Venice* characters ask: "Now, what news on the Rialto?… How now,what news?… How now Shylock! What news among the merchants?" These are the questions put to businessmen, or concern business and trade. "News," to use a much-abused phrase, often stems from the link between curiosity, impatience, and commodities. "News is more and more a commodity," I read on the Reuters Intranet in the 1990s.

Plays are magnificent media that encapsulate the urgency and effect of news, of expectations about, and impact of, events, private and public, whether attributed to the Gods or to men, in on-stage real time, when one enters into the illusion of immediacy conveyed in the theatre, when practising "a wilful suspension of disbelief." Sometimes, perhaps, too much is made of them. In his entertaining, *Getting the Message, A History of Communications*, it is possible that Laszlo Solymar (1999, 11) goes too far in asking, on the basis of the opening passage in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (458 B.C.), whether the Greeks had set up an elaborate relay system between Troy and Argos, news of the battle of Troy being eagerly awaited in Argos, with the watchman on his guard for months past. But Solymar is doubtless right to pick up how the Chorus debates the reliability of the information, subsequently confirmed when a herald arrives and confirms the fall of Troy. I would argue that even more apposite is the presentation of the doubts and procrastinations of the messenger in Sophocles' *Antigone*: there are remarks about how the bearer of bad news should go about his task, the discursive strategies he should adopt, and even observations such as "these are the facts; it is for you to decide what to do, how to interpret them" (*Antigone*, staged before 441 B.C.). This, to simplify, is the debate about "killing the messenger" – holding the bearer of bad tidings responsible for what he announces or relates. The theme or keyword has survived as part of the journalistic cultural cannon. In the United States there have been anthologies entitled "To kill the messenger." A former journalist, former spokesman of the British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, Bernard Ingham called his memoirs, *Kill the Messenger.*[2]

Playwrights read, study, and draw from their predecessors. In London Shakespeare adapted texts by Seneca and contemporary histories of Britain (Holinshed); Ben Jonson, a rival and later a champion of Shakespeare, adapted and transposed Aristophanes (445 to 386 B.C.).

Many dramatists have depicted messengers, the impact of messages, letter, reports, and news or tidings. The arrival of the unexpected messenger, or of unexpected news, is the fulcrum, the dramatic turning point of many plays. The messenger may be a herald, an agent between the Gods and men, or between mere mortals; Hermes, god of messengers, thieves and merchants, plays tricks on his audience, as in Aristophanes' *Peace*. Shakespeare, Jonson (*The Staple of News*, and elsewhere) and Molière often depict the messenger as a shady or grotesque character, who is either taken in or intentionally seeks to deceive by the news he relates. *The Merchant of Venice* particularly merits study for our purpose: in the first and last of the twenty lines (1600, Act III, scene I, quarto edition) we read or hear : "Now what news on the Rialto?…/ How now Shylock, what news among the merchants?" In the intervening lines we find "if my gossip Report be an honest woman of her word." Shylock himself asks a little later, "how now Tubal, what news from

Genoa?" (III, i, 73). There is even a reference to "love news." In his study of *The Merchant of Venice*, Marc Shell (1993, 47-55) notes the verbal interplay between "ewes," "Jews," and "usury." I would add "news."

By Shakespeare's and Jonson's time – the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – "news" was a common English term. It sometimes took a singular, sometimes a plural verb. Shakespeare – as do Reuters newsmen today – even refers to "new news." In *As You Like It* (1599-1600, I, i, 94-95), Oliver asks Charles, "What's the new news at the new court?" In 1624 – the year when England entered the Thirty Years War – Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, written in Oxford, notes the destabilising effect of the impact of continuous bad news reports: "new newes every day … of what these tempestuous times afford … of warre, plagues, fires, inundations, massacres, meteors … so many men slain … new pamphlets, currantoes, controversies."

We are fortunate that Shakespeare and Jonson were writing at the turn of the 1600s, when the notion of periodical publishing, of regular printed newspapers, and periodical publications (there is mention of *"newes paper"* in a letter of September 10, 1670) was gaining currency. "News," "newys," or "newis" figure in documents dating from the late fourteenth century. It is generally agreed by philologists that the term comes from the French "*nouvelles*" – old French "*noveles*" – which itself came from the Greek *neos* and Latin *nova.* There are interlocking points: "newness," a contraction of "new things" (new's), and the reports relating these "new things." Compression, content, and medium – a news report – are interrelated. In 1382, there is mention of "*in the dayes of newes,*" the days when new things were learned (market days or sermons). Whereas old English, under Nordic influence, preferred *tædings* or *tidings,* "news" seems to reflect French (Norman French) influences. Chaucer, the English translator of the French *Roman de la Rose* (1235), writes, "*how that this blisful tidyng is befalle,"* in the sense of happy news. "*Bring the newis glad, that blissfull ben*" (1423), is the same sense of happy "*tidyngs.*" The point here is that "news" appears to refer to an account of the event, to the content of the event, and to the likely response to the event.

This brief philological or etymological digression pinpoints the "hybrid" nature of news. It can be argued, with reason I believe, that the term gained currency when a relatively standard form of the English language itself was emerging (the late medieval period).

Chaucer, who lived in a London of about 50 to 60,000 inhabitants, mastered Latin, French, and English. In the fifteenth century, there was no standard English; noble families spoke these three languages, it is believed. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a form of standard English emerged, which incorporated many French terms. William Caxton set up the first printing press in London in 1476 (in Paris, there is trace of a printing press in 1470). In several countries, the authorities showed concerns at the dissemination of news: in Britain, Richard III – Shakespeare's wicked hunchback – sought to forbid "the telling of tales and tydings whereby the people might be stird to commocions." News-letters, sometimes written in both English and French, circulated by the 1470s – but they were not called as such. In 1551, the word "news" figures in the following phrase: "not for a vayne and curious desire to see newes." The notion of curiosity and trivia – perhaps even of "seeing" as opposed to reading or hearing – news, appeared to be abroad. In the London of Shakespeare (1564-1616) are abundant references to news from abroad,

as both "foreign" and "strange" news – *News from Rome*, London (1606), for example. The book by Thomas Nashe, *Strange News* (1592), contains a discussion of censorship. This seems apposite: in many European countries, censors only allowed foreign news, not domestic news, to be published. In short, two processes were evident in the late 1500s and early 1600s: censorship, licensing, and the control of the flow of news to a wide or general (urban) public occurred at the same time as princes, merchants, and religious powers (the papacy) organised the circulation of news and intelligence. The latter included what we would now call general, political, and diplomatic news, but also economic, financial, banking and commercial news. The licensing of printers, attempts to prevent "forged tydings and tales" (*Henry VII*), and the organisation of regular postal services, for public and private uses (the royalty, or merchant bankers) are widely attested in European capital cities. As is the belief that private, manuscript communications (relations) were often more reliable than published "news books."

Here I have summarised points made in many histories of the press or histories of news. I favour concentrating on *plays*, partly because they capture the intensity, or the pace of news – however contrived. Plays were themselves "copy," composed in haste and classified as "ephemera." Jonson was attacked when he considered his plays "works" that merited publication, and not mere ephemera. If his "works" had not been published in 1616, it would probably have been even more difficult for others to bring out the first folio edition of Shakespeare (1623), for which, incidentally, Jonson provided a fulsome plaudit.

If both news and plays were considered ephemera in the minds of many early seventeenth-century authorities, there is some point in studying the impact of both in conjunction. In the late twentieth century the Czech-born British playwright, Tom Stoppard, often depicted journalists, the press and the media generally in unflatteringly terms. "The media. It sounds like a convention of spiritualists" (*Night and Day*1978, Act I), for example. Some recent plays depict the dangers of multinational multimedia news organisations. In 1626 Jonson, in *The Staple of News* appears to allude to the fear that a limited number of stationers sought to control the news ("the currantos") printed in London. Only foreign news could be printed; domestic news reporting was banned until 1641 (1999, 22, 258-59).

My concern here is how to capture the urgency, the pace, and the cadences that mark media professionals covering, producing, and delivering at speed for a worldwide audience – within the next couple of minutes, or, if the product has a "long shelf life, sell-by date," during the next six to eight hours. With luck, the news product can be recycled as "historical data," and used in follow-up pieces. This is one of the senses of the "commoditisation" or "commodification" (both ugly words) of news – its transformation into a commodity. Jonson used "staple" in the same sense.

Quality Control of News Output

It is often said of the theatre that a play can be made or broken by "first night reviews." New York productions depend on the say-so of the critics. I intend now to turn the proposition around. How do quality control mechanisms within international news organisations seek to monitor output of a given news cycle to improve performance during the next news cycle, so as to pinpoint failings *pour mieux*

encourager les autres. The organisation of the logistics of news coverage, setting up smooth coordination between various news centres and media outlets is complex, and the difficulty is compounded by the awareness of how competitors will seize on any failing.

There is a certain amount of material on how proprietors or owners – "conductors" to use a late nineteenth century English term – commented daily on the output of their various publications. Alfred Harmsworth, Lord Northcliffe (1865-1922), dictated "letters from the Chief" commenting in note form on the copy of his publications. Harmsworth, invited by Joseph Pulitzer to be "editor for the Day" of the New York *World* on January 1, 1901, wrote of the "tabloid" newspaper: "the daily time-saver" that would enable readers, by "glancing down the … list of contents," to get an overview of the world's news within sixty seconds. He also wrote elsewhere of how "a simultaneous newspaper" could be available in Britain and the United States the same day. Histories of media owners, from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries often use some of this evidence. Here I shall use quality control reports, notes rather, based on in-house assessments by Reuters personnel in London and New York. The reference period is the late 1980s to 2002. My argument is that peer pressures and peer assessment of how one has performed, vis-ŕ-vis colleagues, competitors, and customers (media and non-media clients) do much to determine the norms of the "alchemy of news." I shall use the points noted while conducting three "case studies": in-house comments on the coverage of the ex-Yugoslavia conflict during the 1990s, coverage of the 1990-1901 Gulf war, and coverage of the U.S. presidential election of November 2000. The underlying assumption – one voiced by Robert Darnton, who in his youth was a reporter on *The New York Times* – is that the judgement of one's peers is far more important than any notion of what an imagined, "typical" reader or customer, wants. "We never wrote for the 'image person' conjured up by social science. We wrote for one another. Our primary 'reference group', as it might be called in communication theory, was spread around us in the newsroom, or the 'snake pit,' as we called it" (Darnton 1990, 62). This is not to deny that perceptions of what clients want weigh heavily in news marketing and on-line services, for example.

But let me recall an earlier point, "words are our raw material and we must be careful how we craft them." Words, but also digits and pictures (pix). One of the lexical difficulties of studying news, past and present, is what I would call the polysemic perversity whereby so many experts from so many different fields used the same words. "Raw data," "news," "information," "intelligence," or "story" mean different things to different people, in different contexts, and may mean different things to the same person, sometimes at the same time. I say this partly in frustration at the difficulties that arise, and partly from an innate suspicion of studies that appear to impose norms and classifications on what we are about – in this case the flow and impact of news. The cultural context that marks news, as I have sought to indicate, is no less relevant than attempts to impose norms and forms from outside and within the news industry. As an example of the former, some newsmen dread the impact of News mark-up hypertext languages, with their encoding "straightjackets." The latter certainly help expose the implicit ideology of news. But they sometimes cause further confusion. I am more concerned, here, to capture – like a fly on the wall – what newsmen say about themselves and their out-

put, in house, on a day-by-day basis. I call this practising an incision, a surgical cut, in the news flow; perhaps this is because I am influenced by the "father" of French journalists, a doctor by training, Théophraste Renaudot.

In November 2000, a reporter on the Reuters New York desk key-stroked this graphic account of the pressure he and his colleagues were under; they were battling to provide up to the minute copy on the U. S. presidential election "saga," G.W. Bush versus Al Gore. Let me summarise some of the points:

This is where we're at. It's 4 p. m, Friday. The Florida Supreme Court is about to turn the final screw in the political coffin of Al Gore. You're in the middle of completing the wrap-up piece on the issue. All the TV analysts expect the decision to go against Gore, so your draft lead, reflecting this, is ready. The spokesman then appears, reads out the court decision. Wow! They've voted 4 to 3 in favour of Gore. The judgment makes several points: the inclusion of votes in favour of Gore in two of the disputed counties; a recount in Miami-Dade and elsewhere. You try to take it all in. You think about it thirty seconds. Then you start writing. Time clicks by… You start with a factual lead. "The Court has decided to call for a manual recount." But you find this sounds flat. You draft something more striking: "the Court plunged the nation into a new constitutional crisis"… But that sounds over the top. You play with words, suppress some, shift others around. You know you must get this lead out in 20 minutes, 30 seconds maximum, or Yahoo will prefer the AP version. The pressure is unbearable.

There is more of the same. For instance:

"12 minutes gone, and you've only written four 'graphs'. The TVs are blaring, your (computer) screen is full of comments, updates. The telephone rings continuously. You blot everything out to concentrate on the lead. What should I put in the second paragraph, and in the third? Dip thru' the faxes that are piling up on the desk. Do rapid sums. Is Bush ahead, by how many? Do we have a Bush reaction? We've got three comments from the Gore camp. Which is the best?

18 minutes gone, and you've written 600 words…. 21 minutes, 126 lines… After 27 minutes, having checked and double-checked you punch -type "send"...

31 minutes gone: a message from the quality controller says; "the figure in paragraph 3 ought to go in higher." You blot out your sense of failure and futility. Your hands trembling, you wonder whether you can dash to the restroom and decide you can't. You scroll up your copy on the screen and work on a revised lead. Repeat every day, eight or ten times a day, for six months or more….

Newsmen are hunter-gatherers and word-processors. In Mesopotamia, to judge from the *Correspondance épistolaire du palais de Mari*, there were distinctions between those who carried the burned-clay tablet yet ignored its contents, those who relayed orally a message learnt by heart, and those who had verbal skills that were to complement what the tablet said: "a skilful messenger knows how to make peace between kings."

This ambassadorial role is not that of newsmen but, as multimedia wordsmiths, they have the skills to address fast various markets or publics in various forms.

Notes:

1. A similar document figures in the Havas archive. Cf. M. Palmer 1983.

2. Ingham prides himself on the speed with which he produced the book.

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