

THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG THE NEWS MEDIA, SOCIETY, AND CULTURE: THOUGHTS ON OBJECTIVITY, METHOD AND PASSION ¹

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Passion

I have a colleague in the Department of Journalism who speaks about his work with a degree of passion that one usually doesn't hear in academic circles. An expert on Central Asian reporters, he covers reporters and editors working – or trying to work - in these authoritarian countries that were once part of the Soviet Union. My colleague's department head lauds his dedication and expertise. He gathers information with such consummate skill, she advises, that central Asian reporters risk being quoted in his articles. Asked why he writes about the problems journalists face in these countries, my colleague talks about journalism, freedom of speech, and democracy. His voice resonates with fervor. "Those countries are undemocratic," he proclaims. "There can be no democracy without a free press. I write about the problems these reporters and editors face...because they have to be free for us to be free." (My colleague does not discuss how notions of freedom of expression vary from one media system to another; to him, this freedom is an absolute right.)

I've heard other people speak with such passion; in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, it flowed from participants in the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and the nascent feminist movement. During the years in the 1960s that I observed the reporters and editors of the Seaboard City Daily, I heard journalists advocating for social change at their newspapers, but often they did not let their passion show. Here's an example: "We [our newspaper] only print the marriage announcements and pictures of brides who are white," one told me. He added, "That's wrong."

Here's a more complicated example, also from my field notes about the Seaboard City Daily.² The night that Martin Luther King was assassinated, a young reporter received the task of calling the residence of Richard Cardinal Cushing, the beloved and aging prelate of Boston. He was often ill and medicated. For some reason, the Cardinal answered his own phone. Asked his thoughts on the death of Dr. King, he replied that he thought that Dr. King was a great man and should be beatified. That's a strong statement from any religious – let alone an important cardinal. An argument broke out in the newsroom. Some editors declared that Cardinal Cushing must have just taken some pain-killers and therefore not have known what he was saying. An Irish Catholic editor announced he would leave the church if it gave Dr. King significant recognition. A third insisted that since the Cardinal had said it; "we should print it." These editors consulted a fellow higher in the editorial hierarchy, who had driven to the newsroom as soon as he had learned of the assassination (while watching television). He suggested a compromise: someone called the residence again. A public relations person answered the phone. Asked what the Cardinal thought about the death of Martin Luther King, he answered judiciously. That "official" answer was used in the reaction story.

My informant was angry enough to have told me about those newsroom events; but as I recall, he did not sound half as passionate as does my colleague from the journalism department, when he talks about how much democracy depends on freedom of expression. My

¹ Presentation to the Masters Program in Political Communication, Instituto de la Comunicación e Imagen, Universidad de Chile

² I also discuss this event in "Qualitative methods in the study of news," pp. 79-92 in Klaus Bruhn Jensen and Nicholas W. Jankowski, eds., a Handbook of Qualitative Methodologies for Mass Communications Researchers. New York: Routledge, 1991.

colleague was explaining himself to people who did not understand his calling to journalism. He would not see them for sometime; they all worked in different buildings on a large campus. The editor who told me about the phone call to Cardinal Cushing understood that it is unprofessional to argue vehemently with colleagues whom one sees daily; it is in everyone's interest to get on with one another. Nonetheless, it was perfectly clear to my colleague, to the editors of the Seaboard City Daily, and to me that ultimately journalism is about politics and freedoms—freedom of the press and of the people.

These stories also reveal a theme to which I will return later – one can learn how an organization works by studying exceptions to the rule. As Paul Lazarsfeld wrote decades ago, the exception proves the rule.

Politics & Freedom

Writing after World War I, Max Weber reminded social scientists that journalism is about freedoms. He placed his comments about the news media in his famous essay "Politics as a Vocation," where he associated newspapers with politics and noted that journalism is a difficult profession precisely because journalists have so much political responsibility. The job also is precarious: "The journalistic career remains under all circumstances one of the most important avenues of professional political activity. It is not a road for everybody, least of all for weak characters, especially for people who can maintain their inner balance only with a secure status position."³ Weber suggests that the status of the journalist is precarious, because people "associate it with its ethically lowest representative." Yet, it is a terribly responsible job. Here's Weber again:

...the responsibility of the journalist is far greater, and ...the sense of responsibility of every honorable journalist is, on the average, not a bit lower than that of the scholar, but rather as [World War I] has shown, higher. This is because in the very nature of the case, irresponsible journalistic accomplishments and their often terrible effects are remembered.⁴

The connection between reporters with political parties is long gone in the United States, although "columnists" are still described as though they have a political affiliation. Today, the news media are associated with corporate chains, where as Max Weber put it all those decades ago, "[T]he journalist worker gains less and less as the capitalist lord of the press...gains more and more political influence." In the United States, especially on radio, local news is becoming defunct.⁵ The circulation of daily newspapers, including the New York Times, the Washington Post, and USA Today, is sinking, as more people use digital media. Furthermore, in the United States membership in local political clubs has been declining as citizens seem to enact an observation that Lazarsfeld and Merton's made in 1948.⁶ Describing what they called the "narcotizing dysfunction," they suggested that some people seem to feel that they do not need to act politically because they keep track of the news and so are politically informed.

Although an undergraduate course on freedom of expression is a standard item in the undergraduate journalism curriculum, communications research rarely talks about political freedoms, including freedom of expression. With occasional exceptions, a quick spin through a communications journal makes me feel as though these researchers have become so fixated on Weber's notions of objectivity in "Science as a Vocation" that they have forgotten that their

³ P. 98. Max Weber, "Politics as a vocation." In Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., From Max Weber. New York; Oxford University Press, 1958.

⁴ P. 96.

⁵ Eric Klinenberg, Fighting for Air. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2007.

⁶ Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action." 1948 reprinted in Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, eds., Media Studies: A Reader. Pp. 18-30. New York: NYU Press. 1999.

research has political implications. In that essay,⁷ Weber wrote that politics – or some other interest—may lead to the selection of a problem, but once one has selected a problem, one should proceed objectively, following the dictates of science. According to Weber, one may use one's findings for political purposes. Indeed, the last pages of Weber's Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, much like the end of Emile Durkheim's Division of Labor are passionate criticisms of their respective societies based on their research. Many contemporary researchers have either forgotten that their work has political implications or assume that Weber's notion of objectivity implies that one should not point them out.

There appear to be two lines of exceptions: (1) Journalist-researchers explicitly concerned with the state of democracy, whether in Latin American or the United States,⁸ and (2) researchers trying to analyze the implications of the increasing dominance of digital media, including online news. Here are three examples of mainstream communications with political implications, but they seem to point in contradictory directions.

A New Era of Minimal Effects? W. Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyengar⁹ recently asked: Given the stratification and fragmentation of media use as people in digitally rich societies increasingly drift toward alternative (and sympathetic) sources of information, are we entering another era of minimal effects? Are people simply being reinforced in their views? Has the fragmentation of the media decreased the possibility of media involvement in reasoned political debate? Have we irretrievably decamped from what Habermas famously called “the public sphere”?

Imitation and the Quality of Information: In his studies of online news, Boczkowski emphasizes the pervasiveness of shovelware and so how much imitation dominates digital news¹⁰. “Shovelware” is the term used to describe the practice of locating information on some other organization's website, combining it with still others organizations' accounts, and then placing it onto one's own news site or blog. (It is a variant of practices long found in the media, such as rewriting competitors' stories for the second edition of one's newspaper or writing copy for a television anchorperson, while reading either wire service copy or a newspaper.) Since shovelware has such a huge role in reporting for the internet, are people really exposed to a diversity of opinions?

Cell phones and Political Organizing: Philip Howard reports that members of social movements, including revolutionary movements, used digital media, including cell phones, to share knowledge that circumvents governmental control and to organize forbidden demonstrations despite media boycotts.¹¹ He says that in the Muslim world, democratization is not possible without a well developed information infrastructure such as that provided by the digital media.

Media Institutions & Social Structure

Such questions necessarily imply a structural tie between media and political systems, so let me be explicit. As Weber notes, the news media are part and parcel of a political system. Philip Howard adds, “information infrastructure is politics.” In the United States, media systems developed out of the tensions between political and economic institutions. I mean the term

⁷ Also in Gerth and Mills, pp. 129-156.

⁸ Such as Ken Leon-Dermota, Sallie Hughes, and Robert McChesney.

⁹ “A new era of minimal effects? the changing foundation of political communication. *Journal of Communication* 58(4), 2008: 707-731.

¹⁰ I draw on Pablo Boczkowski, Digitizing the News (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2005), Pablo Boczkowski and M. de Santos, M. (2007). “When more media equals less news: Patterns of content homogenization in Argentina's leading print and online newspapers” (*Political Communication*, 24, 167-190) and the studies reported in Chris Paterson and David Domingo, eds., Making Online News (New York: Peter Lang: 2008).

¹¹ See Philip N. Howard, The Internet and Islam: The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. New York; Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

“tensions” to highlight the need to monitor the ever-changing implications of this interaction. Economic institutions may work to reshape government to their interests. Forty or fifty years ago, legislators from states dominated by one television station were reluctant to criticize it, lest they lose its crucial support in elections. Today, in the United States the structure of the electronic media has changed. There are more stations (now on cable), but these media outlets are part of media behemoths. Now legislators are loath to criticize the oligarchic structure of the media lest they lose needed political support. A 2010 federal appeals court ruling is also germane. The Washington, D.C. Federal Appeals Court stated that the U. S. Federal Communications Commission does not have the legal authority to manage the network practices of internet service providers.¹² The lawsuit between Comcast and the F.C.C. was triggered by customer discoveries that the internet service providers were interfering with their use of peer-to-peer networking applications. Weber recognized that the media are political, but the context is significantly different than just after the Great War.

In the United States, media conglomerates have developed together and in tension with political institutions. In The Creation of the Media: the Political Origins of Modern Communications, Paul Starr uses historical documents to trace the interaction among communications industries and political systems. His story emphasizes politics as much as changing technologies. Economic profit appears as the outcome of political choices. Often, owners of old media have avoided buying into new media so that they will not attract too much attention to themselves and so also invite political regulation. (When necessary, they have volunteered to regulate themselves.)

The picture looks somewhat different when one can observe and speak with the people about whom one is writing. Again I cite Pablo Boczkowski's Digitizing Media. Using the statements of what Thorstein Veblen might have called the Captains of the Media Industry, interviews with media workers, and participant observation, Boczkowski concludes that the goal of maintaining the profits associated with print media has shaped digital news. The process of enacting this objective is rooted in current practices, not a vision of the future: Digital reporting has been shaped by corporate desires to protect profitability while spending as little as possible; that is, to adapt before new media drive current media out of business. As they do their jobs, professionals accumulate new skills, such as mastery of complex computer programs and knowledge of what those computer programs cannot do. I believe it is probable that Paul Starr's conclusions differ so from those of Pablo Boczkowski, because Starr uses archival data and Boczkowski, a variant of participant observation. Historical data always raises the issue of what individuals, groups, archivists, libraries and the media themselves have chosen to collect and preserve.

Online News and Newsroom Structure: Equally important, the attempt of print media to survive has transformed newspapers. Boczkowski puts it this way:

American dailies have often tried to reproduce print's ways of doing things in their nonprint forays. But in doing this they have begun constructing a kind of newspaper that although it bears connections to its print predecessor, also differs qualitatively from its material infrastructure, editorial practices, and production routines.

He continues: “Print has survived in the online environment, but, paradoxically, this survival has enabled the creation of a new medium increasingly dissimilar from the old one” (p. 187,188).

It has also transformed newswriters' jobs, for capitalists and corporations are not the only groups fighting to survive. Though they may not be as interested as their bosses in maintaining profits, professionals are certainly interested in keeping their jobs. Like corporations, they too face the issue of survival, including how to change as little as possible. The skills that professionals develop – or are forced to develop to survive -- may introduce new

¹² Comcast argued that it had a responsibility to manage scarce resources, such as broadband. Users argued that Comcast was interfering in their ability to use peer-to-peer network applications. See Edward Wyatt, “U.S. Court Curbs F.C.C. Authority on Web Traffic,” New York Times April 6, 2010, downloaded April 27, 2010.

professional niches or expand existing ones, much as Andrew Abbott argues that individual professions are components of expanding and contracting systems of professions.¹³ Frequently, those professionals must go beyond ritual compliance with the expectations of their employers. (Once professionals were workers who defined their own rights and responsibilities, but today they are increasingly subjected to external instruction and regulation.) What is clear from Abbott's work is that professions which do not adapt to new environments – whether they are economic, political or technical – will lose their ability to control key facets of their work, even as the work that they do simultaneously changes.

Again I turn to Boczkowski. After noting that online newspapers may have two newsrooms rather than one, he observes: “advertising and marketing personnel may also influence what gets covered, via topic selection and budget allocation, to a greater extent that what is usually the case in print newspapers...” And, “technical and design personnel also seem to inform how the news gets reported, from the use of multimedia and interactive tools to the adoption of the notion of a visual interface as an integral part of the storytelling efforts.” Finally, through comments and chat boards, users seem to have more of an impact on what is newsworthy than had been true in the print media, where as I noted in 1978, reporters and editors zealously defended their expertise, including their ability to define news and determine how it would be covered.

Through interviews and observations, one can see the same forces in the digitalizing new media. Klinenberg notes that as the profit-margins of the printed media have contracted, corporations which already owned radio and television stations, such as Tribune, have shrunk their reportorial and editorial staffs, developed online capacities, and combined television, online and print capabilities.¹⁴ Some of my students and acquaintances have been associated with a well-known Tribune newspaper. They remind me that reporters have become “redundant” and forced to find new jobs. Those who remain on the now-smaller news staff bemoan their inability to do “real reporting,” especially investigative reporting. (Investigative reporting costs both time and money. It is an investment in truth.) Also, one former editor who now has a tenured position at a rather good school of journalism advises me that the association of print media with television and, more important, with online media demands new mental habits. As she put it, reporters must now “think in images.” As they write for online media, they must ask themselves how they will illustrate their story. Thinking in terms of pictures instead of linear argumentation, reporters may search for different facts (as in facts that imply pictures) rather than facts that imply mere words.

Thinking in Images: To be sure, movies and television also are based on images. Indeed, I recall conversation with a NEWS reporter in which he explained one difference between newspaper and television reporting. In that December chat some forty-years ago, he told me about an interview with a veterinarian that he (and his cameraman) had filmed the previous week. The vet had advised that certain plants used to decorate during the (northern hemisphere) Christmas season grew small red berries that were poisonous to dogs. As the reporter left the building in which the vet had his office, he noticed one of those plants with its telltale red berries beside the building's door. “Just seeing that meant we could go to double system” [illustrate sound film with silent film], he told me. He had thought visually. It's one thing for reporters for some media to think visually; it's another for reporters working in all media to do so.

However, computer programs may also constrain thought, as even the American military has complained. According to the New York Times, even the military command in Afghanistan and Iraq openly criticize PowerPoint. It reported, “Brig. Gen. H. R. McMaster, who banned PowerPoint presentations when he led the successful effort to secure the northern Iraqi city of Tal Afar in 2005, ...liken[ed] PowerPoint to an internal threat. PowerPoint's worst offense is... rigid lists of bullet points (in, say, a presentation on a conflict's causes) that take no account

¹³ In *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1988).

¹⁴ Klinenberg, op. cit.

of interconnected political, economic and ethnic forces. 'If you divorce war from all of that, it becomes a targeting exercise.'¹⁵

Additionally, new ways of accomplishing professional tasks may lend new meaning to existing distinctions. I think here of Boczkowski's discussion of hard and soft digital news.¹⁶ Because in the United States newswriters want to maximize "users" [to maximize advertising income] and define hard news as information vital to users, they want to carry the "big stories" of the day. At some online news media, Reporters specializing in hard news must not only revise and update the hard news for which they are responsible during their shift, but also they are responsible for five stories a day. Responsibility for five stories is well beyond the quota at a print daily decades ago, when reporters may have aimed to cover one assigned story and to enterprising another.

Marginal Differentiation: However, soft news (loosely speaking feature stories) takes on a different meaning in media that are part of market systems. I interpret Boczkowski as implying that soft news provides the marginal differentiation between news outlets. The user might turn to a favorite online news medium or blog not only because he or she likes its politics and feels assured that it will cover the significant stories of the day, but also because the user expects to find interesting features. Since feature reporters must produce only two stories a week, the digital media transform them (not hard-news reporters) into *the* enterprising newswriters.

Of course, not all digital media, including on-line news media, even bother to cover the 24/7 news cycle. For the past few months, I have been reading Chilean newspapers online. I have tended to favor the online Santiago Times so that I do not have to deal with the idiosyncrasies of Google translations. Perhaps because it captures English speakers like me, that medium chooses not to compete in the 24/7 news cycle. Whatever the reason, it usually looks the same at 21:00 o'clock as at 7:00. Some writers feel that economic competition may drive online news media to honor the 24/7 news cycle. Thus, Ken Leon-Dermota asked whether El Mostrado will force El Mercurio's online edition to be more open to more news stories to attract more readers 24/7.

Such questions are as empirical as attempts to demonstrate how, in market-driven media systems, the political views of owners affect the identification and processing of news. Some of the books I have recently read about Latin America's news media, particularly Ken Leon-Dermota's And Well Tied Down (Chile Inedito) and Kristen Sorensen's Media, Memory, and Human Rights in Chile, as well as Sallie Hughes' Newsrooms in Conflict: Journalism and the Democratization of Mexico, document how newspapers in authoritarian and market-based media systems may choose not to carry a story that may harm the economic or political interests of its owner or contradict the owner's personal or religious values.¹⁷ Leon-Dermota is particularly brilliant at combining methods – obtaining interviews and using content analyses to confirm how patterns of coverage conform to the editorial policies discussed in those interviews or inferred from ownership patterns and known political allegiances.

¹⁵ "Like an insurgency, PowerPoint has crept into the daily lives of military commanders and reached the level of near obsession. The amount of time expended on PowerPoint, the Microsoft presentation program of computer-generated charts, graphs and bullet points, has made it a running joke in the Pentagon and in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"PowerPoint makes us stupid," Gen. James N. Mattis of the Marine Corps, the Joint Forces commander, said this month at a military conference in North Carolina. (He spoke without PowerPoint.) Brig. Gen. H. R. McMaster, who banned PowerPoint presentations when he led the successful effort to secure the northern Iraqi city of Tal Afar in 2005, followed up at the same conference by likening PowerPoint to an internal threat.

"It's dangerous because it can create the illusion of understanding and the illusion of control," General McMaster said in a telephone interview afterward. "Some problems in the world are not bullet-izable."

Elizabeth Bumiller, "We Have Meant the Enemy and He is PowerPoint." New York Times, April 27, 2010, downloaded April 27, 2010.

¹⁶ See Boczkowski, P (2009). Rethinking hard and soft news production: From common ground to divergent paths. Journal of Communication, 59, 98-116.

¹⁷ In her book, Hughes contrasts authoritarian, market-based and civic media systems. Mixed systems are also possible.

Such examples instruct us to examine the mutual determination of structure and culture. How does it happen that newswriters come to agree with their editors and the editors with their owners, as Warren Breed reported in his classic observational article from the 1950s, “Social Control in the Newsroom?”¹⁸ One answer is that reporters who cannot tolerate their editors’ views may quit (or be fired). Journalism is a stepping-stone to other jobs; there are relatively few reporters in late middle-age. Another is that newsrooms may themselves be arenas of contestation.

News, Culture and Structure

The contemporary sociological literature insists that culture and structure are embedded within one another. They are mutually interdependent. One can observe this interdependence in routine practices, but it is easier to analyze this mutuality when one examines an exception to the rule. Conflicts in newsrooms constitute such exceptions and reveal the interface of culture and structure, especially when newswriters strive to find ways to agree with one another and so to restore working relationships¹⁹

Earlier I mentioned how the Seaboard City Daily killed Cardinal Cushing’s fulsome praise of Martin Luther King. That story is a combination of culture and structure. Cushing’s statement challenged Irish Catholic socio-cultural understandings common in Seaboard City. The people who had expressed opinions on Cushing’s statement included the local editor, the city editor, and an assistant city editor – all of whom could claim a structural interest in the “reaction story.” They appealed to the managing editor, who suggested the additional phone call to Cushing’s residence.

Officially, the editorial compromise did not concern market consideration. No one had phoned the publisher, who was an upper-class white Anglo-Saxon Protestant as were a few of the other top editors. The men I was observing knew the publisher preferred not to offend his readers’ sensitivities. On another occasion, a headline writer had explained to me that a publisher (and his newspaper) should be able to respond to all groups. (Using his hands to illustrate the ability of the Daily’s publisher to do so, the headline writer pointed his little finger outward as he pretended to sip from a glass of champagne and then mimed a blue-collar worker drinking a bottle of beer.) That evening’s compromise left the local editor and an editorial writer annoyed, but no one used such words as “racism” or “prejudice,” terms that would have made it more difficult for everyone to work together. Equally important, since the editors had presented their case and the managing editor had found an acceptable compromise, the men could continue to believe that the Seaboard City Daily exercised freedom of the press and that they made decisions in the democratic interest. They believed they were engaged in civic, not market-driven journalism.

I suspect that few North Americans believe that their media are market-driven; they prefer to believe that all citizens of the United States exercise freedom of expression. (Technically, we have the freedom to express many ideas on our own front porch, but may need our neighbor’s permission to make the same statements on his veranda.) My next example only indirectly concerns news. Many of my colleagues believe that my last book Wannabe U: Inside the Corporate University is about the University of Connecticut, where I work. In a local

¹⁸ Warren Breed, ‘Social Control in the Newsroom: A. Functional Analysis’, *Social Forces*, vol. 32 (1955), PP. 326-35. Laurel Leff provided a particularly well documented example. She used archival research and interviews to produce the award-winning Buried By the Times, the tale of why the New York Times did not cover the holocaust. One reason was that the Times’ publisher, who was himself Jewish, viewed Judaism as a religion rather than an ethnicity. Therefore, even as he helped distant cousins escape the Nazis, he viewed the victims of the concentration campus as Poles, Russians and Germans rather than as members of a Jewish people. He also feared increasing anti-Semitism in the United States. As Warren Breed might have predicted, the Times’ top editors and reporters defined Judaism as their boss did.

Other common examples seem more explicitly concerned with power and structure. Knowing that the New York Times knew details of the Bay of Pigs Invasion, President John Kennedy phoned its publisher and asked him to kill its story until after the invasion had started. Many presidents, prime ministers, senators, legislators, and mayors have complained about news coverage at one time or another. Others have resisted the temptation to do so.

¹⁹ See also Sallie Hughes, op. cit.

newspaper, I have also published an opinion piece that criticizes the current president of the university. Yet, the president said to me, “No one ever told me what to write and I won’t tell you what to write.” Several deans have advised me that the central administration has no reason to be angry with me. They say I have merely done my job: I have engaged in scholarship and written it up in a form that will let readers know that the University of Connecticut employs sound scholars. Frankly, I suspect that my president does not love my last book, but we are members of an academic culture that demands at least lip service to academic freedom, a variant of the freedom of expression supposedly enjoyed by the news media. That culture limits how the president may express his reaction to my work.²⁰

So far as I know, tell-all articles and books about one’s employer are relatively rare in the United States. At least, they are rare enough for someone to make a fuss when such a book is published. Do other people self-censor or do they just not care? How are we to interpret the failure of people to take advantage of freedom of expression? What does it mean to be a member of a culture that praises these freedoms, but increasingly honors the corporate right to self-expression, even when those corporate rights might conflict with the rights of the individual citizen? Are some people so sure that people in the United States enjoy freedom of speech that they do not even notice when it is violated? Perhaps to notice would involve questioning their faith in this dominant American ideology.

I want to end on with a final related example. In 1978, I was on a juror in New York City. Most people thought the accused was innocent. Several did not. We had to stay overnight at a crummy hotel on Staten Island, where I shared a room with a graduate student in sociology who had a marvelous faith in the jury system. She believed the accused was guilty, but the next day as debate proceeded she changed her mind. Eventually the jury declared the fellow innocent. As we left the courtroom, she praised the American jury system: how grand to be a member of a judicial system where people could reason with one another and change their minds. She was the only person who had turned the full 180 degrees and changed her mind. In her very person, she had exemplified culture and structure; she had proved to herself that the jury system work.

I suspect that as digital news replaces the print media, many citizens of the United States will not notice how neo-liberalism is limiting their freedom of expression. Able to choose which of the available materials they want to read and what (within limits) to post on their webpage, they might not notice that blogs are an exercise in selective attention, that media audiences have become fragmented and stratified, and that as corporations, the media are enjoying more power. To notice how very much our media are market-driven may endanger our claims to American exceptionalism -- and I am fairly sure that few of us want to do that. But, you asked me to speak about method; and so I wish to observe that my suspicion is an empirical question and not a qualitative one.

²⁰ Parenthetically, the President of Wannabe University’s statement reminded me of reports concerning Oprah Winfrey’s reaction to Kitty Kelley’s recently published biography of her. As Kelley often does, she searched for scandals. The Chilean press quoted Winfrey as saying that the United States has freedom of speech and she has nothing to say about Kelley’s book one way or another. The American press reported that on her television show, Winfrey threw the book in the garbage. Both reports are perfectly consistent with American interpretations of free speech.