

Special to PressThink: Interview With Herbert Gans, America's Senior Sociologist of News
Sociologist Herbert J. Gans wrote the scholarly classic, *Deciding What's News*, in 1979. In it, he calls for news from multiple perspectives, which means "reporting all ideas that could resolve issues and help problems, even if the ideas come from ideologically small groups." That would change coverage of politics, the economy, war, and everyday life.

*In the late 70s, Herbert J. Gans decided to study how journalists make decisions at Time, Newsweek, the CBS Evening News and the NBC Nightly News. So he went to talk with them at length, and observe what they do. The results were published in **Deciding What's News**, one of the key works in the "sociology of the newsroom" tradition.*

Gans, who teaches at Columbia, is a sociologist, so the tacit codes by which journalists live were perhaps easier for him to see. "One of the journalists put it nicely when he said I was writing down the unwritten rules of journalism," he said. "But rules contain values, and the book is also about the values and ideology of a profession which deems itself objective and nonideological."

His conclusion was that journalists absorb and express in their work--without always realizing it--the ruling ideas in American society. "I felt that my book was as much about the dominant culture in America, and about its economic and political underpinnings, as about them." And yet Gans was sometimes critical of the "bias" criticism we see today. "The assumption is that distorted news can be replaced by undisorted news; but that assumption is untenable."

Among students of the press, he is known for arguing that news should be "multiperspectival," which may be happening today with the rise of the Net and lower barriers to entry. Instead of the dominant parties defining politics, multiple parties. Instead of the dominant ideas being heard, multiple ideas. Instead of the dominant speakers in the news, many more speakers. Instead of a dominant frame, multiple frames.

*Gans is a liberal who has studied the injuries of class, suburban life, popular culture and journalism. His works are filled with warnings about the centralizing of power and the disempowerment of too many Americans. He is also a realist. He constantly stresses how difficult and harried the life of a journalist is. His most recent book, summarizing what he's learned in almost 25 years of press watching, is **Democracy and the News** (Oxford, 2003). (Read a review [here](#).) Here's our exchange.*

PressThink: In *Deciding What's News* and other settings over the years, you have argued that a "multiple perspectives" approach to news would be better for journalists and democracy-- better than the doctrine of objectivity, as it is generally seen in American journalism. What have events since 1979 done for this thesis?

Herbert Gans. I still believe that what I called a multiperspectival approach is vital for journalism and democracy, and so I proposed it once more in *Democracy and the News*. If the de facto main day to day democratic role of journalists is to report what the top elected officials are telling the citizens (what I think of as "top down" journalism), then only that perspective is needed for political and related stories, or when there is controversy or conflict, that expands to "both sides."

The solo perspective also leads to rhetoric about that collectivity, "the nation." If you believe, however that journalists should also inform citizens about such subjects as the country's political diversity, the politically relevant activities and ideas of their fellow citizens, and what issues are concerning these citizens (which our elected representatives also need to know) then journalists need to be multiperspectival: to encompass all the important viewpoints from people with different values, interests, incomes, etc.

PressThink: Does that mean covering more things, different things?

Herbert Gans. Yes. Journalists should be covering politically relevant activities of all social strata, economic classes, races, and so on-- which means that journalism has to be more than about the issues and problems that concern the white middle class mainstream. But multiperspectivism goes further; it also means reporting all ideas that could resolve issues and help problems, even if the ideas come from ideologically small groups. In addition, political news should not be just about partisan politics but also about the economy-- for example, how economic power is expressed in and uses political power, and what the various corporate lobbies are doing in Washington day in and day out.

PressThink: You and I know the first thing journalists say when presented with a list of Better Things to Cover is: “You gotta understand. We have limited space, only so many minutes of news.” I'm curious: What would your reply to this reply be?

Herbert Gans. I realize that the scarcity of news hole space and time, as well as audience interest, limit the number of perspectives that can be reported, but the principle on which my notion is based remains valid and journalists need to figure out when and how far they can go.

PressThink: Funny, I would give a similar answer. In many talks with journalists about ideas, in what I would call non-defensive settings like a conference where you are getting paid to reflect, I gradually learned the value of saying to them: this is what I think, you figure out how it works (if you think it works at all). And it's usually a principle like yours.

Herb Gans says you have a duty to multiply the perspectives before the public when you report the news. Herb Gans declines (as I would) to specify exactly *how* you should do it. Every reporting situation, we know, has its own constraints, which it is the journalist's job to reckon with, and that happens in a concrete setting with dozens of real world limitations.

What we can recommend for “the press” is one thing. What journalists should do on the ground, in the news setting itself, is another. You can discuss both, and argue your points. But I think there is always going to be a point where it's wise to say: you guys figure it out. Which really means: we haven't taken it that far... Usually, because we don't know enough!

Herbert Gans: Well, academics are not and do not have to be practitioners and so can suggest what might be rethought and changed in the profession-- and indeed, that is, as I see it, one of their roles in the division of labor between newsroom and classroom. They should not be required or expected just to teach the status quo to the next generation.

Except there is a fly in this ointment; many of the J-School academics are themselves practitioners, or former ones, and so they side with ex-colleagues in the press, accusing other academics of being impractical, which is hardly fair. And change is apt to be impractical until it is accepted and thus no longer change. To complicate things yet further, the impractical ones may not have been practitioners; they have come out of mass communication, sociology and political science.

PressThink: That's true. Where these perspectives—journalist, teacher, media critic, sociologist, political science professor—can come together is in analysis of press performance, and the imagination of alternatives. At that level, then: How might your principle—multiple perspectives—have worked in covering the war in Iraq?

Herbert Gans: If such an approach had been in effect during the Iraq war, the news media's cheerleader role might have been supplemented by earlier and more detailed news of the various kinds of protest against the war and how it was conducted--unilateralist, pre-emptive--a protest that began before the war itself.

If the multiperspectival reporting were applied to Iraq, and diverse Iraqi's other than just the Pentagon's pals, we might have learned that Iraq wasn't such a sophisticated modern society, that extended families, clans and tribes still played a major role in it, with values that went directly counter to the American style of democracy and capitalism, which the administration intended to implement.

PressThink: Suppose we saw coverage like that. If the press is potent, would it not have had an effect?

Herbert Gans: Whether such news would have changed administration policy or the war is dubious, for we are currently governed by an ideological party which sees only its own perspective while demonizing all others. Moreover, the power of the news and the ability of journalists to affect society is limited, sporadic and unpredictable. But the amount and diversity of relevant information would have been greater, and who knows what subsequent and indirect impact it might have had.

Moreover, one would have to ask what if multiperspectivism had existed for a number of years and had already had a cumulative impact. We would know lots more about all the domestic and international issues that keep coming up and the country's history might be a little different now. I assume the ability of Southern and other states to discourage black voting would have been old hat long before it was discovered happening in Florida in 2000, and all kinds of election results would have been different.

PressThink: So are the multiple perspectives you recommend an alternative to the doctrine called objectivity, or do they amount to a form of objectivity?

Herbert Gans: I see no connection between multiperspectivism and objectivity. Journalists cannot be objective in their choice of topics or sources (and what is objective about privileging the White House as the first source of regular domestic news?), or of what they define as facts. However, they must report these sources and facts objectively or at least with detachment from their own personal values and biases. And that doctrine would apply no matter how many perspectives they are reporting from.

PressThink: I want to ask you a more detailed question about the philosophy of objectivity, which is still standing, in a sense, although in many other ways seems about to fall. To me it was the greatest puzzle in twentieth century American journalism; and your work, in particular, seemed to take on objectivity as a central problem in understanding the newsroom and how it works.

Many discussions about mainstream journalism seem to run aground on or near the big rock “objectivity,” which is not only what the press, in certain situations, says about itself, but also what it uses to keep from having to say much of anything about itself. Particularly in the matter you wrote so well about: deciding what’s news.

For example, I can find out what the news standards of the New York Times are. They exist, and are probably being written into new form by the new standards editor there, Allan Siegal. But what if I want to find out what the *political* news standards are? Let’s say, the standards for taking someone seriously as candidate for public office. Do they exist?

Well, they may, in the minds of editors and reporters. But because of objectivity, they are not written down or codified, as far as I know. If one wants to argue with the Times about them, one is arguing with something not officially declared extant. So in a sense the subject disappears on you. If you want to talk about the duck on some guy’s shoulder and he says: what duck? you are straight out of luck.

To me, that’s one of the fascinating powers of objectivity: to “disappear” discussion. It can be used by journalists to keep from having to say much of anything about matters of news judgment. In this sense, it’s a means for the press to keep politics at bay, and it offers protection from instant and hostile criticism. Both of these may be valid goals, I think.

But here is my question, does objectivity as a professional code, doctrine and practice, still dominate in American journalism, despite cracks, or do you see it

breaking apart, coming under assault, or perhaps morphing into something else?

Herbert Gans: For me, maybe because I am a sociologist, objectivity is the conscious effort to be detached, to keep one's own personal values out of, not necessarily the topic chosen, but the method with which facts are gathered and the writing so that the final story (or research project findings) has neither an investment in the answer nor is a statement supporting the reporter's or researcher's values. (I exclude values on which there is assumed to be consensus, e.g. that we support our troops, our capitalism is the best and our democracy is the only one, and so on.)

It seems to me this kind of objectivity will survive, because once a news firm, or any other firm with an ideologically diverse audience, takes sides--especially on issues on which the audience is divided or polarized--it runs the risk of alienating a large number of customers, or important advertisers worried about alienating their customers. And this it will not do if it does not need to. Profit almost always trumps ideology.

None of this denies or contradicts the existence of unconscious values, or value laden assumptions, but objectivity works at the level of the deliberate and conscious, at intent not outcome. Media critics tend--and rightly so--to focus on outcomes, to call attention to the values that lurk underneath, making them explicit and arguing that other values should be considered, as well. Journalists call this balance, and come out for the both sides they have space or time for. I go further and say be multiperspectival.

PressThink: So then objectivity is not the great demon some say it is?

Herbert Gans: I don't see this as demonic but a practical solution for a capitalist press in a heterogeneous country without a party press, or the kinds of ideological and programmatic parties that would care about having an openly ideological press. (The Bushists do care, I think, and if Murdoch, Fox, and others were not providing their kind of press, they would likely start their own--or they probably would if the news media did not allow them to saturate the news with their events and ideas.)

This kind of objectivity is not a perfect solution, though I don't know if there is such. I think it could be improved, however, by making additional room in the news media for more opinion-- especially opinion journalism by people who have done the legwork and can therefore provide an "informed" opinion. I would also like more commentary from a larger variety of commentators and

the general public so that as many points of view as possible get heard--intensely multiperspectival opinion, if you will.

I am not sure I have answered your question, but as I understand that question, it really has to do not with objectivity but with the purposes of journalism, if any, beyond getting the stories that will be professionally legitimate and commercially desirable. These purposes help to determine the norms that should guide news judgment, but as you suggest, journalists do not say much about the purposes of journalism.

In the new book, I talk about one purpose, the preservation and advancement of democracy. I begin with the journalists' own statement thereof (from Tony Lewis, to be specific): journalists inform citizens, and a citizenry so informed is what journalists believe democracy requires. Presumably journalists have other overt purposes, but I have not inquired into them. All I know is that how you determine the purposes has little to do with objectivity as I think journalists define it.

PressThink: I think the distinction you make is crucial, and clearer than my question was. Different journalistic purposes can be served by the practical discipline called objectivity. Even opinion journalism can show greater or lesser objectivity, depending on whether it comes from journalists who have done the legwork, talked to many people, researched the question and so on. Presumably, then, a newsroom that was committed to “multiperspectival” journalism would be better at producing reports that didn’t just conform to pre-existing values among journalists.

In *Democracy and the News* you argue that journalism can help in fostering a “citizen's democracy,” which you define as “that form of representative government that maximizes the political responsibilities, rights, and most important, the public decision making of citizens.” What would journalists be doing—especially during this campaign season—if they wanted to help foster “public decision making by citizens?” And where do you go to report on something like that?

Herbert Gans: I am not a journalist, but I would think that any activity by citizens in the campaign process would be relevant, from the questions people in Iowa and New Hampshire ask of, and the comments they make to, candidates who are campaigning there. Also what citizens write to the local media, say to each other-- for example, about issues none of the candidates are covering, or are covering inadequately. And as always, journalists should be covering the people who are not participating in any of the campaign; they are,

after all, the majority of the citizenry most of the time and are the ones most consistently left out of political and domestic news coverage generally.

PressThink: Here is a quote from candidate Howard Dean in a **recent** Wired magazine article: "The Internet community is wondering what its place in the world of politics is," Dean says. "Along comes this campaign to take back the country for ordinary human beings, and the best way you can do that is through the Net. We listen. We pay attention. If I give a speech and the blog people don't like it, next time I change the speech."

Dean is talking about supporters getting more voice in the campaign. Meaning those supporters who are active in reading and writing about politics through the Dean weblogs they maintain or visit. "We listen. We pay attention." Is that a significant development? Is the Dean campaign closer to a citizen's democracy, in your view?

Herbert Gans: Dean certainly sounds as if he is listening to his constituency, and more democratically than the candidates who do their attention paying to consultants and the findings of surveys and focus groups in lieu of the people they can't meet face to face right now.

However, I see a campaign as at best an introduction for citizens' democracy; the real thing can only take place when there is a government ready to make decisions on the big issues. And then it has to decide which citizens to favor at the expense of others when necessary-- and when to put citizens behind not only the national interest but also the demands of the economically vital (like those who create jobs) and the politically powerful.

But there is one complication even around the exciting events surrounding Dean's Web-related constituents: the fact that the people who are being active via the web are not representative; as always, they are the better educated citizenry-- the same people that always get involved the moment a new form of participation becomes available. (Usually they are also the more affluent, though maybe not in Dean's case.)

And they are the ones who vote as well, which is why I said in the book that we are moving toward an upscale democracy. This is obviously not Dean's fault, but at some point it has to be addressed. In a proper citizens' democracy, the less educated, less affluent, and the non voting non participating people also have to be drawn in or at least consulted and represented, and all that is very difficult.

Incidentally, although the journalists are beginning to take notice of the Web supporters in the Dean and other campaigns, they still have to start covering the citizens in the Web organizations. What I have read gives me a better sense of the organizations than of the people in them. Same point as I made before; journalists ought to do more "bottoms up" reporting about what citizens are doing, not just what the candidates and campaign organizations are doing to and for them.

Finally, one of the heartening things about the Web support for Dean is that young people are getting politically involved. Now we will have to see whether and how long they will stay, including for the election and especially if Dean is not nominated and they have to work for someone else. People have to reconcile themselves to having to vote for the lesser of the available evils but that takes a while getting used to.