August-September 2003

Journalism's Identity Crisis

What is the news for?

Joli Jensen

Democracy and the News, by Herbert J. Gans, New York: Oxford University Press, 240 pages, $26

What kind of news do we need for democracy to flourish? This question bedeviled journalists and scholars throughout the 20th century, and now it animates the latest book from sociologist Herbert J. Gans. His answer, however, is oddly contradictory. In *Democracy and the News*, Gans argues that we need a different kind of news, along with differently trained journalists, while simultaneously suggesting that journalism itself "can do little to reduce the political imbalance between citizens and the economic, political and other organizations that dominate America." His final chapter suggests economic, political, and social reforms to redress this imbalance of power, but only after telling us how little the news can really "do."

So which is it? Can the right kind of news foster the right kind of democracy? Or does democracy depend on something other than the information we call "news"? Journalists and media academics want to believe that the right information will guarantee active, engaged, informed citizens who can participate wisely in self-government. Gans tries to have it both ways: News practices can and should be changed to encourage citizenship, but in the end, they don't really matter. If we examine the reasons behind this contradiction, they suggest that there is something amiss in the way that he -- and we -- understand news, citizenship, and democracy.

Media scholars such as James W. Carey have long noted a fundamental problem with the definition of the news that Gans and many journalists use. They see news as the

transmission of messages to a stubbornly inattentive public. Attempts to measure how well this process functions usually find that it doesn't work very well. People don't understand news stories, nor do they remember them; worse yet, they fail to change their beliefs or their actions because of them.

Journalism's theory of democracy still relies on a belief that an informed citizenry will be an engaged citizenry, that an engaged citizenry will be more participatory, and that the result will be a more democratic society. As Michael Schudson points out in *The Good Citizen* (1998), this is a relatively modern view of what each of us should be. Democracy emerged -- and sometimes flourished -- with alternative visions of citizenship and information.

For the founding fathers, the ideal citizen was a white, property-owning male whose vote was a ratification of a fellow prominent citizen's trustworthiness to lead. Contemporary democratic staples like freedom of the press, party politics, open deliberation, campaigns, and even widespread public education were not considered vital elements for citizenship in the colonial period. Our first version of democratic citizenship was, in Schudson's analysis, a politics of assent.

This gave way, in the mid 19th century, to a politics of affiliation, where the ideal citizen was a party loyalist, aware of his party's passions and convictions and active in the carnivalesque atmosphere of conventions and election days. It wasn't until the turn of the 20th century that the ideal of an independent, rational, informed citizen became dominant, and it was in that context that rational, informed, "objective" news became central to our vision of democracy. The informed citizen needs a neutral, trustworthy information source -- knowledge of the facts -- not knowledge of the platform planks in his political party or the lineage of his potential representative. The emerging profession of journalism relied increasingly on this vision of news as disinterested expertise, fueling the public's need, or right, to know.

Gans, like many social critics, begins with the premise that an uninformed public is a disengaged public. He believes that "we live in a country in which the normal state of the citizenry is ‘disempowerment.’" Current news practices, supposedly flawed and ineffective, must be changed. But if the effort won’t make that much difference in the end, why bother? Gans’ case is logically muddled because he, like many others, presumes that information, civic participation, and democracy require each other. That is a presumption worth questioning.

There is a way out of his muddle that salvages many of Gans’ most interesting points, but only if we redefine the key concept. News is best understood not as information, but as a form of more general, mediated storytelling. A participatory democracy relies on many things, information among them. But this more cultural definition includes all the stories we tell ourselves. If professional journalism is but one of the ways we tell ourselves stories, and stories are only part of what sustains our common life, then what matters (and what doesn’t) about how news operates?

Let’s examine Gans’ case. In a chapter dedicated to "Journalistic Practices and their Problems," Gans sketches a familiar story: the sorry state of national journalism. On the "production" side, there is shrinkage, conglomeration, and consolidation in the news industry, declining foreign news coverage, and increasing focus on commercially successful (rather than professionally excellent) news practices.

On the "consumption" side, he describes declining audience trust in the media, along with a general disinterest in "traditional" political and economic coverage. These general problems are exacerbated by established journalistic practices, which mean that news flows from big cities, especially Washington, and is gathered from established, news-savvy insiders. The national news is routinized and mass produced, paying attention mostly to established government sources, and fostering very little independent investigation of the economy, or of the consequences of political decisions.

Gans then moves beyond the "informed citizen" ideology in a discussion of "The Problem of News Effects," summarizing the different social functions the news may have. Here he unintentionally -- but crucially -- moves away from his model of news as information transmission. Instead, he considers news to be a modern social and cultural form. Gans points out that the news has a function of social continuity -- demonstrating by its recurring formulaic coverage that "the social order continues to exist." He also argues that the news informs people of what journalists deem important, legitimates the dominant social system, possibly shapes opinions, and (rarely) has effects on individual actions. There is also, he suggests, a watchdog effect (keeping tabs on the powerful), and general effects on political opinion, especially around election time.

But these news functions have little to do with information transmission, and much more to do with storytelling -- they spring from the media's ongoing portrayal of the world. The news offers us mundane and sometimes heroic pageantry, the spectacle of dramatic players whom we hold to certain standards, and whose actions and experiences have some implication for our common lives. These "social functions" are really about news portraying the world *theatrically*, rather than informing us objectively of facts. Without a free press, Gans rightly notes, we are at risk for autocracy or chaos. But is this because we will be inadequately "informed" about facts? Or is it because we will be without access to diverse, contradictory, and meaningful portrayals of our common life?

What does the news *mean* to us? The transmission model of news that Gans relies on misses most of what makes news meaningful in a modern democracy. It imagines the public as passive information recipients, not as constant participants in dramas of private and public life. As Carey has long noted, the transmission view of news misdefines public life as a technocratic process of information circulation, dissemination, and retrieval, rather than as dramatic, ritual participation in common experience.

The transmission view limits news to political and possibly economic "information," and dismisses most of what people are eagerly consuming -- newsmagazines, feature stories,

celebrity gossip -- as not-news, as mere entertainment. The more that journalists and scholars cling to this definition, the more the audience becomes their scapegoat. This logic leads to chronic complaining: What is *wrong* with people who don't eagerly attend to "real" news, weigh the pros and cons of policies in small, lively political conversations, then rush off to precinct meetings and voting booths? And it leads to a recurring implicit hope, shared by Gans: that with the right kinds of news, maybe people would become the right kinds of citizens, and stop wasting their time with pop culture trash.

Gans' remarkable academic career makes this a surprising hope. He has a deep understanding of people's lived experiences and has long been an articulate champion of cultural pluralism. His extraordinary participant-observation work (of an Italian-American community in Boston's West End in *The Urban Villagers*; of suburban experience in *The Levittowners*) demonstrates his unusual respect for the varieties of imaginative worlds we live in. His seminal work on cultural pluralism, *Popular Culture and High Culture*, describes and honors the varieties of "taste cultures" that make up a democratic society. But when it comes to thinking about news and democracy, he maintains a definition of news as information that almost completely misses its role as culture.

Imagine, instead, a more cultural view of the news. Such a view would see news as a vast, commercial, professionalized system of telling stories that reporters think that the public ought to know, in response to what the public is already interested in. In his recommendations for journalistic change, Gans actually tends toward this more cultural approach, and offers suggestions that challenge longstanding notions about the line between information and entertainment. In this way, he is clearly a sociologist rather than a journalist; few professional journalists would allow concerns about neutrality and objectivity to be so blithely disregarded.

For example, Gans devotes a chapter ("The News: What Might Be Done") to how the news could become more "user-friendly," more responsive to everyday people's actual interests. Challenging many truisms about what the news is and ought to be, he calls for intensive ethnographic investigation into what people want from the news, with a concurrent attempt to offer it to them. Gans suggests that local news constantly seek to address the "effects, implications and impacts" of national and international news on the local community. He calls for journalists to spend more time hanging around coffee shops, rather than in the corridors of power.

More responsive, localized news formats have been attempted, with mixed success. Among the most admired, at least by critics, are the efforts of the controversial "public journalism" -- a range of practices that involve journalists with the people and communities they cover -- detailed by Jay Rosen and others. Among the least admired are the "local angles" on national stories offered by local broadcast news.

These attempts at user-friendly news tend toward the fatuous and pandering: man-in-the-street interviews, alarmist reports into product safety, and call-in segments are rarely extolled as democratic progress.
USA Today, the ultimate user-friendly national paper, is not at all what critics think the news ought to be. In fact, the more "user-friendly" and local the news becomes, the less it addresses the "Why?" questions that Gans ultimately hopes the news can cover.

Indeed, the most interesting part of Gans' argument is his suggestion that news needs to be reconfigured to address *Why?* rather than the traditional *Who? What? When? Where?* of the canonical news story. He calls this "explanatory journalism" and he conceives of it as identifying causes and possible cures for current conditions. In his move away from fact-based, neutral, impersonal hard-news stories, Gans suggests that journalism needs to focus much more on understanding what leads to, and follows from, events and conditions.

What Gans is really recommending is for journalism to be more sociological -- more about understanding and interpreting what underlies experience. But current journalism's attempts at explanation are rarely interpretive or analytical in these ways. While venues such as *The New York Review of Books*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic, National Review,* and reason offer analyses to the more academically inclined, "Why?" questions are usually addressed in the popular media by "dueling experts" who offer starkly contrasting arguments as to why Americans are mistrusted abroad, or why oil prices are falling, or why someone is behind in the polls.

There are many differences between academic analysis and current versions of public discussion. Academic types are all about "Why?" and turn to each other to offer explanations. But the current public-discussion approach to "Why?" questions is found mostly on talk radio or late-night talk show monologues, where there is precious little recourse to what we would want to call evidence or knowledge or understanding. This, then, becomes an issue of social class and styles of explanation. While Gans never makes this claim explicitly, in *Democracy and the News*, he is seeking ways to make academic styles of explanation accessible and palatable for a wider audience.

Gans also calls for the development of explicitly opinion-based news stories -- effectively dissolving American journalism's longstanding insistence on a reporter's neutrality. In his most innovative suggestion, he argues for consciously "multi-perspectival" news coverage, designed to represent all strata of society, by hiring journalists from differing social classes and ethnic groups. Finally, he even suggests adding satire and humor to traditional news coverage, as well as "news fiction" (like *The West Wing*), all to help make the news interesting and accessible to all kinds of people.

Well. This will curdle the blood of most journalism educators and professionals. They will point out that many of Gans' suggestions are already with us, but as entertainment, not "news." The commercial mass media are by their nature "user-friendly"; in order to make money, they will tell us just about anything that enough of us want to know about,

in whatever ways we find most appealing. The mass media "tell the world" in varieties of ways, including humor, satire, news fiction, magazine stories, local angles, and opinions. We have all kinds of stories available to us through the contemporary mass media, which means we also get our "news" from fiction, humor, gossip, contests, jokes, and songs.

What about "multi-perspectival" journalism? If we look at news in cultural terms, understanding that news is one of the many ways we now tell ourselves about the world, then who is doing the telling, in what ways, and about whose world? One of the most powerful and interesting questions in Gans' analysis is, *Whose stories does journalism tell?* Where, he rightly asks, are the voices of the working people and the poor in contemporary journalism? Where are the perspectives of the immigrant, the undereducated, the disenfranchised?

Gans' solution (as it was in his classic *High Culture and Popular Culture*) is to suggest government support for programming to the underrepresented. Another option, more amenable to libertarian sensibilities, would be to ensure that all groups have access to the communication technologies that would allow them to tell their *own* stories, to each other and to the rest of us. Cheap, accessible media technologies help foster an open marketplace of ideas, with a more diverse, inclusive, and cosmopolitan mix of media stories.

Which brings us back to the heart of the problem: What kind of news does democracy need? Gans answers that we need the kind of news that gives people the information they need to participate in public life, and to make wise political and economic decisions. I