

THE PRAGMATICS OF JOURNALISTIC TEXTS:  
TWO HUNDRED YEARS OF CHANGE

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My purpose today is to examine the development of newspaper prose through the last two hundred years and show how changes in technology have affected the ways in which news is written and presented. Newspapers are a familiar object to the modern reading public. Indeed, many people read little else. Yet, because of the unique rhetorical forms which newspapers have developed over the years, their prose is not as simple or as easy to understand as is often assumed. Suppose that on some deserted island or in some mountain hermitage there should be found a person who had been taught to read English prose by studying a library of novels, history books, and high school or college texts in various disciplines. Suppose that by some chance that person had never seen a contemporary English or American newspaper. I am certain she would find it a bewildering object, whose stories would seem to her to be arranged on the page in a strange, fragmentary way and narrated in an obscure, confused and confusing manner.

To show how this distinctive newspaper prose developed, I decided to look at how one newspaper had handled similar stories through a long period of time. The *Times* of London was chosen because it was founded in 1785 and continues to the present day. Besides its continuity of prestige and tradition, a practical factor favoring its choice was that the entire run of the paper was readily available on microfilm.

Having controlled for newspaper type and title by using the *Times*, I wanted consistency in subject matter as well. Obviously, the same story would not be printed in three different centuries, but what about similar stories in different eras? I decided to look at three sudden outbreaks of civil violence in France eighty to ninety-seven years apart:

1. The fall of the Bastille on July 14, 1789.
2. The outbreak of the Commune revolt in March, 1871.
3. The May 1968 riots.

1789: THE FALL OF THE BASTILLE. NEWS IN THE AGE OF THE STAGECOACH AND THE SAILING-SHIP.

In contrast to continental papers of the late eighteenth century, which were mostly heavily-censored four or eight-page weekly news magazines concentrating on descriptions of court ceremonials, the English newspapers of the time were already recognizably similar to modern papers. Although they did not yet have large headlines, their news stories were laid out in columns under various headings. They had advertising, entertainment and cultural items, even sports. They had a "messy vitality" the continental court papers lacked (Popkin 1990, 98-99, 106). The *Times* was fairly new, having been founded in 1785 as the *Universal Register*, changing to its present name only the year before the outbreak of the Revolution. Not yet a leading paper, it was going to make its reputation as a purveyor of foreign news in the next twenty-five years through its coverage of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars (Ascherson 1975, xi).

In the *Times'* reports of the fall of the Bastille, we see that there is a great concern for establishing the credibility of what is being reported. Because of the slowness and uncertainty of communication, "the eighteenth century lived in a perpetual fog of uncertainty about distant events" (Popkin 1989, 6). Journalists covered events far off as rumors that gradually took more definite shape (Popkin 1990, 129-130). They were not yet reporters who covered events at the scene, but rather men of letters who sat in printing offices or coffee-houses trying to evaluate their sources: rumors gathered from travelers, reports from their own foreign correspondents, stories in foreign newspapers, private letters, and such official government accounts as they might be privy to.

We can see both a difficulty of getting a topic under discussion and a concern for credibility in the *Times'* May 12, 1789 story about the opening of the Estates-General of France on May 4. Like a conversationalist who introduces a new topic with a ploy like "as I was telling you just the other day," the first sentence presents the meeting as something which is already on the table:

We have already mentioned the meeting of the States General, and shall now continue the subject.

The next two sentences are concerned with establishing the credibility of what is to follow:

The public will perceive the authenticity as well as early communication of our intelligence. A Gentleman at Versailles is engaged by this Paper to transmit us every particular on this important business, who will attend the proceedings regularly whenever the Assembly meets.

A strategy used by eighteenth century journalists for establishing credibility was the use of strict chronological order in the stories. In following the chronology of events, news writing did not distinguish between important and trivial events (Popkin 1990, 8-9). Thus, the opening of the Estates-General is described in strict chronological order, so that we find out in the second paragraph that the King's Heralds wearing "violet coloured robes, richly decorated with the French Arms, and white satin slippers, proclaimed, on horseback, by the sound of the trumpet, the opening of the States General," but we have to wait until paragraph seven for the most important news of the meeting, the statement by Necker, the widely respected Finance minister, that the French State was essentially broke, since its annual expenditures were approximately twice its income.

Except for the fact that the Estates-General had not met for nearly two hundred years, the *Times* report on its opening was the kind of parliamentary news that had been routine in England since the British Parliament had opened its doors to reporters seventeen years before. If this *Times* story of a previously scheduled event seems a little awkward to the modern newspaper reader in its presentation of the topic, how much more difficulty will the paper have in getting really shocking news under discussion?

The fall of the Bastille was a deeply disturbing event to eighteenth century European public opinion. In a hierarchical society ruled by static concepts of law and morality, popular uprisings were a threat to the social order that had to be suppressed ruthlessly. In Europe, at least until 1789, authority had always triumphed over disorder. To be sure, the French had supported the American Revolution against the British, but that was a matter of Great Power politics. Besides, after the first clashes, the American Revolution was more like a war between small, trained armies in the eighteenth century style than a popular insurrection, and leaders like Washington and Franklin were hardly instigators of undisciplined rioting. At home in Europe, repression of popular movements had been the order of the day in Holland and Geneva in the last ten years. Thus the news that the largest and most populated country in Europe could not master a revolt challenging its authority in its capital city was very bad news indeed. One way of dealing with bad news is to ignore it, as Saudi Arabian television

did the news of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait for about 24 hours after it took place. In a similar way, newspapers in France and the Francophone international press of Europe tried to minimize or forget the fall of the Bastille (Popkin 1990, 127). The highly respected *Gazette de Leyde* in Holland held off publishing first reports of the fall of the Bastille because they were so incredible (Popkin 1990, 31). In Spain, the official government organ, the *Gaceta de Madrid*, said nothing at all about it for the entire year of 1789 (Popkin 1989, 47).

Under these circumstances, it is easy to see why the *Times* begins its revelations of bad tidings with some hesitation, under the headline "Rebellion and Civil War in France":

The disputes which have for some time past convulsed this neighbouring kingdom, have at length been brought to a crisis, which no man could have foreseen or supposed.

Next, before describing events in general or in detail, the *Times* tries to prepare its readers for the full shock of the story by comparing it to something in their own experience and putting it into historical perspective:

The relation of what PARIS has been during last week, fills the mind with horror; and although we have all seen and felt the sad effects of an unlicensed populace in our own country at the time of that dreadful conflagration in London during the riots in 1780, yet even that melancholy event was far short of the general distress which not only is felt in Paris, but in the neighbourhood for many leagues around it.

We have no period in the history of Europe since the time of CHARLES the IX, in France, in 1572, affording so striking an example of a distracted government, and the bloodshed of a civil war, as that which France now exhibits.

Another paragraph of reflections on the consequences of the revolt follows, still without telling us what happened. The next two paragraphs are concerned with the *Times'* right to speak on these matters. It is asserted that other papers are printing rumors, but that the *Times* is in a position to know the true circumstances, which, it says "are sufficiently dreadful without any exaggeration," because it has access to official dispatches from the English Ambassador in Paris and to eyewitness accounts from "several foreigners of distinction, who are arrived in London for personal safety."

The chronological narration finally begins in paragraph 5, with the immediate cause of the violence, the dismissal of Necker as Finance Minister. The actual storming of the Bastille is not mentioned until paragraph 8. The story recounts quickly how the regular army garrison in Paris revolted and was joined by the armed old soldiers living in the magnificent military retirement home/hospital called Les Invalides:

The regular troops held for the protection of Paris were persuaded to join the people ; they were encamped in the *Champ de Mars*, to the number of 5000 men, and marched to the *Hotel of Invalids*, a building in the out-skirts of the city. The invalids joined the rest, and brought away all the great guns, and other ammunition, belonging to the Hospital. With this reinforcement the people then attacked the Bastille prison, which they soon made themselves masters of, and released all the State Prisoners confined there, among whom was Lord MAZARINE, an Irish Nobleman, who has been confined there near 30 years. The Prisoners in the other Gaols were freed in like manner, excepting such as were under sentence of death, whom they hung within the prison. This seemed to argue a premeditated design, as well as great caution.

The supposed Irish nobleman Lord Mazarine is the only person lifted above the anonymous mob by being mentioned by name in the paragraph on the storming of the Bastille. Unfortunately for the accuracy of the *Times* as a historical record, Lord Mazarine seems never to have existed, although an Englishman or possibly an Irishman named Major Whyte was released from the Bastille by the mob. They paraded him around the town on their shoulders in triumph, but when they found that he believed himself to be Julius Caesar, they had him quietly taken away to an asylum (Schama 1989, 407).

Note the explanatory comment in the last sentence in the preceding quotation. The eighteenth century journalist had few rhetorical models for his work, but one was the historian. Journalists considered themselves contemporary historians who were trying to explain, as well as to describe, events as they happened.

The main story continues for seventeen more paragraphs, narrating in chronological order the lynching of the Governor of the Bastille, the Mayor (Prévôt des Marchands) and the Chief of Police of Paris, and the lynchings or escapes of various known persons, including the supposed Lord Mazarine's escape to England, where he is said to have jumped off

the boat, kissed the ground three times and exclaimed, "God bless this land of liberty!"

Then there is the word "POSTSCRIPT" centered in caps in the middle of the page, followed by this paragraph, again asserting the paper's superior right to speak to the topic over competing voices:

The value of this paper will be known by the speed of our communications, for we think we can venture to pronounce, that what follows will appear in no other morning print of this day. This information is only known to a very few people.

In other words, what we would now call an "exclusive" or a "scoop" has been left to the end of the story! There follows in chronological order the King's reaction to the news of the fall of the royal prison/fortress, his appearance before the National Assembly to lament the riots, and the Assembly's reaction in sending a deputation to Paris to try to restore order.

One feature of eighteenth century newspapers, which may be due to the wide number of sources from which they were written, were the so-called "paragraphs," unattached items inserted here and there in the paper. For example, on the same page as the start of the story on the fall of the Bastille between a theater notice for *She Stoops to Conquer* and an item about the Grand Vizier of Constantinople being deposed there is this curious "paragraph," without any reference to its obvious relevance to the story beside it:

The MARQUIS DE LA FAYETTE, who fought so gallantly in America, is among the most popular characters in France.

#### 1871: NEWS IN THE AGE OF THE RAILROAD AND THE TELEGRAPH.

The telegraph brought about the greatest single change in the history of news gathering. In 1814, news of Napoleon I's abdication took about 7 weeks to reach the United States, but the abdication of his nephew Napoleon III in 1870 was known across the Atlantic instantly and appeared in papers dated only two days after his fall (Stephens 1988, 216-227). Between those two abdications Samuel F. B. Morse had sent the first news message by wire in 1844. The newspaper was no longer dependent on distant and sometimes unreliable correspondents, but could rush its own reporters to the scene by rail or steamboat, and have them send back their stories by telegraph. At first, the short, cryptic telegraphic dispatches were

printed verbatim as they arrived, in the order in which they arrived. For instance, the first sentence of the New York *Tribune* story on Lincoln's assassination opens with a brief summary similar to the modern-day lead:

The President was shot in a theater to-night and perhaps mortally wounded.

However, the telegraph dispatches that follow are printed in the order in which they were received, so that the drama unfolds to the reader in much the same way that it did to the telegraph editor of the *Tribune* that fateful night (Stephens 1988, 254-255).

Now let us turn to the *Times* coverage of the beginning phases of the Commune revolt in Paris in 1871. The situation in Paris in March 1871 was briefly this: After the defeat and capture of Napoleon III by the Prussians, the war was continued by a provisional government using what was left of the regular army and a host of undisciplined National Guard or Mobile volunteers. When the French were finally defeated after the long siege of Paris, the volunteers were left stranded and unpaid. The National Guard units in Montmartre, a notorious "Red" hotbed, were ordered to surrender their artillery to the regular army. Here, in order, are some of the dispatches which the *Times* printed on March 9:

Today there was a mutiny in the 10th Battalion of the Mobiles of the Seine, who threatened to hang their commander. It was, however, quelled without serious consequences.

Several commanders of battalions of the National Guard have presented a memorial to General d'Aurelle des Paladines in favour of the principle of electing their Commander-in-Chief.

A Committee has been appointed to organize a Republican Federation of the National Guard.

All last night there was a large crowd at the corner of the Boulevard des Italiens discussing the right of the National Guard to hold possession of their cannon and ammunition. General d'Aurelle has informed this force that none but the Artillery of the National Guard, newly appointed, are to assume charge of the cannon.

A League is being formed to prohibit the employment of Germans in Paris.

There are 50 German officers in prisons in Paris.

A fleet is going to the Elbe to bring back 90,000 French prisoners.

This is news in its raw state, current and exciting, but unexplained and incoherent. With the telegraph, the eighteenth-century journalist's caution in dealing with the fog of events has been replaced by an eagerness for the latest intelligence, even at the risk of having to refute it tomorrow. The significance of each separate piece of news is not pointed out, so reading and understanding it requires a detailed knowledge of current events, as well as of the history and geography of Europe. Stories are organized across time, from edition to edition of the paper, but thrown in with the continuing strands of other related stories so the reader has to learn how to pick them out and assemble them into a coherent narrative.

What we have in these reports from Paris in 1871 is a two-speed news system, with telegraphic news treated differently from news that came by post (Kielbowicz 1987, 33). The compact, enigmatic telegraphic news lacked explanatory background information, which was expensive to transmit. The separation of news into telegraphic news and news that came by the post may have helped accelerate the trend toward the separation of "news" and "views" that is considered the norm of English-language journalism today. The longer dispatches the *Times'* special correspondent filed are more like the *Times* coverage of the fall of the Bastille eighty-two years earlier than they are like modern journalistic style. They are essay-like—discursive and opinionated. As a correspondent for the *Times* was instructed in 1894, "Remember that telegrams are for facts; appreciation and political comment can come by post" (Palmer 1978, 208; cited in Stephens 1988, 258).

#### NEWS IN THE TELEVISION AGE: MAY 1968.

According to news historian Mitchell Stephens, the "inverted pyramid" plan which dominates journalistic writing today had its beginning during the American Civil War: "Journalists rushing to transmit their most newsworthy information over often unreliable telegraph lines had begun to develop the habit of compressing the most crucial facts into short, paragraph-long dispatches, often destined for the top of a column of news" (1988, 253).

The inverted pyramid form is the basis of today's distinctive journalistic rhetoric. It produces a form of prose that is not organized like

any other prose. Modern newspaper stories are seldom told in chronological order, and sometimes they are told in reverse chronological order, with the consequences emphasized over the cause. Nor are the patterns of cause-and-effect or problem-and-solution, common in other kinds of informative prose, customary in newspaper prose, where "how" and "why" are traditionally further down the list of priorities for organizing stories than are the traditional "who" "what" "when" and "where".

This emphasis on separate, unconnected, observable facts has the function of supporting the twentieth century journalistic ethic of objectivity. One cannot easily be accused of bias if one limits oneself to reporting "what happened." Unfortunately, this unbending devotion to the facts sometimes detracts from the reader's ability to comprehend their significance. "Facts--a quotation here, a number there--shine through these hierarchical columns of information, but the temporal, historical, atmospheric or ideological connections between these facts are often weakened, occasionally severed" (Stephens 1988, 254).

The story on page 4 of the May 4, 1968 *Times* consists of nine paragraphs from the *Times* correspondent in Paris, followed by a three paragraph dispatch from Agence France Presse which I will not analyze. Under the heading "FIERCE BATTLE AT SORBONNE: MANY ARRESTS IN CLASH," there is a *wh*-question lead:

The battles (*what?*) between students and police (*who?*) which occurred today (*when?*) in Paris's Latin Quarter (*where?*) were probably the most violent (*how violent?*) since the end of the Algerian war.

The paragraphs of the story follow in scrambled chronological order as follows:

Para. #.	Chrono-logical order	Content.
1	7	Battles between students and police. Consequence: Injuries.
2	8	Consequence: Students arrested. Tear gas clouds in Latin Quarter
3.	9	Consequence: Rector suspends classes. Unprecedented action.

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| 4 | 4 | Students assemble at Sorbonne to protest disciplinary council.               |
| 5 | 1 | Dany the Red insults Sports minister (last January).                         |
| 6 | 2 | Student leaders, at first reluctant, come to support Dany (March).           |
| 7 | 3 | Dany's movement occupies and closes Nanterre University yesterday.           |
| 8 | 5 | Sorbonne students try to take over lecture hall. Right wing counterviolence. |
| 9 | 6 | Police use tear gas in courtyard. Battles continue outside.                  |

The article's chronological structure can thus be divided into four different sequences which turn out to be circular, starting and ending with the most violent phase of the conflict. The battle and its consequences--injuries to police and students, students arrested, classes suspended--are put first, followed by a backward glance to events just before the battle, then a move further back to look at the ultimate causes of the event, and finally a description of the events of the day leading up to the consequences given in the first paragraph.

This article is a good example of the *wh-* question lead and inverted pyramid structure that became dominant in news writing after the invention of the telegraph. Has it been influenced by the technology of television as well? Would it have been written differently if television had never been invented?

The lead sentence does not state, "Battles between students and police occurred today in Paris's Latin Quarter." It says *The word the* before *battles* puts the battles in the category of old information. The lead sentence's structure makes it a comment on the battles, putting them in recent historical perspective, rather than an assertion of their existence. The sentence structure allows the uninformed reader to assume or surmise the battles took place, but the informed reader may have already known about the clash from television, and may be seeking more detailed information about it from print. Stephens has noted "the increased emphasis on analysis and interpretation to which newspapers have been

forced to retreat by the arrival of swift broadcast newscasts" (Stephens 1988, 254).

Some of the *Times*' readers in 1789 might have already heard some inkling of the troubles in France by word of mouth from travellers or by letter from friends in France. They wanted reliable, authentic details from their newspaper. The nineteenth century papers, on the other hand, had a monopoly on the latest news because of their subscription to the telegraphic news services. In the twentieth century, they lost that monopoly to radio and television, and so rejoined the eighteenth century papers in providing analysis and background. Like the article 179 years earlier on the fall of the Bastille, the report on the May 1968 riots sets a very high priority on putting the importance of the events in perspective, situating them in the flow of French history.

Just like my hypothetical competent reader of English prose from the desert island without newspapers, an eighteenth century newspaper reader would have been puzzled by the 1968 article, because of its chaotic chronological form. As readers of twentieth century newspapers, we have learned to put up with such things for speed and efficiency, which, as Teun van Dijk (1985, 82) has pointed out, have made the values of recency and relevance the organizing principles of newspaper prose, to the exclusion of more conventional structures as chronological order and cause and effect found in other kinds of prose.

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