

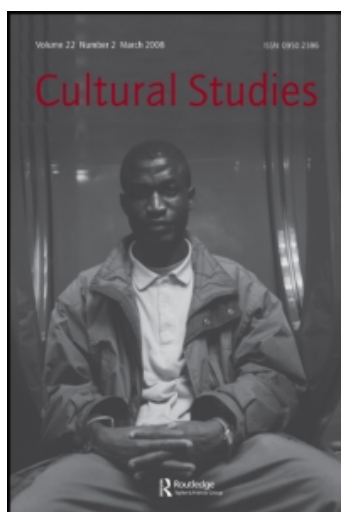
This article was downloaded by: [Tucher, Andie]

On: 23 February 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 908944362]

Publisher Routledge

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## Cultural Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713684873>

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Online Publication Date: 01 March 2009

**To cite this Article** Tucher, Andie(2009)'NOTES ON A CULTURAL HISTORY OF REPORTING',Cultural Studies,23:2,289 — 298

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/09502380802670331

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502380802670331>

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# Andie Tucher

## NOTES ON A CULTURAL HISTORY OF REPORTING

*James W. Carey's landmark call for a cultural history of journalism, or more specifically a cultural history of reporting, has galvanized some scholars and perplexed others, many of whom find too vague or limiting his description of the task as exploring the history of consciousness. Here I suggest recasting the troublesome question and considering instead the history of the most basic and elemental task of journalism: the effort of some humans to persuade other humans they probably don't know that what they say is an acceptable representation of their world. Such an approach involves exploring both the practical, nuts-and-bolts aspects of journalistic work as well as the mutual understandings and expectations that developed between readers and journalists, and focuses on the later nineteenth century as the time of greatest change. I pose a series of questions as a starting point for this investigation.*

**Keywords** James W. Carey; journalism history; reporting consciousness; readers

More than 25 years ago Jim Carey performed a wonderful service for me: he assured me I was not crazy and I would not be alone. As a graduate student in American Civilization I was groping my way toward the idea that the history of journalism was interesting, worthwhile, distinctive, and illuminating – radical adjectives, all four, at a time when few historians of my acquaintance could imagine how the intellectual rewards of reading old newspapers could possibly outweigh the miseries of a lifelong marriage to the microfilm reader. But at a conference I heard Jim lay out his now-famous argument that journalism history is a kind of cultural history, a way of recovering past forms of imagination and consciousness and of exploring how people in the past have grasped reality, and that the bedrock of this way of looking at journalism would be to write a cultural history of reporting [see Carey (1974/1997a, 1985/1997b), for published versions of these arguments]. His insights as well as his infectious enthusiasm sent me reeling back to the microfilm with my inklings validated, my purpose renewed, and my focus sharpened, and I pressed on undaunted with my dissertation exploring the relationships forged

between the new urban penny newspapers and their publics through their collaborative engagement with two timely and resonant stories of murder.

Like most discipline-shaking arguments, Jim's has attracted its share of thoughtful critics. Compelling cases have been made that Carey paid too little attention to the influence on journalists of economic and institutional power (Nord 1988), that he never sufficiently integrated the social role of technology into his concept of culture (Marvin 1990; Schudson 1990), that he failed to fully appreciate that even a cultural history must be rooted in solid, nuts-and-bolts data derived from content analysis and research into professional journalistic practices and behaviors (Schwarzlose 1975; Marzolf 1975; Erickson 1975). Also vexing has been the question of exactly what Carey meant by the word he repeatedly invoked as the linchpin of his idea of journalism history as cultural history. The press, he wrote, was 'an expression of human consciousness . . . [and] should be viewed as the embodiment of consciousness'; journalism was 'essentially a state of consciousness,' and studying its history meant 'grasping a significant portion of the changes that have taken place in modern consciousness since the enlightenment' (Carey 1974/1997a, pp. 93, 90, 91). His emphasis on consciousness has left some critics wondering aloud how one is to discover and identify so nebulous a thing to begin with, and how, precisely, it is 'embodied' in the journalistic report. Is 'the newspaper as a whole the creator of "consciousness"?' Schudson (1997, p. 82) asked. 'Or is the "story" the carrier of the age's sense of meaning?' And Nord, having wrestled often with these questions, recently argued (Nord 2006) that consciousness was not to be distilled from journalistic writing itself but was rather to be found in the ordinary people who read and used it; that culture lay not in the report but in the reporter.

The question of consciousness is provocative, but under Carey's influence it has perhaps muscled its way too aggressively to the forefront of the journalism-history project. The very vastness and vagueness of the concept raise anxiety. It is claimed by cultural historians but also by zoologists, physicians, New Agers, philosophers, neurobiologists, even neurophilosophers; it seems too abstract, too ephemeral, too complicated to be discoverable under the harsh light of that miserable microfilm reader but it feels too solemn to ignore.

It might help, it seems to me, to wriggle free of the disquieting grip of 'consciousness,' to recast the question in a way that still explores journalism as a whole and reporting in particular as cultural products revelatory of the human relationship with reality but in a more specific way. Rather than naming our quarry as historical consciousness we might instead say that writing a cultural history of reporting requires us to explore the development of the most distinctive and elemental of journalistic tasks: the effort of some humans to persuade other humans they probably do not know that what they say is an acceptable (I do not specify 'accurate') representation of a world every one of

them can glimpse. And we might locate a particularly fruitful place to start this exploration in the later two-thirds or so of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the busy time that spanned two of the most important landmarks in the development of the profession of journalism. In the 1830s the reporter was born as a necessary agent of the new urban penny press, which was redefining the idea of 'news' to mean not the customary partisan intelligence distributed by a party-funded editor but rather gathered information about everyday life that was timely, accurate, independent, enterprising, and commercially valuable. By the first decades of the twentieth century the reporter was widely recognized as a professional, and journalism was establishing its own schools, associations, and ethical standards, which, while never as central to vocational standing and identity as those of law or medicine, nonetheless participated in the characteristic social effort of the era to identify, organize, and control the distinctive bodies of knowledge, codes of behavior, 'expert' practices, and special modes of inquiry that set professionals apart from ordinary people. By then journalists were also embracing objectivity as the defining and paramount ideal of their profession even as – or, as Schudson (1978) argues, as a defensive mechanism precisely because – readers, reporters, and society at large had come to acknowledge and accept that it was impossible to represent reality in a truly objective way.

Between those landmarks, reporters and readers together were figuring out what an independent and commercially based journalism looked like, how it sounded, how it was to be done, how it should be read; they were working out, in other words, how one class of people could persuade strangers to trust them to represent the particular world or reality they inhabited and on what grounds those strangers would decide to bestow or withhold that trust. Important here to investigate are certainly the practical techniques, the institutional limits and pressures, the nuts and bolts of the journalist's job. But important to explore, too, are the larger social contexts of the reports in question: the mutual understandings and expectations that readers and journalists forged about the kind of social and cultural work journalism should do, the communities that embraced or resisted examples of that work, the varying ways the same events could be presented to different communities, how an 'acceptable' report might differ from an empirically verifiable one, and what conditions would render a report unacceptable.

In his call for a cultural history of reporting, Carey cautioned that exploring the relatively new and diffuse topic would be 'very difficult to do' in the traditional form of a scholarly monograph. Only by experimenting, attacking with unfamiliar sources and procedures, accepting that the first efforts could consist of no more than 'a series of quite separate essays, loosely hung together on some common theme,' and tolerating their 'necessary disjunctions' might we eventually emerge with something resembling an 'integrated analysis' (Carey 1985/1997b, pp. 110–111). In that spirit I am

outlining a few of the questions – the potential essays – that I think could illuminate the cultural history of the journalistic report.

*How did the relationship between local editors and their readers change?* In this era was spawned the local paper – the *really* local paper, not the kind that put a home town on its masthead while filling its columns with reprinted news from everywhere *but* home. Until the 1850s and 1860s, most smalltown papers allotted the greater part of their news hole to items copied from other journals about international and national affairs, commerce, and politics; rarely did these papers include the kind of local intelligence and gossip that citizens could hear for themselves over the back fence (Russo 1980). And the smalltown editor who gathered and disseminated these items was a vital link to the outside world for people who rarely had regular, timely access on their own to newspapers from elsewhere. Many editors took their job with great seriousness, emphasizing the special care and unique skill they employed in bringing the wider world to their fellow citizens. In the *Vincennes* (Indiana) *Western Sun* of May 21, 1836, for instance, longtime editor Elihu Stout explained that because of the great ‘public anxiety’ about the Mexicans’ annihilation of the Texan forces at the Alamo and the engagement with Sam Houston’s army at San Jacinto, he was reprinting all the reports from Texas he could find. But he also offered his considered professional judgment on them: ‘After a careful examination of the different statements, we regard this much as certain: – Houston has gained a splendid victory . . . It remains doubtful whether Santa Anna is captured . . . In the reported accounts of his execution we place little confidence.’

But as railroads, canals, the improving postal system, the telegraph, and the ever-increasing circulation of the special weekly country editions of the metropolitan papers began to supplant the country editors’ traditional function, they fought back by refocusing their attention on the only news Horace Greeley and James Gordon Bennett could not scoop them on: the old folks’ anniversary party, the Main Street fire, the church picnic, and other news of home. So as local editors lost their special status as gatekeepers to their communities – as sages gifted with special knowledge no ordinary person could possess – how did they adapt to their challenging new role as ordinary people charged with actively gathering news about events that many readers might well have seen or heard about and whose fidelity to reality they could judge for themselves? One clue comes from the *True Kentuckian* of Bourbon County, whose editor explained on May 14, 1870 that having lost his assistant writer he was confined to his office and virtually unable to do any reporting. ‘The reporting part of a paper is the real work of it,’ he told his readers, ‘the writing is but a labor of love. No one except those who have acted as reporters can imagine the immense trouble there is in getting the facts. A small item which we write out in a few moments often costs hours of hard work to obtain. . . . Our friends will, therefore, render us many essential

favors by handing in or sending us all the local news.' Was this strategy of inviting amateur collaborators but maintaining a clear distance from them a conventional one? What sort of contributions did come from readers themselves, and how did editors handle them?

*How did conventions of and expectations about investigative reporting develop?* Whipping out their pencils at the police courts and the fancy-dress balls, audaciously *interviewing* people in authority and expecting them to answer; the new breed of worker called the reporter was developing a varied bag of ways to *find things out*. But what about the task that has become a hallmark of journalism: finding things out that other people were actively trying to hide? The task of investigative reporting required not just new methods but also new attitudes, the conviction that journalists had both a right and an obligation to expose secrets and that the public had the right (and perhaps the obligation) to hear them.

Both methods and attitudes developed in fits and starts. The pioneering penny-press editor James Gordon Bennett, who claimed that his personal, on-the-scene investigation of the 1836 murder of a glamorous prostitute proved the chief suspect had been framed, has often been credited with inventing the art of investigative reporting. Yet while he may well have invented the *idea* of investigative reporting, he also invented most of the facts he published about the murder, cleverly manipulating the language of the public's right to know and the press's duty to challenge authority in the service of a lie designed to support the interests of the city's powerful men (Tucher 1994). The *New York Times's* exposure of the Tweed Ring in 1871 is another generally accepted investigative landmark, and the paper's decision to challenge the mighty Boss Tweed certainly qualifies as epochally bold. But the *Times's* uniqueness lay more in its attitude than its technique: it did more inveighing than investigating, using little *except* language, and it was a disgruntled whistleblower who actually got the goods by copying incriminating account records and handing them over to the paper.

Not long afterwards, in 1875, Julius Chambers of the *New York Tribune* wrote about his experience of sneaking into a madhouse disguised as a patient. But while he scooped Nellie Bly by 12 years, it was the powerful combination of the public's infatuation with the plucky girl reporter, the marketing savvy of the *New York World*, and a mass readership primed to enjoy the discomfiture of the powerful that launched undercover reporting on its great vogue and ensured that any paper worth its salt would have to get into the imposture business. Reporters assumed the roles of factory workers, chorus girls, river pirates, Mormon wives, mine bosses, opium addicts, abortion seekers, and marriage-minded spinsters. Some stories spotlighted and even inspired the clean-up of genuine abuses (Blackwell's Asylum, Bly's temporary home, was granted a budget increase), others informed a shocked world how much a shopgirl's feet hurt at the end of the day, but the key was always the personal

involvement of the reporters themselves, many of whom were earning the more accurate title of 'stunt girls' as the stars of their own stories. So it was a radical change when Ida Tarbell and other muckrakers chose documents over drama, spending months or years combing through archives, government records, and business papers and acting more like scholars than performers. How did investigative journalists describe and justify their work to readers? To their subjects? Were there generally accepted boundaries for what kind of reporting was acceptable, how did they change, and what happened to violators? Did readers see a qualitative difference between the tactics and effects of 'stunt' journalists and those of reporters who did not personally involve themselves in their stories?

*What were the effects of the telegraph on the language of journalism?* Carey's suggestions (1983/1989b) that the telegraph helped promote a carefully neutral and inoffensive objectivity as a news value and a 'flattened,' standardized language as a news style have been justifiably challenged (e.g. Schudson 1990). But the incorporation of the telegraph into newsgathering practice has exerted other influences on both values and style that still bear further exploration. Americans were, indeed, thrilled by the lightning line, which many expected would keep them as up-to-date and well-informed as anyone no matter how far from a metropolis they lived – a democracy of knowledge. Yet while citizens often found themselves surprised and disappointed by the fragility of the wires, which were easily disabled by a soaking rain or a steamship blundering too close to the telegraph poles along the riverbank, they could be just as surprised and frustrated when the wires *were* working. Take, for instance, this comment, which appeared in at least two influential and widely circulated southern newspapers during the tense standoff at Fort Sumter in April 1861. With his pledge that the ship sent to provision the besieged fort would offer no violence unless it was attacked, Lincoln had strategically placed on the secessionists the responsibility for choosing war or peace. In their coverage of the maneuverings, however, the two papers seemed to be criticizing the press for reporting the strategy, not the president for devising it.

We respectfully suggest to the telegraph that it is making a fool of itself. We thought at first that it had only gone crazy, but that which we took to be lunacy turns out to be a bad case of idiocy . . .

We pay that mythical corporation called the 'Associated Press,' for news – for facts. Instead of facts, it keeps continually poking at us nonsensical batches of owlish speculation, furnished by the cheap-panic-correspondents of the New York papers. If there were the least probability of these speculations proving true . . . perhaps we might feel disposed to submit

without a murmur. But there is not.

(*Arkansas Gazette*, 20 April 1861, crediting the *St Louis Republican*)

The tumultuous year 1861 may not, of course, provide the best example from which to draw conclusions about general public attitudes concerning a relatively new technology. But the suggestion remains that at least at some times, the telegraph and its the master, the Associated Press, not only did *not* condition readers to expect neutrality and austerity in news reporting; they might also have served as widely understood symbols of (or scapegoats for) exactly the *opposite* of neutrality and austerity in news reporting. What was new, different, and important about telegraph news for those readers may not have been *how* it came, but rather *where* it came from. Not that it came zinging along shimmering wires that stretched to Louisville or Little Rock or St Louis, but that it came zinging along wires that originated in Washington or Chicago or, most likely, New York, a city that many Americans in the rest of the country viewed with emotions ranging from distaste to disgust. How did that complicated relationship between New York and the telegraph continue to play out?

The influence of the telegraph on style is similarly complex. Even as some newspapers, notably Charles A. Dana's *New York Sun*, were experimenting with a leaner, simpler style as more 'modern,' others were cultivating a Victorian windiness in order to look less stingy. Cable charges amounting to as much as dollar a word in the 1870s made brevity the soul of thrift for news sent by wire, but the *New York Herald*, fiercely competitive as always, hired 'a quaint old fussy Irish gentleman' to elaborate and embroider the spare prose of the telegraphic dispatches into specimens of 'magniloquent verbosity' intended to 'amaze the world of the Herald's reckless outlay' (Clarke 1925, pp. 125–126). Could prodigality trump modernity? How did this and other stylistic strategems affect readers' responses to what they read?

*Under what circumstances and when did hoaxes, pranks, tall tales, and other quasi-truthful items generally fade out of the mainstream press?* For much of the later nineteenth century even the 'serious' metropolitan papers like the *New York Tribune* often included playful items that were not intended as, or seen as, news reports. These served various social purposes generally involving an active collaboration between the reader and the newspaper; I have written elsewhere (Tucher 1994, 2001) about the boundary-setting and community-building uses of journalistic hoaxes and how readers and writers developed shared understandings about the relationships between the style and context of a report and its seriousness. And a scholar of journalism history would only expect that such whimsical collaborations would die out with the professionalization of journalism, the increasingly clear distinctions drawn between the specially-skilled journalist and the ordinary reader, and the growing acceptance



of 'scientific' standards of accuracy and impartiality famously championed by Adolph Ochs's *New York Times*.

But then what accounts for the indulgence by that same sober, serious *Times* in the startling piece of journalism nestling in the issue of June 26, 1904 amidst articles about the Russo-Japanese War and the mounting death toll from the wreck of the *General Slocum* in the East River? Under a four-decker headline beginning 'Gustave, He Have the Menagerie Hor-rible. Three-Foot Snake, He Visit Infant Jeltrup Next Door. M. Jeltrup, He Slay Reptile,' the half-column story described, in a burlesque *franglais* clearly meant to be funny, how a Frenchman in his own parlor had used a ham knife to defend his baby from the yellow-spotted boa constrictor that had escaped from the collection of exotic animals kept by the janitor next door. 'I rent ze house,' the father told the police, 'and I sudden find that my neighbor in hees house a terrible jungle possess.' Perhaps the best question here is: what on earth was that all about? Did the story embed messages for its readers or was it simply a joke – solid evidence that even old Homer nods, or laughs? Did that sort of thing happen often in the *Times*, and if not, what made the paper so fey that day?

*Can a newspaper make us believe in hell?* Carey's landmark essay distinguishing between ritual and transmission views of communication has been enormously influential in advocating the importance of seeing newspaper reading as a ritual act, one that portrays contending forces at play and confirms a reader's view of the world. Even though the news does not change much from day to day and rarely teaches anything new, Carey argued, reading it is intrinsically satisfying as a way to engage with the world because 'news is not information but drama' (Carey 1975/1989a, p. 21).

Yet the drama of newspaper reading does intersect with information, and worth exploring are the particular ways in which the reader's reverence for the newspaper both enhances and is in turn strengthened by the information that it does (or sometimes does not) contain. A piquant though perhaps extreme example is that of Juliet Soskice, the younger sister of the British author Ford Madox Ford and a niece of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Soskice spent her childhood surrounded by artists, intellectuals, and anarchists until a family crisis sent her into the care of devoutly Catholic relatives who placed her in a convent school. The precocious girl was at first unfazed by threats from the nuns and her schoolmates that unless she were baptized she would burn in hell. 'The thing was,' she recalled later (Soskice 1921/1994, p. 77), 'that I didn't really believe in hell. I thought if it was true it would have been in all the papers and I should have heard about it somehow.'

So complete a trust in the omniscience of the newspaper may have been unusual, but more common is the experience of the Arkansas banker John Quincy Wolf, born near the end of the Civil War in a small, poor, and isolated settlement deep in the Arkansas Ozarks. Orphaned young and raised by relatives, he had virtually no formal schooling; he was 14 before he saw his

first newspaper and even older before he traveled out of the mountains or visited a town with more than 1500 people. But his insecurity over his skimpy and impoverished education was assuaged when he realized he could understand and *live up to* even so exotic and sophisticated an artifact as a New York newspaper. ‘Imagine my surprise and happiness in my young manhood,’ he recalled late in his life (Wolf 1988, p. 162), ‘when I discovered that I could understand and enjoy great writers like Dickens and Tennyson; and when I found, in reading the New York journals, that the political and social problems of Washington, New York, the nation, and even the world concerned me and that I could become well enough informed on them to talk about them with well educated people. . . . These discoveries made me think that in some way I belonged to the big world and that though I was a raw newcomer from the backwoods I might make a place for myself in the life of the times.’ In what other ways did newspapers serve as measuring sticks for achievement, entitlement, or stature?

‘The cultural history of journalism,’ Carey concluded in his strongest summons on behalf that project (1974/1997a, p. 93), ‘would attempt to capture that reflexive process wherein modern consciousness has been created in the symbolic form known as the report and how in turn modern consciousness finds institutionalized expression in journalism.’ The questions I pose earlier and others like them are unlikely to illuminate that elusive term any further. What they can do, however, is to open an exploration into the language, strategies, techniques, and understandings that two parties of strangers otherwise known as reporters and writers use to build descriptions of something about which both would agree: this seems true to life. This makes sense to me. This sounds right.

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