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The Mourning Papers:
Death, Religion and American Newspapers, 1690-2002

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The Mourning Papers:
Death, Religion and American Newspapers, 1690-2002

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Communication

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

May, 2004

Dedication

With profound gratitude to Jennifer—everything worthwhile I do is because of you—and deep appreciation to Jordan and Kelsi.

Acknowledgements

Dr. Marvin Olasky's guidance and example were worth the price of admission. Thanks. Thank you also to the University of Texas faculty, especially Dr. Maxwell McCombs, Dr. Jay Budziszewski, and Dr. James Tankard, whose classes made campus life so profitable and enjoyable. Thank you to Charlessa Gates of the Patrick Henry College library for her diligence in obtaining newspaper microfilm and other materials.

The Mourning Papers:
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Publication No._____

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2004

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Historians of journalism have paid comparatively little attention to the relationship between religion and the non-religious content of American newspapers. Because death brings deeply-held religious values to the surface, stories involving death are a good place to begin investigating the relationship between journalism and religious, philosophical and cultural currents in society. This study examines stories that reported a fatal event sampled at roughly 30-year intervals from major newspapers in five American cities: Boston, New York, Charleston, S.C., Chicago and San Francisco. It traces how journalists, reflecting and contributing to religious trends in American society, over time became less and less likely to interpret death in terms of the Reformed Christianity that was prevalent in the eighteenth century and more likely to interpret death in the

context of social and economic theory and science. It also illustrates some of the many different ways that news values and news decisions flowed out of the religious and philosophical contexts in which they were made, and how these decisions changed with the changing times. Of all the thousands of ways to die, this study found that journalists interpreted almost all deaths in one of nine different contexts: crime, executions, natural disasters, military/political, disease, old age, accidents, suicide and obituaries/public figures.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This is the evil, according to the writer of Ecclesiastes, "that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead."[1]

The history of American journalism is, in a way, the history of American journalists' attempts to find meaning in this evil, this common destiny. From the Puritan preachers, to colonial printers, to Revolutionary editors, penny press publishers and on into the twentieth century, American newspapers have been filled with accounts of death.

How journalists shape these and other stories is the result of many factors. Traditionally, journalism historians have paid considerable attention to questions such as the backgrounds and education of individual journalists, changing concepts of news, the nature of their news organization, technological advances, and large-scale political, social and economic forces.[2] Studies of journalism history written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries typically focus on individuals, the first printers and editors whose work would shape the journalism of those who came after, and their relationship to the formation of American democracy. Histories written in the twentieth century typically focus on the

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[1] Ecclesiastes 9:3 (*New International Version*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers,1984).
[2] For a good overview of current theories of the various forces influencing media content, from a sociology of journalism perspective, see Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese, *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content* 2nd ed. (White Plains, N.Y.: Longman Publishers USA, 1996).

connections between media, politics and society or the development of journalistic practice and technology.[3] There has also been some good scholarship on the history of American religious newspapers and periodicals.

But one of the major influences on how a journalist interprets his world has been his worldview, foundational beliefs about the nature of reality, humanity and God, the meaning of life and death, and other Big Picture questions. These are issues to which most historians of journalism, with the exceptions of Wm. David Sloan[4] and Marvin Olasky,[5] have paid comparatively little attention. This study is an attempt to investigate some of the religious and philosophical factors influencing the news content of mainstream, non-religious newspapers.

Death-related newspaper stories are a good place to begin investigating this relationship. "Death causes people to tell stories," as the cultural historian Joseph Amato observed (speaking of stories in general, not just journalism), "that can shaped by moral judgment, fashioned for the sake of argument, made buoyant by metaphor, or given meaning by the rituals of culture and the promise of religion."[6] They explain why people die, when the mind and body cease to be one,

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[3] For an excellent discussion of the various historical approaches to journalism history, see Wm. David Sloan, "Introduction" to *Perspectives in Mass Communication History* edited by Wm. David Sloan (Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1991), 3-5.

[4] See in particular a collection of articles by various authors he edited, *Media and Religion in American History* (Northport, Ala.: Vision Press, 2000); his book on colonial journalism written with Julie Hedgepeth Williams, *The Early American Press 1690-1783* (Westport, Conn, Greenwood Press, 1994), also takes religion seriously.

[5] *Prodigal Press: The Anti-Christian Bias of the American News Media* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1988) and *Central Ideas in the Development of American Journalism: A Narrative History* (Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1991). See Appendix B, "Journalism Historians and Religion," for his survey of their work since the eighteenth century and their general neglect of religion.

[6] Joseph A. Amato, "Death and the Stories We Don't Have" *The Monist* Vol. 76 No. 2 (April 1993), 259.

what the afterlife is, and how the relationship between the living and the dead works. He adds that there is a "standing human passion to have abiding meanings for life and death."

This study reinforces the well-established fact that journalists, reflecting and contributing to religious trends in American society, over time became less and less likely to interpret death in terms of the Reformed Christianity dominant in the eighteenth century and more and more likely to interpret death in the context of social and economic theory and science. This study traces this process of secularization.

More importantly, it illustrates some of the many different ways that news values and news decisions flowed out of the religious and philosophical contexts in which they were made, and how these decisions changed with the changing times. America's religious and cultural contexts changed dramatically in the 300 years from 1704, when the first edition of the *Boston News-Letter* appeared, to 2004, yet journalists never stopped trying to make sense of the deaths that filled the pages of their newspapers.

To gather material for this study[7] I selected five American cities with long and vigorous newspaper traditions: Boston, as home to America's first newspapers; New York, as the center of American journalism from the mid-1800s on, and Charleston, S.C., Chicago, and San Francisco for regional representation. In each city at 30 year intervals I read about 14 issues from each of two newspapers and classified each story involving human death into one of the

[7] I have provided a detailed description of my methods and the theory and research supporting them in Appendix A.

following categories: crime, execution, natural disaster, military/political conflict, disease, old age, accident, suicide, or obituary/public figure. I also read widely from other newspapers or years not included in the sample and used some of those to illustrate various points.

I chose the years 1745, 1775, 1810, 1840, 1870, 1895, 1925, 1950, 1975, 2000 as representative of significant periods in journalism history (San Francisco and Chicago, of course, did not have a significant newspaper presence until the mid nineteenth century, and so my analysis of those cities begins then). The newspapers were chosen for circulation and longevity, on the assumption that larger, longer lasting newspapers were most likely to be influential, both in their communities and with other newspapers.

Having assigned each story a category, I also examined the details to see what sort of "disorder" it emphasized. Sociologist Herbert Gans, in his influential book, *Deciding What's News*, identified two types of news, "disorder" news and routine news. Regarding the former, he argued that reporters have values that tell them what society should be like—events that conflict with these values become news. News stories emphasize four types of disorder: natural, technological, social, moral.[8]

This study does not examine the whole history of American newspaper journalism—that would be simply too large a task. I do not, for example, examine small-town newspapers, or newspapers run by women or racial or ethnic minorities, or newspapers directed at particular social groups. Nor do I attempt to

[8] Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979).

account for the huge variety of newspapers that existed in these five cities. My purpose is to examine large scale shifts and trends as they affected major newspapers in the largest cities. Such trends were likely present elsewhere, in other cities and in other media contexts, but it is important to note that this is far from certain.

For similar reasons my survey of American religious history is limited mainly to Christianity. This country was founded in an intellectual and religious climate that was strongly Christian. Although not all journalists were or are Christians (Christian journalists became increasingly uncommon after the late nineteenth century) they operated in a cultural context that Christianity shaped. Whether applying Christian ideas and worldviews to the coverage of death (as was common among colonial journalists) or reacting against those worldviews (as is more common today), any American journalist attempting to reach a mass audience has had to deal with the effects of Christianity on American culture. More work will be needed to examine the influence of other faiths on American newspapers.

Stories about death do not often deal explicitly with worldviews—Big Picture questions—nor do journalists often describe their own philosophical and religious assumptions. However, each story has a frame, a shared context between journalist and audience or, as Reese defines it, "organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully

structure the social world."[9] This frame gives the story meaning and provides clues about the writers' worldviews. By examining the way frames involving death shift over time, and by tracking journalists' tendencies to select greater or lesser numbers of stories in particular categories, I attempt to show, not only how journalists view death itself, but also how worldviews relate to news value decisions. I also make some observations on how the histories of sensationalism and objectivity relate to the coverage of fatal events.

Chapter 2 begins with a brief examination of three of the major ways philosophers in the Western tradition have approached death. It concludes with a discussion of how Puritan preachers, the original American journalists, integrated their Christian worldview and their "teleological" approach to news into their death-related sermons and pamphlets. Modern readers would say that the preachers taught their readers that sin brings consequences, but the pastors would have said that it was God who taught those lessons—the message resided in the event itself, and they were just the interpreters. If the event involved sensational, bloody murder or mayhem, then the message would be that much more effective in leading their readers to repentance. Puritan clergy would have agreed, with some reservations, with Charles Dana, the 1890s editor of the *New York Sun*, who said, "I have always felt that whatever the Divine Providence permitted to occur I was not too proud to report."

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[9] Stephen D. Reese, "Prologue—Framing Public Life" in *Framing Public Life* edited by Stephen D. Reese, Oscar H. Gandy, Jr., and August E. Grant (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates , 2001), 11.

Chapter 3 begins with the first American newspaper, Benjamin Harris's *Publick Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestick,* and continues until the Revolutionary War. Printers in this era adopted many of the Puritan perspectives and approaches, hardly surprising given that much of the culture was still, in 1745, explicitly Christian. But just as Puritan-style Calvinism, while still powerful, was by the mid-1700s no longer the only game in town, even in New England Bible-based teleology was no longer the only system for interpreting murder and military defeat. Colonial printers saw the hand of God in the affairs of men, but they also saw the hands of men.

Because of the French and Indian Wars and then the Revolutionary War, the most common category in the 1745 and 1775 samples was the military/political context. Coverage of death in Revolutionary newspapers (Chapter 4) tended, unsurprisingly, to be closely wrapped up in politics and religion. The worldview of those describing battles had changed dramatically, however, from the days of Puritan preachers who had insisted that military defeat was a judgment of God. They made sense of death in ways that accorded with their faith, and most had considerable faith that independence was God's will for America.

By the era of the Party Press (Chapter 5) stories involving death showed definite signs of Enlightenment thought and a foreshadowing of Romantic impulses. Neither of the two main streams of journalism showed much interest in death, however, because "news" like accidents and murders were not normally among the most important questions of the day. For the party-supported

newspapers politics defined newsworthiness, while the many Christian newspapers were far more concerned with the advance of the Gospel than the King of Terrors.

The teleological approach to news, which assumed that God spoke through events, was fading, even as the stage was being set for the emergence of what one commentator called "the most powerful religious movement in American history." The Second Great Awakening, driven by Methodist-style revivalism, was partly the cause, partly the result of American society's transformation into a liberal, competitive, market driven culture. It signaled the arrival of mass democratic politics and the president whose style typified the period—the "Age of Jackson."

The Jacksonian ideals of independence, initiative, and personal responsibility combined with a related transformation, the "democratization of American Christianity," to provide an ideal environment for the rise of the Penny Press (Chapter 6). Political and religious newspapers had been bound to churches and political parties by finances and loyalty, but the new generation of newsmen led by Benjamin Day, James Gordon Bennett, Horace Greeley and later Henry J. Raymond claimed for themselves and their newspapers independence. A business model built on advertising instead of patronage produced new news values designed to attract the largest possible readership, values that focused on crime, accidents and the deaths of public figures. Consequently death and sensationalism made a dramatic, if not always sparkling, return onto the pages of American newspapers. The news values evident in the way these journalists treated death set

the tone and pattern for the treatment of death that continues to this day, even though major worldview changes in American culture were at hand. The Bible's near-absolute authority in the mid-nineteenth century was about to be seriously undermined by the arrival of Darwin and the dominance of the scientific paradigm.

Civil War newspapers extended and intensified many of the Penny Press's tendencies. The industrial-strength newspapers of the Industrial Age that followed (Chapter 7) continued to report death more frequently and to operate within a mostly Christian framework; politics and religion, for example, played significant roles in how reporters interpreted some crime stories as they began to articulate the worldview issues at stake through their coverage. This occurred even though references to Christian theology became less common and teleological interpretation had virtually disappeared. In the aftermath of the civil war, race became a focal point of interpretation in some stories.

Much of American journalistic coverage of death since the Puritans has had more or less sensational, reformist and moralistic tendencies, but these characteristics distinguish the age of the Yellow Press (Chapter 8). Journalists did not seem to see much eternal significance in the murders, accidents and suicides that filled newspapers. Christianity had not disappeared as a cultural influence, but the liberal Protestantism in vogue in 1895 was heavily influenced by scientism, materialism, historicism and naturalism; the cultural authority of the Bible was dying. To scientifically-minded reporters the world was explainable in terms of what they could see and hear, and that made talk about heaven and hell,

sin and redemption seem irrelevant to the vast majority of the things they wrote about, even stories involving death. Coverage of death, in reflecting the Progressive agenda, emphasized instead the social factors that led to the murders, accidents and suicides, things like evil monopolies and heartless bureaucratic structures.

The sensationalism of the 1890s had within it the trends that would lead to its eventual decline. The beginnings of the professionalization of journalism and the widespread acceptance of the objectivity standard in the first decades after 1900 laid the foundations for an approach to death that proved remarkably durable in newspapers throughout the century, despite radical changes in American culture and media (Chapter 9). The tendencies toward materialistic and scientific approaches to events became even more pronounced, along with a persistent hostility toward, not religion itself, but certain brands of Christianity (notably "fundamentalism") that journalists deemed incompatible with their own modern worldviews. This atmosphere provided a receptive context for sympathetic coverage of abortion and euthanasia, offered a variety of frameworks of social issues for dealing with murder in different periods, and gradually eroded journalistic interest in suicide.

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, may have "changed everything," including modifying journalists' sense of news values to account for the terrorist threat, but journalists' worldviews regarding death and their approaches to the journalistic task remained on the same basic course (Chapter 10). Although some assert that the perception of news media hostility to religion

is overblown, the terrorist attacks revealed journalistic tendencies begun a century before. Immediately after the attack journalists were briefly sympathetic to faith generally, but soon many saw radical "fundamentalist" Muslims attacking, not merely their country but their entire worldview, leading them to identify mistakenly the terrorists with American "fundamentalist" Christians. The lines, as one *New York Times* columnist put it, are not between religions but between "modern" and "medieval" worldviews.

The late twentieth century saw also the natural extension of the tendencies that limit sensationalism and focus on social forces and issues: journalists are still ready to portray death in graphic, sensational terms, but they do so without guilt in the service of issues their worldviews deem worthy, such as hate crimes involving the acceptance of homosexuality and racism. Death brings to the surface journalists' values and worldviews; they never really gave up moralizing, they just adapted their conventions to fit the times.

Chapter 2: Death in the Western Tradition

Nothing is so offensive to humans as the notion of death, observed Arnold Toynbee: "Since man first became aware of himself and of the universe in which he finds himself, it has seemed to him incongruous that a being of his intellectual stature, and his moral stature, too, sinner though he knows himself to be, should be subject to death."[1] Indeed, "Death and its denial—Immortality—have always formed, as they form today, the most poignant theme of man's forebodings."[2]

All the world's major religions and philosophies account for death in some way; the most important of those take seriously the search for meaning in death and life even if they come to radically differing conclusions about what death means and how to deal with it. "History's grandest civilizations, religions, and intellectual movements have had the grandest conceptions of the damage death works in human life," wrote historian of philosophy James P. Carse.[3]

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[1] Arnold Toynbee, "Traditional Attitudes Towards Death" in *Man's Concern With Death*, ed. Arnold Toynbee, et al (San Francisco: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1969), 63. He suggested nine strategies people have used to reconcile themselves to the fact of death: 1. hedonism—eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die; 2. pessimism—life is so wretched that death is the lesser evil; 3. circumvention—take physical countermeasures, like placing food in the tomb, to get around death; 4. winning fame—one "lives on" in the memories of others 5. concern for posterity—put your hope in your physical, spiritual, or intellectual descendants; 6. merging oneself, the sense of Eastern mystical religions, with "ultimate reality"; 7. belief in the immortality of souls; 8. belief in the resurrection of the body; 9. hope of heaven and fear of hell.

[2] Anthropologist B.K. Malinowski, quoted in John Bowker, The *Meanings of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 7.

[3] James P. Carse, *Death and Existence: A conceptual history of human mortality* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1980), 9.

PHILOSOPHICAL BEGINNINGS

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive history of attitudes toward death,[4] a review of how a few major influences in Western civilization approached death, with an emphasis on the Christian tradition, provide some helpful perspective for understanding how American journalists developed their views on the subject.

C.S. Lewis observed in 1947 that people tend to adopt one of two attitudes toward death:

> One is the lofty view, which reached its greatest intensity among the Stoics, that Death 'doesn't matter,' that it is 'kind nature's signal for retreat,' and that we ought to regard it with indifference. The other is the 'natural' point of view, implicit in nearly all private conversations on the subject, and in much modern thought about the survival of the human species, that Death is the greatest of all evils.[5]

As one of the first proponents of the "lofty" view of death, Plato argued in *Phaedo* that real philosophers have no objection to dying. He said philosophers should be "willing to die lightly" and even anticipate death as the high point of the practice of philosophy. In death, he contended, they leave behind their evil, distracting body and thereby allow their pure souls to contemplate Ultimate Reality through reason. Philosophy prepares the practitioner to meet death at any

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[4] Readers interested in a more complete account of this subject should consult Bowker, *The Meanings of Death*, and Carse, *Death and Existence*. Bowker addresses the argument that religion arose in large part because of a fear of death, while Carse's comprehensive study includes chapters on major ancient philosophers (notably Plato and Epicurus), major world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity) and major modern intellectual movements from Freud and Jung to Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Kierkegaard.

[5] C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 202.

moment; it would be absurd, therefore, to practice philosophy and then resent death when it came.[6]

The Stoics believed that people should just accept what Nature brings them. If men are only bodies, death is only a scattering of atoms. A true philosopher has no objection to death, even suicide, especially if circumstances make life difficult. "The hut smokes; I move out," wrote the Roman Stoic Marcus Aurelius. "No need to make a great business of it."[7] Many of the ancients declined to go so far as to advocate suicide, declaring it an offense against "the gods,"[8] but Aurelius saw it as a logical step given the right circumstances. If men have some sort of spirit, then death is either an extinction of that spirit or merely a change from an earthly, bodily existence to a pure, immaterial consciousness in the atmosphere, eventually rejoining the "generative principle of the Universal Nature." He added: "Despise not death; smile, rather, at its coming; it is among the things that Nature wills."[9]

Life is short compared to eternity, wrote Seneca, another Stoic. The great men of history struggle and are unhappy and the great bulk of mankind wastes their time on drink and debauchery, he continued. But the wise man, who serves himself and thereby avoids unnecessary risk, has enough time if he spends the

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[6] Plato, *Phaedo* trans. by David Gallup (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 8.
[7] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* trans. by Maxwell Staniforth (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), 87-88.
[8] Plato, for example, wrote that "Man is a prisoner, who has no right to open the door and run away . . . The gods are our guardians . . . and we men are a possession of theirs. Aristotle declared that suicide is an unjust and cowardly act, an offense against the State. For a good discussion of suicide in the history of philosophy, see Georgia Noon, "On Suicide" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39 No. 3 (July-September 1978): 371-386.
[9] *Meditations*, 138.

time he has in "in learning how to live, and, which may surprise you more, one's whole life must be spent in learning how to die."[10]

Similarly, Epicurus contended that the greatest evil in life is pain and the greatest good is pleasure. Unlike some of his followers, Epicurus defined pleasure not as a gratifying physical or emotional sensation but rather as freedom from pain. Men experience pain and pleasure both and only through the senses. While the pursuit of the highest pleasure is properly sought through the virtues, allowing a man to be content with little, there is no reason to fear death; after all, a man who has no body has no pain.[11] "Faced with death as simply the dispersion of matter, Epicurus responded by cultivating a serene disregard," wrote Carse. "Since the randomness of death is far more powerful than any agency of our own, disregard it; pay no attention to its effects, and turn instead to that which precedes death: the eternal motion of the universe."[12]

One of the clearest articulations of the alternate view, that death is the greatest imaginable evil, came over a millennia after the fall of the Roman Empire. In 1651 Thomas Hobbes published his philosophy of government, *The Leviathan*, based on the idea that

> life is but a motion of limbs, the beginning whereof is in some principall part within; why may we not say, that all Automata (Engines that move themselves by springs and wheeles as doth a watch) have an artificiall life? For what is the Heart, but a Spring; and the Nerves, but so many Strings; and the Joynts, but so many Wheeles, giving motion to the whole Body, such as was intended by the Artificer?[13]

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[10] *Of the Shortness of Life*, trans. by Aubrey Stewart (Bohn's Classical Library, 1889), 297.
[11] See Epicurus, *Morals*, trans. by Walter Charleton (London: Peter Davies, Publisher, 1926).
[12] Carse, *Death and Existence*, 42.
[13] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* ed. C.B. Macpherson (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), 81.

If life is but motion, then obviously men are in a continual struggle (usually with other men) to keep moving. For, "every man . . . shuns what is evil, but chiefly the chiefest of natural evils, which is death; and this doth, by a certain impulsion of nature, no less than that whereby a stone moves downward."[14] Man, in Hobbes's State of Nature, has a right to take anything from any other man, including the other's life, and might well do so given the opportunity; every man, therefore, had the right to preserve his own life by whatever means available. The only way for men to avoid death and construct an acceptable society, then, was for each man to give up some of his natural rights, recognize certain laws and come to a certain sort of agreement, his famous Social Contract.

Similarly, Ernest Becker argued in Hobbesian terms that the fear of death is man's main motivation, only the typically human solution is not to try to control death but to deny it:

> [T]he idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that this is the final destiny for man.[15]

Christianity turns both these notions on their heads. On the one hand, wrote Lewis, death is the triumph of Satan, God's punishment for the Fall in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), and the last enemy to be overcome. Death, as the outstanding colonial theologian Jonathan Edwards put it,

> with the pains and agonies with which it is usually brought on, is not merely a limiting of existence, but is a most terrible calamity; and to such a creature as man capable of conceiving immortality, and made with so

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[14] Rudiments, Ch. I, Sec. 7, p. 26; cited by Macpherson in "Introduction," *Leviathan*, 39.
[15] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), ix.

> earnest a desire after it, and capable of foresight and reflection on an approaching death, and that has such an extreme dread of it, is a calamity above all others terrible, to such as are able to reflect upon it . . . it is manifest, that mankind were not originally subjected to this calamity . . . Sin entered into the world, and death by sin, as the Apostle says.[16]

But Christianity also teaches that only the one who loses his life will save it; believers are baptized into the death of Christ (Romans 6); and death is the only possible remedy for the Fall: "Since the children have flesh and blood, [Christ] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death," according to Hebrews 2:14-15. "It is Satan's great weapon and also God's great weapon," wrote Lewis, "it is holy and unholy; our supreme disgrace and our only hope; the thing Christ came to conquer and the means by which He conquered."[17]

PURITANS AS THE FIRST JOURNALISTS

In the last two decades journalism historians have increasingly recognized that in their event-based sermons and speeches, later often printed up as pamphlets or in newsletters, Puritan divines were the original American journalists.[18] A review of the writings of the Puritan preachers shows how they applied this "ambivalent" vision of Christianity, as Lewis calls it, to the

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[16] Jonathan Edwards, *Works* (New York: Robert Carter, 1881) vol. II, p. 372; cited in David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 77.
[17] *Miracles*, 203.
[18] On the role of Puritan preachers as the original American journalists, see Marvin Olasky, *Central Ideas in the Development of American Journalism: A Narrative History* (Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1991), ch. 3; and on the pervasive influence of Puritan preaching, see Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

interpretation of fatal events in colonial days. In describing for their hearers and readers the facts about events of various types, from royal coronations and government decrees to military battles to calamities, disasters, crimes and executions, they interpreted those events in the light of their Reformed Christian theology. With their focus on God's sovereignty—there is no such thing as an "accident" for a good Calvinist—Puritan preachers believed that God had a message in everything He allowed to happen and that message could be discerned by interpreting those events in light of the Scriptures. The preacher's responsibility was to explain that message and its Scriptural basis to their hearers and readers.

In those days "news" reported in a "straightforward" fashion an event that was current and public. These "defining elements of news were shaped by the belief that everything happened according to God's perfect plan. News was, in a word, teleological."[19] Such an approach strikes many modern readers and journalists as foreign. Regarding Thomas Mann's observation that the modern age affords no satisfying answers to the questions of "why?" and "to what end?" Michael Schudson wrote: "That is not a pronouncement one can stare at for very long without blinking."[20]

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[19] David Paul Nord, "Teleology and News: The Religious Roots of American Journalism: 1630-1730" *Journal of American History* 77 (1990):10. Although news, then and now, appears "straightforward," Nord adds that the "simplicity is always deceptive. Though presented as naked empiricism, uninterpreted and self-evident, news is actually a highly complex social construction, forged in the fires of cultural convention, interpretation, and power. The meanings given these four elements define the nature of news and the function of journalism in a particular time and place."

[20] Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 159.

Puritan preachers made death a frequent topic, partly because of the significance of death in their theology and partly because it was so often a part of daily life. The settlers recognized that they, their children or their friends could literally die on any given day to due the ever-present risks of, for example, disease, Indian attacks, accidents, drowning, starvation, and cold. As a result the Puritans, as David E. Stannard observed, "faced death with an intensity virtually unknown in modern American life."[21] Puritan settlers brought with them much of the Old World, including

> their sense of divine purpose and design of the universe, with the earth as its perfect center; their belief that the earth was occupied by evil spirits as well as evil men; their conviction that the world was now in its waning moments and that the millennium was near at hand; and their desperate, ever present individual hopes that, although the vast majority of men were destined for a postmortem fate of excruciating and eternal torment in Hell, they *might* be among the very few God had chosen to save from damnation.[22]

Stannard made the point that Puritans, unlike later generations of Americans, had a coherent and comprehensive view of death, backed by a long-established theology, that they taught to their children and shaped their public discussion.

Several death-related themes stand out in the journalistic writings of major Puritans. The most common, seen clearly in funeral and execution sermons, is that individual sin brings individual consequences, both in this life and the next. Puritan preachers laid out the alternatives—Heaven or Hell—in stark language. Increase Mather, in *A Sermon Occasioned by an Execution of a Man found Guilty*

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[21]Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, ix.
[22] Stannard, 42.

of Murder (1686) said that the prisoner had confessed that he had murdered his neighbor in a rage after a quarrel; James Morgan said "he would run the [iron] Spit into his bowels; and he was as wicked as he said he would be." Morgan was about to be hanged, continued Mather, and if he refused to repent, then

> that spark of Immortality which yet takes up its lodging in you, must be [broken in the cave of dragons] for as many millions of years as there are stars in the sky . . . yet be no nearer the end of the Gnawes and Scalds than the first moment that they began . . . This night your soul shall be in Heaven or Hell for ever. [23]

Morgan confessed, according to Mather, that "I have by my sins provoked Him to destroy me before my time." Said sins included Sabbath-breaking, lying, drunkenness, cursing, and most of all, "I have despised the Word of God and many a time refused to hear it preached."

In the same sermon Increase Mather relates the story of a man, about to be executed, because he "had been much addicted to that sinful Recreation of [Card Playing] . . . and once he wished he might be hang'd if ever he played again, and therefore (said he), God is just in bringing me to such a death as this."

Similarly, pastor John Whiting wrote in 1683 of how Samuel Stone, the excommunicated son of a Hartford church teacher who had wasted his estate in dissipation, missed a bridge while walking home from the tavern one night, fell onto the rocks, and was found dead the next morning. "The Lord makes this awful death powerfully instructive and awakening," he commented.[24]

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[23] Increase Mather, *A sermon occasioned by the execution of a man found guilty of murder : preached at Boston in N.E. March 11th 1685(/)6.* Boston, : Printed by R.P. (i.e., Richard Pierce) Early American imprints. First series; no. 432.

[24] Cited in Gordon E. Geddes, *Welcome Joy: Death in Puritan New England* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), 83.

Puritans paid close attention to the manner of death as it reflected on the character of the deceased and was often seen, in God's providence, as highly ironic. Increase Mather described how the body of a previously sober young man who had joined the Quakers (given to ecstatic experiences and what today is called "speaking in tongues"—the Puritans regarded them with considerable suspicion) washed up on the beach. Although his new friends had asserted that the lad's tongue would be "the Pen of a ready writer, to declare the praises of their Lord," when found he had three stab wounds in his throat and

> no tongue in his head, nor the least sign thereof, but all was clear to his neckbone within . . . one of his Eyes hanging down upon his cheek out of his head, the other sunk so deep in his head that at first it seemed quite out, but was whole there.[25]

"It is remarkable that many of those who have loved drink, have died by water, and that at the very time when their understandings have been drowned with drink," he wrote.[26]

"It hath always been observed here," said preacher John Winthrop, "that such as fell into discontent, and hungered after their former conditions in England, fell into scurvy and died." He also related how a seaman, just before he was blown up by a barrel of gunpowder aboard a boat, told a mate who urged him not to light up, "that if the devil should carry him away quick, he would take one pipe."[27]

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[25] Increase Mather, *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (Delmar, N.Y.: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, Inc., 1977). 342.
[26] Mather, *Illustrious Providences*, 258.
[27] John Winthrop, *The History of New England from 1630-1649* Ed. by James Savage (Boston: Phelps and Farnham, 1825-26), cited in Geddes, *Welcome Joy*, 44-5.

In addition to negative moral lessons, sometimes the Puritan preachers pointed to the godly lives of the recently deceased as examples to follow, as Cotton Mather did in the 1705 funeral sermon for Harvard president Leonard Hoar entitled *A Faithful Man, Described and Rewarded*.[28] Cotton Mather's 1712 sermon, *Awakening Thoughts on the Sleep of Death*, congratulated Mrs. Mary Higginson, deceased, for her friends "found her life a noble Commentary on Every Verse there assigned to the Vertuous Woman," referring to Proverbs 31.

There was intense interest in the deceased's last moments also because, in Puritan theology, salvation was not necessarily certain. Puritans were usually optimistic about the fate of the faithful, but it was possible that the dying person might at the last minute repudiate his faith or that he somehow was not, despite appearances, one of the predestined. The last moments might reveal some clue one way or the other. Before the Great Awakening, according to Stannard, Puritans expressed their fear of death "in private, even reluctant admissions of abject despair."[29]

Still, the Puritan clergy generally recognized that "We may not judge of Men merely by outward accidents which befal them in this world, since all things happen alike unto all," said Increase Mather. "The Lord's faithful servants have sometimes been the subjects of very dismal dispensations." This was illustrated by the case of John Hart, a "choice Christian" and his wife, "a good Woman," who perished with their six children in a house fire.

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[28] Cited in Geddes, 27.
[29] Stannard, 146.

> Such things sometimes fall upon those that are dear unto God, to intimate, if that be done to the green tree, what shall be done to the dry tree, that is fit for nothing but the fire? Nevertheless, a judgment may be so circumstanced, as that the displeasure of Heaven is plainly written upon it in legible characters.[30]

Increase Mather wrote the *Record of Illustrious Providences*, he explained, not only to recount "extraordinary judgments" but also "extraordinary mercies." One such case was a little girl who, while playing under a wagon, was pierced behind the right ear with a sharp hinge. Her mother "immediately drew out the Iron, and thereupon some of the Brains of her Child which stuck to the Iron, and other bits were scattered on her Forehead." But the child survived to become a mother of two.[31]

Modern readers may be struck with the Puritan willingness to describe in graphic terms the corpses of the deceased to heighten the sense of horror among their readers. Robert Bolton warned readers that

> Thy body, when the Soule is gone, will be an horrour to all that behold it; a most loathsome and abhorred spectacle. Those that loved it most, cannot now finde in their hearts to look on't, by reason of the grisly deformedness which death will put upon it. Down it must go into pit of carions and confusion, covered with wormes, not able to wag so much as a little finger, to remove the vermin that feed and gnawe upon its flesh; and so moulder away into rottennesse and dust …[32]

Such language was, in part, a holdover from previous generations, a "medieval preoccupation with putrefaction and morbidity" from the Middle Ages,

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[30] Mather, *Illustrious Providences*, 338-9.
[31] Mather, 33.
[32] Robert Bolton, *Mr. Bolton's Last and learned Worke of the Foure Last Things, Death, Judgment, Hell and Heaven* (London, 1635), 80.

as Stannard pointed out.[33] In using such disquieting detail the preachers took advantage of this apparently universal revulsion. Lewis suggested that people fear both ghosts and corpses because they recognize that the division of body and spirit is unnatural.[34]

Another possible explanation is that a person's dignity as a human survives his death, which accounts for the respect given to corpses of respected persons—to show disrespect for the body is to insult the memory of the deceased.[35] The disintegration of the corpse, arguably, was symbolic of the "disrespect" that Death has for all men. Francis Bacon observed that in his day people feared the actual process of physical death far more than it deserves, perhaps largely because of the tales of the clergy:

> Men fear Death, as children fear to go in the dark; and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other. Certainly the contemplation of death, as the wages of sin and passage to another world, is holy and religious; but the fear of it, as a tribute due unto nature, is weak . . . You shall read in some of the friars' books of mortification, that a man should think with himself what the pain is if he have but his finger's end pressed or tortured, and thereby imagine what the pains of death are, when the whole body is corrupted and dissolved; when many times death passeth with less pain than the torture of a limb.[36]

Whatever the reason, Puritan preachers were quick to recognize and use details that would produce a powerful emotional reaction in their readers and hearers.

The Puritan style of reporting death has antecedents also in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, a book that has had an enormous impact on how death is viewed

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[33] Stannard, 19.
[34] Lewis, *Miracles*, 154.
[35] Toynbee, "Traditional Attitudes," 60.
[36] Hugh G. Dick, ed. *Selected Writings of Francis Bacon* (New York: Random House, 1955), 9.

in Western civilization. Dante, like the Puritans, focused on the eternal fate of souls, taught that God was sovereign, and presumed that God had a message for the living in the stories of the deaths of the deceased. Dante presented the ironically just nature of the suffering of the damned as divine judgment for their sins on earth. He saw death in terms of personal, individual morality because he understood that humans live in an intrinsically moral universe.

As individual sin led to individual judgment, so communal sin produced communal judgment. Puritans understood earthquakes, floods, and severe weather of all sorts to be the result of God's wrath on His people. Thomas Prince titled a 1727 sermon prompted by recent earthquakes *God Shakes the Earth Because He is Wroth*. "Let our flesh still tremble for fear of god, and let us be ever afraid of His judgments," he said.[37] "There have been many sudden deaths in this county which should not pass without some remark," wrote Increase Mather. "For when such Strokes are multiplied, there is undoubtedly a speaking voice of Providence therein."[38]

Along with weather, the Puritans saw epidemics as particular signs of judgment. In the winter of 1678, small-pox was ravaging Boston and 30 had died in one day. "Death waits for you," Increase Mather told his congregation.

> There is now a Mortal and Contagious Disease in Many Houses, the Sword of the Lord is drawn and young men fall down apace, slain under it; do you not see the arrows of death come flying over your heads? Why then, Awake, Awake and turn to god in Jesus Christ while it is called

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[37] In *The Puritan Sermon in America, 1630-1760: Humiliation and Execution Sermons* (Delmar, N.Y.: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1978), 142.
[38] Increase Mather, *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (1864), New York: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, Inc., 1977, 258.

> today, and know for certain that if you dy in your sins, you will be the most miserable of any poor Creatures in the bottom of Hell.[39]

Military defeat was also a clear sign of divine displeasure. In *A Brief History of the Warr with the Indians in New England*, Increase Mather described attacks on two Puritans farms, in which the Indians

> did they burn with fire and barbarously murdered both men and women in those places, stripping the slain whether men or women, and leaving them in the open field as naked as the day wherein they were born. Such also is their inhumanity as that they flay the skin from their faces and heads of those they that they get into their hand, and go away with the hairy Scalp of their Enemys.

The colonists pursued the Indian raiders into the swamp, but gave up and retreated minutes before the Indian leader, King Philip, would have surrendered, they heard later. "But God saw that we were not yet fit for Deliverance, nor could health be restored to us unless a great deal more Blood be first taken from us."[40]

The death of eminent clergy was another major sign of God's judgment. The greater the social importance of the deceased, the greater the damage to the social fabric of the colony. "We were God's first-born son," wrote William Stoughton in *New England's True Interest*, one of a collection of essays on the deaths of notable Puritan preachers. "We have had Moses and Aaron to lead us" but "now that they are dead and gone, oh how doth the unsoundness, the rottenness and hypocrisie of too many amongst us make itself known."[41]

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[39] Quoted in Stannard, 60.

[40] Increase Mather, *A brief history of the warr with the Indians in New-England, : (from June 24, 1675. when the first English-man was murdered by the Indians, to August 12. 1676. when Philip alias Metacomet, the principal author and beginner of the warr, was slain.)* (Boston: John Foster, 1676), Microopaque. Worcester, Mass. : American Antiquarian Society, 1955-1983.

[41] Cited in Stannard, 127.

These judgments were expected because the Puritans saw themselves in a covenant relationship with God. God had blessed them in bringing them to the American shores and it was their duty to live according to His laws.

Puritan preachers did not intend by their dire warnings to bury their listeners in despair, however. "Puritans kindled the flames of fear, not to immolate themselves, but to throw light on their mortality, their sinfulness, and the need to prepare for the coming of God's grace," points out James J. Farell.[42] Death was not the worst thing that could happen to a person—the worst thing was to die unrepentant and unforgiven. The message of judgment for sin typically came with a promise of forgiveness, free for the asking by God's grace, for those who turned from their sin, for communities as well as for individuals. Said Benjamin Coleman to Margaret Gaulacher, convicted of killing her child: "Tho' the blood of that murdered infant, with all they other bloody crimes, horribly cry to God against thee, yet a louder and better cry, from the blood of they Saviour, shall drown that formidable cry."[43]

Although for most the preferred style of death was the lingering illness, giving the individual time to prepare his soul,[44] some godly men had prayed for sudden death. In fact, those "in Christ" could welcome a sudden death, wrote Increase Mather, "whenever it shall come, be it never too soon, never so suddenly."[45]

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[42] James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple Press, 1980), 18.
[43] In Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* ed. Kenneth B. Murdock and Elizaabeth W. Miller (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1977) vol. 2 p. 422.
[44] Geddes, 37.
[45] Mather, *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences*, 258.

Many, despite their uncertainty, eagerly anticipated heaven and the resurrection of their earthly bodies. Josiah Smith described the dying hours of one lady as "joy unspeakable." "But I must restrain my Pen," he wrote, "and draw the Curtain, lest you cry out; 'Let us also go that we may die with her!'"[46]

They took the Apostle Paul literally:

> Behold I shew you mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump; for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall e changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality . . . then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death in swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?[47]

Still, while the glory of heaven was certainly a part of the Puritan focus, the emphasis was on this life, on living out the exhortation to be "in the world but not of the world." God does not permit men to know the time of their death, Increase Mather wrote, so that "His children might live by faith, so that they might live a life of holy dependence upon God continually." For "did they know that before the next week they shall be in another world, they would live after another manner than now they do." [48]

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[46] Josiah Smith, *The Doctrine and Glory of the Saints' Resurrection* (Boston, 1742), 12-13.
[47] I Corinthians 15: 51-55, King James Version.
[48] Increase Mather, "Man Knows Not His Time," in *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry*, ed. Perry Miller (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1956), 186, 190.

Chapter 3: The Colonial Press

The Puritans were the dominant social force in New England when Benjamin Harris produced the first American newspaper, dated September 25, 1690. Harris, also notable for his publication of *The New England Primer*, planned for *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick* to run monthly or "if any Glut of Occurrences happen, oftener." It was a four-page newsletter with the back one blank, presumably so readers could add their own news before passing it on.

Publick Occurrences read as if it was written by a Puritan preacher. Harris wanted his paper to help readers "better understand the Circumstances of Publique Affairs" and also to curb the rumors that were rampant in Boston. But its primary purpose was "That Memorable Occurrences of Divine Providence may not be neglected or forgotten, as they too often are."

One such memorable occurrence was a suicide, which Puritan preachers condemned. "Life is great mercy," said Increase Mather in *A Sermon on the Horrid Crime of Self-Murder*. "Men should be cautioned against despising, and wilfully casting away the Mercies of God." Harris, who had the support of the Mathers for his paper,[1] described the event in such a way that the theological lesson was clear. The wife of an "old man" in the community had recently died. He "was of somewhat a Silent and Morose Temper, but one that had long enjoyed the reputation of a Sober and Pious Man." After she was buried, "the Devil took

[1]Wm. David Sloan, "The Origins of the American Newspaper" in *Media and Religion in American History* ed. by Wm. David Sloan (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2000), 36.

advantage of the Melancholy which he thereupon fell into." This melancholy was the more dangerous because "his Wife's discretion and industry had long been the support of his family, and he seemed harried with an impertinent fear that he should now come to want before he died." His friends, concerned, kept an eye on him but one evening he slipped away into the stable. There they found him hanging by a calving rope, "with his feet near touching the ground."

The lesson was obvious. Here was a man who, having grown lazy in his responsibilities to his wife and family, found himself suffering the consequences when she died. Lacking faith that God would provide for him, combined with the machinations of the Devil, he took his own life, yet another sin that was strongly suggestive of his eternal fate.

Other stories in the first and only issue of *Publick Occurrences* included, among other things, a report of Christianized Indians planning a "Day of Thanksgiving to God" for providing during a recent food shortage, the status of the declining smallpox epidemic in Boston, and a local fire.

Harris also reported that Indian allies of the British had committed atrocities against French prisoners, and harshly criticized the colonial authorities for their connection with the Mohawks:

> If Almighty God will have Canada to be subdu'd without the assistance of those miserable Savages, in whom we have too much confided, we shall be glad, that there will be no Sacrifice offered up to the Devil, upon this occasion; God alone will have all the glory.

He repeated a scandalous rumor that the king of France "used to lie with [his] Sons Wife."

The Boston authorities suppressed *Publick Occurrences* after its first and only issue, ordering Harris to cease publication because it was unlicensed. The traditional position among journalism historians was that the religiously-motivated Puritan leaders crushed this freedom-loving proto-journalist, inaugurating a conflict between religion and the press that continues to this day. Later scholars have shown that this is incorrect.[2] The interim council government in Boston at the time, representing royal authority, included members of diverse political and religious interests. Some may have opposed the *Publick Occurrences* because they were political enemies of Increase Mather, who supported the paper, and wanted to discredit him. Other council members may have seen the criticism of the Indian allies as simply too explosive in what was at the time a "chaotic" political environment. Julie Hedgepeth Williams has pointed out that the rumor about the French king was so salacious the council members might have judged it "sinful speech"; just six months earlier the government had warned "sinful speech" brought down God's wrath on the colony in the form of the Indian wars. In this case, "sinful expression was potentially dangerous," she observed.[3]

Harris's approach to journalism illustrates the tensions inherent in the transition period between what Marvin Olasky calls the "official story" and the

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[2] Wm. David Sloan has provided the details of this event, and citations for the journalism historians who assume Puritan suppression, in: "The Origins of the American Newspaper" in *Media and Religion in American History*; with Julie Hedgepeth Williams, *The Early American Press 1690-1783* (Westport, Conn, Greenwood Press, 1994), 2-10; and "Chaos, Polemics, and America's First Newspaper" *Journalism Quarterly* 70 (1993): 666-81.

[3] Julie Hedgepeth Williams, "Puritans and Freedom of Expression" in *Media and Religion in American History* ed. by Wm. David Sloan (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2000), 30. This article contains a fine account of the Puritan views on the licensing of printing and freedom of expression, which she describes as supportive of debate and free within the limits of orthodoxy.

"corruption story." Olasky proposes that in the earliest years of printing, royal authorities recognized the power of the printed word and therefore sought to control what was printed, primarily through licensing. The only news people received on paper, therefore, was the official version of events.

However, through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a handful of courageous printers in Europe, heavily influenced by the Reformation and many of them Puritans, insisted that, because evil arises from the human heart, the most effective way to deal with sin, particularly in high places, was to expose it. This they did in pamphlets and newsletters and books, despite prosecution and persecution. Through their persistence and with the support of the public, who recognized that the royal authorities were unlikely to provide truth on their own, these journalists gradually made the "corruption story" the dominant approach to news in Europe and America by the dawn of the 19th century.[4]

The point is that Harris's Puritan faith and religious commitment played a significant and supportive role in the production of the first American newspaper. Rather than founding a long-running feud between religion and the press, *Publick Occurrences* followed a pattern that to its readers seemed natural and normal. In interpreting the fatal events of the day, the newspaper reflected a Christian worldview that they had heard regularly from the pulpit since Massachusetts was established, the same worldview that preceding generations of courageous

[4] Marvin Olasky, *Central Ideas in the Development of American Journalism: A Narrative History* (Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1991), ch. 1-3. See the Introduction for a summary of the argument.

journalists had used in helping to found England's newspaper culture in the 1600s that was willing to criticize even royal authority.

Nord, as noted in Chapter 2, wrote that Puritan writers assumed that the interpretation was inherent in the event, that God meant to communicate something by allowing it to happen:

> The reporting was plain and simple only because new events struck the reporters as so obviously part of a recurrent pattern of occurrences. If interpretation was simple or even neglected entirely, it was only because the proper interpretation seemed self-evident. Behind the bare-bones recording of occurrences lay an unmistakable commitment to interpretation by authority.

But as the Puritans passed from the scene so did their perception of what constituted news, according to Nord. The end of the era was Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette*: "The reporting of current public occurrences mattered to Benjamin Franklin just as much as it had mattered to Increase Mather and Samuel Danforth and John Winthrop—but with a difference. What had been divine providence had become, by 1729, simply the news." [5]

However, Nord underestimates the influence of religion in colonial journalism. The newspapers that followed *Publick Occurrences* also strongly reflected the religious faith of the people who produced them, even though newspaper editors may not have relied on or supported religious authority in the same way or to the same degree as Cotton Mather. As David Copeland explained, not every story was about religion, but the settlers saw religion as "an integral part of the news and a motivator of events." He added that because

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[5] David Paul Nord. "Teleology and News: The Religious Roots of American Journalism, 1630-1730" *The Journal of American History* 77 (June 1990), 29, 36

> religion was a part of nearly every colonial's life and almost every religious group views its understanding of God through its own theological lens, news interpretation was often colored by the religion of the printers, correspondents or writers to newspapers.[6]

"Outside the conspicuous example of Benjamin Franklin," noted Sloan and Williams, "hardly any publisher produced a newspaper in which his or her Christian faith did not play a part."[7] Not every journalist was a New England Puritan, of course. Regionally, the dominant denominations were Anglicanism in the South, Congregationalism in New England, the Society of Friends in Pennsylvania, and Dutch Reformed in New York. Journalists tended to reflect the views of their audiences.

The growth of newspapers in the colonial period was irregular. After *Publick Occurrences*, the *Boston News-Letter* appeared in 1704. It was primarily a compilation of official pronouncements and foreign news reprinted from English papers arriving by ship. Published by postmaster John Campbell, an Anglican, it was also extremely deferential to the royal Boston authorities and remained Loyalist right up to the Revolution (which it did not long survive). Campbell, observed Sloan, had no notion of editorial independence and regarded himself as an official conduit of information.[8]

The *Boston News-Letter* was the sole American newspaper for over a decade, until 1718 when Campbell lost his job as postmaster but refused to turn the paper over to his successor. The new postmaster, William Brooker, started his

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[6] David C. Copeland, "Religion and Colonial Newspapers," in *Media and Religion in American History* ed. by Wm. David Sloan (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2000), 54, 60.
[7] Sloan and Williams, *The Early American Press*, 206.
[8] Sloan, "The Origins of the American Newspaper," 42.

own, the *Boston Gazette*, in late 1719. In 1725 both the *Gazette* and the *News-Letter* dropped "Published by Authority" from their flags, a sign that printing was continuing its escape from official control.[9]

From then on a variety of printers founded newspapers in various colonies at irregular intervals. Publishing a newspaper was labor-intensive and not very lucrative, so that scarcely more publications survived than were founded. There were only 12 in all the colonies by 1750, but 48 by the eve of the Revolution.[10]

Meanwhile, in the colonial period American religion changed in ways that had significant effects on how news was reported. The standard reading of American religious history for that period, according to Patricia U. Bonomi, is a story of declension. Among the original Puritan settlers institutionalized religion was among the most powerful social and political forces in society. The social cohesion that came with widespread acceptance of Puritan values began to fragment in the late 1600s as increasing numbers of immigrants from various Christian traditions arrived on American shores, and the governments of different colonies provided state support for different churches. This fragmentation continued in the 1700s (interrupted briefly by the revivals of the Great Awakening

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[9] Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 41.

[10] Donald R. Avery, "The Colonial Press, 1690-1765." in *The Media in American: A History* edited by Wm. David Sloan and James D. Startt (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 1999), 38-47. For a detailed look at the social and economic forces that promoted the growth of colonial newspapers, see Sidney Kobre, *The Development of the Colonial Newspaper* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1960).

in the 1740s) and, encouraged by the creeping effects of Enlightenment rationalism, culminated in the severing of church from state after 1776.[11]

Sydney Ahlstrom, a leading historian of American religion, added that assessments from the pulpit of the state of religion in the colonies around 1700 were "gloomy." As the century progressed Enlightenment thought ate away at the Puritan focus on a national covenant with God, yielding to "moralistic individualism." The ardently held convictions of the first generations of Puritan settlers became formal doctrinal positions, held with considerably less ardor and intensity.[12] Christian institutions became more inclined to emphasize the human role in salvation (denying or downplaying predestinarianism), emphasized the simplicity of Christianity, focused on ethics and morality, and developed an increasing optimism about human progress. "Enlightenment piety was rational, reserved and law centered," wrote Ahlstrom.[13]

Bonomi agreed that by the mid-1700s rationalism was a major factor in making religion an increasingly private and compartmentalized matter, so that "it did not flow so easily into very corner of daily life."[14] But she disagreed that this necessarily meant that religion as a societal force was waning. Instead, she argued, while there was probably a decrease in doctrinal vigor, "a certain rounding off in sharpness of doctrine," overall there was an increasing religious vitality characterized by growth, diversity and volatility. All this was generated by

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[11] Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 37.
[12] Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 280.
[13] Ahlstrom, 357-8.
[14] Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven*, 102.

a “free market for theistic beliefs and practices” that continued to affect politics. Despite the volatility, an increasing supply of clergy throughout the 18th century helped stabilize the institutional church and regularize attendance. The Great Awakening, in fact, helped prepare the colonists for the American Revolution by providing “a pertinent and useable model for radical activists.” The at times riotous revivals broke down social cohesion and elevated the importance of the individual conscience. In doing so, according to Bonomi, the Great Awakening showed that an assault on the social order could succeed and encouraged followers to take action despite the risk of painful consequences.

It should be kept in mind, however, that even though religion was the dominant institution in colonial America, this was not based solely on the piety of the colonists; the fact that institutionalized churches enjoyed legal privileges was also important:

> In wielding influence over culture, the settled Protestant churches had, in comparative terms, little competition. Ministers constituted the intellectual elite. They ran the colleges and they controlled the printed and the spoken word. Religious devotional material kept printers and booksellers in business, and colonists got much of their news, and instructions about how to interpret it, from sermons.[15]

All of this had a significant impact on colonial journalism, as we will see, and a noticeable effect on how journalists reported news of death.

CRIME AND EXECUTIONS

Most media history scholarship typically presents colonial newspapers as boring, observed Copeland, “two or four page sheets of stale, clipped political

[15] R. Laurence Moore, “Religion, Secularization, and the Shaping of the Culture Industry in Antebellum America.” *American Quarterly* 41 No. 2 (June, 1989), 217.

news from London newspapers concerning Europe or clippings from other colonial newspapers." The high point of colonial journalism, in this view, was the trial of New York printer John Peter Zenger in 1735, which spawned the notion of a free press. Otherwise, its only notable achievement was the transformation of colonial news-letters into political machines that fired the Revolution.[16]

While it is true that much content was political and clipped from the London papers, continued Copeland, colonial newspapers' crime coverage was regular and it could be shockingly sensational. "Brains, bowels, blood, and puddings [intestines], each was splashed across the pages of colonial newspapers."[17]

Many of the goriest reports were from Europe, especially in the first half of the century. One lengthy story recounted in graphic detail how a Bristol ship builder attacked his father on the beach "and with an ax fell'd him unmercifully to the Ground, leaving him for dead." John Maddock then went after his mother and "also with his Ax split her Skull, and dash'd out her Brains, while she was in her Daughter's Arms, who with horrible Shrieks did Endeavor to prevent it." Maddock then returned to the beach and, seeing his father being helped along by some others,

> ran furiously at them with his Ax, as oblig'd them to quit their Assistance and save their Lives, who with Horror see him cut and mangle his Father in the most unheard of Manner, till he had finished his Life. He put the whole Village in Fear, till he was knocked down with a Club . . ..[18]

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[16] Copeland, *Colonial American Newspapers*, 12.
[17] Copeland, 74.
[18] *Boston Weekly News-Letter*, 26 September 1734.

There were also crime stories from American soil. In 1759 *Wyman's New York Gazette* reported that one Mr. Dyer of Stafford, "somewhat violent in temper," had been accused of stealing some hay and his wife, "a women of remarkable Piety," seemed to side with his accusers. The next morning a neighbor found them dead; he had beaten her to death with a maul and hanged himself:

> Her Flesh, especially about the Neck and Head, appeared beaten almost to a jelly, her Scull broke all to pieces, her Blood and pieces of her Brain was bespattered upon the Wall and the Ceiling, she seemed to have been dragged all over the Room, and beaten, even after she was dead; the gold Beads of her Necklace were beaten into the Flesh on her Neck, and the Drops of her Ear Ring was buried a considerable Way under her jaw.[19]

Many of the reports had an ironic twist, just as did those of the Puritan preachers. One New York man who wanted to murder his wife brought her some poisonous herbs and instructed her to stuff some veal with them. If he came home late, he told her, "do you eat" without waiting. She used the herbs and ate the veal, so that she was feeling ill when he got home. The husband, seeing that she was still alive and perhaps wanting to act normally, asked her to cook him some sausage, which she did—in the veal gravy. "I am a dead Man," he said, when he discovered what happened. "They continued sick for some Days, but he died sometime before his Wife. They had been married about five months."[20]

Colonial reports of murder also tended to emphasize moral disorders of many sorts. Stories about killing one's own parents, spouse or child were regular,[21] as were murders involving some sort of sex crime and sometimes

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[19] *Weyman's New York Gazette*, 7 May 1759.
[20] *Boston Weekly News-Letter*, 7 February 1744.
[21] "Infants, specifically bastards, were often killed or abandoned to die by their mothers, and colonial newspaper denounced the crime and criminal regularly." Copeland, 110.

accusations of witchcraft. A young Irish lawyer, Constantine Macguinnis leaped out of his bed and attacked with a sword his laundress, Frances Williams, when she came to light the fire in his Essex rooms. He stabbed her 14 or 15 times, "mostly about her Belly. She was five Months gone with Child." (The story implied that the child was probably his.) He then dragged her by her hair down three flights of stairs. When arrested and carried before the judge "all he offer'd was, she was a Witch, and had Bewitched him."

Just as violent crime illustrated extreme moral disorder, so accounts of the mutilation of corpses showed moral and sometimes social disorder. As Toynbee wrote, human beings have dignity because they are human and "this dignity survives his death …therefore his dead body must not simply be treated as garbage and be thrown away like the carcase of a dead non-human creature, or like a human being's worn out boots or clothes."[22]

Hence, newspapers sometimes covered, not as crime but certainly as moral battles, the attempts of student physicians to obtain corpses for "anatomization" or dissection. The *Boston Gazette* reprinted a lengthy story of a three-way struggle for the body of a man executed for strangling his wife (although he denied it, and was possibly innocent, the stories implied). The Proctors, local public officials, tried to let the deceased's friends sneak quietly off with the body in a coffin, but "the Mob" retrieved the coffin from them, and threw it in the river, whereupon some Oxford students "jumped in like Spaniels," fished the body out and hustled it off the Lincoln College, from whence public officials seized it again, and so on,

[22] Arnold Toynbee, "Traditional Attitudes Towards Death" in *Man's Concern with Death* edited by Arnold Toynbee, et al, (San Francisco: McGraw Hill Book Company: 1969), 60.

through six changes of possession until it ended up "now dissecting in Christ Church College."[23] A poem from London's *Lady's Magazine* commented on the theft of a young woman's body from St. Peter's Churchyard, Oxford:

> For Shame! For Shame! Oxonians all
> And blush to find it said,
> Not pleased to steal the girls alive,
> But must ye steal them dead?
> Insatiate Nature thus directs
> Nor is it strange I own
> That those who love to taste the flesh
> Should like—to pick the Bone.[24]

The practice of grave robbing to obtain cadavers would continue, both in Europe and America, well into the nineteenth century, although newspaper reports of it were not common. A 1950 presentation to the New York Society of Medical History, as reported by the *New York Times*,[25] noted that the first six presidents of the New York Academy of Medicine, founded in 1847, all confessed to have taken part in body-snatching during their years as medical students. The study detailed a three-day riot against doctors in 1788 in which 5,000 enraged citizens forced doctors to "slip out of the windows, creep behind bean barrels, crawl up chimneys, hide behind feather beds, and the grave gentlemen of the healing art were forced to flee in dark places like hunted rebels or persecuted prophets." The riot was touched off, during an anti-grave-robbing campaign in the newspapers, when some boys, peeking into a hospital window, saw some doctors dissecting a cadaver. One doctor waved a bodiless arm at the boy in the window and told him

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[23] 19 October 1730.
[24] *New York Weekly Journal*, 2 April 1750.
[25] 14 April 1950, p. 25.

it belonged to his mother. It might well have. The boy's mother had recently died, and the terrified boy rushed home to tell his father, who exhumed his wife's grave and found her corpse was missing.

Puritan preachers typically described murders in execution sermons. By that time the perpetrator had been caught and the community, through the courts, had delivered its sentence. Colonial newspapers also often reported murders in the context of executions, and wrote so as to teach very similar lessons: sin brings judgment, the judgment fits the crime, and the manner of death reflects on the manner of life and whether, in his or her last moments, the condemned confessed and made peace with God and society.

Thus, when two pirates were hanged near the Charleston,

> The substance of what the Pirates said, was, That all should take warning by Them, and beware of the Sins of Profaning the Lord's Day, of Disobedience to Parents, of Cursing and Swearing, and of Drunkenness; One of'em desired That those that follow the Sea would take warning: and if any should be taken by Pirates, rather Dye than Content to be of their Number.[26]

Similarly, when Richard Wilson was hanged for burglary, "At the Place of Execution he warned the Spectators against Drunkenness, Profane Swearing, which he acknowledge he had been much accustomed to, and had led him on to the Commission of the Fact for which he was going to suffer." The report closed: "He heartily forgave all the World, and in a Judgment of Charity, died a good Penitent." [27]

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[26] *Boston News-Letter*, 28 May 1724.
[27] *South Carolina Gazette*, 23 October 1732.

Some were not such agreeable penitents, and their final moments were accordingly horrible. A detailed report of London executions in 1726 described how murderer Katherine Hayes was "burnt alive according to her sentence, as in cases of petty treason." But, as a notorious offender, she "had not the Indulgence of being strangled before the Fire came to her, which they say is often done in such cases." She was fastened to the stake with a chain around her body and around her neck an iron collar and a halter, "which the executioner pulled at when she began to shriek." If her last-minute confession was true, the writer pointed out, then her son "killed the Father, and assisted in quartering him, and lay with his Mother [Hayes] when his mangled limbs were under the Bed: he was hanged in chains near Tyburn Road."[28]

In May, 1750 Alexander McCram of Edinburgh had stabbed his pregnant wife and cut his own child's throat with a razor. "During the whole trial he behaved with a remarkable Hardness and Unconcern," according to a letter from London.[29] He confessed that he did it to carry on a "filthy intrigue" with another woman. At his hanging

> He was mounted on a High Scaffold, where his Right Hand was chopped off with an Ax, when the Cart drove from under Him, his Weight broke the Rope, but he was again hoisted up by a Pulley, and after he was dead, he was hung in chains, and his Right Hand nailed to the Top of the Gallows.[30]

"'Tis a Pity if such an Example has not its Proper weight and Influence, to deter others from a Vice which is so apt to lead to the most Unnatural and

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[28] *New York Gazette*, 22 August 1726.
[29] *Boston Gazette*, 4 September 1750.
[30] *Boston Gazette*, 11 September 1750.

Shocking Extremities," observed the correspondent. This analysis, notably, did not mention divine judgment, but the message is clear.

Victims of crime could also serve as warnings. "To provide a service to the unwary youth," the February 12, 1732 *South Carolina Gazette* reprinted a story from London about how a "young Gentleman" who had "strayed into one of the miserable Houses of false Pleasure" was attacked by one of the prostitute's "bullies." He had time to jump out of bed and draw his sword, but "was unfortunately kill'd by the Villain, on the spot. Tis said he was deservedly the darling son of an excellent Mother, and that, lately, by the death of his Father, he was come to the possession of a plentiful Estate."

Crime stories accusing black slaves of murder, whether in the American colonies or the West Indies, were also regular. While scholars suspect that much colonial news suffered from relying on reports that were inaccurate or dated, crime news involving blacks seems especially given to exaggeration.[31] Such reports showed how many colonials regarded blacks with a mixture of contempt and a deep-seated fear of a slave insurrection. News in 1734 from a sloop lately of St. Christophers said that between 1,200 and 1,400 slaves had revolted on St. Johns and "entirely massacred all the white People on that Island, consisting of 200 families, with great Cruelty."[32] The *South Carolina Gazette* was especially inclined to run stories about how slave-owners responded harshly to revolts in the West Indies, torturing and executing suspected ring-leaders, along with stories from the colony itself. For example, when Mr. Charles Jones caught a slave who

[31] Copeland, 131.
[32] *Boston News-Letter*, 27 December 1734.

had stolen something and then fled, Jones bashed the slave over the head with his musket and killed him, then reported the incident to the local judge who ordered Jones to "cut his Head off, fix it on a Pole, and set it up in a Cross-road, which was done accordingly near Asbly Ferry."[33]

Another specialized and common type of murder report was the pirate story. Besides being interesting reading, these warned readers about the dangers of travel on the sea. Often the stories were generated by an execution when the pirates were finally caught, and many of the rest were reprinted letters from passengers or sailors who had been attacked. At his hanging one Nicolas Lewis, formerly a mate with "Lowe, the notorious Pyrate," said that once Lowe was so angry that a captain had tossed overboard a chest of gold before his ship was taken, he "cut the said Master's Lips and broil'd them before his Face, and afterwards murthered him & all his Crew, being 12 persons. This Lowe was also notorious for all his Cruelties even to the British Subjects that fell into his Hands."[34]

There were two important differences between the murder and execution stories of colonial newspapers and the sermons from their Puritan counterparts. First, while journalists understood evil as arising primarily from the individual human heart, they were more likely to acknowledge claims that other factors were involved, particularly insanity. John Maddock, who murdered his parents with an axe, "had been delerious some time before." Macguinnis, who stabbed his laundress, the next day attacked his jailers and showed "Great Tokens of Lunacy."

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[33] *South Carolina Gazette*, 29 January 1732.
[34] *Boston News-Letter*, 24 September 1724.

"Some Day this Week," according to the February 12, 1732 edition of the *South Carolina Gazette*, "one Mr. Gough was unhappily kill'd by a Gentleman, who (as we hear) has the Misfortune to be out of his Senses."

Michael Carmody, hanged in 1734 for thefts that "Necessity compelled me to commit," begged the hearers of his confession to wear no more cotton clothing. Those who made their living in the wool industry had been devastated by the arrival of cotton, he said:

> Therefore, good Christians, consider that if you go on to suppress your goods, by wearing much cotton as I am now cloth'd in, you will bring your country into Misery, which will consequently swarm with such unhappy Malefactors as your present Object is, and the blood of every miserable felon that will hang, after this Warning, from the Gallows, will lie at your Doors.[35]

Second, news reports were less likely to include an explicit statement of the moral lesson—they were less likely to "preach" about Heaven and Hell. This does not mean that the stories carried no moral lesson. To the contrary, the implications of the details journalists chose to include were quite clear and the message obvious. To the colonial mind, crime was a sin and so, by definition, crime was a personal, moral disorder. But printers adopted a style that, in general, separated the presentation of the details from the interpretation and often included no interpretation at all.

This distinction likely arose in part because colonial journalists, consciously or not, copied the style of the English papers from which they got so much of their material. In part it also probably reflects the growing theological

[35] *Boston News-Letter*, 25 July 1734.

diversity of the colonies, the increasing "vitality," as Bonomi put it. Although society had still a largely Christian consensus, and most would have agreed that murderers who fail to repent end up in Hell, many colonial printers did not face questions about death and the afterlife with the same intensity as their Puritan journalistic forerunners.

What is the purpose behind reporting such stories? Why did colonial newsmen lean toward such gory, sensational stories when they were available? Copeland wrote that given the apparently universal tendency to sensationalize news, the impulse must be "rooted in the nature of news, and in all honesty, its origins lie deep within the nature of human beings as well."[36]

Some modern theorists have suggested that the purposes of crime news are to outline and enforce the moral boundaries of society; they are, in effect, a form of social control.[37] The news media are agents of social control that "preserve the status quo by providing unsympathetic coverage to those whose behavior threatens it."[38] In a sense that is correct, in that crime news provides a negative moral example that discourages certain things, like murder. However, these

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[36] Copeland, *Colonial American Newspapers*, 18. For an excellent discussion of this point, see Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News: From the Drum to the Satellite* (New York: Viking, 1988), 2-3.

[37] Richard V. Ericson, Patricia M. Baranek and Janet B.L. Chan, *Representing Order: Crime, Law and Justice in the News Media* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 357. See also T.L. Glasser and J.S. Ettema, "Investigative journalism and the moral order" *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1) (March 1989): 1-20. This study, based on interviews with journalists, argues that journalists' news judgments draw on historically-based moral order framework to attack breaches in this moral order; this is the transformation of moral claims into "empirical claims." Stevens argued that the "social utility" of sensational crime news was to involve the community in a "redefinition of their own values" and thereby reassures itself what its own values are; see John Stevens, "Social utility of sensational news: Murder and divorce in the 1920s," *Journalism Quarterly* 62 No. 1 (1991): 53-58.

[38] Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979): 295.

sensational stories do not necessarily set "boundaries," a word that implies that everything up to that line is acceptable. In covering crime, newspapers are "representing order" to the community: "A murder provides the occasion not simply for a primary factual account of what happened, but for a morality play of how what happened fits into the order of things."[39] Bloody, sensational news stories represent the most extreme edge of possible human behavior. Sensational crime news tells us not what is acceptable, but what is possible; it tells us not the way the world normally is, but the way the world could be if such evil went unchecked. Sensational crime news is, put simply, a warning to those who value order and morality, and the more sensational the crime, the greater the potential danger.

For colonial newsmen, crime news was also an affirmation that they lived in a moral universe governed by divine authority. The Puritans (less so the Anglicans) "saw religious significance in public acts and public significance in religious acts." All areas of life were open to religious scrutiny and every aspect of life could be ordered to the glory of God.[40] Readers could tolerate graphic stories about death because their worldview allowed them to make sense even of horrific and bloody crimes. This worldview told them that evil arose (mainly) out of sinful, individual human hearts and carried consequences for the perpetrator—certainly in the next world, if not in this one. Some killings were shocking and writers described them in ways that were meant to shock readers. But all crimes, no matter how awful, were explainable in terms of the corruption

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[39] Ericson, Baranek, Chan, *Representing Order*, 343.
[40] Mark A. Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution* (Christian University Press, 1977), 30.

story, and the execution of the murderer (preferably penitent) was the means to restore order in society.

NATURAL DISASTERS

After London suffered its third earthquake in a month in early 1750, the Bishop of London wrote a letter to his clergy and the city's inhabitants. His Grace wrote, according to the account of an unnamed correspondent reprinted in the *Boston Gazette*, "that it is every man's duty to give attention to all the warnings which God in his mercy afford to a sinful people." Moreover, while writing His Grace happened to notice a newspaper with 15 advertisements for plays, music, opera, dancing, cock-fighting, prize-fighting, and so on. This was unacceptable to His Grace, and "he concludes this excellent performance with exhorting every man 'Whatever his station to do his part towards averting the judgments of God."[41]

Colonial printers regularly devoted considerable space to natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes. If the story included a moral, it was much like the Bishop of London's warning described above. "And it has always been the conduct of the Supreme Ruler (however impolite it may be to talk in this strain)," said one writer in a lengthy sermon later that year in the *Boston Gazette*, "to punish National Sins in a national way."[42]

In another *Gazette* essay on God's judgment, one writer noted that people like to watch lightning from a distance but when the storm comes close

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[41] *Boston Gazette*, 22 May 1750.
[42] 14 August 1750.

> we bar the Doors and Windows, and every Avenue of Light, but we bar them all in vain; Flames break in at every Cranny, and threaten swift Destruction . . . Happy is the Soul whose Hope in His God composes all his Passions amidst these storms of Nature.

The lesson: "But the hour is hastening, when every threatening in the Bible shall appear to be the Voice of God, and his Power shall employ all the terrible Thing the Creation, for the Accomplishment of his Dreadful Word."[43]

Such sermons show that, even though Enlightenment rationalism probably weakened the colonial belief in federal theology and God's sovereignty, belief in them was still present and still discussed publicly, even though some might regard it as "impolite."

Just as the Puritans did not always interpret disaster as judgment, recognizing that sometimes bad things happen to good people for no apparent reason, so news reports would often provide just a detailed description of the tragedy without further comment. Lightning struck the home of Jonathan Smith one night, killing his wife and a little slave girl. It hit the chimney, came down the side of the house and then in through the window, according to the report,

> where it met the poor woman as she was going to fasten them; the Little girl had hold of her Mistresses Cloathes thro' Fear. The Lightning melted one of the Woman's Shoe-Buckles, and the End of a Scythe in the Chimney with a pretty deal of lead in the windows.[44]

The printers also recognized how details make a story come alive. The *Boston News-Letter* of November 14, 1745 reported how hailstones the size of "hens eggs" had killed several people in Paris. Another reported how a tornado

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[43] 24 September 1745.
[44] *Boston News-Letter*, 6 September 1744.

destroyed a house near Boston with 12 people in it. The wind carried a black man 10 rods into the air and a little girl 40 rods; it destroyed 7,000 board feet of lumber leaving no "pieces large enough left to make a coffin for the negro" (who had died of broken ribs); several women found themselves in the cellar with no idea how they got there; and it drove loose nails into trees so firmly that they could not be pulled out by hand.[45]

Some stories, particularly those of natural disaster from Europe, seemed driven by anti-Catholic sentiments:

> They write from Rome that a Prince of Georgia, who had lately embraced the Roman Catholick Religion, was arrived there in the Habit of a Priest, and received by the Pope with great Civility. The Ecclesiastical State has suffered Great Damage by Storm of hail, and two Persons were killed a few days ago by a flash of Lightning at Frascati.[46]

Coincidence? To Protestants who took seriously God's sovereignty and believed wholeheartedly that Catholicism was evil, the connection was obvious.

A comparison of crime coverage with that of natural disasters nicely illustrates the differing emphases in Puritan theology between personal sin and national sin. For individuals, they took seriously Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." But Puritan social doctrine was modeled on the Old Testament theocracy, a collective covenant based on works and duties.

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[45] *New York Gazette*, 30 July 1759.
[46] *Boston News-Letter*, 27 September 1704.

They believed that New England was in a unique covenant relationship with God and affirmed both types of relationships simultaneously.[47]

MILITARY AND POLITICAL DEATH

American newspapers were founded in the era of the French and Indian Wars. This was a series of conflicts, mirroring the struggle for supremacy among the European powers, that pitted the English, their American colonies and their Indian allies against the French and their colonies and Indian allies. In America they were known as King William's War (1688-97), Queen Anne's War (1701-13), King George's War (1740-48) and the French and Indian War (1756-63).

"In America all these wars involved intermittent but often cruel and bloody border fighting, burnings of towns, massacres, and continuous feelings of suspicion and hostility," Sydney Ahlstrom explained.[48] Early in the 18th century newspapers focused on war news from Europe and especially war news involving Britain. Later, as the newspaper industry developed, inter-colonial communication improved, and the colonies developed increasingly strong identities,[49] newspapers reported more regional news and also news from other colonies while still devoting large amounts of space to the conflict in Europe, especially after England declared war on France in 1756.[50] The sample of 1745 newspapers for

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[47] Harry S. Stout, "Word and Order in Colonial New England" in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, edited by Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 29.
[48] Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 58, footnote 1.
[49] For a discussion of the economic and demographic factors that influenced the rise of American newspapers, see Sidney Kobre, *The Development of American Journalism* (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers, 1969).
[50] David Copeland, "Join or Die: America's Press during the French and Indian War" *Journalism History* 24:3 (Autumn, 1998): 116.

this study had more military stories involving death, 42, than the other top three categories combined (obituaries, 13; natural disasters, 10; accidents, 9).

Colonial printers generally regarded dying in battle as a noble thing. Said the *New York Gazette* in an obituary for John Forbes, who had an extensive military career: "He made a willing sacrifice of his Life to what he valued more, the Interest of his KING and Country."[51] Puritan preachers expressed no doubt that military victory and defeat came directly from the hand of the Lord, and defeat was the result of national sin. While many colonial journalists may have agreed in principle, in practice their reports of war and other political disorder reflected a sense of nationalism more than a sense of national sin.

While this may say something about the attitudes of the printers themselves, another major factor is that many such accounts were reprinted letters from British officers, soldiers or sailors, particularly in the first half of the eighteenth century. Sometimes these letters were to family but typically they were official reports to superiors. Thus the stories that were printed are frank attempts to cast the enemy in the worst light possible.

Military coverage was also flavored with a heavy dose of anti-Catholicism, arising out of the eighteenth-century Protestant view that world history was essentially a war of evil popery against good Christians.[52] War was, almost by definition, a social disorder in the sense that it involved whole nations

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[51] *New York Gazette*, 15 March 1759.

[52] Michael Schudson, "Preparing the Minds of the People" in *Three Hundred Years of the American Newspaper* ed. John B. Hench (Worchester: American Antiquarian Society, 1991), 428. Copeland adds that the colonies' spiritual welfare was at stake, for Protestantism was sure to suffer if Catholic France gained control of the continent; "Join or Die" *Journalism History*, 117.

in conflict. But with colonial newspapers interpreting the conflict, not merely as "us versus them" but also believing themselves to be on God's side, war was an issue with strong moral overtones.

Stories of conflict on the high seas, for example, featured the heroic British sailors battling the dastardly French or Spanish cowards. One lengthy account tells how an English man 'o war, after picking up two British captains and three seamen marooned on a West Indies island by a Spanish privateer, gave chase to the privateer and soon caught it. The warship sent longboats to board the privateer but "they, seeing the English coming with Resolution, run the Sloop ashore, left her and hid themselves in the Bushes."[53]

"Had they not been a parcel of Hen-Hearted Cowardly Dogs," wrote a British officer whose out-numbered men had beaten off an attack of Spanish privateer sailors, "they must have cut us all to pieces."[54]

The *New York Gazette* ran a full column account of how a British "bomb" ship took a French privateer without losing a man, killing 20 of the enemy in the process including two British traitors. "Notwithstanding the French Captain honestly informed them of their Danger of hanging, if taken, two of them had the good Fortune to be kill'd in the fight (by which one of their countrymen say, *saved their lives*)."[55]

When the British lost, it was often explained as the result of enemy duplicity or overwhelming force. An "Account of the Disagreeable News of

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[53] *Boston News-Letter*, 2 February 1744.
[54] *Boston Gazette*, 19 May 1740.
[55] 19 November 1744.

Major Washington's Defeat at his Camp at the Big Meadows" from one of Washington's officers described a three-hour battle that eventually ended in Washington's surrender. The British troops, badly outnumbered, supposedly killed 200 of the enemy compared to 30 on their side. When Washington complained to the French commander that the Indians were killing British prisoners, the Frenchman instead commended them, "and what is most severe upon us, is, that they were all our own Indians."[56]

Defeats were also regarded as another opportunity to describe French cruelty. For example, according to a 1759 letter from Samuel White of London, English officers wrung out of sailors captured from a French privateer that they had killed the crew, captain and his son of a recently-taken prize. They had kept the captain's son alive for "3 days, crying for his father. The third day they said, that as he squalled like a cat, they would dispatch him likewise, so they cut the child in two."[57]

The "sculking" Indians were portrayed as savages and worse. Brief reports of how Indians attacked farms and tiny settlements appeared regularly, such as the story of how a Quaker at Dover came home from church to find two of his children killed and scalped and his wife, maid, and four children carried off.[58] A survivor of a battle near the "Gut of Canso" claimed that the Indians "cut open Capt. Donaheu's Breast, and suck'd his Blood, and hack'd and mangl'd his Body in a most inhuman and barbarous manner, and then ate a great part of his Flesh."[59]

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[56] *Boston News-Letter*, 1 August 1754.
[57] *New York Gazette*, 30 April 1759.
[58] *Boston News-Letter*, 1 August 1745.
[59] *Boston News-Letter*, 27 August 1724.

A 1745 update on "Saraghtoga," N.Y., after the city had been taken by the French and their Indian allies, charged that "the barbarous Savages had kill'd Col. Schoyler the younger, who liv'd at that village, and that they inhumanely rip'd open his Body and pull'd out his Heart, and cut off his Head."[60] Some Chickasaw warriors (French allies), hoping to draw some British-allied Shawanese raiders out of a temporary fort, tied a Shawanese woman "to a stake near the Fort, and setting Fire to her, to see if her Countrymen would come to relieve her." None did, so the Chickasaw fighters gathered up the horses and left.[61]

Some accounts revealed that the British troops were just as bloody as their French and Indian enemies, but the carnage was justified because it portrayed the military virtues—strength leading to victory. A letter reporting the efforts of Col. Montgomery related the details of a lengthy campaign against the Cherokee Nation, with soldiers burning and looting as they went from village to village:

> Many of the inhabitants who had endeavered to conceal themselves, I have reason to believe perished in the flames, some of them I know for certain . . . I could not help pitying them a little; Their villages were agreeably situated, their homes neatly built, and well provided . . . After killing all we could find, and burning every home in the nation, we marched to Keowee, and arrived the second of June [where they took 40 prisoners and killed 60-80 warriors with bayonets] . . . I almost forgot to tell you that we had intended to save Sugar Town . . . but we found the body of a dead man, whom they had put to the torture that very morning, it was then no longer possible to think of mercy.

The letter concluded: "The correction you'll allow has been pretty severe, I dare say, the whole nation will readily come to terms, and will not be very fond

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[60] *New York Weekly Journal*, 16 December 1745.
[61] *New York Gazette*, 2 July 1759.

of breaking them." The printer provided his own introduction, that the material was published "for the *Information and Satisfaction of the Public*."[62]

In military coverage, then, the interpretation of death had very prominent moral and religious implications as well as political considerations. Individual sin was not the main point and in the narratives death itself was not the central focus, nor were questions about an afterlife relevant. Rather, the stories of death were used to prove other points about the justice of the British or colonial actions or the evil of their enemies. In short, war coverage was focused on morality almost to the same extent as crime coverage, but with a political purpose.

DISEASE

Colonial papers ran three primary types of disease stories involving death. The most basic was the city mortality report, usually a simple table with the number of deaths and the number of baptisms. These totals represented the number of those who had entered the Kingdom of God in this world and those who had left. By including blacks, printers showed that they recognized the equality of all men in the Kingdom of God, even if it was not granted in colonies of men. The first issue of the *Boston News-Letter* in 1754 gave the statistics for the previous three years: there were 481 deaths (418 white, 63 black) against 396 "baptized in several churches" in 1753. These totals were down substantially from 1752, in which there were 1008 deaths (893 white, 116 black), many due to small

[62] *Boston Gazette*, 7 July 1760.

pox (569 total, 494 white and 75 black) against 357 baptisms.[63] The tables sometimes also broke down the figures according to sex and disease.[64]

More common were accounts of single deaths involving unusual symptoms. Zechariah Morse of Scarborough, near Boston, was sitting with his child in his arms one day. The baby was "seeming well, but suddenly his Head fell back, and his Throat rattled; upon which some near him took the child from him, and laid him down upon the Floor, but he never Breath'd again."[65] Thomas Wilson of Great Britain, 27, "a Gentleman in the prime of Life" and seemingly well (although he had suffered from consumption in the past), one day was taken with a violent cough. This was "followed by such a sudden and extraordinary Effusion of Blood from his Nose and Mouth, that he expired in a few minutes, without speaking a Word."[66] Mr. Thomas Miles of "Brooklin," out collecting wood on a sled, "cry'd out that he was blind, and immediately swooned away—spoke a few words tho' not rational, and in less than Half an Hour, exchanged this for another World."[67]

The other common type of disease story was the report of the epidemic. Where the disease itself was well-known, such as small pox, accounts tended to be brief updates on the status of the epidemic in a particular town, giving the number who had died recently and in total, and possibly the number who had

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[63] *Boston News-Letter*, 3 January 1754.
[64] For more detail on mortality reports, their significance and uses by contemporary writers, see Stephen C. Messner, "Loud Sermons in the Press: The Reporting of Death in Early Massachusetts Newspapers," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 17 (Winter, 1989): 46-48.
[65] *Boston News-Letter*, 30 May 1734.
[66] *Boston News-Letter*, 27 June 1734.
[67] *Boston News-Letter*, 2 February 1764.

recovered. These stories informed would-be travelers which cities they should avoid or when it was safe to visit again. Those with relatives or business interests in those cities would be particularly interested.

When the illness was unknown or seemed unusual, the report included pathological details, often quite graphic. A visitor from Bath County, N.C., told a Boston paper that in the North Country "'twas judged above half the inhabitants were dead . . . the Distemper begins with a violent pain to the Eye, and the Sick continue but about 20 or 30 hours before they dye."[68]

Similarly, Bethlehem, Conn., suffered 34 deaths one November. The victims are "taken with a Cold, and then a malignant Plurisy sets in, that soon carries them off." One man reportedly saw 11 quail fly over a house where several people had died and some were still sick; eight of those were picked up dead soon after, according to the report.[69]

Such details were interesting, but they also served an important purpose: to help others recognize whether the same symptoms were appearing in their town, and so assess the spread of the disease and possibly assist in treating the victims.

On rare occasions colonial newspapers would include a bizarre item that the editors, even in a time when the reality of supernatural forces was accepted, regarded as incredible. One report from Hungary held that there were

> dead Bodies sucking, as it were, the Blood of the living; for the latter visibly dry out, while the former are filled with Blood. And they have even transmitted to the Imperial Council of War a True Copy of the

[68] *New York Gazette*, 19 May 1735.
[69] *Boston Gazette*, 15 December 1750.

> Relation attested by unexceptionable Witnesses. But the Fact is too monstrously ridiculous to bear a Recital.[70]

Apparently there was political or economic pressure, in some instances, for newspapers not to report the spread of contagious diseases.

> From North Carolina we learn, that a malignant and contagious Distemper in that Province, which is attended by a great Mortality: That they style it a West India Fever, but it has extended itself to the Plantations: And that the Fate of the Infected is generally known in 48 Hours. We think it our Duty, not to suppress an Information of so much Consequence.[71]

The most likely motivation for suppression was to avoid discouraging immigration to and investment in the colony—things for which all the colonies competed—but the printer clearly saw it as his responsibility to warn readers of the dangers. Such disease stories appeared regularly, but it is difficult to say whether suppression played a significant factor.

To the Puritan mind, the spiritual lesson from disease stories (apart from the practical applications of the information) was clear: one could die at any moment—it happened to many apparently healthy people, and epidemics were real dangers. Therefore, one should always be prepared spiritually to "exchange this for another World." Even the mortality statistics had an inherent message, as one included the following: "The Survivors of any Consideration will understand how to make their profitable *Reflections* both Political and *Religious*, upon a Bill of this Importance laid before them."[72]

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[70] *South Carolina Gazette*, 1 July 1732.
[71] *South Carolina Gazette*, 6 September 1770.
[72] *Boston News-Letter*, 10 March 1707.

Rarely was this lesson stated but it seems likely that it was still a part of the thinking of colonial newsmen, given the Christian context in which they lived and the sorts of deaths that merited coverage as a disease story—sudden and unexpected as opposed to a "lingering illness."[73]

The coverage also reflects a modification of how colonial Christians integrated their theology and medical advances. The Puritans preached that disease and particularly epidemics, like other natural disorders, were signs of divine judgment, and many Anglicans shared that view. But the foremost Puritan of his day, Cotton Mather, led the drive in 1720s Boston to inoculate against small pox. Some of Mather's Anglican political opponents charged that inoculation, then an experimental method, relied on man's ability to cure disease instead of trusting in God's providence.[74] But supporters argued that it was not necessarily infringing on God's sovereignty to attempt to defer death by seeking cures. Rather, it was using the resources and intelligence God had made available to serve his people. That is, by and large colonial printers tended to view disease as a natural disorder, something that was wrong with this fallen world and which God permitted them, even called them, to struggle against.

ACCIDENTAL DEATH

The *Boston Gazette* described how a workman, while emptying a barrel of rum into a hogshead, sprayed a little on a candle. The stream caught fire and the

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[73] Colonial newspapers did often mention drawn out illnesses but normally in the context of an obituary, not when the disease was the focus of the story.

[74] For an excellent account of the impact of the Puritanism and Anglicanism on the inoculation controversy in Boston, its political factors, and how it related to the founding of the *New England Courant*, see Sloan, "The Origins of the American Newspaper," 43-51.

barrel exploded, badly burning a young man who later died. The explosion was heard six miles away. “It is hoped, that this instance may serve as a caution to all who deal with rum, under like circumstances, by candle-light,” concluded the writer.[75]

Accident stories let the community know that someone had been killed, but they also served as emphatic warnings. There were many ways to die and journalists reminded readers of commonplace dangers while also informing them of the bizarre possibilities of which they probably had not heard.

The three mostly commonly reported types of accidental death involved fire, firearms and drowning. House fires were a particular danger, especially in winter when the stoves were burning much of the time for heat, and at night, when the household was sleeping. In one “tragical accident,” a candle started a fire in a bedroom. The father removed his personal papers in a trunk and headed back upstairs to get his six sons out, but the flames spread so quickly he could not; all six “perished miserably.” The writer concluded that “Such Tragical Instances as these ought to stir up diligence in every person, of what Station soever . . . to prevent such terrible Calamity as these poor miserable Objects were plunged into.”

Other stories warned repeatedly about the dangers of leaving children alone with fires burning. One New York mother left her 18-month-old baby in a chair by a fire for a short time and came back to find the child’s clothes on fire

[75] 6 August 1770.

and the baby burned almost to death. “They gave it hot Wine, and it cry’d More, More, and dyed immediately.”[76]

Reports of firearms accidents tended to be brief, possibly because the dangers of careless handling was well-known to a people familiar with guns. A black lad, not realizing a gun was loaded, pointed it up at a young woman in a window. It went off and “shot her in the Face, and she Dyed immediately.”[77] The lesson was too obvious to bear comment.

Drownings were also regular, especially newsworthy and frequent because the first major colonies were coastal cities: ships sank, canoes and small boats overturned, people fell off docks and barges and into wells or broke through thin ice. One lady from Canterbury, England, slipped on icy ground and fell headfirst into a four-foot deep well “to her Hips, where she fasten’d; no body being in sight, she soon perished.”[78] A report from Jamestown described a tragedy involving three brothers in two canoes. When the first canoe sank, the brothers in it jumped for the second, which also sank, and two drowned swimming for shore. “Agreeable to the Melancholy Occasion, the Rev. Clap the Minister of the Town preached a sermon from that Text I Sam. 4 17, Thy two Sons — are dead.”[79]

Colonial journalists were sensitive to a variety of different types of disorder, and tended to mention things that illustrated their observations. After the

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[76] *Boston Gazette*, 23 November 1730.
[77] *New York Gazette*, 18 July 1726.
[78] *Boston News-Letter*, 2 February 1764.
[79] *Boston News-Letter*, 27 June 1734. Few fathers would find that passage from I Samuel, interpreted in context, especially comforting; it relates how the prophet Eli was told his two blasphemous sons were killed in battle as a judgment of God.

Fancy, a sloop, sunk during its Jamaica to Honduras run, several of the crew escaped into the long boat.

> The sixth day after they left the vessel, one of the men drowned, and three more died of hunger and thirst, they being then without bread or water, but what fell from the heavens, and were glad to drink their own urine. On the tenth day in the morning, another man died, part of whose carcass they were obliged to cut up to subsist on.[80]

The writer seems to regard cannibalism and drinking urine as justifiable in these circumstances; the crew was not guilty of a "moral failure" in that sense. Nevertheless, he obviously felt that the fact of cannibalism, a fairly common feature in the "lost at sea" stories, was a shocking disorder and therefore a significant part of the story.

Colonial journalists frequently pointed out the disruption of the social order when someone died in an accident. When an adult male died, the story would typically mention his wife and the number of children who had lost, not only their father, but their means of support. Benjamin Dowse was shot in a hunting accident,

> upon which he expired in a minute or two with those words in Acts VII 59 *Lord Jesus receive my spirit*. When the Body was brought on shore, it would have melted the most Adamantine heart into relenting, to have heard the Weeping and seen the Tears, which the whole town shed at the affecting sight.[81]

The Scriptural reference in this case was unusual, but the focus on the community's loss was not.

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[80] *New York Gazette*, 22 July 1767.
[81] *Boston Gazette*, 22 August 1720.

Besides the risks of being burned, shot or drowned to death by accident, there were hundreds of other ways to die. A few found in this study include attacks by snake,[82] dog,[83] wildcat[84] and baboon.[85] People were trampled by cows,[86] poisoned by carbon monoxide, broken in falls, and scalded by boiling pot-ash.[87]

Colonial newspapers seldom reported deaths caused by technological failure. Such deaths were reported infrequently compared to the other sorts throughout the history of American journalism. Writers seemed to regard such deaths as natural and expressed none of the outrage or indignation at the designers or builders of faulty equipment that characterized accident coverage beginning in the mid-1800s. After a cannon burst following an official ceremony in Boston, killing three dignitaries, the writer noticed that the fragments were "very much honey-Comb'd and eaten almost through." But he passed on from there to describe the procession carrying the mangled bodies home and the "Mixture of Grief, Compassion and Terror . . . in the faces of all at so dismal a Sight."[88] The *Boston News-Letter* had a four-line story mentioning that a scaffold collapsed in Salem, killing one and injuring another. The only comment was that it was a "very sorrowful accident."[89]

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[82] *South Carolina Gazette*, 17 June 1732.
[83] *New York Weekly Journal*, 25 February 1740.
[84] *Boston Gazette*, 18 August 1770. A boy, 10, was attacked and survived, but died some days later died "in agony" and "quite mad," possibly of rabies; the wounds turned black.
[85] *Boston Gazette*, 20 March 1750. In Jamaica, a baboon broke loose, seized a child and "tore it in such a Manner that it died soon afterwards. The Creature was immediately shot."
[86] *South Carolina Gazette*, 20 May 1732.
[87] *Boston Gazette*, 7 April 1740, 6 March, 1750, 15 October 1770.
[88] *New York Gazette*, 14 July 1735.
[89] 6 June 1745.

While often an accident was just an accident, sometimes there was a moral component to the account. At this historical distance, it is not always easy to tell whether a colonial reader would have regarded, for example, the spraying of rum on a candle as the workman's moral failure, as something that "should" have been prevented and that demanded punishment. It seems clear, on the other hand, that printers believed that parents who left alone small children bore significant responsibility if the child died in some accident. In short, accident stories in colonial days often implied moral responsibility but only rarely included a clear statement of blame or a determined search to fix it. This characteristic, as will be shown in later chapters, began to change in the nineteenth century and reversed itself in the twentieth.

Still, some acknowledged God was still sovereign. A lengthy account of a very severe fire in Boston noted that

> In the midst of our distress, we have great cause of thankfulness, that notwithstanding the continuance and rage of the fire, the explosion at the south battery, the falling of walls and chimnies, divine providence has mercifully ordered it, that not one life has been lost, and only a few wounded.[90]

SUICIDE

Compared to the other types of stories mentioned so far, suicides were reported only infrequently.[91] In accord with the Puritan view of suicide, colonial newspapers presented suicide as "an unpardonable sin," observed Copeland, "because it was caused by the failure to control passion and because colonial

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[90] *South Carolina Gazette*, 3 May 1760.
[91] There were none in the sample chosen for the content analysis.

citizens saw no way for the self-murderer to obtain forgiveness for the act committed." He quoted the January 21, 1760 *New York Gazette*: "Not to brand with infamy the memory of a wretch who takes away his own life, is merely to applaud the most cruel actions occasioned by melancholy and ferocity . . . the crime is inexcusable."[92] But if society and newspaper accounts invariably did present suicide as "inexcusable," why would the writer of the above essay find it necessary to chide his readers and, presumably, other newspapers?

Regional differences in the effect of religion on death coverage were most clearly illustrated in obituaries and stories about suicides. The Anglicanism dominant in Charleston contrasted at times with the still influential Puritanism of Boston and the Reformed tradition in New York.

> Southern Anglicanism became a dominant tradition not by force of popular vitality, but because of government support and the social prominence of its membership. The prevailing theology in these churches drifted steadily away from the earlier Puritanism toward a mild, rationalistic Arminianism, while remaining firmly Protestant and strongly anti-Roman in spirit. For many, church membership came to be increasingly nominal.[93]

A handful of stories from the *South Carolina Gazette* in 1732 illustrates the several ways Anglicanism tendencies and Enlightenment thought influenced suicide coverage in Charleston. A report from Bristol, England, noted that a wealthy spinster had been found hanged. "Miss Fanny Brado-K," a "great Admirer of that Hazardous Dependence, Gaming, lately met with some unlucky

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[92] Copeland, *Colonial American Newspapers*, 101.

[93] Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 199. Noll in *Christians in the American Revolution*, 30, points out that, by the eve of the Revolution, three-quarters of colonists identified with a denomination with roots in the Reformed, Puritan wing of Protestantism: Congregational, Presbyterian, Baptist, German and Dutch Reformed.

Chances, that both deprived her of her Fortune and her Reason, and occasioned the unhappy Dilemma, abovementioned." The verdict of the Coroner's inquest was "lunacy." The story closed with an editorial aside from the *Gazette* editor. Those who knew Miss Fanny (and presumably he did) recognized "the favorable parts of her Character" and so, not wanting to cast aspersions on the dead, "let us leave her to the Judgment and Mercy of that Being who is infallible in both."[94]

"Unlucky Chances" did not exist in the Puritan view of the world, and as such they were an inadequate explanation for someone losing her reason leading to suicide. In Boston such circumstances would have been fodder for a powerful moral example but not, apparently, in Charleston.

In the June 10 edition the *Gazette* ran another item from England, this one about a wealthy fortune teller who had predicted the day of his own death.

> But happening to continue on in perfect Health to the very Hour, and fearing he should be banter'd and ridicul'd if he outlived it, he chose to dispatch himself, in order to verify the Prediction. It were good for this Nation, that every Man had as great a Regard for his Reputation.

A Puritan might think it a fitting end for a fortune teller and would certainly recognize the ironic justice, but his theology would say that no one ought to take his life under any circumstances. Determining the day of one's death belonged to God alone.

In August the "most melancholy affair happened that has been heard of for many years": a Charleston couple shot themselves and their young daughter. The *Gazette* published three suicide notes the couple had written to their landlord and two business associates in the August 19 issue. "We chose," wrote the editor, "to

[94] 5 February 1732.

give them genuine to the Reader, and leave him to make his Reflections on so shocking a scene."

In the letters the husband apologizes for not paying his debts and blames the "meddling" of unnamed persons for his financial woes, claiming that he and his wife had worked diligently. The cause of their demise was "an inveterate Hatred we conceived against Poverty and Rags."

> We apprehend that the taking of our Child's Life away to be a circumstance for which we shall be generally condemned; but for our own Parts, we are perfectly easy on that Head. We are satisfied it is less Cruelty to take the Child with us, even supposing a State of Annihilation, as some dream of, than to leave her friendless in the World, expos'd to Ignorance and Misery.

He went on to provide a lengthy account of his theology, "to obviate some Censures, which may proceed either from Ignorance or Malice." His perspectives in 1732 showed strong signs of Enlightenment rationalism. He asserted that his belief in the existence of an "Almighty Being" was grounded "not in an implicit Faith" but from the "Consideration of his wonderful Works." He asserted also that God is good,

> not like such Wretches as Men are, not taking Delight in the Misery of his Creatures, for which Reason we resign up our Breaths unto him without any terrible Apprehensions, submitting ourselves to those Ways, which in his Goodness he shall please to appoint after Death.

These, of course, are some of the reasons Puritans argued against suicide—that God is good, and therefore men ought to trust Him to decide the day of their death rather than presume to make that decision on their own.

OBITUARIES

"No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe," wrote John Donne in his famous *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), "any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee."

Colonial journalists, like Puritan preachers, generally would have agreed with the sentiment (an irony, given that the job of the journalist was to let readers know "for whom the bell tolls"). In obituaries and death notices they paid tribute to the notion that a death was a loss to the entire community, and the more socially significant the person the greater the loss.

In this study, obituary-like notices were the second most common type of death story (16, after 55 military/political stories). There were three basic types, and some stories had elements of more than one type. The shortest and most basic was the brief death notice announcing that a particular person had passed away. In the "old age" story, of which there were comparatively few, the age was normally followed by some detail of that person's long life that made their survival to that point notable, such as the number of descendants still living. The third type described the deceased in eulogistic terms and explained why this death was a particularly noteworthy loss to the community.

Obituaries expressed religious concepts more clearly and frequently than any other type of death-related story. The obituary for Boston magistrate John Fayerweather noted that when his wife passed away, "this unspeakable Bereavement he bore with a manly and virtuous Resignation to the divine Will,

knowing to be the Chastisement of his Heavenly Father, and that he *should soon follow her*," which he did, two weeks later. "Death was no surprise to him in the least," the article continued, "and being disarmed of its Stings and Horrors, he bid it welcome; breathing out his last the hands of Jesus—*Mark the perfect Man, and behold the upright for the End of that Man is Peace*."[95]

Such language was common, particularly in Boston where the Puritan influence was still strong. Often writers expressed sorrow or shock or described the community's loss, but the value most highly regarded seemed to be submission to God's will, both among the deceased and the survivors. "We are ready to stand amazed at the conduct of divine providence, when persons of superior accomplishments, and who seem particularly formed for blessings to the world, are thus taken away, as it were," began the *Boston Gazette* for Rev. Mr. Edward Barnard in a two-column eulogy. "But God is infinitely wise and good, and his government incomprehensible even where his judgments are unsearchable and his ways past finding out."[96]

Obituaries sometimes clearly revealed regional theological biases. In Boston deceased preachers received the most extravagant praise; the longest single article among colonial newspapers found for this study was a five-column (almost two pages) eulogy for Rev. Mr. Walter in the November 6, 1750 *Boston Gazette*.

The Charleston newspaper noted the deaths of clerics but regarded wealthy merchants as worthy of more attention. A long item for Charles

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[95] *Boston Gazette*, 22 September 1760.
[96] 3 March 1774.

Peronneau said that "By a laudable Industry, and quick capacity for Business, he had amassed a considerable Interest and laid a probable Foundation for all the little Happiness this world can promise."[97] Similarly, Mr. Benjamin Savage, 51, died, a "Gentleman many Years Eminent in the Merchantile Way (by which he had acquired a large Fortune with Honor and Reputation) and valuable for the many good Qualities that rendered him beloved by all who had the Pleasure of his Acquaintance."[98]

Shorter death notices, usually a paragraph or two, were much more common than lengthy eulogies. Some would provide a few details about the deceased's last moments or, more often, comment favorably upon his or her Christian character. In the "old age" obituaries," writers mentioned either how many descendents the deceased had or what excellent health he had enjoyed up until his last moments. This was standard newspaper practice in England, and both were taken as a sign of God's blessing. "They write from Chaurs near Troyes in Champagne, that one John Chamain, Organist, died there on the 20th past, 102 Years old, and that two Days before he died he was playing on the Organ."[99] "We hear from Albany," began a report in the February 7, 1754 *Boston News-Letter*,

> that a German died on the back Settlements, aged 106 years and has left an Offspring behind him, to the fourth Generation, amounting to 170 all living. 'Tis said he retained his senses and had a good Stomach till within a few Days of his Death.

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[97] *South Carolina Gazette*, 16 October 1740.
[98] *South Carolina Gazette*, 16 July 1750.
[99] *Boston News-Letter*, 28 July 1704, datelined "Paris, December 4."

The phrase "decently interr'd" frequently appears in the Boston papers. It comes from *A Directory for the Publique Worship of God*, one of the outcomes of the 1645 Westminster Confession: "When any person departeth this life, let the dead body, upon the day of Buriall, be decently attended from the house to the place appointed for Publique Buriall, and there immediately interred, without any Ceremony."[100] The point of the instruction was to avoid ostentatious ceremonies for they "are in no way beneficiall to the dead and proved many ways hurtful to the living."

Yet in colonial New England opulent funerals were common, often including gifts of gloves, rings or other presents from the deceased's family to the mourners. The *News-Letter* editorialized in 1764 that the government should abolish "the Practice of putting on Mourning . . . The Saving to this Town is judged would be Twenty Thousand Pounds per Annum."[101] Therefore it seems likely the phrase "decently interr'd" in a newspaper obituary refers less to a plain funeral than to whether there was the procession to the cemetery.

Politics could play a role in whose death was covered, and how. The July 1, 1732 *South Carolina Gazette* offered a decidedly lukewarm send-off to the governor's wife, Madam Jobuson. Her death "proves a General Concern," many attended her funeral, and "We hear that Most People design, on this Occasion, to put themselves in Mourning."

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[100] Cited in David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 101.
[101] 4 October 1764.

The next week the editor was back-pedaling hard as he introduced a praise-filled eulogy: "To enumerate all the Perfections and Endearing Qualities of the Person whose Absence we are mourning, serves only to aggravate the afflicting sense we have of our loss."

CONCLUSION

The fragmentation of Reformed Protestantism worked against a colonies-wide interpretation of death. Newspapers still interpreted death in ways that were in many respects similar to Puritan preaching, but the interpretation tended to be implicit rather than explicit, shown in the details the writers and editors chose to include.

Some scholars have argued that by the middle of the 18th century religious influences on newspapers were waning. This chapter suggests that, instead, religious influences continued to be strong right up to the American Revolution. But the influence was not purely Puritan and context was a major factor in determining not only whether there was a significant religious influence on the coverage, but what sort of influence.

Some types of stories, such as murders, executions, natural disasters and obituaries, lent themselves easily to a Scriptural interpretation and a moralistic tone that included confessions and sermonizing with explicit references to Heaven and Hell. In other cases the influence of religion on the news pages varied, as with suicide stories, in relation to the colony's religious affiliation.

In military stories there was a strong religious component that flowed out of Puritan and Reformed thought (anti-Catholicism), but the lesson had shifted

from the days of the Puritan preachers. Instead of Increase Mather telling his congregation that "We sinners must repent before we see victory," soldiers and passengers were telling their friends, superiors and family about those "hen-hearted cowardly dogs" who would, given half a chance, impose their Catholicism on the American continent and crush true Protestant worship.

Other types of stories, such as disease and accidental death, may have reflected at times a decreasing sense of God's sovereignty and control over everyday affairs, while in others the implicit Christian message seems clear.

It is clear, however, that death was a regular feature on the pages of colonial newspapers and that colonial journalists made sense of it in ways that accorded with their faith. In post-modern Western civilization people "must tell all sorts of stories to keep many-faced death at bay," observed Joseph Amato. "We must tell stories to distract ourselves from death, to explain and to mitigate its worst consequences, and to suggest how we will be preserved from it."[102]

Colonial journalists, on the other hand, did not tell stories to distract themselves from death. They faced death perhaps not so intensely as an earlier generation of Puritans, but face it they did. They considered death a disorder, something terrible on the loose in this world, but it was also a price to be paid for the restoration of order. They believed that it would all make sense in the next life if they could not make sense of it in this one. Thus, while only occasionally did a colonial newsman regard death as something to look forward to, never did they

[102] Joseph A. Amato, "Death and the Stories We Don't Have," *The Monist* 76 No. 2 (April, 1993): 253.

regard it as either a mere trifle or the worst of all possible evils. This perspective allowed them to manage death as best they could, but they did not try to tame it.

Chapter 4: The Revolutionary Press

This chapter takes a look at the coverage of two of the more important events in the Revolutionary War and concludes with some observations on death-related coverage in the period.

THE BOSTON MASSACRE

The Boston Massacre was a serious incident but not, as massacres go, much to write home about. Tension had been high for many months between the 7,000 British troops stationed at Boston since 1768 and the citizens who regarded the soldiers as public nuisances and, even worse, symbols of hated royal authority. The soldiers were there to protect the King's corrupt customs officers and intimidate the citizens, whom royal authorities regarded as unruly and ungrateful malcontents.

On the evening of March 5, 1770, a young barber's apprentice insulted a sentry standing guard outside the Customs House. The sentry knocked the lad on the ear with the butt of his rifle. The boy left but returned with help, and the angry mob grew larger when someone rang the church bells. Half a dozen soldiers arrived from the garrison and the confrontation escalated until the troops found themselves facing hundreds of furious Bostonians taunting, throwing snowballs and ice, and pressing close to the soldiers' bayonets. After some in the crowd began swinging clubs and a cutlass, the soldiers fired, killing three, mortally wounding two more, and injuring five others.

The soldiers were promptly arrested. At the trial that fall, five were acquitted, and two were found guilty of manslaughter, but merely branded on the hand and released.[1]

Newspaper accounts and illustrations, however, portrayed the event as a bloodbath started by troops who returned bullets for snowballs, the inevitable result of a standing army quartered close to a city. Well over half of the narrative in the March 12, 1770, *Boston Gazette* recounted, as the cause of the incident, a vicious and cowardly lot of armed troops bullying innocent boys and respectable, unarmed citizenry. The soldiers, out looking to beat up some lads who had defied them, came through town

> insulting all they met in like manner and pursuing some to their very doors. Thirty or forty persons, mostly lads, being by this means gathered in King Street, Capt. Preston with a party of men with charged bayonets, came from the main guard to the commissioner's house, the soldiers pushing their bayonets, crying, make way! They took place by the custom house and, continuing to push to drive the people off pricked some in several places, on which they were clamorous and, it is said, threw snow balls. On this, the Captain commanded them to fire; and more snow balls coming, he again said, damn you, fire, be the consequence what it will! One soldier then fired, and a townsman with a cudgel struck him over the hands with such force that he dropped his firelock; and, rushing forward, aimed a blow at the Captain's head which grazed his hat and fell pretty heavy upon his arm. However, the soldiers continued the fire successively till seven or eight or, as some say, eleven guns were discharged. By this fatal manoeuvre three men were laid dead on the spot and two more struggling for life; but what showed a degree of cruelty unknown to British troops, at least since the house of Hanover has directed their operation, was an attempt to fire upon or push with their bayonets the persons who undertook to remove the slain and wounded!

[1] Boston Massacre Historical Society [http://www.bostonmassacre.net] accessed July 22, 2003.

Colonial newsmen were more than outraged. An account in the *South Carolina Gazette* began moderately, saying it was "a recent and melancholy demonstration of the destructive consequences of quartering troops [near] citizens in times of peace, under a pretence of supporting and aiding civil authority." But it ended calling it a "horrid massacre" and an "inhuman tragedy":

> Tuesday morning presented a most shocking scene, the blood of our fellow citizens running like water through King Street and the merchants Exchange . . . Our blood might also be tracked up the head of Long Lane, and through other diverse streets and passages . . ..[2]

The *South Carolina Gazette* went on to repeat more rumors about British villainy and mentioned conspiracy theories in the same breath. Shots had supposedly been heard from upper rooms of the customs house, "and more than one person declared upon oath, that they apprehended several discharges came from that quarter.—It is not improbable that we may soon be able to account for the assassination of Mr. Otis some time past."

Such treatment for British soldiers is a complete reversal from the reports of 20 years earlier that lauded British soldiers and sailors for their courage under fire and their decency toward the innocent. It typified how the Patriot Revolutionary press handled war reports from the mid-1760s through the end of the American Revolutionary War.

Scholars have argued for over 200 years how and why the American colonials changed from fiercely loyal royal subjects into anti-English rebels determined to free themselves from despotic British oppression. The main factors are likely a combination of: ideology, arising out of dissident Protestantism and

[2] 5 April 1770.

Enlightenment Rationalism, that focused on individual, inherent and God-given rights such as freedom and liberty; events, notably the end of the French and Indian Wars and the British Crown's attempts to raise money from the colonies (justly, the British felt, given the cost of prosecuting the war and maintaining security in America) through the Stamp Act, the Sugar Act, and other taxes; the presence of a collection of fiery individual colonists to lead the Revolution who determined that liberty and justice were worth death; and social and cultural circumstances (such as increasing economic development and strengthening lines of communication and transportation between the colonies) that fostered the spread of revolutionary ideas and made rebellion itself possible.[3]

Chapter 3 described the effects of the Enlightenment and denominational fragmentation on the religious atmosphere of the colonies. A few things are worth emphasizing.

First, religion and politics became increasingly intertwined through the Revolution. The Great Awakening helped prepare the way for the Revolution by elevating the status of the individual conscience and, through denominational competition and struggle as Puritanism faded, promoting a vital religious atmosphere. Further, the revolutionary "ideology of dissent" linked religious tyranny with civil tyranny, making the Church of England a political threat just as

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[3]The details of the causes of the American Revolution are far beyond this project; for overviews and good general discussions, see Carol Sue Humphrey, "The Revolutionary Press, 1765-1783" in *The Media in America: A History* 4th ed. edited by Wm. David Sloan and James D. Startt (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 1999); Edmond S. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic 1763-1789* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956); Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (New York: Norton, 1972); Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

Catholicism had been. Common themes in this ideology, commented Mark A. Noll, were a bearish view of human nature; the interdependence of virtue, freedom, and social well-being; and the connection between national virtue and civil material and moral health (and conversely, national corruption with social and moral disease). Concern with virtue was of particular significance, noted Edmund Morgan. Among the Revolutionary generation the idea of an "omnipresent angry God" was far less authoritative but

> the values and precepts derived from [the Puritan Ethic] remained intact and were reinforced by a reading of history that attributed the rise and fall of empires to the acquisition and loss of the same virtues that God had demanded of the founders of New England.[4]

Hence, from 1750 through 1783, wrote Noll,

> when Ezra Stiles describes the blessings promised to Israel in Deuteronomy 26:19 as "allusively prophetic of the future prosperity and splendor of the United States," religious energies stimulated, sanctioned, and supported the movement for American independence.[5]

Through this intertwining, political institutions began to exercise more influence. "In 1740," wrote Morgan, "America's leading intellectuals were clergymen and thought about theology; in 1790 they were statesmen and thought about politics."[6] It was not that religion was unimportant, Noll wrote, but "political ideology had assumed religion's role as the fashioner of the most creative ideas in America."

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[4] Edmund S. Morgan, "The Puritan Ethic and the American Revolution" *William and Mary Quarterly* 24 No. 1 (Jan,, 1967): 6.
[5] Mark A. Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution* (Christian University Press, 1977), 49.
[6] Edmund S. Morgan, "The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement" in *Paths of American Thought* edited by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Morton White (Boston: Houghlin Mifflin: 1963), 11.

Second, Puritan Calvinism, with its emphasis on predestination and divine judgment, continued to give way before a Protestantism that was far more individualistic and evangelical. Calvinism conflicted with Revolutionary ideology on several points, such as the emphasis on human depravity vs. self-determination, and unconditional election vs. man's right to secure happiness through his own efforts.[7]

All of these trends had significant influences on the Revolutionary press. The press was heavily politicized, partly through conviction and partly through pressure,[8] and thereby divided into two camps: the larger and generally more aggressive Patriot press and the embattled Loyalist printers. American and British leaders

> put great stock in the persuasive reports in the newspapers. Clearly, both Loyalist and Patriot factions saw the printed word as the spark behind any great upsurge of public feeling. Journalists, political leaders, and generals sincerely believed that printed efforts at winning the public heart were necessary-even vital-to their cause. They expected their press to behave accordingly. News reports in the Revolution, therefore, were certainly never meant to contain mere factual coverage or to describe battles and events objectively. Instead, coverage of news was a deliberate, highly valued attempt to paint the two sides in their most persuasive colors. Journalists, for their part, perceived that they could not-and indeed, would not-avoid taking sides.[9]

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[7] Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution*, 160, 171.

[8] Stephen Botein, "Printers and the American Revolution" in *The Press and the American Revolution* edited by Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench (Worcester, Mass: American Antiquarians Society, 1980), 11-58. He argues that printers generally opened their press to diverse points of view, but in times of political unrest found it wise to be partisan. For accounts of how specific papers reacted to pressure to become partisan, see James L. Moses, "Journalistic Impartiality on the Eve of the Revolution: the *Boston Evening Post* 1770-1775" *Journalism History* 20 (1994): 125-30 and Ralph J. Randolph, "The End of Impartiality: *South Carolina Gazette* 1763-75," *Journalism Quarterly* 49 (1972): 702-9, 720.

[9] Wm. David Sloan and Julie Hedgepeth Williams, *The Early American Press 1690-1783* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 191.

As result, in this period "freedom of the press" did not mean absolute liberty. Instead, taking further the Puritan notion that the limits of debate should be bounded by orthodoxy, to Patriot printers it meant the freedom to print that which supported Revolutionary ideals. That is, in deciding on the limits of public discourse, Patriot printers substituted an political ideological standard for a theological one. As Francis Hopkinson, a signer of the Declaration of Independence explained, when press freedom

> is manifestly abused, and the press becomes an engine for sowing the most dangerous dissensions, for spreading false alarms, and undermining the very foundations of government, ought not that government, upon the plain principles of self-preservation to silence, by its own authority, such a daring violator of its peace, and tear from its bosom the serpent that would sting it to death?

In Patriot-controlled areas, therefore, many Loyalist printers suffered regular threats and attacks, as mobs smashed presses and broke up printing rooms and occasionally assaulted the printers themselves.[10] Loyalist printers facing such persecution were often ready to print both sides of an argument, a tactic Patriot mobs discouraged and Patriot printers regarded with contempt. To a true Patriot, to print both sides was simply to propagate error and support the enemy. "Such an outlook made necessary a selective use of material," as Humphrey put it.

The war itself was hard on the press and on printers, particularly those whose political positions made them unpopular with their constituents. At the start of the war there were 37 newspapers in the colonies but only 35 at the end. Including the 33 new papers founded during the war, 70 published at one time or

[10] Humphrey, "The Revolutionary Press," 54-57.

another but half folded. Simply operating was difficult, given the difficulty of collecting news, an uncertain postal system, economic and military instability, bad roads and a shortage of newsprint, among other troubles.[11]

All of these political, economic and religious factors produced predictable and consistent effects regarding death-related news items. Military stories continued to dominate coverage, with 43 of 90, or 48 percent of this study's sample for 1775. Printers were seldom, if ever, able to provide what modern readers would regard as an adequate overview of the war. As with war coverage in the colonial period, news items were typically short accounts of isolated incidents and battles, reprinted from letters and official reports of different kinds.

The coverage was no longer anti-Catholic, except on occasion, but rather anti-British. And where colonial writers had tried mainly to shock their readers with gory but straightforward accounts of French or Indian cruelty, Patriot writers also expanded their rhetorical repertoire to include more biblical allusions and more reference to British or Loyalist sources to make their points.

As will be shown below, coverage of other types of death was curtailed sharply. There were only a few more death-related stories in 1775 among five newspapers than there had been in 1745 among four. In part, war and political coverage dominated printers' time and attention, but printers finding it even more difficult than usual to stay solvent likely struggled to collect a variety of news.

[11] Humphrey, "The Revolutionary Press," 54-58, 64.

THE BATTLE OF LEXINGTON AND CONCORD

Newspapers spent considerable space on the Battle of Lexington and Concord, a minor skirmish that opened the Revolutionary War, and probably contributed significantly to popular support through Patriot accounts of it. On April 19 General Thomas Gage, the British military governor of Massachusetts, sent out up to nine hundred troops to destroy the colonials' military stores at Concord. He had hoped to surprise the colonials, but a body of militia was waiting at Lexington Green. As the British attempted to surround and disarm the Americans, who were dispersing, a shot rang out and then the redcoats opened fire, killing eight militiamen and wounding 10. The column advanced to Concord but the ever-growing body of militia turned them back at the North Bridge. The British retreated and, although supported by reinforcements at Lexington, suffered heavy losses as the colonials sniped from behind walls and trees at the exposed British lines all the way back to Boston.

Colonial accounts of the battle, however, focused on alleged British duplicity and atrocities. Many of the accusations were simply not true, and the reports are a mix of nationalism, religion and rumor. "The late frequent Marchings and Countermarchings into the Country, were calculated to conceal the most cruel and inhuman design, and imagining they had laid Suspicion asleep, they 'pitched upon Wednesday Night for their Execution," said one account in the May 1, 1775 *New York Gazette*. The troops, upon arriving at Lexington, found the militia

> assembled peaceably without Arms …The Commander called them rebels, and bid them disperse …On their Refusal, he fired, killed and wounded

> nine. They then proceeded towards Concord, making their Way with Cruelties and Barbarity never equalled by the Savages of America. In one House a Woman and seven children were slaughtered (perhaps on their return)."

That writer continued: "It is no time now to dally, or be merely neutral, he that is not for us is against us, and ought to be the First of our Resentment." The son of a Tory who had guided the British troops was captured and shot, "a Death too honorable for such a Villain!" God was on their side, he asserted:

> In every Struggle Heaven has as yet given us Strength equal to the Day, its hand is not shortened, nor its Arm weakened. We are now called upon to show the World "*that whom we call Fathers did beget us*." and that we desire to enjoy the blessings they purchased for us, with their Lives and Fortunes . . . *God who transplanted us hither, will support us.*

The May 4, 1775 account in the *New York Journal* charged that "there was not a single wounded provincial found alive; the troops having with a brutality disgraceful to the Character of British soldier, killed all the wounded Americans." Further, "at Lexington they burnt four houses and two out houses, thrust a sick old man through the body with a bayonet, and shot two other sick old persons."

"Alas!" moaned an essayist in the same issue, "Would not the heathen, in all their savage barbarity and cruelty, blush at such horrid murder, and worse than brutal rage; is the bravery of British troops?" "We hear for certain," said the May 12, 1775 *South Carolina Gazette*, "that the soldiers on their retreat entered two or three houses, and most barbarically butchered several very old and sick people."

General Gage circulated his own account of the conflict, insisting that the colonials fired first and that his men only fired back under extreme provocation and despite the best efforts of his officers to prevent them. He mentioned that

three Companies passed by one of their own lying on the ground, "scalped, his Head much mangled, and his Ears cut off, though not quite dead; a Sight which struck the Soldiers with Horrour" (a credible charge, given the colonial fighters' history in the French and Indian Wars).[12] But some Patriot printers published the general's account mainly, it seems, to provide fodder for another editorial attack. One response, running immediately below the account cited above, charged that General Gage had "exercised his Ingenuity" in composing his report for "pernicious Purposes, nay to deceive the World and misrepresent the Americans."

General Gage was a favorite target of the *New York Journal*. Later that summer the editor provided an account about a Muslim general who had been extorting silver from Turks and Romans at Rumalia. He was arrested as he was entering the fortress to which he had been appointed governor, and then hung. "His head was immediately sent to Constantinople."

The very next item noted that "by our earliest accounts from Philadelphia, we are assured that a reconciliation would have been the consequence of Lord North's propositions of the 20th of February, if the troops under Gen. Gage had not commenced hostilities before the same could be taken into consideration. But now no conciliatory plan will have any effect."[13] The true Patriot, no doubt, fervently wished for Gen. Gage the fate of his Muslim counterpart.

After the colonials laid siege to Boston and the British were preventing people from leaving, a letter from Worchester reported that in Boston food was scarce, many were sick and there was much worry about the coming winter.

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[12] *South Carolina Gazette*, 26 May, 1775.
[13] 14 September 1775.

> Notwithstanding the present and the prospect of a much greater scene of misery, our Modern Pharoh [Gage], as if he was determined to be exceeded by none, still persists in hardness of heart, by refusing the let the people go" (emphasis and brackets in the original).[14]

The same issue of the *Journal* also ran stories from the British papers and apparently Loyalist writers that furthered the Patriot cause; some seemed designed to foster Patriot rage. A letter from a Loyalist in Cambridge recounted that, during the siege, due to hunger and disease the inhabitants were "extremely distressed and the troops almost as much." Most of the British wounded from the Battle of Bunker Hill had died, along with most Provincial prisoners, who were claiming that British balls had been poisoned.

The *Journal* editor then added a report from a sympathetic London paper, taken after the news of Lexington had arrived:

> When the remonstrance from the city lamented, at the foot of the throne, that the blood of His Majesty's subjects would be the consequence of persevering in their oppressive measures against our fellow subjects in America, the courtiers burst out in a fit of laughter—These things will be remembered, when the blood they have wickedly shed is visited upon their heads, and they are overwhelmed by the popular vengeance they have provoked.
>
> Again:
>
> With what astonishment people are struck at reading an article in the Gazetteer, published by Authority, and as it were under the Eye of Majesty, calling the murder of 150 British subjects, A SKIRMISH! Good God, at what times have we arrived, when our fellow subjects, blood of our blood, flesh of our flesh, are set to murder and destroy one another.

[14] 14 September 1775.

The Patriot papers often called the British soldiers names. Those who went out to seize provisions from local townsfolk were "sheep-stealers" and "pirates,"[15] while others referred to the troops as "Bloody Backs," not for their red coats but for

> their base and savage Conduct in suffering the Head of the brave Capt. Baker to be severed from his Body, and fixed upon a pole at St. John's, where it now remains, as a Monument of their Savage Tempers, and an incentive to bravely Revenge his Death, or fall in the glorious Attempt.[16]

Patriot printers did not neglect the standard accusations of cowardice. A letter from Williamsburgh told how some Provincials had with just a couple of shots captured a boat loaded with a cannon and other supplies, killing two British soldiers. One Lieut. Wright "made his escape by jumping overboard, and swimming away with Mr. King's Negro Man."[17] Meanwhile, the cowardly British soldiers were inducing terror in the American population, as with the Newport woman who was so frightened that a British man 'o war was about to fire on the town, "that she went into strong convulsions, and continued in violent fits, and very delirious, till she died."[18]

The *Boston News-Letter* had been founded by a staunch Anglican Englishman and Loyalist it remained until its demise in 1775. The Boston Massacre had somehow escaped the attention of Mr. Draper, the editor (although in the April 6, 1770 edition he still ran a story from New York about how 40 or so redcoats had surrounded the house of a man accused of sheltering a youth who

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[15] *South Carolina Gazette*, 17 November 1775.
[16] *New York Gazette*, 2 October 1775.
[17] *New York Journal*, 9 November 1775.
[18] *New York Journal* 17 August 1775.

had witnessed soldiers vandalizing a Liberty Pole; a crowd appeared and the soldiers "retreated precipitately").

The *News-Letter* was reluctant to print much on the war, an understandable sentiment for a Loyalist publication given that Boston had been home to the most vociferous of the Patriots and was also under the command of General Gage. It contained only two military stories with fatalities in the 12 editions selected for this study's sample, compared to nine for the *Boston Gazette*, eight in the *South Carolina Gazette*, 10 in the *New York Gazette*, and 14 in the *New York Journal*.

CONCLUSION

As they had in 1745, military stories dominated death-related coverage in 1775: 43 military stories, 16 obituaries, 11 accounts of accidents and 7 of disease. Even though coverage of the Revolution dominated the papers in theme and content, the pattern of the counts of death-related story types in 1775 mirrors almost exactly that of 1745 (see Appendix B). The 1775 sample included only six more death-related stories than in the 1745 sample, even though the later group included an extra newspaper in the sample and by then most newspapers were using larger pages and printing more of them. This suggests, unsurprisingly, that Revolutionary news and opinion left less room for crime, accidents and so on. The Revolutionary press continued and even extended the tendencies of the colonial printers to regard war as an "us vs. them" situation, with God on the colonial side.

Non-military stories were similar to those of the previous generation in style, tone and content. For example, after a party of traders were attacked by New Zealand "savages," their shipmates came ashore and found

> the heads, hearts, livers, and lights, of three or four of our people broiling on the fire, and their bowels lying at a distance of about six yards from the fire, with several of their hands and limbs in a mangled condition, some broiled and some raw.

Their comrades collected all the remains they could and took them back on board, but the ship's surgeon "could not make out to whom they belonged."[19] This sort of graphic sensationalism, common in the 1740s and 1750s, was still present in the 1770s.

As in the colonial press, editors continued to make sense of death in ways that accorded with their faith. However, one noticeable difference was that, at least in the stories in this study, religion seemed so tightly intertwined with politics that God was seldom mentioned outside of a political context. As in previous years, the type of story most likely to include an explicitly religious reference was the obituary. The *Boston News-Letter*, for example, made merely an oblique reference to the afterlife in noting that prior to her passing Mrs. Elizabeth Rice languished in "sore confinement" for five years, "yet with the greatest patience waited until her Change came, which we believe was happy."[20]

Another difference was the dearth of sensational crime news. This was likely due, at least in part, to the difficulty in obtaining such material in a time of war. British newspapers (previously a major source for such stories) were harder

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[19] *New York Gazette*, 20 February 1775.
[20] 16 February 1775.

to get and local crime probably received less attention when the “crimes” of the British soldiers occupied everyone’s attention. Perhaps the editors felt their publications were sufficiently gory with war news.

Significantly, journalists still tied sensation to moral truth. As the most important moral truths of the day were being upheld on the battlefield instead of in the courtroom, newsmen focused on the bloody conflict rather than on bloody crimes. Death, for the Revolutionary printer, was still generally evil and it indicated serious disorder, but Patriot printers showed very little ambivalence about how to make sense of it all.

Chapter 5: The Party Press Era

Early generations of journalism historians had often stereotyped the Party Press, so named because of their ties to the political parties that emerged after the Revolutionary War, as highly partisan purveyors of scurrility. On rare occasions the scurrility was clever: Federalist William Cobbett of *Porcupine's Gazette* described Republican editor Benjamin Bache as an "ill-looking devil . . . [whose] eyes never get above your knees."[1] But generally Federalist and Republican editors were described as having run party mouth-pieces, labeling their political enemies with nasty names and leveling spurious charges that made up for a lack of subtlety with an abundance of vitriol.

But in the last two decades journalism historians have increasingly recognized that the Party Press (although they were definitely purveyors of scurrility) used techniques that were, by contemporary standards, more sophisticated and their opinions better reasoned than their critics acknowledged.[2] Historians have also noted that religion was a significant factor in spurring developments in printing and publishing, and that religious journalism was a significant force in this period. David Paul Nord relates, in "The Evangelical Origins of the Mass Media in America,"[3] how evangelicals were the first to develop printing and distribution methods on a truly mass media scale beginning

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[1] Porcupine's Gazette, 14 November 1797, quoted in Wm David Sloan, "The Party Press, 1783-1833" in *The Media in America: A History* 4th ed. edited by Wm. David Sloan and James D. Startt (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 1999), 75.
[2] Wm David Sloan, "Scurrility and the Party Press, 1789-1816" *American Journalism* 5 No. 1 (1988): 98.
[3] *Journalism Monographs* No. 88 (May 1984).

around 1800. Until recently most journalism history textbooks would, observed Marvin Olasky,

> ignore comments by early nineteenth-century press–watchers who noted, "Of all the reading of the people three-fourths is religious . . . of all the issues of the press three-fourths are theological, ethical and devotional." They do not mention that New York City alone boasted fifty-two magazines and newspapers that called themselves Christian, or that from 1825 to 1845 over one hundred cities and towns had explicitly Christian newspapers. The facts, though, are irrefutable, once they are dug up; in the early nineteenth century, American journalism was often Christian journalism [4]

Despite the fact that religion and politics were up to this point closely associated with death in the news columns, this study found a marked decrease in the number of death-related stories in the 1810 sample. It was certainly not for a lack of public interest, for death was a frequent character in the popular literature of the early and middle parts of the nineteenth century.

> At a time when religion was increasingly becoming the province of women and children . . . death (like religion) took on new meaning. Schoolbook poetry and popular consolation literature spread wide the message that death was a thing to be desired and hoped for with all one's heart; it meant deliverance from this mundane world, and glorious reunion with loved ones in the dazzling palaces of heaven. . . . Heaven literally became home to much of nineteenth century America.[5]

The easiest explanation is that editors so concentrated on political questions that they had less time and space for accidents, crime and so on. As in the Revolutionary period, the most important questions of the day were political,

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[4] Marvin Olasky, *Prodigal Press: The Anti-Christian Bias of the American News Media* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 1988), 17-18.

[5] David E. Stannard, "Introduction" in *Death in America* edited by David E. Stannard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), xii. Lewis O. Saum adds that in the early 1800s American society was "saturdated with concern for death, and fastidious to a fault in observances pertaining to it ("Death in the Popular Mind of Pre-Civil War America," 34).

but without a war to report journalists gave death a much smaller role in their accounts of the world around them.

Politics, however, did not merely push death out of the picture. It is a complicated and pivotal period in the history of American religious life, politics and journalism. Enlightenment rationalism continued to modify Puritanism and in some ways prepared for the rise of Methodism, which exploded across America in the Second Great Awakening in the first part of the nineteenth century. Trends in religion and philosophy supported the rise of mass democratic politics. Meanwhile Romanticism rapidly gained momentum through in the early part of the 1800s contributing, among other things, to the public's increasingly sentimental view of death.

In terms of journalism history, between 1790 and the mid-1800s newspapers developed along two distinct lines: what in modern terms is called the mainstream press (concerned primarily with political and commercial matters[6]) and the "church press" (explicitly Christian newspapers, often denominationally supported). It was a time of remarkable growth for the fledgling industry. From 35 newspapers in 1783, it exploded to 1,200 by 1833.

The Penny Press arrived in the major cities in the mid-1830s and soon overshadowed both the religious and political journals in terms of circulation and influence, even though there were far more political and religious newspapers than penny journals and the former continued to operate, especially in smaller

[6] For the purposes of this paper, this tradition of newspapers will be referred to as the political press; some newspapers, particularly in large cities, were mainly organs of commercial news, but those placed little emphasis on death-related events and so will not be dealt with here.

cities, through the 19th century. Eventually, however, newspapers based on party politics or denominational affiliation gave way before the new journalistic paradigm that the Penny Press introduced.

This chapter, then, will describe the ways political and religious newspapers approached death and how these often correlated with the intellectual streams that were gathering strength in America through the first third of the century. But this chapter will also note some ways the political and religious press were fighting against the currents, for the factors that contributed to the downfall of the Party Press era papers also set the stage for the triumph of the penny papers.

RELIGION, DEMOCRACY AND SCIENCE IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

Historian of religion Sydney Ahlstrom refers to the period immediately after the Revolutionary War as a "Religious Depression." The Revolution accelerated the advance of Enlightenment philosophy, natural theology and secularized thought.[7] It "released many inhibitions, opening American minds not only to French liberalism and anti-clerical thought, but to the larger and far more easily comprehended tradition of English rationalism."[8] The passing of the First Amendment in 1791 cemented religious freedom into American law and culture and led to the disestablishment of churches and opportunities for increasing

[7] Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 364. Contemporaries agreed: "The religious leaders of the new United States were almost immediately convinced that the political achievement of federal union had been accompanied by a spiritual deterioration hardly to be equaled in the darkest chapters of Christian history"; Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1965), 3.
[8] Ahlstrom, 367.

religious pluralism. On the other hand, the Second Great Awakening sprang out of a large Protestant consensus, "Reformed and Puritan in spirit."[9]

This is the standard interpretation for the period of the school of historians that sees the main story of American religion as the transformation of Puritanism into mainline American Christianity. But this view does not give sufficient credit to Methodism and related forms of evangelical-style Christianity that swept across the country in the 19th century to become, as Nathan O. Hatch put it, "the most powerful religious movement in American history, its growth a central feature in the emergence of the United States as a republic"[10] The Second Great Awakening was so not because of its intellectual elegance but because of its impact on American life and worldviews.

American Methodists nearly became extinct during the Revolution, but after,

> under the tireless direction of [Francis] Asbury, the Methodists advanced from Canada to Georgia emphasizing three themes that Americans found captivating: God's free grace, the liberty of people to accept or reject that grace, and the power and validity of popular religious expression—even among servants, women, and African Americans. Led by unlearned preachers committed to sacrifice and to travel, the Methodists organized

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[9] Ahlstrom, 381.

[10] Nathan O. Hatch, "The Puzzle of American Methodism" in *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture* ed. by Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001), 26. In this essay Hatch also discusses the "scholarly neglect" of Methodism. He argues that historians of religion, after religion was revived as a legitimate subject in American universities, first focused on the story of Puritanism, with an emphasis on intellectual history and from a Consensus perspective. Then in the pluralistic spirit of the 1960s, many historians took up the "outsiders" that the Consensus scholars had overlooked or marginalized; women, native and nature religions, Catholics, and the many Christian subcultures such as Pentecostals and Seventh-Day Adventists. Through all this and until recently Methodists were largely overlooked, Hatch argues, even though it was a large denomination with an enormous cultural impact that extended well beyond circuit riders in the West and the Second Great Awakening.

> local classes, or cells, and preaching circuits at a rate that alarmed more respectable denominations.[11]

With this aggressive strategy, the Methodists went from three percent of all church members in 1776 to 34 percent by 1850, making Methodists the largest religious body in the nation and among national institutions second in size only to the federal government. Methodists had four thousand itinerant and eight thousand local preachers (ten times the preaching force of the Congregationalists), and 1.5 million members in a country of 23 million.[12]

The importance of Methodism and related evangelical denominations (like the Baptists, who also enjoyed significant growth in the period[13]) to the story of American journalism is that the former "sprouted from the same cultural taproot that nourished a culture of liberal individualism and mass democracy."[14] American life was profoundly transformed between the Revolution and the Civil War. It became a liberal, competitive, market-driven society instead of a hierarchy like Britain or a republican society as envisioned by the Founding Fathers. It embraced mass democratic politics, including overt political campaigning, universal (white) male suffrage, and the domination of government by political parties. It became a "crucible of intense sectionalism" over slavery, a sectionalism

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[11] Hatch, "The Puzzle of American Methodism," 27.
[12] Hatch, "The Puzzle," 27-28.
[13] Roger Finke and Rodney Starke, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), argue that the central theme of American religious history is found in the growth, often at the expense of mainline denominations, of the upstart denominations like the Baptists and Methodists through determined efforts at evangelism and a focus on holiness and personal commitment. Edwin Scott Gaustad observes also that although the North was quite diverse, "the South had been transformed by 1800 into a bastion of evangelical religion. Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists created a kind of cultural and religious united . . .." *A Religious History of America* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 139.
[14] Hatch, "The Puzzle," 38.

that the mass distribution of books, newspapers and magazines (an explosion of printing in which Methodists played leading roles) "intensified . . . by airing in every hamlet the most intransigent opinions, abolitionist and fire-eater alike." It was also a time of great religious ferment and originality:

> The wave of popular religious movements that broke upon America in the generation after independence decisively changed the center of gravity of American religion, worked powerfully to Christianize popular culture, splintered American Christianity beyond recognition, divorced religious leadership from social position, and above all, proclaimed that moral responsibility of everyone to think and act for themselves. In this ferment, often referred to as the Second Great Awakening, Christendom witnessed a period of religious upheaval comparable to nothing since the Reformation—and an upsurge of private initiative that was totally unprecedented.[15]

Where Calvinism had emphasized the depravity of man, the sovereignty of God, and the importance of church structures, Methodism "proclaimed the breathtaking message of individual freedom, autonomy, responsibility, and achievement."[16] "The dominant theme in America from 1800 to 1860 is the invincible persistence of the revival technique," wrote Miller.[17] This culture that valued freedom and initiative encouraged many Protestants to fulfil their Christian responsibilities, whether that involved preaching the Gospel, social reform, or something else. Newspapers were a big part of how this impulse was expressed.

About this time in America Romanticism was gaining ground. Romanticism, in some ways a reaction to the order, calm, and harmony of the

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[15] Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger, "Introduction" in *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture* ed. by Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001), 12-13.
[16] Hatch, "The Puzzle," 28.
[17] *The Life of the Mind in America*, 7.

Neoclassicism of the late 1700s and the rationality and materialism of the Enlightenment, "emphasized the individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional, the visionary, and the transcendental." It was characterized by a deep appreciation of nature and a turning in upon the self, along with a "preoccupation with the genius, the hero, and the exceptional figure in general." In Romanticism, as Olasky pointed out, God did not reveal Truth through nature or revelation, Man used reason to create Truth out of his own experience.[18] Romanticism featured

> an emphasis upon imagination as a gateway to transcendent experience and spiritual truth; an obsessive interest in folk culture, national and ethnic cultural origins, and the medieval era; and a predilection for the exotic, the remote, the mysterious, the weird, the occult, the monstrous, the diseased, and even the satanic. [19]

Arguably, interest in "the mysterious, the weird, the monstrous" had been a staple of American writers since Increase Mather's *Remarkable Providences*. The difference in this period was the worldview that lay behind these characteristics.

DEATH AND NEWSPAPERS IN EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICA

Political and religious newspapers had much in common stylistically. Both were essay-oriented. They reported some "current events" but they did not, unlike some modern media, purport to offer a comprehensive report of "the news." Political papers focused on the workings of government and party politics, and religious papers on the "progress of the Gospel" as defined by reports from

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[18] Olasky, *Prodigal Press*, 24.

[19] "Romanticism." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved August 25, 2003 from *Encyclopedia Britannica Online* <http://search.eb.com/eb/article?eu=86025>.

mission fields, revival accounts, church and denominational activities, and so on. In neither case did editors normally regard accidents, suicides, diseases or crime as significant factors in the most important questions of the day.

The Political Papers

Nations, argued David Paul Nord, do not happen—they are built. In its early years the American republic was fragile, and "disputes over key terms of political philosophy and practice were incessant, passionate, and sometimes violent . . . Yet the conversation went on." Newspapers did not "soften or diffuse the hostilities generated by this dialogue. On the contrary, they amplified the hostilities and intensified the crises of the state. But they made the dialogue possible."[20]

Editors in this period came to do more than merely facilitate dialogue, however. Jeffrey Palsey shows how, soon after the American Revolution, politicians regarded newspapers as "the means by which the rule of public opinion would be put into action; if the people were provided with an accurate view of the world, then public opinion would always be a good ruler."[21] As most newspapers were run by traditional, trade-oriented printers, they generally supported constitutional authorities. In 1795 three-fourths of newspapers were either Federalist or avoided politics.[22]

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[20] David Paul Nord, "Newspapers and American Nationhood, 1776-1826" in *Three Hundred Years of the American Newspaper* ed. John B. Hench (Worchester: American Antiquarian Society, 1991), 405.
[21] Jeffrey L. Palsey *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 62.
[22] Palsey, *The Tyranny of Printers*, 106.

A significant change in journalistic practice about then was the appearance of the editor (as distinct from the printer, who had until then fulfilled both functions) and the formal editorial.

But the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts, in large part a Federalist attempt to shut down Republican presses critical of President Adams and his supporters (Vice President Jefferson, a Republican, was pointedly excluded from the Sedition Act's protection), and the handful of subsequent prosecutions radicalized Republican printers and others.

> The Federalist repression convinced many printers that there was no place for an honest printer who followed the traditional non-partisan approach. Simultaneously, the growth of political parties opened new roles for printers that validated the claims that all American artisans felt they had to equal rights. Many of them became political professionals, people for whom printing was a way to make a living out of politics, rather than the other way around.[23]

In the escalating war of words, "partisanship became a matter of self-respect and political professionalism a matter of necessity."[24] After 1800, political debate in newspapers changed from a "marketplace of disembodied ideas to a battleground for political warriors."[25] Editors believed they had a duty to promote the true and right, and to fail to take a stand was simply to fail. Therefore, they cannot be evaluated by modern standards of whether they were neutral or adversarial toward the government; they were an integral part of the political system.[26]

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[23] Palsey, 131.
[24] Palsey, 152.
[25] Palsey, 176.
[26] Wm. David Sloan, "The Early Party Press: The Newspaper Role in American Politics, 1788-1812" *Journalism History* 9 No. 4 (Spring 1982): 23.

The continual conflict accelerated the growth of the industry. America boasted 35 newspapers in 1783, 92 in 1790 (with eight dailies), 234 in 1800 and 325 by 1808. By then, all but 56 were affiliated with a major party, at least loosely.[27] This was partly from conviction, partly from necessity. Many papers would have folded without party support or government printing contracts because being an editor of a country paper was, as it had been in Revolutionary Days, "generally little better than starving," as the proprietor of the *Trenton* (N.J.) *True American* put it.[28]

After the election of James Monroe as President in 1816, with the Federalist Party fading rapidly, some hoped that partisanship would decline. From that election until 1824, known as the Era of Good Feelings, partisanship seemed less overt. But instead the collapse of the Federalists resulted, Palsey argues, in a "vast" infrastructure of media committed to political conflict but lacking the national party alignments.[29] The Republicans split into factions, with editors assuming increasingly important roles in the political organizations, and two contentious presidential elections in 1824 and 1828 destroyed whatever few Good Feelings might actually have existed.

> Before the 1820s, editors were influential but disdained henchmen who . . . occasionally fought their way into positions of honor or authority, but were then usually undermined or betrayed by their own allies. By the 1830s editors had forged the decisive role in American political life that they enjoyed for most of the rest of the century.[30]

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[27] Carol Sue Humphrey, *The Press of the Young Republic 1783-1833* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 2, 71.
[28] 26 July 1802. Quoted in Wm. David Sloan, "The Party Press, 1783-1833," 71.
[29] Palsey, *Tyranny*, 348-9.
[30] Palsey, 349.

Contemporary critics blasted as corruption Andrew Jackson's appointment of dozens of editors to political posts after his 1828 victory. He saw it, however, as "honoring and rewarding his patriotic supporters, and giving equal opportunity to rich and poor alike." Editors (and there were many—863 newspapers by 1828 and 1,200 by 1833[31]) emerged as key players in the developing party system.[32]

The partisan press peaked during Jackson's presidency. Most papers continued to operate with party ties until late in the century and for some party loyalty continued into the twentieth. But in 1846 Congress passed legislation requiring bids be let on printing contracts, thereby depriving editors of considerable support, and in 1860 the federal government established its own printing office, ensuring that only economically independent newspapers would survive.[33]

Overall, at 36 the 1810 sample of political newspapers had fewer death stories than any other sample in this study (82 in the 1745 sample, 86 in 1775) even though the 1810 sample drew from six newspapers instead of five. Discounting war stories (because 1810 was the first sample year in which the colonies were not in active conflict with either the French or the British, and because in 1745 newspapers printed much news about European conflicts), the numbers still show a decrease in the number of death stories: 1745—40; 1775—53; 1810—31.

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[31] Humphrey, *The Press of the Young Republic*, 99-100.
[32] Palsey, 393.
[33] Sloan, "The Party Press," 91.

Politics did not merely crowd out accidents and suicides; rather, journalists' worldviews led them to narrowly-defined notions of what constituted an event worth their attention. To the political journals, politics was self-evidently more important than mere accidents or suicides. The system itself encouraged editors to pay less attention to death-related events. Its reliance on political patronage, the deep connections between editor and party, and the perspective that saw newspapers as political tools and newspaper publishing as a battleground for political ideology all encouraged editors to see politics defining the most important issues. This pushed reports of fatalities further into the background and discouraged attempts to interpret such events in a larger context.

The stories resembled those of the Revolutionary and colonial periods in both tone and content. Accident stories often carried a practical lesson. "How many tragedies must take place from trusting in the care and discretion of young children?" demanded the *New York Herald* after a girl, 6, burned to death in a house fire.[34] Crime stories could be graphic, yet writers agreed that factors other than sheer human depravity might be responsible. For example, a schooner captain assaulted two widows in their own home with an iron bar. He bruised one woman's head and as for the other "horribly fractured her skull and actually beat out a part of her brain." The captain had "evinced strong symptoms of mental derangement both before and after perpetrating the horrid deed.[35]

Accounts of executions still featured confessions as warnings, as in the case of one Atkinson of London, who warned that "Sabbath breaking, bad

[34] 12 May 1810.
[35] *New York Herald*, 12 May 1810.

women, and idle company have brought me to this untimely end, but I have made my peace with the Almighty and shall soon get rid of this wicked world."

Oddly, even though Atkinson was noted as the most repentant of four criminals hanged that day, he suffered the most brutal death. Indeed, it was the climatic feature of the story that bore the title, "Scene of Horrour." After the scaffold dropped, "Atkinson cried out, 'Oh God! Oh God! I cannot die, I cannot die! lift me up!' Immediately a soldier of the 69th regiment went to him, lifted him up a little, and then by hanging at the body, put the poor wretch out of his misery."[36] Atkinson's end clearly undercuts the teleological, Puritan interpretation that the manner of death reflected on the deceased's life. That lesson seems, in this story, either ignored or overwhelmed by the facts.

War coverage was, like that of Revolutionary newspapers, dominated by reports and letters from American officials and soldiers. Unlike the Revolutionary papers, however, British soldiers were once again the heroes. One three-column report described the glorious courage of British troops as they stormed a fortress in the Ionian Isles. It was written by a British general.[37] The political sheets devoted substantial space to the War of 1812, at which time the British military reverted once again to the role of villain in the American papers. The *Boston Patriot*, for example, devoted several columns to printing first the official report of a British naval officer aboard the *Java* (captured by the American *Constitution*)

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[36] *Charleston Courier*, 20 October 1810.
[37] *Charleston Courier*, 6 September 1810.

followed by an extensive rebuttal from an American officer to the charges of cowardly conduct.[38]

The papers reported suicides infrequently (none in the sample) and with little explicit censure. "Yesterday, Mr. Lyon Levy, a diamond merchant . . . precipitated himself from the top of the Monument, and was literally dashed to pieces," began one item in the *Charleston Courier*. It related how he circled the iron railings atop the tower several times before he sprang off, "the body turning over and over" and hitting the stone griffins near the bottom of the building. "Nothing has transpired from which the friends of the deceased can judge the cause of the catastrophe. Mr. Levi has left a wife and eight grown-up children."[39]

Obituaries continued to be most likely to have some explicit religious reference. The passing of Benjamin D. Perkins was "deeply to be deplored," said the *New York Evening Post*. "Let us be still and bow to the will of God. To his fellow citizen, this is one among many loud calls of Divine Providence which say, 'Be ye also ready.'"[40] For the wife of Thomas Dort, "Her sincere belief in the Christian Religion, and firm hope in the mercy of God, softened the pangs of disease, and deprived a death bed of its terrors."[41]

It was acceptable to mention religion because many among the political elite regarded morality as an necessary part of a civil and just society. John Adams regarded Christianity as the "sturdy ally of morality," as Gaustad put it, that introduced millions to "the great Principle of the Law of Nature and Nations:

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[38] 30 June 1813.
[39] 14 March 1810.
[40] 24 October 1810.
[41] *Charleston Courier*, 28 August 1810.

Love your Neighbor as yourself, and do to others as you would that others should do to you." Adams was disdainful of what he thought was Calvinistic theology, saying in 1821 that he simply would not believe that "millions of and millions of men are to be miserable and only a little handful of Elect Calvinists happy forever."[42] Similarly, Thomas Jefferson, a deist, was enthusiastic about Christian morality but in his rationalism dismissed the notion that God actively intervened in the world. These tendencies supported trends toward Unitarianism in Congregational churches and others: "Unitarians spoke of man's moral nature, his rational capacity, his freedom to choose to reject the doctrines taught and the promises offered by the Christian religion."[43]

Clearly this trend among the country's political elite had a significant impact on the editors of political papers. Even though they continued to see "religion" as important, rationalism also taught them that God did not work in the world as their predecessors had believed. Occasionally writers acknowledged "Providence" but seldom offered teleological interpretation. Only rarely did they portray death as a result of sin or sinful behavior.

Hence, natural disasters received little attention after the Revolution (one story in the 1810 sample, four in 1775, down from 10 in 1745) and little or no teleological interpretation. Writers still constructed execution stories and obituaries using the forms and conventions of a previous era, but far fewer of them. The accounts themselves, compared to those of the previous century, lacked

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[42] Edwin Scott Gaustad, *A Religious History of America* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 124.
[43] Gaustad, 142.

a certain Calvinistic intensity and the ironic twists that characterized the interpretation of death-related events in light of a sovereign God.

This was characteristic of much of the death-related popular literature of the day. Folks were undeniably very concerned about death, but "a striking thing about the deathly reflections [in popular literature] is the almost total absence of explicit references to otherworldly rewards or even to the assurance that, whatever they were, a particular person would enjoy them."[44] Gender roles may have helped push death out of newspapers, even though concern about death was a major feature in popular literature and society:

> Liberal clergymen and devout women were the principal authors of the mourners' manuals, lachrymose verse, obituary fiction and necrophiliac biographies popular at the time, and the characteristic features of such works make the clearest sense when placed in a context of clerical and feminine anxieties and ambitions.[45]

Douglas adds that consolation literature was focused on domestic, private grief. The concern was not on the kind of life a believer should live to get to heaven, but on heaven itself as a "continuation and glorification of the domestic sphere."[46] Christian teleology as a system of interpreting current events, under pressure through the colonial period and weakening through the Revolution, was nearly irrelevant in the political newspapers by the beginning of the Party press era.

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[44] Saum, "Death in the Popular Mind," 46.
[45] Ann Douglas, "Heaven Our Home: Consolation Literature in the Northern United States 1830-1880" in *Death in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 54.
[46] Douglas, "Heaven Our Home," 55.

Teleology as an interpretive system was not dead, however, and it appeared irregularly in newspapers throughout the nineteenth century. A teleological focus was also evident in a handful of Christian newspapers, as will be shown below. Moreover, many newspapers continued to run sermons and other items that reflected traditional, orthodox Christian approaches to death. "We are all hastening to a common end," noted one such sermon warning readers to be watchful for the Second Coming:

> On this side and the other the young, the gay, the vigorous, and the aged, are crumbling into dust. How often do we witness their departure, follow them to the narrow, humble habitation of the grave, and enter again upon the business and the vanities of life, seldom realizing for one single moment, that we also must soon occupy the same mansion. Would it not be wise to make DEATH a friend?[47]

With the weakening of the teleological framework, several of the death-related stories in the 1810 sample reveal one or more Romantic tendencies, even though in 1810 Romanticism was still decades from its peak. Reflecting the interest in heroes and the belief that experience led to truth, the *Boston Gazette* reported that an Austrian nobleman, referred to only as "Howard," died when he caught the "epidemic fever" from a patient in a Moravian castle he had converted into a hospital. He had traveled Europe "in order to become acquainted with the happiness and wretchedness of mankind, and everywhere to promote the former and mitigate the latter."[48]

"MURDER WILL OUT" proclaimed a title in the November 8, 1810 *Boston Independent Chronicle*: "They say it will have blood." A woman on her

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[47] *Charleston Courier*, 30 June 1810.
[48] 24 June 1810.

death bed confessed that, 18 years earlier, her son had come home covered in blood the same night a 17-year-old woman was murdered with a belt buckle. He had washed a bloody shirt that night, and afterward often slept restlessly and cried out in his sleep. Once he claimed a young woman came into his bedroom with a lighted candle.

The description of the corpse was timid, by earlier standards. The face had been marked, noted the writer, but

> humanity forbids our proceeding further in this horrid recital [except to mention that] Professional persons of both sexes were brought to examine the body, and it was the opinion of the woman that the unhappy girl had been violated, and then murdered!! Surely the earth and sea combined could not hide a villain of so deep a dye . . . Let him take refuge in the hollows of the mountains or in the bottom of the deep abyss, he must and will be vomited up again to appease the justice of the virtuous living.

In that story the "justice of the virtuous living" had replaced the justice of God, but in other stories Romantic impulses often merged with Calvinist theology. Near Dublin in 1809, a hired killer had buried the corpse of his victim on his farm. Officials searching the farm on another case stumbled across the body. The criminal had escaped suspicion at first but "an all-ruling Providence has ordered that it should now come to light . . . For murder, though it has no tongue, will speak with most miraculous organs."

The *Boston Independent Chronicle* reprinted an article detailing how, after an extraordinarily well-preserved body was dug up in a Swedish mine, a "decrepit old woman leaning on crutches" identified it as that of her fiancé from 50 years before. "She threw herself on the corpse, which had all the appearance of a bronze

statue, bathed it with tears, and fainted with joy at having once more beheld the object of her affection on this side of the grave."[49]

Newspaper editors in this period also showed a fondness for verse. Many were obituaries or took death as a subject combining, again, Romantic tendencies and Christian theology: "Yes, she is gone, Her angel-spirit fled/To realms of bliss and now numbered with the dead/ . . . /God! know the nature and the act approved/And while His wisdom did thy sister save/Marked thee O! Harriet for an early grave."[50]

The Christian Newspapers

This study will not deal in depth with the content of Christian newspapers. Most, as noted above, were devoted to church-related subjects and spent little space reporting current events. Carol Sue Humphrey has documented how such newspapers, despite the stated intentions of some editors to run a *news* paper, focused instead on denominational activities, revivalism, and the spiritual health of the nation. Some became leading reformers in areas such as temperance, prostitution, poverty and slavery.[51] Like the editors of political papers, religious editors regarded newspapers as a tool to promote the good and the right; to fail to use the power of the printed word to advance Christianity was to neglect their responsibility.

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[49] 19 July 1810.
[50] *New York Herald*, 7 February 1810.
[51] Carol Sue Humphrey, "Religious Newspaper and Antebellum Reform," in *Media and Religion in American History* edited by Wm. David Sloan (Northport, Ala.: Vision Press, 2000).

Although religious newspapers might be specific and unyielding on particular theological or social issues, when it came to reporting death they tended to reflect the social consensus of attitudes toward death, reading nothing more into a particular death than what most people would agree was there. In a society that was increasingly pluralistic, fragmented and market-driven, newspapers still attempted to appeal to the widest possible audience, within limits. Editors of religious newspapers in this environment might take a stand on doctrine (perhaps out of conviction, perhaps because they felt their readership demanded it) but have little incentive to attempt an authoritative interpretation of a particular accident, suicide or earthquake. In short, they did not report much untimely death because they did not regard it as a central feature in the story of the progress of the Gospel, and they provided only basic, non-controversial accounts of the deaths they did report, likely to avoid giving offense over what they regarded as non-critical matters.

A few Christian newspapers, such as the *Boston Recorder*, founded in 1816, did take seriously the call to report current events. Co-founder Nathaniel Willis wrote in his prospectus that plans were afoot to "diffuse Christianity and civilization throughout the world." The purpose of the *Recorder* was to report on religious activities (missionary activity, tract publishing and Bible translation) but also "to obtain the earliest information of all such events as mankind usually deems important."[52]

[52] 3 January 1816.

Hence Willis included a story about how one Nixon, being hanged for murder in Savannah, Georgia, on the gallows insisted he had been framed. Still,

> He acknowledged that he had been a sinner all his life; but since his condemnation he had seen his error and now has assurances that God had forgiven him—that he would soon be happy in another and a better world, and that he was ready and willing to die.[53]

Willis also wrote stories that declared the connection between sin and untimely death—a connection few newspapers made explicit after the Revolution. An 1819 article headlined "Shocking Homicide" described how a man killed his son after being "for a long time troubled with irreligious fears, and a belief that his sins were too numerous to be pardoned."[54] A story headlined, "AN ACT OF SELF MURDER" recounted how Esquire Sheldon of Lebanon, N.Y., shot himself. He did not believe "in a future state of rewards and punishments, or even a future existence, or the Supreme Being," and he taught his wife and children to believe the same. At age 70 he was infirm and in pain. His daughter heard a shot, entered the room and "beheld her father with the top of his head shot off, and his brains scattered about the wall! . . . He died as a fool dieth . . . if the righteous are scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear!"[55]

On the other hand, Deacon Samuel Capen of Dorchester was an honorable, godly, well-loved and spiritually strong man who died after a week's illness, having just enough time to consult with his pastor and say good-bye to his family and friends. He "expired with out a struggle or a groan . . . Who is not

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[53] 13 March 1816.
[54] Quoted in Olasky, *Prodigal Press*, 19.
[55] 24 August 1827.

ready to say, O let me die the death of the righteous and let my last end be like his! Behold the upright, for the end of that man is peace!"[56]

Another regular feature of the *Recorder* was an item titled the "Annals of Intemperance." It listed curt accounts of people who killed themselves or others while intoxicated: "Another drunken man, by the name of Simon Van Patten, killed himself by a fall on Monday week at Schenectady."[57] In the *Recorder*, at least, the teleological approach to news was alive and kicking until the 1830s.

At times the *Recorder* was genuinely sensational, by any standard. "A Horrid Tale" described how several black children went missing in Havanna in 1824. "At last it was discovered that their bodies were cut up in a long vault under a pastry shop and made into pies sausages, &c. The shop had a high reputation and supplied the best families." Four people were executed.[58]

But even in the *Recorder*, the definition of "news" was (usually) bound by theological priorities, namely the tracking of the progress of the Gospel and a desire to show the pre-eminence of Christianity. Timeliness, for example, would become one of the dominant news values in the era of the Penny Press; even the colonial press, often criticized for publishing months-old news, still valued the "freshest advices." But the *Recorder* was quite happy to print, as news in the January 7, 1816 issue, a report from 1796 headlined "The Cruelty of Hindoo Superstitions." It detailed how on a "dark and rainy night" the wife of a deceased Bramin in India, having refused to be created along with him (as the Hindu

[56] 14 April 1830.
[57] 3 August 1827.
[58] 3 August 1827.

custom required), was tied upon the funeral pyre. She slipped off, but her own son caught her and threw her back on the blazing pile. The article was excerpted from *Ward's Account of the Hindoos*.

A 20-year-old excerpt may seem untimely to modern sensibilities, but to Willis it was relevant and significant, in that it described the nature of the Hindu opposition to Christianity that missionaries to India faced. Willis also ran a description of how capital punishment attracted little attention in China:

> There are no confessions, no dying speeches, no account of the behavior of the unhappy victim of the offended laws, at the last awful scene, no minister of religion attends to urge them to repentance, in the hope of divine mercy, though human laws cannot forgive.[59]

He made the point in an editorial aside that followed:

> *Paganism*, even the most refined, is not in its nature adapted to cherish the nobler feelings of the human heart . . . a genuine commiseration towards guilty sufferers and cordial forgiveness of undeserved punishment, are the productions of Christianity, and of it alone.

Despite the gore the *Recorder* provided, its editors still ran (with no acknowledgement of the irony) an editorial from the *Baltimore Telegraph* responding to reader complaints that the paper was dull, with "no hostile armies in motion, no conflagrations, no victories, no mangled and mutilated bodies." Such a fixation with violence and action was sheer bloodthirstiness, retorted the editor. Did people not realize that "interesting" news meant real misery? People should be far more interested in whether the sovereigns of Russia or Austria embraced Christianity: "Here is a victory worthy of all their admiration, a triumph not

[59] 1 January 1818.

extorted by the blood of our fellow-men, not wrung from the tears of the orphan and of the widow."[60]

Later in the nineteenth century more editors in the religious press attempted to approach current events (and death) as had the *Recorder*, but most resembled Elias Smith more than Nathaniel Willis. A typical list of the contents of Smith's *Herald of Gospel Liberty* (Portsmouth, N.H.) included reports on Bibles in Louisiana, a missionary's assessment of India, "an account of the revival of religion" in Hallowell, Maine, reports of preaching in the territories, a list of preachers in New England, new publications, and several devotionals on topics such as "Truth," "Bible reading," "Duty" and so on.[61] Rather than teach readers about death by telling true stories of how people died, Smith scolded that people pay no attention to the lessons of other people's deaths: "Without emotions they behold their fellow creatures snatched from off the busy theatre of action and driven . . . *into the house appointed for all the living*."[62]

CONCLUSION

Despite some exceptions like the *Boston Recorder*, in most newspapers the teleological approach to news had faded by 1810. Many still interpreted death in a mainly Christian framework, but the framework was less Calvinistic. Journalists did not normally view death or the circumstances surrounding it as a window into the mind and purposes of God for this world. Death was less important to journalists who regarded politics and the advance of the Gospel as

[60] 22 May 1816.
[61] 4 March 1814.
[62] 18 March 1818.

defining issues and the lenses through which they evaluated newsworthiness. Therefore, they devoted less space to accidents and suicides, crime and executions.

Journalists did not ignore death, however. With teleology dying as an interpretive system, Romantic tendencies appeared. If the meaning of a particular death was not to be found in the decisions of a sovereign and personal God, then perhaps meaning could be found in an impersonal Providence. In this worldview Murder spoke and the "justice of the virtuous living" would prevail.

Just as the political press reached its peak in the mid-1830s, the Penny Press appeared in the form of Benjamin Day's *New York Sun*. Where the political and religious papers were bound tightly to institutions outside journalism, the penny papers claimed independence, and this independence had a crucial impact on how they shaped and formed their presentations of death.

Chapter 6: The Popular Press

A woman in Plymouth, Massachusetts, loved cats but she had a new one she needed to get rid of, reported the November 25, 1833, issue of the *New York Sun*. She tied a weight around its neck and tried to drown it in a bucket of water: "The cat, it appears, in struggling, contrived to extricate itself, upon which it flew at its mistress in the most desperate manner, and scratched her so much that mortification ensued, of which she finally expired."

Historians have credited Benjamin Day's *Sun* with inaugurating a new age of journalism. His was the first successful attempt to publish a daily penny newspaper in America, the first issue arriving on September 3, 1833, but within two decades penny papers (penny papers in style if not always just one penny in price) had appeared in major urban centers across the country. Although coverage at times could be shockingly sensational, the "cat kills woman" story typified much that was in the penny press. "The traditional stress upon foreign and political news was discarded in favor of an emphasis on sensation, human interest, witty paragraphing, gossip, and local happenings," as Frank Luther Mott put it.[1]

Although the sensationalism made, at times, for grim reading, the penny press set the pattern for coverage of death that persists to this day through their emphasis on crime and accidents in unprecedented volumes. No suffering, no news, wrote *Sun* editor George W. Wisner, for news

[1] Frank Luther Mott, "Facetious news Writing, 1833-1883," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 29 No. 1 (June, 1942): 35.

> must generally tell of wars and fighting, of deeds of death, and blood, of wounds and heresies, of broken heads, broken hearts, and broken bones, of accidents by fire or flood, a field of possessions ravaged, property purloined, wrongs inflicted . . . the abundance of news is generally an evidence of astounding misery . . ..[2]

Historians consider the penny press the founders of modern journalism: they were financially independent from the political parties and churches, focused on news rather than opinion (in the form of essays and editorials), and appealed to a mass audience.[3] While it is true that newspapers were less likely to invoke explicitly Christian terminology, it is not accurate to say that newspapers were secularized in this period.

THE GROWTH OF THE PENNY PRESS

In 1830 only the largest newspapers had a circulation over a few thousand. By 1860, New York had at least three penny papers, all founded after 1833, each with a circulation near 40,000 or more: the *Herald* (James Gordon Bennett claimed a circulation near 60,000), the *Tribune*, and the *Times*, even though the commercial and political dailies continued to operate and despite the continued presence of many religious weeklies. Nationally, newspaper circulation went from under 100,000 in 1830 to 1.5 million in 1860, much of the growth the result of the new penny papers in major cities.

James Gordon Bennett, founder of the *New York Herald* in 1835, in an 1849 editorial congratulated himself and his colleagues in the penny press for

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[2] 4 April 1835 and quoted in Marvin Olasky, *Central Ideas in the Development of American Journalism: A Narrative History* (Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1991), 189.
[3] in Michael Buchholz, "The Penny Press, 1831-1861" in *The Media in America: A History* edited by Wm. David Sloan and James D. Startt fourth ed. (Northport, Ala.: Vision Press, 1999), 122.

injecting new "vitality" into the industry over the previous 14 years. The commercial and political papers were, he asserted, "feebly conducted and bad," characterized by "long essays on moral and political economy by Scrutater, Publicus, and Justatia and other eminent anonymous scribblers." Society had needed an "accurate and impartial vehicle of intelligence," because a new age of "intelligence, refinement and high cultivation" demanded a paper of similar qualities, yet still accessible to the masses.[4] James Gordon Bennett was just the man to give it to them.

Many other factors contributed to the success of the penny papers. Until the arrival of the *Sun*, many newspapers were expensive and paid for by annual subscription, around $10, a price beyond most folk. These papers were designed for the commercial and political classes and, in general, had little appeal for non-elites. The *Sun* was cheap—one penny, hence the name—had "bright," interesting content, and distributed using a technique imported from London: it was hawked on street corners by newsboys who, having bought 100 papers for 67 cents, had to sell aggressively to make a profit.[5]

> The idea of making [newspapers] an article to be cried about the streets, to be sold for a cent, to be bought by workingmen and boys, to come into competition with cakes and apples, must have seemed to the respectable New Yorkers of 1831, unspeakably absurd. When the respectable New Yorker first saw a penny paper, he gazed at it (I saw him) with a feeling similar to that with which an ill-natured man may be supposed to regard General Tom Thumb, a feeling of mingled curiosity and contempt; he put the ridiculous little thing into his waistcoat pocket to carry home for the

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[4] 7 April 1849.

[5] William E. Huntzicker, *The Popular Press, 1833-1865* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999; The History of American Journalism series edited by James D. Startt and Wm. David Sloan), 10.

> amusement of his family, and he wondered what nonsense would be perpetrated next.[6]

Increasing literacy fueled the demand for reading material even as the increasing availability of newspapers, books, tracts, etc., (brought about by the revolution in printing and mass distribution—see Chapter 5), stimulated the desire to be literate, especially among the millions of immigrants who arrived on American soil as the century progressed. The development of public education made literacy possible for many who would not otherwise have learned to read. Technological advances in printing, notably the Hoe cylinder press and Fourdrinier papermaking machines, allowed greater numbers of papers to be printed ever more cheaply.

Schudson pointed out that factors such as technology and literacy, although they made the penny press's massive circulation figures possible, do not account for its popularity. He argued that the penny papers "invented the modern concept of news." The changes in the styles of journalism were prompted by the rise of the Jacksonian democratic market society: "To be more precise, in the 1830s newspapers began to reflect, not the affairs of an elite in a small trading society, but the activities of an increasingly varied, urban, and middle-class society of trade, transportation, and manufacturing."[7]

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[6] James Parton, *The Life of Horace Greeley, Editor of the New York Tribune* (1855, reprint, New York, 1970), 140. Quoted in Buchholz, "The Penny Press, 1831-1861," 121. Buchholz has a well-rounded discussion of the factors that contributed to the growth of the penny press.

[7] Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 22-23.

The nation was transformed from a "liberal mercantile republic" to an egalitarian market democracy where "money had new power, the individual new standing, and the pursuit of self-interest new honor."

The penny press was also successful because of a new business strategy. Where the commercial and religious press had relied on subscriptions and institutional support, the penny press relied on advertising revenue. As the circulation figures went up, so did the revenue, but for publishers the main attraction of higher circulation was the increased rates they could charge for advertising space. The penny papers claimed to be "independent" from political parties, and although some editors were politically very active, the papers themselves did not require party support to be successful. They were, however, dependent on their ability to deliver readers to advertisers.[8] Therefore, newspapers competed for readers on the basis of its ability to obtain "the news." The editorial was dying, declared Greeley biographer James Parton, and the success of a journal depends "wholly and absolutely upon its success in getting, and its skill in exhibiting, the news. The word 'newspaper' is the exact and complete description of the thing which the true journalist aims to produce." [9]

RELIGION, DEATH AND THE PENNY PRESS

The rise of the liberal market democracy fits well with the rise of evangelical religion in the 1820s, the "democratization of American Christianity,"

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[8] For a more complete discussion of this shift in the business model, see Gerald J. Baldasty, "The Nineteenth Century Origins of Modern American Journalism" in *Three Hundred Years of the American Newspaper* edited by John B. Hench (Worchester: American Antiquarian Society, 1991).

[9] James Parton, "The New York Herald" *North American Review* 102 (April 1866): 376. Quoted in Schudson, 22.

as Hatch put it, and the values this change promoted: individual freedom, autonomy, responsibility, and achievement, as discussed in Chapter 5, above.

Two other related and seemingly contradictory characteristics of the antebellum period are notable for their effects on journalism and the penny press in particular: the authority of the Bible in American life and a growing acceptance that "science" was a legitimate means to knowledge (along with revelation, i.e. the Bible).

There was "no higher court of appeal" than the Bible in antebellum America, observed George Marsden.[10] But not all who appealed to the authority of the Bible necessarily submitted to its teachings. Mark Noll notes that in antebellum America ministers (and the same is no doubt true of journalists) at momentous public events often preached from Scripture,

> but this text of Scripture became a gateway, not for the proclamation of essentially biblical messages, but for the minister's social, political or cultural convictions, which had been securely in place long before he had turned to the Bible.[11]

Early in the nineteenth century this authority came under attack from Romanticism and Enlightenment rationalism. The response among Christians was a combination of Scottish "common sense" and Baconian science, an interpretive system Mark Noll calls "theistic Enlightenment science." It was not the skepticism of Hume nor the revolutionary Enlightenment of Rousseau but a

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[10] George Marsden, "Everyone One's Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth Century America" in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* edited by Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 79.
[11] Mark A. Noll, "The Image of the United States as a Biblical Nation, 1776-1865," in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* edited by Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 42.

combination of evangelical and rationalistic convictions: 1. the world of nature, known experientially through the senses, was the foundation of reality; 2. detached, scientific inquiry was the ultimate arbiter of knowledge; 3. by pursuing a disciplined inquiry into the experience opened by the senses, humanity could progress to new heights of glory. This could all be done in the service of Christianity, social stability and scientific progress, not as a replacement for Christianity[12] because, pre-Darwin, Christians assumed science and Christian theology would support each other. Therefore, they accepted the premises of science—that it is autonomous, rational, objective and naturalistic.[13]

Romanticism hit full stride just as the penny papers were building themselves into a major cultural force and along with it came transcendentalism, a development Olasky describes as a mixture of materialism and pantheism. Transcendentalism, although present in American culture,

> seemed cold until 1836. In that year Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Nature" appeared and the Transcendental Club, composed of young Unitarian preachers, began meeting at the parsonage of George Ripley, who later became an editor of the New York *Tribune*.[14]

The focus was on Nature, Ahlstrom adds,

> its wildness and unrestraint was a well spring of inspiration . . . And pervading this entire impulse was an emphasis on spirit that accorded wonderfully with the new idealistic and antimechanistic trend of philosophy. It was a concept that could be blended with traditional

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[12] Mark A. Noll, "The Evangelical Enlightenment and the Task of Theological Education" in *Communication and Change in American Religious History* ed. by Leonard I. Sweet (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, 1993), 277-78.

[13] After Darwin, this system of "theistic Enlightenment science" fell apart and the Protestant "common sense" consensus crumbled; this development and its effects on journalism will be discussed in Chapters 7 and 8.

[14] Olasky, *Prodigal Press*, 24.

> Christian thinking about the Holy Spirit, but it was also connected with all the animating forces of man and nature.[15]

Emerson and others in this current believed that the truly divine thing about Man is his moral nature, and that Man himself defines that. "Speak no further of Man's sin and his responsibility before God, Emerson suggested: Man is God, or at least part of God, because a little bit of godstuff is sprinkled everywhere."[16]

Popular literature paid considerable attention to death in the middle of the century, much from a distinctly Christian viewpoint or at least using Christian terminology. Michael McDowell's analysis of themes in death literature in this period found it emphasized inevitability, universality, and imminence. But death also had a "happy" side, for it brought blessedness and rest—at least for the pious and the very young.

> The nineteenth century balanced a peculiar and ancient paradox in its theological mind: death was the punishment for sin, was the worst of human miseries, Satan's last and greatest hold over us; at the same time, however, Death was God's careful servant, his reward to bring us out of this sad and sorry world into bliss.[17]

The effects of this intellectual environment on how penny papers covered death varied between journals. These effects were not obvious or even present in every death-related story. Many stories were indistinguishable from paper to paper, reported and composed according to well-established conventions

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[15] Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 588.
[16] Olasky, 24.
[17] Michael McEachern McDowell, *American Attitudes Toward Death, 1825-1865*. Unpublished dissertation, Brandeis University 1977, 19.

journalists had used since colonial days and would continue to use for generations longer.

On the other hand, overall journalists undeniably experienced a huge shift in news values. If news values had held steady between 1810 and 1840, the latter sample should have had a few more of each type of story than the former, given that the news hole was somewhat larger as newspapers increased their page size and number. Instead, the 1840 sample reveals the beginning of major trends in story selection, the results of which are still evident in newspapers today.

The numbers of different types of stories in the samples had been generally fairly consistent for the years 1745, 1775 and 1810. The totals for most categories were within a range of five for those three sample years. The exception was military/political stories; there were far more in 1745 and 1775, because in those years the colonies were at war, than in 1810.

But in the 1840 sample, with much of the increase in volume coming from the *Herald* and the *Tribune*, the number of death-related stories increased in all categories but one—obituaries, in which the total fell from 11 to 8. The totals in two categories showed dramatic increases: the number of accidental deaths reported showed the largest increase, from 6 in 1810 to 48 in 1840, while crime-related stories (murder and executions) went from 4 to 27. Some of the increase is of course the result of papers tending to run more and larger pages. But the increases are large enough that it seems clear that editors have new ways of making news value decisions.

Penny papers often had their own personalities, a reflection of the beliefs and personalities of their founding editors, that gave some stories a distinctive twist. The following section will focus on how coverage of death in three significant New York penny newspapers as well as the *Charleston Courier* related to the trends in religion and society related above, and in the process discuss how these trends related to particular types of stories.[18]

James Gordon Bennett and the *Herald*

Bennett and the *Herald*, which he founded in 1835 when already an experienced newsman, had a major impact on American journalism. He was largely responsible for or one of the first practitioners of dozens of innovative techniques: the obsession for getting the news first; the use of telegraphic news; analytical business news; women's news; sports news; and Washington correspondents, among others. He was also highly controversial, shocking his rather staid competitors with frank language and critical comments about Wall Street, politics and religion.[19]

Bennett, a Scottsman, had left the Catholic Church after a personal crisis.[20] His own faith he described in one memorable—even breathless, given his

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[18] I focus on New York newspapers because, in general, they were highly influential and are generally credited with starting the trends that shaped American journalism from then until now. However, this is a difficult question. Shaw shows that in newspapers outside New York, the content and style of locally produced news remained fairly constant after the arrival of the penny press, suggesting that they were not strongly influenced; on the other hand, stories from New York accounted for between one-third and one-quarter of reprints; Donald L. Shaw, "At the Crossroads: Change and Continuity in American Press News, 1820-1860" *Journalism History* 8 (Summer, 1981), 38-50.

[19] Buchholz, "The Penny Press," 127-8.

[20] Crothouthamel recounts how Bennett, influenced by Enlightenment rationalism during his years at Blair's College of Aberdeen, decided not to enter the priesthood and left the Catholic Church. Later, he became bitter toward the Church after his younger brother died while "undergoing the

constant use of dashes—passage that seems to embody or hint at many of the religious and philosophical trends discussed above:

> Religion—true religion—consists not in eating and drinking—not in high salaries—not in hanging around the apron strings of rich old women—not in presuming to judge the opinions others beyond what their acts will justify. Neither does true religion—nor real Christianity consist in believing the dogmas of any church—or [dogmatic statements] of any man. The Bible is before me. Have I not a right to read that book—to draw out from it religious opinions—and to create a belief and a church of my own? . . . I went to the source of true religion, and drank of the pure stream, uncontaminated by priest or prelate, parson or minister; and as long as we have these sacred volumes in full circulation here below, defiance may alike be set to the bigots of Catholicity or of Protestantism. We care for neither. We are independent of all. Like Luther—like Paul, we go on our own hook.[21]

His acceptance of the authority of Scripture, his individualistic emphasis on personal responsibility and morality, and his reliance on experience to find Truth, all characteristics of antebellum Christianity, stand out. Given his disdain for dogma, it also seems likely that Bennett intends to imply here his rejection of traditional Christian teachings on sin and salvation through faith in Christ. Despite this simmering antagonism toward institutionalized religion, "religion continued to fascinate him," observed Judith Buddenbaum, and one of his innovations was regular coverage of religion.[22]

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rigors of training for the priesthood." James L. Crouthamel, *Bennett's* New York Herald *and the Rise of the Popular Press* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1989), 5.

[21] Quoted in Buchholz, 127. The

[22] Judith M. Buddenbaum, "Judge . . . What Their Acts Will Justify": The Religious Journalism of James Gordon Bennett" *Journalism History* 14 (Summer 1987): 54-68.

Helen McGill Hughes argued that in their drive for readership the penny papers transformed the death notice into the human interest story.[23] The difference is that "the *facts* for a writer of a human interest story lie in the inner experience. His work demands the understanding and the imagination to discover another's state of mind, and then, having penetrated it sympathetically, to tell what it is like."[24] The more completely a story covers the private passions and ambitions of its characters, the more it "exposes a man's soul to the public," the more readers can relate to it. This impulse, it seems, has its roots in Romanticism.

The *Herald*'s coverage of death often illustrated the difference between a mere death notice and a genuine human interest story. As improving printing and papermaking technology allowed newspapers to become larger and add more pages, editors used the space to lengthen their stories and add more details. The details they chose helped the reader visualize the deaths and their aftermath more clearly and helped them identify emotionally with the characters in the accounts.

For example, the *Herald* reported that the city was "shocked" by the suicide of Nathaniel Prime, a well-known, respected, and retired Wall Street banker who had "everything that could make life desirable—unblemished character, large property, and surrounded by numerous and affectionate family."[25]

Then why did he kill himself?

> The want of accustomed work may possibly have caused the mind to prey upon itself. Certain it is, that at intervals lately, great depression came over

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[23] Helen McGill Hughes, *News and the Human Interest Story* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1981, reprint from 1940): 46.
[24] Hughes, 101.
[25] 28 November 1840.

> the spirits of the deceased, for which he was not able to account, and against which, alas, has been unable successfully to struggle.
>
> Yesterday he was in the city, well apparently, and cheerful; returned to his house about 1 o'clock, and taking a book, said he would lie down awhile before dinner.
>
> He was within a quarter of an hour found by Mrs. P. on the floor of his dressing room—in a pool of blood, and dead—the fatal razor near him in its case.

It was a morality tale, in the end. Bennett concluded the account:

> From the history of his life, and its melancholy termination, a great moral may be learned—never to abandon the mental or other pursuits that may have contributed to your rise in life—stick to the oar till you go down, and you will go down in good temper, and like a man.

Such an interpretation was consistent with his religion, and a passage headlined "THE NEWS OF THE WEEK" helps explain why he felt so free to moralize on the stories that flowed daily across his desk: Such news "is not of very much importance. Yet the most insignificant events can be swelled to matters of great moment, if they are traced up eternity to their causes, or down eternity to their consequences."[26]

Sensationalism, muted in the party and religious newspapers for 50 years, regained its voice in the penny press, led by the *Herald*. A two-column story on "The Horrid Murder of a Mother and Her Two Twin Daughters" told how the victims were found with their throats cut and the husband hiding in the woods, his clothes dripping with blood. "The knife," testified the doctor who performed the

[26] 12 March 1837.

autopsy, "must have been driven in [to the victims' throats] and worked around until nearly all the veins and muscles of the neck were severed."[27]

Sensationalism in the press was not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it was part of society's fascination with death in this period. Gory crime literature, featuring graphic descriptions of corpses, was resurgent. In the 1840s photographers would pose corpses with members of their family, a cross or a Bible. People would gather at the opening of a tomb, the result of a

> morbid desire, especially in women, which is rather difficult of analysis, to descend into the damp and dreary tomb—to lift the lid—and look upon the changing, softening, corrupting features of a parent or child—to gaze upon the mouldering bones.[28]

Historians have often remarked on the *Herald's* coverage of the murder on April 10, 1836 of Helen (or Ellen) Jewett, a New York prostitute. The girl's skull was smashed three times with an axe and then her bed set on fire. In an unusual move for an editor in those days, Bennett himself visited the crime scene. He passed through the crowds standing outside, past the cop guarding the doorway (the officer instantly recognized his right to be there, telling someone in the crowd that Bennett was "an editor—he is on the public duty," or so Bennett claimed) and up to the bedroom where the body still lay. He wrote an impressionistic account of his visit, the premises, and the corpse:

> Not a vein was to be seen. The body looked as white—as full—as polished as the purest Parian marble. The perfect figure—the exquisite limbs—the

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[27] 14 April 1849.

[28] Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 76-78.

> fine face—the full arms—the beautiful bust—all—all surpassed in every respect the Venus de Medicis . . ..[29]

The description was remarkable, and suspect, given that the somewhat burned body had been autopsied in the room several hours earlier. Bennett followed up his exploits on the crime scene by arranging a formal interview with the madam of the girl's brothel. The victim's boyfriend, an 18-year-old clerk named Richard Robinson, was acquitted of the murder despite some compelling circumstantial evidence in a trial that attracted the nation's attention.

Bennett was not the first to use death and sensation to sell newspapers, of course, nor was his coverage more gruesome than that in colonial newspapers, but it differed in a few significant ways. Using the techniques of the human interest story, Bennett and his contemporaries constructed narratives that were more compelling and readable than the sensational newspaper accounts of previous eras.

This shift was facilitated by religious trends. Journalists had moved yet further away from understanding the world in terms of the "corruption story," the Calvinistic emphasis that evil was the result of fallen, frail sinful human hearts. Murder was not simply the result of a heart hardened by a failure to attend church, card playing, alcohol, or disobedience to parents. Murder was still a moral atrocity, and the Jewett story was still a morality tale, but this shift led to journalistic attempts to explain moral failures in ways that discounted depravity. How could an ostensibly respectable young man like Robinson (or, if not him, somebody else) commit so horrible a crime? How could so lovely a young lady

[29] 11 April 1836.

end up employed in a house of ill-repute? Journalists of the day commonly resorted to "fate" or "Providence" to explain these sorts of mysteries,[30] but Bennett and many of his contemporaries delved into the backgrounds of Robinson and Jewett, publishing lengthy profiles in the week following the murder explaining how and why they found themselves accused of murder and in the morgue. Colonial papers had acknowledged that factors other than depravity, usually just "lunacy," could play a role in horrific crimes; penny papers provided narratives (when they were able and when the story seemed interesting enough) that purported to explain how those factors played out in the lives of the murderer and victim.

Scholars have analyzed these narratives in the coverage of the Jewett murder in terms of sex, gender, power and class.[31] At least one modern historian has tried to make the case that the penny press often played fast and loose with the facts of a case in service of a larger "truth." He quotes one Arkansas editor observing dryly that

> the lackadaisical sighs and tears of the contemptible penny papers in New York for the fate of Ellen Jewett . . . were ridiculous and harmless—but that those romantic fabrications about her youth, innocence, beauty and

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[30] As noted in Chapter 5, since soon after the American Revolution journalists had been invoking destiny to explain crimes and their resolutions: "Murder Will Out," said a headline in the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* (19 December 1840). A Philadelphia murderer had buried his victim under his cellar floor, thinking his secret safe "until the last trump," but the corpse was discovered through "one of those mysterious ordinances of Providence which human sagacity can never penetrate, and human guilt never escape, leads to detection! Truly, murder is a secret which man cannot trust himself with."

[31] See, for example, Andie Tucher, *Froth & Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness and the Axe Murderer in America's First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994; Patricia Cline Cohen, "The Mystery of Helen Jewett: Romantic Fiction and the Eroticization of Violence" *Legal Studies Forum* 17 No. 2 (1993): 133-45.

> seduction &c. should have been copied into so many newspapers pretending to character, is marvelous . . ..[32]

Tucher agues at length that accounts in the Herald were obviously made up, but people expected penny newspapers to publish exaggerations and some flim-flam. "Large universal truths concerning death and sex and evil illuminated the penny press reporting of Helen Jewett's life," he wrote. "Subterranean, parochial truths involving class, privilege, ambition, resentment informed the debate over Robinson's guilt."[33] Tucher's interpretation of the narratives may be suspect, but it seems clear that Bennett and his contemporaries did use narrative to explain the meaning of these things to their readers.

Bennett led the way in another area. Journalists had long used stories of death to make theological points (in the colonial press) and political points (in the Revolutionary press). The party-era press paid little attention to death, using mainly essays to make their political arguments. Bennett (along with his contemporaries) rejoined death to politics, and he did it by tying to his agenda local deaths that his newspaper covered.

A lengthy story of an industrial fire that took two lives ended with a warning to city hall: "This singular explosion of a locofoco factory ought to be a serious warning to the great locofoco factory at Tammany Hall, for, according to all appearances, that factory will be in danger sometime next November."[34] Similarly, he once printed a chart comparing deaths in London and New York for the previous year. Noting that there were 17 murders, 28 smotherings and "197

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[32] Tucher, *Froth & Scum*, 94.
[33] Tucher, 61.
[34] 16 April 1840.

destroyed, nobody knows how" (the chart reads 'unknown deaths, probably murdered') in New York compared to 1, 0 and 12 in London, a city five times larger, Bennett commented that the table alone "would be sufficient to authorize the whole community in calling for a change in the city government."[35]

Sometimes Bennett even tied death to his own personal agenda. In May of 1840 several "respectable" newspapers of New York and region, led by the *New York Courier and Inquirer*, advocated a public and advertiser boycott of the *Herald*. It was too sensational, they charged, declaring that no one but the impious and immoral read it. No doubt these papers also felt threatened by the *Herald's* massive gains in circulation and popularity. The *Herald* fought back, but it lost circulation for a time and Bennett toned down his columns for a while.[36] The episode is known as the "Great Moral War."

In December, Bennett noticed five reports of suicides in a few days in New York and neighboring states, and he spotted an opportunity for revenge. The deceased were all wealthy businessmen, older, comfortable, and with no obvious motivation. "Is this not a singular list?" inquired Bennett. "What can be the cause of such catastrophes coming in clusters?" His answer: Wall Street newspapers.[37]

He began by lamenting the poor state of religion in the country. Christian nations have always treated suicide "as it deserved—a mark of disgrace—a crime." Those who committed it were buried at crossroads with a stake through their hearts "to mark the spot that contained the polluted remains."

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[35] 25 February 1840.
[36] Buchholz, "The Penny Press," 128.
[37] 2 December 1840.

> All this is now changed. Self-murder is called suicide—and the individual who commits it is pitied under the idea of "alienation of mind." It is very evident, however, that in whatever community self-murder prevails, Christianity has a very limited influence. . . . . The ancient Romans and modern French put an end to their existence on any frivolous occasion, with the dogmas of philosophy, or the sentiments of virtue on their lips.

He circled a little closer, suggesting that the decline of Christianity has "enabled false teachers to paralyze weak minds till they run to the razor or the rope for assistance—purely to get rid of their own horrible impressions."

Then he moved in for the kill:

> Take the case of Mr. Prime himself [the same Mr. Prime whose suicide the *Herald* had lamented four days earlier]. He was in the habit of reading the New York American and papers of that class that for years have been representing all the affairs of the country as going to wreck. Mr. P. only knew the movements of the world as they came to him through these journals, which were dark and gloomy as the grave itself, unenlivened by a single spark of good humor or benevolence . . . it is no wonder that Mr. P. felt equally gloomy.

He had no doubt that the other deceased read such papers as well. But "whoever heard," continued Bennett, "of any reader of the lively Herald cutting his throat? The thing is impossible."

> We do verily believe that the Wall Street prints, and papers of that violent calibre, have driven more weak persons to suicide than any other cause whatsoever—Don't you? . . . [the Wall Street press] in fact, is the pale horse going forth conquering and to conquer, with all hell organized and in action at its heels.

Obviously the accusation that the commercial papers drove these men to suicide was tongue-in-cheek, but like all satirists but he was serious about his main point: that his attackers were hypocrites. He did not see the *Herald* as immoral, and certainly not compared to the Wall Street journals which

contributed mightily to the decline of "true Christianity," as he saw it. He was also, generally speaking, right about how earlier Christian societies had treated suicide compared to the newspapers of his day. The Puritans and the earliest American journalists had treated suicide as a moral failure, not a mental illness. Given the religious atmosphere of the period, Bennett's strategy of tying his attack on the Wall Street papers with Christianity was extremely clever.

In basing this attack on suicide, Bennett was using a story with which his readers were, by 1840, very familiar. Newspapers in this era began to report suicides more regularly than before and the trend continued right through the nineteenth century into the early part of the twentieth. A total of two were in the 1745, 1775 and 1810 samples, but there were 7 in the 1840 sample; the 1870 sample had 37, and coverage peaked in 1895 at 81. After that, totals steadily declined, with 52 in 1925 and the 2000 total back down to 7, despite more papers in the sample and a much larger newshole.

Noon writes that in the Middle Ages, suicide was universally condemned as an offense against Christianity. In the eighteenth century "Age of Reason," "anti-suicide prejudices are met with scorn [because] it is only reasonable that a man may do as he likes with his life, as long as he does it with propriety and decorum." In the "Age of Romantic Agony, the imagination and subjectivity are elevated, and great bursts of intense feeling become fashionable justification for suicide." Drama, doom, and an element of heroism is added to suicide. Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, in raising suicide to a new level of desirability,

"creates a suicide epidemic of international scope, and self-destruction attains heroic dimensions."[38]

But by the time of the penny press, this "heroic" take on suicide was fading. Society regarded the act as a moral mistake and a failure of one's responsibility to his family. This background helps explain suicide coverage in the penny press era that Bennett was complaining about. Journalists were not ready to whole-heartedly condemn something society had so recently regarded as heroic, but neither would they condone it. Most took a middle road; they showed some pity for the self-murderer and focused on finding an explanation that carried a moral message.

The *Baltimore Sun* reported how a New Jersey man about 60 years old ruined himself speculating, on a local level, in grain. His wife found him soon after with his throat cut. "The spirit of speculation, stimulated to madness by a pernicious credit, severed his hold on life, and he now fills a hurried and untimely grave."[39] The September 4, 1850, *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans) neatly summarized the common understanding of how suicide typically occurred. A "dissolute" man and his married mistress, a 24-year-old woman who had just buried a child, were found drowned in an apparent double-suicide. Some IOUs and notes were found in their pockets. Although the whole story is tragic, clearly the writer believes that the process begins with a moral failure: "The letters may throw further light upon their conduct, and their motives for self-destruction,

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[38] Georgia Noon, "On Suicide" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39 No. 3 (July-September 1978): 381.
[39] Reprinted in the *Charleston Courier*, 13 May 1840.

though we fear it will prove a short story—guilt, shame, fear, remorse, destitution, despair, suicide!"

Horace Greeley and the *New York Tribune*

If Bennett's *Herald* showed the effects of Enlightenment rationalism, reflecting a sort of rationalistic deism Thomas Jefferson would have appreciated, Greeley's *Tribune* was home to the latest transcendental trends. As a Unitarian, he believed that man was naturally good and evil was the product of corrupt institutions; Utopia, therefore, was in reach through the right education, social programs and organization. Greeley became the father of the modern journalistic crusade as he poured revenue generated by his newspapers into one new idea after another. His enthusiasms included a brand of socialism called Fournierism, leading him to bankroll dozens of communes, and at various times he supported Agrarianism, anti-rentism, "free love," temperance, abolition, and other causes.[40]

He also, like Bennett, claimed that his beliefs reflected "true Christianity." Greeley claimed that he took his religious philosophy from the Bible, believed in the Golden Rule, and acknowledged the supremacy of God and Christ but was no trinitarian.[41] Indeed, he believed the logical application of Jesus' teachings led to socialism, an opinion he made clear in a published debate on political economy between himself and Henry J. Raymond, who would go on to found the *New York*

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[40] Olasky, *Prodigal Press*, 46.

[41] For more details of Greeley's beliefs and a presentation of Greeley as "perhaps one of the greatest romantic journalistic personalities in America," see Doug Underwood, *From Yahweh to Yahoo!: The Religious Roots of the Secular Press* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 62-63.

Times. Olasky frames the debate as a confrontation between Raymond's biblical Christianity and Greeley's Transcendentalist socialism. Greeley argued that

> the duty of every Christian, every Philanthropist, every one who admits the essential Brotherhood of the Human Family, to labor earnestly and devotedly for a Social Order, which shall *secure* to every human being within its sphere the full and true development of the nature wherewith God has endowed, Physical, Intellectual, and Moral.[42]

Greeley was also a talented journalist who tried to be true to his enthusiasms, even if they changed in emphasis from time to time. Disdainful of sensationalism, he "attempted to keep his newspaper on a high moral ground while exposing his readers to the latest in liberal philosophy."[43]

The gory details of death, then, were not high on Greeley's list of news values. In 1843 (the earliest year available for this study) his death-related stories were garden-variety accidents, obituaries, and crimes. Rarely was the *Tribune* sensational or gory, and the occasional truly gruesome murder was recounted in subdued fashion. "On throwing open the door," began a report from Newark in the May 5, 1843 edition, "the body of Mrs. Costner was found, with her murdered infant in her arms, lying in bed, killed apparently by stab wounds in the neck."

The *Tribune* covered about as many deaths as the *Herald* and more than many other papers, but the writing was sober, calm and respectable, and this approach flowed out of the worldview of its founder. Like other papers, many *Tribune* stories had a social moral, either implicit or explicit. Greeley was interested in crime primarily as illustrating issues that require reform. The story of

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[42] *New York Tribune*, 26 March 1847. For a complete discussion of the debate itself, see Olasky, "The Great Debates of Journalism," *Central Ideas*, ch. 6.
[43] Buchholz, "The Penny Press," 133.

a newborn found strangled with its umbilical cord in a sink, "CHILD FOUND IN SINK," pointed to domestic abuse.[44] The December 19, 1843 edition recounted how an Ohio man, normally a "temperate and amiable man, who lived happily with his family," killed his wife "by striking her several blows on the head with an ax." He was "insane at times, but considered harmless. His subsequent conduct left no doubt but this was an act of insanity. When will people learn to take care of mad persons?" lamented the writer.

In this respect, Greeley was the father of modern crime coverage in mainstream newspapers (as opposed to modern tabloid coverage). He covered it often but not in depth and typically with a social purpose. From 1840 through 2000, the total number of murder stories in this study's samples is second only to obituaries.

As a temperance crusader, Greeley frequently ran stories that noted the influence of alcohol. A report of a suicide in Madison, Wis., described how the deceased had been "exceedingly intemperate," joined the Temperance Society but apparently had "relapsed into his habits of beastly intoxication." He shot himself in the mouth with a borrowed rifle: "Despair of every being able to break loose from the demon that had bound him is supposed to have been the cause of the deed."[45] Another brief story headlined "A Warning" told how a stagecoach driver in Albany remarked that 15 years ago he had five drunken tavern-keepers along his route. Since then four had died and one was in the almshouse.[46] A list of three

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[44] Huntzicker, *The Popular Press*, 41.
[45] 7 February 1843.
[46] 1 March 1843.

coroner's reports included one verdict of "death by intemperance" regarding a British officer who had died suddenly while in a pub, and another accidental death in which a hard drinker cut his throat while shaving.[47]

Another notable feature of death coverage in the *Tribune* is its scarcity of references to religion or God. The *Tribune* referred sometimes to the Almighty or Providence, but Greeley was more interested in how the living could build heaven on earth than in how the deceased left this earth. Believing that the answers to humanity's problems were to found in organized social action, Greeley did not regard fatal events as significant for what they told readers about the nature of death, God and humanity. Greeley certainly did not take a teleological approach, and this sample contained no references to an afterlife. To Greeley, fatal-events were another indicator of social problems that called for the application of the latest in liberal philosophy.

To a modern reader, this lack of attention to religion may seem normal and natural, but the *Tribune* of 1843 stands out in this regard, especially compared to the early years of the *New York Times*.

Henry J. Raymond and the *New York Times*

Raymond, like Bennett and Greeley, was an noted newsman with experience on both Wall Street and penny papers by the time he founded the *New York Daily Times* in 1851. At the time newspaper readers faced, according to sympathetic Raymond biographer Augustus Maverick, a dismal choice:

[47] 24 November 1843.

> Either the sixpenny journals of Wall Street, with meagre supplies of news,—or the cheaper *Tribune* and *Herald*, with all the intelligence of the day overlaid and almost extinguished by the Socialistic heresies of the one and abominable nastiness of the other.[48]

Raymond, a Presbyterian and a bible-believing Christian, proposed to fill that hole with solid news. Although this study did not come across an explicit statement of Raymond's faith such as Bennett published, the *Times* stands out from the *Tribune* and the *Herald* for the number and clarity of its references to Christianity. This happened in a variety of contexts.

Occasionally the *Times* resembled the explicitly Christian newspapers with regular attention to missionaries and similar topics. One of the front-page stories in one of his first issues was of the death of a promising young Baptist missionary heading to Burma.[49] Raymond ran a regular section headlined "Moral and Religious" broken up into sections on "Church Intelligence" (which church is hiring whom), "Missionary and Revival Items" and "General and Personal Matters" covering international church news, Christian publishing, theological controversies, and denominational matters.

In its first week of publication, on September 20 the *Times* ran a lengthy account of the execution of Aaron Stooky that had almost all the elements of a Puritan execution sermon. Early in the morning, a minister went to Stooky's cell and "there found him knelt by the side of his couch, praying fervently to God." He prayed all afternoon and "made every atonement for his acts to his Maker." He almost fainted when the noose was fastened around his neck, but he pulled

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[48] *Henry J. Raymond and the New York Press*, 1870, quoted in Huntzicker, *The Popular Press*, 42.
[49] 18 September 1851.

himself together to deliver a last warning to the crowd, which the *Times* printed verbatim. Stooky placed himself at God's mercy ("Lord Jesus, have mercy on my soul") and declared, "You must all beware of Rum, for Rum has been the cause of placing me here to meet this awful fate."

"I sincerely hope you will be happy in the other world," said the sheriff. A few minutes later he swung the ax that cut the rope; 280 pounds of weights fell and "the murderer was ascended into the air in the twinkling of an eye," an allusion to I Corinthians 15:50-52 where the Apostle Paul describes the "Rapture" at which time all believers will receive their resurrection bodies.[50]

Execution stories in the first years of the *Times* were as reliably Christian as in colonial days, whether or not the condemned was as repentant as Stooky. Jacob Armbruster, hanged at Doylestown, Pa., on the scaffold denied his guilt and claimed that the trial had been rigged. The *Times* ran, in addition to a brief item describing his demise ("His dying words were, 'I want no judge but God.' The drop fell, and he died without a struggle."), an editorial using language with distinctly theological connotations: "Today," it began, "this hardened and incorrigible man expiates, according to law, the crime of a most horrid murder."[51]

During the closing arguments of a murder trial that attracted considerable attention, the *Times* reprinted the proceedings almost verbatim. The prosecutor in his comments admonished those in the gallery that:

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[50] "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed" (*New International Version Grand Rapids*: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1983).

[51] *New York Daily Times*, 16 February 1856.

> it is no place for the exhibition either of admiration, applause or disapproval, but that they should remember they are in the very temple of the living God, and that when He ministers here the whole earth should be silent. There is nothing more like Him than the administration of justice.[52]

A lengthy article on the coroner's inquest after a New York school collapsed, killing 43 and injuring twice as many, emphasized the religious angle. Besides accounts of testimony at the inquest, it included a detailed report from a funeral that summarized the opening prayer and then reprinted large sections of the sermon:

> An affecting prayer was offered up to the Almighty and Supreme Being by Rev. Mr. Seely, in which he alluded feelingly to the sudden manner in which the dear little ones had been called away from this life . . . Then Rev. Mr. Taggart arose [and said], "Life is but a vapor and soon passeth away . . . We are all too apt to rely on our precautions against death—on a certain regimen, perhaps—on the use of particular rainment, &c., but it is God our Father who holds the key of our lives; and not a sparrow falls to the ground without his knowledge. God gave me but one dear child, and that has since been taken from me. It was his pleasure to call it away; and he has a right to call all away. Do not forget that God has a right to the lives of your little ones—that in giving them to you, he never resigned His right to them. Then let us kiss the rod which chastens us; and may He in his mercy enable us to feel and say, not only 'the Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away,' but 'blessed be the name of the Lord.'" All, who were within the walls of the house of God, were moved and touched . . ..[53]

Such references to God in verbatim accounts of official or public events do not necessarily prove much about the attitudes or beliefs of the reporter (although in the story above the reporter is very clearly sympathetic to the reverend's point of view). However, by reprinting sermons, speeches and so on the *Times* strongly reflected the religious beliefs of the people and the society it

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[52] 13 December 1855.
[53] 24 November 1851.

covered. When death and serious issues were at stake, people generally viewed these issues through a Christian lens; some papers reflected that approach strongly, as in the early years of the *Times*, while others, like the *Tribune*, did not.

Regarding the authority of Scripture in society, for example, an editorial on the death penalty in the September 21, 1851 issue said of executions, "what a crushing tribute does it pay to the barbarity of the old system." Yet the logic of the death penalty opponents struck Raymond as "appealing to the sentiments rather than the understanding." The main reason for his ambivalence: Scripture was "confused" on the issue. He would gladly remove the "vindicatory portion of the [biblical] law" but society would then fall apart because "the world requires centuries of schooling under the evangelical system, to permit the abrogation of this and many other grievous restraints."

Spiritism and mesmerism gained popularity in the nineteenth century, reaching a high point in 1870.

> There were always the bereaved and the remorseful who desperately needed and wanted to make contact with the departed—a fact that stimulated interest spiritualism after each of the country's major wars. . . . Still others, having drifted away from the churches, now sought and found confirmation of their religious yearnings in an objective and "scientific" way.[54]

While it seems odd to the modern reader to associate spiritualism and science, to nineteenth century Americans it made perfect sense. If the world of Nature could be known through the senses, and science was a means to rational,

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[54] Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 489.

objective truth, then the experience of a séance, for example, was a valid, "scientific" confirmation that a loved one was still alive, in some way.

Spiritualism received generally critical coverage in the *Times*. One story detailed how Matthew Langdon, distraught at the death of his daughter, immersed himself in spiritist publications and met twice weekly with mediums (fees were $1 per meeting, which he often couldn't pay). After ten months of this he slit his own throat. His wife testified at the inquest that the mediums "told him that if he became a *seeing medium*, he could see his child," so they gave him instructions on how to meditate. "That these venal jugglers designed to lead him to self-destruction we do not suppose; but if that had been their object they could not have adopted any surer mode of bringing it about," observed the *Times*. It ran the inquest's complete verdict:

> That Matthew Langdon came to his death by exhaustion consequent upon mental excitement and from a wound inflicted by himself upon his throat We also find that this state of mind was superinduced by his connection with persons calling themselves Spiritual Media. We also recommend the Grand Jury to take measures for the suppression of circle meetings and the houses named in the testimony.[55]

The growing acceptance of science had a major impact on many newspapers, and in this period it showed up clearly in their reaction to large-scale fatal accidents. On January 10, 1860, the five-story Pemberton Mill in Lawrence, Massachusetts, collapsed, killing dozens in an avalanche of bricks and beams and trapping hundreds more. Hundreds of rescuers worked to extract

> the unfortunate persons, many of whom are still crying and begging to be released from their tortures . . . Every few minutes some poor wretch is

[55] 10 January 1853.

> dragged from his or her prison, and it is heartrending to hear their cries as they are drawn out with legs or arms crushed or torn. One man, shockingly mangled and partly under the bricks, deliberately cut his own throat to end his agony.

Then, after midnight, "Calamity succeeds calamity! In ten minutes the whole mass of ruins has become a sheet of flames. The screams and moanings of poor buried creatures can be distinctly heard, but no power can save them."

A January 12, 1860 editorial observed that "some were literally roasted alive." However, "Such tragedy should excite in the public mind something more than a passing emotion of horror and indignation [because the collapse] was not an accident against which ordinary human care and precaution offer no security." Raymond blasted the mill owners who, he charged, knew the mill was badly built. It was "a reckless sacrifice of life upon the altar of a mean and criminal cupidity." He called for laws "to ensure proper construction of public buildings in our cities and towns." Such building codes were not necessary for private dwellings, he said, but buildings wherever crowds gather "should be subjected to rigid and scientific inspection before they are allowed to be used."

Raymond was no Greeley, believing that the correct system could fix all problems, but neither did he presume that the disaster was a sign of God's judgment. Like Cotton Mather, who saw small-pox inoculation as a God-given means of reducing human suffering, Raymond believed that science, Christianity and some sort of social action (in this case, limited government regulation) could go hand-in-hand to prevent or reduce human suffering.

After 1840 coverage of accidents was the third most common death-related story type following obituaries and murder. The increasing coverage of

accidents, particularly those involving technological failure, reflects both greater dangers from advancing technology, like steam engines that explode, and journalists' growing faith in science. This seems like a paradox, in that paying more attention to failures would seem to indicate less faith in technology, not more. However, the coverage reflected journalists' sense that technological failure was a disorder that could and should be overcome. Appropriately, in the 1840 sample 9 percent of the disorder details coded were for technological failures, the highest in the study. One other year (1870) had 7 percent and the rest were 5 percent or lower.

The sample years 1840 through 1925 each had specific types of accidents characteristic of the period. In 1925, for example, it was automobile accidents; in 1840, it was steamboats. "ANOTHER STEAMBOAT ACCIDENT," declared a headline in the *Daily Chicago American*.[56] After a different incident the editor of the New Orleans *Delta* got the following off his chest:

> Another of those steamboat explosions—whether by carelessness or accident, is not known, and, like the thousand and one of a similar kind that have preceded it, never will be—occurred at our levee yesterday, hurling some eight or ten human beings into eternity.

The boiler had burst, "shivering the cabin to atoms." Captain Brown, who was at the wheel, "was blown some fifty feet into the air, with a portion of the boiler deck on which he stood, falling again into the hold of the vessel. He was slightly scalded, and received a few bruises, none serious."

Steamboat accidents were common enough that Mark Twain had Huckleberry Finn, needing to concoct a plausible story for Aunt Sally, say that he

[56] 19 November 1840.

was two days late coming down the river because his steamboat had "'blowed out a cylinder head.' 'Goodness gracious! anybody hurt?' 'No'm. Killed a nigger.' 'Well, it's lucky, because sometimes people do get hurt.'"[57]

Twain was satirizing an attitude common in antebellum society that was, unsurprisingly, common also in newspapers. The death of blacks, who were in the South slaves and therefore not persons, received scant attention. As in colonial newspapers, in southern papers the accidental death of a slave was newsworthy as a loss of property, not as a loss of a person. Stories of rebellions and slave revolts in other countries that were so common in colonial newspapers, however, had largely faded away by mid-1800s.

Coverage of large-scale disasters also showed how the *Times* and other papers emphasized experience. Reporters today might interview several survivors of, for example, the sinking of an ocean liner, and typically include only a few lines from several individuals, giving no more than a paragraph or two to any one person. Reporters in the mid-1800s would often interview dozens of survivors, collecting lengthy statement after statement recounting the experience in excruciating detail. The *Times* filled with such narrative 14 full columns on the sinking of the steam liner *San Francisco* and the suffering of the survivors as they crammed aboard the bark *Kilby* until rescued by the *Lucy Thompson*—and this was the supplementary coverage.[58] The main front page story giving the basics of

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[57] Samuel Clemens, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1963), 260.
[58] "Wreck of the San Francisco," *New York Times*, 16 January 1854.

the disaster (four columns) had run two days earlier. In all the *Times* ran 11 stories on the disaster over the next month.

In a report on the foundering of the *Central America* (626 lives lost, 60 saved, most plucked from the sea) one *Times* reporter explained why he went to such lengths to provide "Thrilling Narratives by the Survivors":

> Of men placed in extraordinary positions of peril we instinctively desire to know the sensations, thoughts, all the mental, all the physical phenomena. We try to imagine how a man feels who is to be hanged in the morning, how the man felt who went over the America Falls at Niagra, a year or two ago, who was clinging all day to a root of a tree, with his awful fate starting him in the face. So it is part of our nature to be curious respecting the feelings of men situated as these men were, tossing for hours on a stormy sea, certain to perish before long . . ..[59]

Times reporters questioned nearly all the survivors, he said.

> We found no one who would confess, per se [to be afraid of death]. One thought of his family, his friends, and struggled for life for their sakes. Another wished to live that he might enjoy the treasure which he had stowed away on his person. A third, who had lost everything, wanted to begin life anew, and make his fortune over again. A species of fatalism consoled some. If their time was come, it was come, they saw their comrades in misfortune fail in their last struggle and sink, with scarcely a pang. One man told us he went to sleep in the water.

But the *Times* did not stop with merely reporting experiences. Its columns included much testimony about the conduct of the officers (one of the engineers was accused of deserting his post) and who might be responsible for the swamping of the furnaces and the subsequent foundering. A September 21 editorial concluded:

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[59] 21 September 1857.

> Is it now clearly the duty of the public, and the Press, as its representative, to be satisfied with nothing short of an absolute demonstration that all this misery, and ruin, and excitement, could not have been averted, or at least alleviated, by human skill and human foresight? . . . [The survivors who] are speaking to us now with such fresh and thrilling eloquence of God's wonders on the deep, have also a testimony to be rendered in regard to the possible causes of the disaster.

Romanticism and the *Charleston Courier*

The notable feature of death coverage in the *Courier* in 1840 was its editor's taste for Romantic tales of the sort found in popular literature. Some items seemed considerably closer to fiction than news, particularly tales involving Indians. One lengthy story titled "Indian Revenge: a Tale of Kentucky, Founded on Fact,"[60] related how one tribe captured the intrepid Captain Dayton and tied him to a stake to be burned. He waited with "cool determination," but then they led out his "beautiful daughter, Elizabeth!" She fell on her father with a shriek. "I submit willingly to my cruel fate," she said, "but to see you, to see my beloved father thus—it is too much."

Just then, the girl's lover dashed through the Indian camp on horseback, scooped her up and forced his way out of the village. The Indians were astonished, but they soon recovered and lit up Captain Dayton and three previously unmentioned "innocent females" who "uttered no shrieks, but with a calm and dignified submission, resigned themselves to their fate."

"But what a sight was this for Dayton? How could a Christian calmly and patiently see female friends thus treated while he had no assistance to offer? His reason fled, he foamed and sprang from side to side . . .." Then they tortured

[60] 27 August 1840.

Captain Dayton to death with knives and red-hot gunbarrels. He, despite his foaming, shaking lunacy, "with unshaken resolution, bore all this without one groan, or the least external indication of pain."

Indians, when they were not portrayed as cruel savages, were sometimes portrayed as noble savages, a theme that accorded with the Romantic attraction to wild, untamed Nature. One story told how a warrior, after killing the son of a chief in a drunken brawl, turned himself in when he heard the chief was preparing to take revenge on his wife's family. "The fire drink made me kill your son," he said. "Mickenbock is very sorry and deserves to die." He handed his knife to the brother of the victim and "pointing to the spot nearest his heart, gave the word, 'Strike.'" The chief then took Mickenbock's wife and children into his own wigwam so they would be taught "to be brave, like their father."[61]

Another long piece titled "LIFE AND DEATH: A Sketch" recounted the story of Eva, "young, beautiful and beloved, [her] happy heart vibrates with affection and hope. She had never tasted the bitter portion of mortal suffering." But one "starlit morning," while lying amidst the flowers, a "gentle but pensive thought" crossed her mind. "It was a thought of death [and it] came like a shadow flung from a darkening future. 'To die,' she murmured, 'to pass away from these pleasant and familiar things, to be laid in a clay cold tombs, where my mother's

[61] Accounts involving Indians were not always romanticized, of course, even in the *Courier*, and other reports were grim and matter-of-fact in tone. A report from Florida told how Indians brutally killed and scalped several settlers: "These are matters of important to the interest of Florida, and to the country generally" (*Charleston Courier*, 25 August 1840). The *Daily Picayune* of New Orleans told how the men of a wagon train bound for California, surrounded by a band of 300 warriors, handed over a man who for no good reason had shot the first "squaw" he encountered. The Indians tied him to a stake and "his skin was peeled from him, even to his toes. The operation lasted two hours, and the victims survived two hours after it." The whites were forced to make a ring around the stake and watch (7 August 1850).

kind voice shall be heard no more,'" etc. She wept. The rest of the column related in similar prose how, devastated by the mere thought of death, she slipped into an illness over the following winter. In the deathbed scene she said

> "Mother, I think that I am dying," the pale girl said. "Father I must leave you, but you will come to me, Father, though I shall never, never return to you. Once did I weep and pray that I might not thus early depart, but now I am content to die, for Heaven is a blessed place, and the less I have of earth, the earlier I shall be there. Farewell my kind brothers, you have long watched my dying pillow, with tenderest truest love. Where we shall meet again, 'There shall be no more death.'"

The substance and style of such tales are taken straight from the highly sentimentalized death literature of the period. The *Courier* did not mark these stories as "fiction" or otherwise distinguish them from the regular news columns. To the modern reader it seems a strange mix of news and story, but there is no reason to believe that the readers of the *Courier* noticed anything unusual. These tales reinforced and reflected societal values about death—that it was tragic yet blessed, the end of this life yet the beginning of the next. These tales also explicitly and implicitly revealed their Christian context and theology. In both stories, meaning in death is derived from the manner of death, for how they died says much about the character of the deceased. Captain Dayton is manly and virtuous because he died in great pain, while Eva's virtue is proved by the quality of her sentiments as death approached, and by her family's loss at her passing.

In the *Courier*, as in other newspapers, Romantic tendencies also appeared in conventional news stories, such as this obituary:

> Departed this life, on the 22d of November, 1840, at his plantation, St. Paul's Parish, of inflammation of the chest, BENJAMIN D. SINGLETARY, in the 24th year of his age, leaving a disconsolate

> widowed mother to mourn her loss. Thus, in the bloom of manhood, and in the vigor of his days, has he been summoned from amongst all he loved, to the cold and silent grave. Scarce had he reached the years of maturity, ere death's cold and icy embrace has encompassed him around and bore him away from all who loved him here on earth. But grieve not, fond parent, for thy son—he has left a world of wretchedness and trouble for the bright realms of glory above the skies—"where the wicked cease to trouble, and the weary are at rest."[62]

This Romantic streak, although especially prominent in the *Courier*, was present in other papers. "Yes, death is the universal, invariable friend, not the enemy of the children of men," the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* quoted from the funeral sermon preached at the death of ex-president Zachary Taylor.[63] And journalists had not lost their appreciation for the ironic. After James Greenleaf, Jr. died from injuries received falling through a trap door, the *Charleston Mercury* briefly recounted the man's eventful life and concluded:

> He had encountered death in almost every form, in the cruel and bloody pirate, in an open boat tossed upon the briny deep, in yellow fever, in cholera, in shipwreck—still his life was preserved; his hour had not yet come. But alas! in a moment of security, in an hour when no danger threatened behold the summons is at hand.[64]

Teleology, although weak, was still not quite dead among journalists, if this preacher was correct: "I cannot sympathize with those who regard this event as a calamity—a judgment of Heaven," continued the Rev. Theodore Clapp. He did not wonder clergy believed that, but he was surprised to find such an attitude among those "whose minds have not been narrowed or darkened by the study of

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[62] 29 December 1840.
[63] 4 August 1850.
[64] 8 September 1840.

theological dogmas"—specifically, senators, congressmen, and "learned conductors of the press."

"Oh, the grave! the grave!" intoned the January 4, 1840 *Boston Evening Transcript*. "It buries every terror, covers every defect, extinguishes every resentment." A poem on marriage in the *Daily Chicago American* concluded, "And when death breaks these earthly vows/And we have passed through Jordan's flood/Oh! may we then in endless bliss/Be re-united with our God!"

Another story described young Ellen, dying in bed, while her drunken father from the next room "poured forth a volley of oaths and horrid imprecations." The girl

> raised her little skeleton hand and beckoned her mother who stood weeping on the other side of the room to come to her. She, poor child, had only strength to say, '*why don't you ask Pa to be still while I'm dying?*' These were the last words of Ellen; but they were in vain. With the last sigh of her gentle spirit, there went up to heaven also the inhuman ravings of the drunken father! This story is no fiction; not a matter of imagination, but of real occurrence.[65]

The plea for credulity at the end strongly resembles obviously bogus Internet rumors of today that conclude, "THIS IS NOT A HOAX." The fact that the writer included it suggests he recognized his audience might be skeptical. As Mott showed, journalists did not regard their columns as strictly divided between "news," "opinion" and humor or satire. The journalists knew what they were doing, of course, but no news conventions demanded that these genres be kept separate or even marked as such. Nor were journalists necessarily averse to improving their news stories with an amusing detail or sharpened bit of

[65] *Daily Chicago American*, 6 March 1840.

dialogue.[66] The Romantic anecdote, presented next to the "real" news, may not have been strictly factual, but it was not an attempt to fool the reader like the *New York Sun*'s 1835 Moon Hoax or the *Herald's* Wild Animal Hoax of 1874.

It is hardly surprising that Romantic, sentimentalized prose seeped into the news columns of newspapers; it would have been more surprising, given the pervasiveness of popular death literature, if it had not.

CONCLUSION

The penny press did not "invent" news, contrary to what Schudson argued. The stories that characterized the penny papers—many of which involved death, such as murder, accidents, disease, suicide and so on—had been a part of newspapers since Campbell's *Boston News-Letter*. Instead, the penny papers hit upon a business strategy for finding and selling particular types of news stories that attracted large audiences, particularly (when it came to death) murders and accidents. Large audiences meant penny papers had financial independence through increased sales and advertising and this provided the freedom to pursue the stories that would attract still larger audiences. Although there was still a major religious presence in journalism through Christian newspapers, conditions

[66] Frank Luther Mott, "Facetious News Writing, 1833-1883" *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 29 No. 1 (June, 1942): 35-54. Tucher argues that New York readers were "flinging themselves wholeheartedly into competition with the editors and reveling in the heady thrill of choosing for themselves whether or not to believe" *Froth & Scum*, 55. Schudson quoted a journalism text from 1894, *Steps into Journalism*, stating that, even though editors get caught occasionally, "this trick of drawing upon the imagination for the non-essential parts of an article is certainly one of the most valuable secrets of the profession at its present state of development. Truth in essentials, imagination in non-essentials, is considered a legitimate rule of action in every office. The paramount object is to make an interesting story" (*Discovering the News*, 79).

were ripe for coverage of death to become less explicitly religious in the penny papers, the line from which modern journalism arose.

But it is not accurate to say that the penny papers led a trend toward secularization. The coverage of death in the penny papers, while much coverage was less explicitly Christian compared to colonial newspapers, was still strongly influenced by religion. Because they were not subservient to political parties nor bound by denominational ties, penny newspaper editors could select the stories they believed would attract audiences, and present those stories in interesting ways. These decisions about news values were shaped by both journalists' worldviews and the intellectual and religious trends prevalent in society—how all these played out in any given story depended on the details of the event and the interpretation of the individual journalist.

Bennett, for example, appealed to traditional Christian teachings on suicide to attack his competitors (only a few days after treating the same suicide as an object lesson on keeping busy after retirement). Greeley spared his readers the gory details of murders because he believed that the causes of such actions were rooted in social structures, not the human heart. Raymond treated executions as the condemned man's last chance before divine judgment and his paper consistently printed transcripts of speeches, sermons and events that reflected society's strong Christian framework. In addition to acknowledging the authority of Scripture, at least in principle, all three of these editors accepted the power of science to provide answers to at least some questions. In short, religion, both the

personal beliefs of journalists and the religious context in their society, continued to have a major effect on news and news values.

But American society's Christian context would soon face a devastating challenge in the last third of the nineteenth century.

Chapter 7: The Industrial-Age Press

In many ways, 1870 marked the eve of a new era in big-city journalism. Henry J. Raymond died in 1869, Horace Greeley and James Gordon Bennett would pass away in 1872. They were the major figures in what some call the "Golden Age of Journalism," a period when a few men, mostly in New York, with powerful personalities (and often eccentric habits) grew followers and fortunes by creating newspapers in their own images. The major urban papers of the 1870s and 1880s extended and strengthened the journalistic trends that began with Benjamin Day's *New York Sun* in 1833 and continued right through until the end of the nineteenth century: financial independence from political parties, the rise of advertising, sensationalism, the demand for timeliness, and the rising status of the reporter, among others. Accidents, crime and obituaries became the most frequently reported types of death stories for the first time in the 1870 sample, and that trio of story types has dominated death coverage ever since.

The Civil War (1860-1865) accelerated and reinforced those trends in journalistic practice. The most significant changes in the American intellectual and religious climate in the last third of the nineteenth century—the revivalism of the Gilded Age and the rise of the Social Gospel, Darwinism and radical historicism—would not have their greatest effects until after 1870. A more complete discussion of these factors is therefore reserved until Chapter 8. This chapter, Chapter 7, will discuss briefly notable features of death coverage in the

Civil War and attempt to show how those features continued in the post-war years.

THE CIVIL WAR

Climbing circulations and increasing advertising revenues in the 1840s and 1850s meant that newspapers, particularly the major urban publications in the North, had money and resources to spend reporting and illustrating the Civil War. At one point the *New York Tribune* had 29 reporters in the field, and the Associated Press, formed in 1848, had dozens of correspondents across the country.[1] This was the first war in which the telegraph was widely used, and the speed it offered, along with innovations in photography and the printing of illustrations, provided the public on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line with a massive volume of news. Papers provided eye-witness accounts of battles, assessments of military strategy, troop movements, profiles of life in the camps, political analysis, official military reports, and anything else the editors thought would enlighten the public. This included a fair amount of intelligence military and administration officials preferred the newspapers had not published and led to scattered attempts at censorship.

Quantity of copy, however, did not always result in quality coverage; newspapers were filled with errors and, occasionally, fabrications. Journalists, showing no evidence of detachment, impartiality or other modern notions of objectivity, continued to root for the home team. "Every triumph became a

[1] Kathleen Endres, "The Press and the Civil War, 1861-1865" in *The Media in America: A History* edited by Wm. David Sloan and James D Startt (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 1999), 159. Endres provides a useful summary of the main features of Civil War journalism, including discussions on reportage, the telegraph, photography and illustration, and censorship.

Glorious Victory, every retreat a Shameful Rout, and the most inventive Bohemians [northern reporters] never had a whiff of the gunpowder from the fray they described in such graphic detail," observed Summers.[2]

Regarding the coverage of death, three features stand out. Newspapers sensationalized death, glorified the dead, and sometimes made sense of it all by placing the story in a religious context.

It was the first major war American reporters covered up close, and with 600,000 deaths it was also the bloodiest in American history. Much coverage involving death was neither sensational nor particularly graphic, such as routine reports of battles or official casualty lists. However, an industry that had increasingly been relying on sensationalism to attract readers before the war had little hesitation about portraying the blood and guts of the battlefield in graphic words, drawings and photographs.

Civil War coverage glorified those who died in combat to an unprecedented degree. The newspapers of the American Revolution, of course, made much of those who died in the fight against the British "Bloody Backs," but in the Civil War the reporters' proximity to the fighting allowed them to produce narratives that glorified battle and romanticized the dead, not through hiding the horror of battle, but by emphasizing it.

Finally, although religion was mentioned only infrequently in newspaper coverage, it was a major factor in how soldiers, citizens and journalists interpreted the war. Clergy played leading roles in the moral revolutions that swept through

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[2] Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Press Gang: Newspapers and Politics, 1865-1878* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 21.

the North and the South in the antebellum years, in opposite directions when it came to slavery. Northern churchmen "converted the antislavery movement into a massive juggernaut, and Southern clergy dedicated the South to preserving a biblically supported social order." It was all overlaid with the "overcharged intensity of revivalism."[3]

During the war, chaplains ministered extensively to soldiers on both sides preparing them for the afterlife that awaited so many. A "fervently pious nation" was at war with itself, Ahlstrom explained, and "on both sides the soldiers' sense of duty was deepened, his morale improved, his loyalty intensified." Less pious men might have compromised. "Perhaps piety lengthened the war. Certainly it deepened the tragedy and made the entire experience a more enduring scar on the national memory."[4]

At least in the North, some saw Union blood as a source of patriotism and virtue as well as propitiation for national sins—a somewhat distorted echo of colonial teleology. After the Battle of Bull Run, Horace Bushnell declared in an address entitled "Reverses Needed":

> Without shedding of blood there is no such grace prepared. There must be reverses and losses, and time of deep concern. There must be tears in the houses, as well as blood in the fields; the fathers and mothers, the wives and dear children, coming into woe, to fight in hard bewailings . . . In these and all such terrible throes, the true loyalty is born. Then the nation emerges, at last, a true nation, consecrated and made great in our eyes by the sacrifices it has cost.[5]

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[3] Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 673.
[4] Ahlstrom, 677-78.
[5] Quoted in Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 128.

For many citizens and journalists, the desire to make death meaningful in the war relied on a "symbolic triad," as Laderman, put it, of Jesus, country and home.[6]

One lengthy account in the July 4 *New York Times* shows how, occasionally, all these features came together in newspapers. Samuel Wilkeson reported on the last day of the Battle of Gettysburg (July 1-3, 1863) that "soldiers in Federal blue were torn to pieces in the road and died with the peculiar yells that blend the extorted cry of pain with horror and despair." And he focused on one casualty, "a central figure of transcendingly absorbing interest, the dead body of an oldest born, crushed by a shell [and] abandoned to death . . .."

Why was one corpse of "transcendingly absorbing interest," and how did Wilkeson know it was the body of an oldest born? But readers probably went on to Wilkeson's description of how, around 1:00 p.m., a bird was singing in a peach tree near Union General Meade's headquarters, and then

> a shell screamed over the house, instantly followed by another, and another, and in a moment the air was full [of shells that] shrieked, whirled, moaned, whistled and wrathfully fluttered over our ground … Forty minutes, fifty minutes, counted on watches that ran oh so languidly.

Wilkeson continued, "Then there was a lull, and we knew that the rebel infantry was charging." General Robert E. Lee sent 15,000 men against the center of the Union line. "They rushed in perfect order across an open field up to the very muzzles of our guns, which tore lanes through them as they came." A few made it over the barricades, but the Army of the Potomac held its ground.

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[6] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 135.

Some Union soldiers died. Capt. Cushing, Company A, Fourth Regular artillery, received a severe wound early in the afternoon but kept his post beside his guns. He poured

> grape and canister into the advancing columns of the rebels until they had reached the very muzzles of his pieces, and sure of their capture, were attempting to turn them upon our forces, when they were driven off by our infantry. At this moment Capt. Cushing received his death wound, and fell lifeless to the earth.

Most of the dead were Confederates. Wilkeson wrote that "the field in front of the stonewall was literally covered with dead and wounded . . . [the rebels] lay in swaths, as if mown down by a scythe.... Not less than one thousand dead and wounded laid in a space of less than four acres in extent."

Wilkeson's conclusion was visionary but puzzling:

> Oh, you dead, who at Gettysburg have baptized with your blood the birth of freedom in America, how you are to be envied! I rise from a grave whose wet clay I have passionately kissed, and I look up and see Christ spanning this battlefield with His feet and reaching fraternally and lovingly up to heaven. His right hand opens the gates of Paradise . . ..

Why was Wilkeson kissing wet clay? In the July 8 issue *Times* editors explained that the reporter's eldest son, Lieut. Bayard Wilkeson, 19, died after 10 hours of agony on the first day of battle, July 1, abandoned in the field. Wilkeson, despite his "transcendingly absorbing interest" in just one soldier, steeled himself to write of many soldiers. He told of sights and sounds and feelings so his readers could live the horror and courage and carnage through his articles. He wrote of his vision of Christ and the battlefield dead because he knew that, in war, the question

of what happens after death is at the forefront. Mourning for his son, he tried to show what it means to be a hero.[7]

Laderman argues that the Civil War prompted significant changes in public attitudes, partly toward death, but more specifically toward the corpse. In antebellum America people regarded dead bodies primarily in three ways: death was the Great Escape for the soul and so the body was an empty container (although the corpse would be needed for future life); death was a fact of Nature, and so decomposition was nothing to fear; death was, in a sense, denied as people maintained a connection with the deceased through a "morbid obsession" with the corpse.[8] But by the end of the Civil War, the overwhelming number of bodies on battlefields and in hospitals, familiar to many by experience but also described in words, drawings and photographs in the press, led to a growing indifference to the corpse.[9] At the same time, faced with the problem of how to transport battlefield corpses home, society gradually embraced embalming. This was one of several factors that led to the rise of the funeral profession; the corpse left the hands of the community and became the property of "a growing cadre of death specialists." Laderman argues further that

> No longer symbolically rich with meaning—whether associated with human corruption, the character of the soul, or the sacrality of the nation—[the corpse] proved to be antithetical to the values and aspirations of late nineteenth century Protestants in the North. What mattered more than the fate of the physical body, and what held the rapt attention of religious believers, was the condition of the spirit at death.[10]

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[7] Les Sillars, "Dying under the flag," *World Magazine*, 15 June 2002, p. 43.
[8] Laderman, 50.
[9] Laderman, 124.
[10] Laderman, 170.

Laderman is perhaps overstating his case, as believers, including Christian journalists, throughout the century had expressed concern about the soul. But it is a fair observation that people began in this period to distance themselves from corpses, if not death itself.

THE INDUSTRIAL PRESS

The Civil War accelerated changes already begun in the popular press "by calling forth a public demand for eye-witness reports, graphic ones, in-depth and every day."[11] After the war ended, editors and publishers took advantage of new markets, new social conditions and new technology to build their businesses and solidify their financial independence from political parties, even though some journalists themselves were politically active and most newspapers took political positions. The press of this period differed markedly from the Partisan Press in that the former were willing to criticize their own leaders.

Other factors contributed to newspapers' political independence and financial clout. Journalists began to emphasize the power of news in shaping public opinion and attracting readers, and they began to downplay editorials. To finance the increasingly expensive and industrial-sized printing and editorial operations that the urban newspapers were becoming, publishers and owners turned to issuing stock; editors would not begin to lose control of their newspapers for decades, but the change forced them to focus on profits with greater intensity. Finally, the industrial age meant increasing numbers of mass-produced goods were on the retail market. To compete, leading businessmen

[11] Summers, *The Press Gang*, 15.

started to advertise more in an attempt to get the public to demand their goods by "brand name."

Meanwhile, immigration from Europe, which had slowed during the Civil War, resumed after 1865 and soon grew to a flood, crowding cities in the East and spilling over into the Mid-West and then the West. More people meant more consumers, more advertising, more readers and, ultimately, more size and strength for large urban papers, not only in cities like New York and Boston, but also in Chicago and San Francisco.[12]

Crime

Crime and accidents continued to be the most common death-related story types. Compared to the 1840 sample the total number of stories in these categories rocketed upward, from 30 crime and execution stories in 1840 to 105 in 1870, and from 48 accident stories in 1840 to 111 in 1870. The number of obituaries rose from 8 to 40. From this point on in the study, crime, accidents and obituaries are the three most common story types, with obituaries dominating by the middle of the twentieth century. All categories showed increases in the total number of stories in 1870 compared to 1840, reflecting both a larger news hole and an extra paper in the 1870 sample.

The period is not noted for its sensational crime coverage (perhaps because it seems less so compared to the era of the Yellow Press that followed), but accounts of murders continued to be as detailed, bloody and at times brutal as

[12] For a more complete discussion of social and economic factors in the growth of the industrial press, see Ted Curtis Smythe, "The Press and Industrial America, 1865-1883" in *The Media in America: A History* edited by Wm. David Sloan and James D Startt (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 1999), 197-208.

in any previous era. “Horrible Murder and Suicide in Massachusetts,” read one *San Francisco Chronicle* headline. The story described how a mother had, while lying in bed with her 11-year-old son, slashed him across the throat five or six times so that “his head was nearly severed from his body.” She then drew the razor across her own throat so deeply that the blood “spurted nearly across the room.” They were found lying together, the razor between, the bed “drenched with gore.”[13]

After a drunken ruffian killed a passer-by with a coal shovel, the *New York Herald*, with the senior Bennett positioning it as the voice of the common man, declared that the incident was “a warning to us all.” It “conveys a disagreeable suggestion that any of us may be knocked over the head with a shovel by a drunken rowdy at any time of day.” Society, wrote Bennett, “is tainted with a cloud of such wretches, with whom to kill, without purpose of provocation, seems to be a pastime.”[14]

The political purposes of crime coverage were, unsurprisingly, closely tied to the circumstances of the era. With Reconstruction in the South a hot topic, Bennett’s *Herald*, pro-slavery in the antebellum years, ran the following headlines that tell the story, as Bennett saw it: “MYSCEGENATION AND MURDER; The Black Husband of a White Wife Commits a Horrible Crime; Another Virginian Atrocity—The Result of the Intermixture of the Races—A Child Coolly Disposed Of—Negro Barbarian and Fiendish Calmness.”[15]

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[13] 10 October 1870.
[14] 14 September 1870.
[15] 17 December 1870.

If the headline wasn't enough, the lead read: "This peaceful community [Pittsylvania, Va.] has been thrilled with horror by a murder, which for cold-blooded atrocity has seldom been equaled, even in the history of negro crime in the South, since the war." The article related how a white widow and her children went to live with "one of the blackest and basest negroes in the county" in his hut a few miles from town. "As a natural sequel to this unpardonable and inhuman union, the couple lived together in an almost starving condition, detested by both races." The report accused the "demon negro" of striking his five-year-old stepson for some trivial offense, and then stomping him until "his kidneys were bruised and his stomach was bursted and his last breath had departed." The mother lay upon her bed, too sick to protect her child.

The *Charleston Courier* had no stories quite that gruesome in the sample, but it ran several smaller pieces obviously designed to illustrate what the editors regarded as the essential character of blacks. Reports described: a young black man, 18, who shot his mistress,[16] the execution of a black man who had murdered a white woman and her farm manager after he attempted to "ravish" her (the noose gave way on the first attempt, and he had to ascend the scaffold steps again),[17] a black man who shot his common-law wife through the head ("her life-blood and brains mingling together on the ground"),[18] and an inquest into a fight in which one black killed another with a board.[19]

Historian Summers observed that the Northern papers

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[16] 10 June 1870.
[17] 2 July 1870.
[18] 16 August 1870.
[19] 31 December 1870.

> never seemed to learn. Each scare was accepted as credulously as if it were the first to appear. As the [Chicago] Tribune pointed out, every time the cry arose about blacks massing to butcher the whites, the casualty lists turned out the same way. "If any one is punished, it is a negro. If any one is driven from home, it is a negro. If any one is killed, it is a negro; and if any one is to blame, it is of course a negro" (12 December 1874). [20]

The *Chicago Tribune*, in contrast to the *Chicago Times* operated by the notoriously racist editor Wilbur F. Storey, was willing to run stories of white injustice against blacks. "A Brutal Murder," tells how a "respectable white man," after losing a ten cent bet to a black man, demanded his money back at the point of a revolver. When this "unreasonable request" was refused, he shot the black man in the neck.[21]

Politics, crime and religion mingled sometimes in ways with far-reaching implications. In May of 1870 Daniel McFarland, who the prosecution alleged was a drunken lout and Tammany henchman, was tried for murdering Albert Richardson, a *New York Tribune* correspondent who was engaged to McFarland's former wife, the actress and sometime writer Abby McFarland. On November 25, 1869 McFarland walked into the newspaper's office and shot Richardson. It was the second time he had tried to kill him.

McFarland's lawyers relied on a defense of not guilty by reason of insanity, portraying him as a "nervous" man driven temporarily mad by the desertion of his wife and the abduction of his child. One morning Mrs. McFarland kissed her husband good-bye as he left for work, then headed straight to an arranged meeting place with Richardson. "The prisoner was aware that a certain

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[20] Summers, *The Press Gang*, 232.
[21] 27 May 1870.

literary clique had surrounded his wife," said the *New York Times* in its assessment of the case, "and had inspired her with certain ambitions and aims which tended to estrange her from him."[22] Given the clique and the letters and portraits of Richardson he found in his wife's trunk, it was no wonder, said the *Times*, he believed there was a conspiracy.

The *Tribune* pressed for a conviction, and in the months leading up to the trial ran editorials and stories that mentioned neither McFarland nor Richardson by name but clearly had those figures in the background. "The Logic of Assassination," ran a June 17, 1870 headline to an editorial decrying "the half-savage state of society which revenges private wrongs by assassination": "A half-dozen cases will instantly occur to everyone, where a perverted public sentiment has attempted to excuse a jealous husband or wife for the murder of some third person, perhaps upon the very slightest grounds of suspicion."

The jury returned a verdict of not guilty. The *Charleston Courier*, among other newspapers, was pleased. The *Tribune's* post-verdict release of Richardson's letters and a 10-column affidavit from Mrs. McFarland describing abuse at the hands of her ex-husband (the defense had presented as evidence of previous affection letters from Mrs. McFarland written during the periods of alleged abuse) would not, said the *Courier*, sway those whose "good judgment approved the verdict of an impartial jury." The *Courier's* New York correspondent is worth quoting at length:

> Whatever may be said in extenuation of either Richardson or Mrs. McFarland, and whatever may be adduced in condemnation of the erratic

[22] 11 May 1870.

> individual, whose only fault existed in loving his family too well—the fact remains established, now and for all time to come, that the entire crowd of men and women, who believe in the Tribune doctrines, and a large number of those who go further in the expression of their opinion on marital rights than even the Tribune dare to go, have suffered an exposure at the hands of a high tribunal, from which they will never recover. They have legally been shown up as moral pests of society who, if they ever would obtain the upper hand in our social circles, would gradually overthrow all the safe-guards which tradition, religion and sound civilization have placed around the family circle. It is that and nothing else which inspired the twelve men the moment that they declared the "prisoner at the bar" not guilty. It is that and nothing else which inspired the masses of the community, when they applauded that verdict. . . . There is not a man in his senses who approves of murder, or of any man taking the law into his own hand, but there are many men who approve the killing of a free lover, even before he commits actual adultery, the moment he enters, as Richardson did, in a family's household, talks nonsense and love to an inexperienced girl and wins her away from those affections which alone by law and by religion, ought to surround her. . . . [P]eople who believe in "isms" and ologies," side with the Tribune crowd. Take for instance the women who are just now holding their Annual Convention, to once more tell us that female suffrage is the true panacea for all our evils. They condemn the McFarland verdict. They repudiate the law which compels a woman to "love and obey her husband," and want her to seek congenial companionship elsewhere, the moment the husband should happen to come home drunk, or should be somewhat dyspeptic at a time she feels the necessity of being gay. The classes who oppose the verdict are first the free lovers, then the Women's Rights' people, then the young men about town, and last but not least all those bad women—and there are scores of them in New York—who await a favorable opportunity to be divorced from their husbands, not because they [the husbands] are bad, but because they [the wives] cannot get money enough for their dresses and toilet.[23]

Horace Greeley did embrace communalism and free love, but it is not clear whether Richardson and Mrs. McFarland went quite that far; Henry Ward Beecher married them on Richardson's death bed in December, 1869.

[23] 17 May 1870.

The *Courier* was not alone in sensing danger in the free love movement. The *San Francisco Examiner* told in a brief item about how a well-known but apparently cowardly New York politician fled after catching his wife with a seaman, "and the wife at once cut her throat with her husband's razor." The headline: "Another Free-Love Tragedy."[24]

As murders go, the McFarland case was just another jealousy killing, albeit one involving a high-profile victim; but it attracted national attention in part because many saw this trial as representative of a larger cultural battle over the nature of the family, marriage and divorce, all questions with clear religious contexts, and an individual's right to challenge socially-accepted and religion-based morality. As the defense lawyer put it, as related by the *Courier* correspondent, counsel for the defense "really represented the people. Should the defense break down so would public morality, and it behooved the District Attorney well to understand his anomalous position." The lawyer promised to prove "not only that Mrs. McFarland committed adultery, but other outrageous doings, which, as the counsel termed it, 'will make every father in the land tremble with indignation.'" The report also mentioned that "the jury are all married men and have children, and there is hardly any doubt that Mr. McFarland will be acquitted."[25]

Death and politics had been linked in military stories, of course, but the *Courier's* analysis of the McFarland trial shows how newspapers made yet another move toward modern journalistic approaches to death. The penny press

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[24] 14 February 1870.
[25] 11 April 1870.

had reconnected crime and death to politics, with Bennett using death to push his own particular agendas and Greeley interpreting fatal events as opportunities to moralize about particular social evils. In the mind of the *Courier* correspondent, the McFarland murder put a whole worldview on trial.

Worldviews had been battling for most of the nineteenth century, as Olasky describes in Part Two of *Central Ideas in the Development of American Journalism*.[26] Journalists were slowly shifting from the "corruption story," a largely Christian way of looking at the world which understood evil as the result of sinful human hearts, to the "oppression story," which saw people as basically good until oppressed by evil social systems and forces. In the McFarland case the conflict was articulated in a murder trial. Some modern scholars now see the coverage of the Ellen Jewett trial of 1836 as illustrating larger social truths about the culture, but Bennett of the *Herald* and Day of the *Sun* were more interested in the facts of the case—was Robinson guilty or not? What kind of a person was Jewett, really? By 1870, at least some journalists themselves were able to articulate the primary conflict in the McFarland trial as being over a social, moral, religious and cultural vision for the way society should be and the reasons why it was not.

Accidents

Accidents did not usually attract as much attention as murder, partly because accidents were so common and partly because journalists saw murder as morally wrong. Accidents were "big stories" either when several people died

[26] *Central Ideas in the Development of American Journalism: A Narrative History* (Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1991).

(indicating a great loss to the community—a significant social disorder) or when it was likely that someone was at fault (suggesting a significant moral disorder).

Nevertheless, accidents and obituaries were more common than ever, as noted above. This is likely tied to the increasing use and importance of reporters and an increasing emphasis on local news—that is, the volume of accident coverage showed the effects of journalistic routine. The police court was a valuable source of interesting material for the early years of the penny press; it was soon obvious to reporters that the morgue and inquests could serve the same purpose. At these places reporters could find, not only murder victims, but also material for brief stories of accidents and fatalities of all kinds. One issue of the *Tribune* contained, in a column that was longer than normal but typical in style, the following 10 accidents: a public official who drowned on a beach; a stone dropped from a dock punched a hole in a boat, leading to a drowning; a maid was burned to death in a gas can explosion; a drunk boatman fell overboard and drowned; a girl, 4, died of burns after playing with matches; a woman died of apparent heatstroke; a milk wagon ran over a pedestrian; a sewer cave-in smothered a workman; a train ran over a tinsmith after failing to blow a warning—the engineer tried to escape in the engine, but the crowd stopped him; and lightning killed a boy, 13, as he leaned against a chimney.[27]

Accident coverage could be sensational in the sense of being gruesome, although it was uncommon. The *Herald* ran an item from the *Portsmouth Chronicle* noting that the clothes of a three-year-old girl caught fire and burned

[27] 15 August 1870.

completely off her body after her parents left a trio of small children home alone. Neighbors found the child sitting on the steps, her body so badly charred that when they laid her in a cradle, "the flesh across her chest broke open with a noise resembling that occasioned by the breaking of a burnt crust of bread."[28]

The *Tribune* continued to favor accidents with a social moral. In 1870 immigrants into New York were packing into unsafe and unsanitary tenement housing. "A Landlord Charged with Inhumanity" went one February 22, 1870 headline. Testimony at an inquest revealed that Christian Winfield had threatened to turn out the Clayton family for non-payment of rent and take away their stove immediately. "The manner and threats of Winfield so frightened Mrs. Clayton that she was immediately seized with labor pains, and that same night was delivered of still-born twins." "An Extraordinary Case," went an April 14, 1870 headline. "A Man Dies in a Tenement Closet, and Remains Undiscovered for Four Months." When some neighborhood boys discovered in an outhouse the corpse "with the appearance of a mummy," authorities realized it was a resident named Colt whose wife had reported him missing the previous December. A thorough journalistic expose` of New York tenement housing, however, would have to wait another 20 years for pioneering photo-journalist Jacob Riis.

Temperance continued as a favorite theme of the *New York Tribune*. A report of a sermon from the pulpit of the Lafayette Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn noted that Dominicus S. Voorhies had recently died in a dram shop *on a Sunday* (state law required dram shops to close on Sunday). Four times more

[28] 25 November 1870.

"murders" occur in dram shops than by bullets, asserted Rev. Theodore L. Cuyler, for death by alcoholic poison is just as certain as death by a bullet. The reporter summarized the sermon:

> It would seem that satan takes possession of cities on Sunday and reigns supreme. It was fitting that the horrible tragedy should have been committed in a dram shop. The assassination of a popular, generous, public-spirited citizen on the Sabbath sent a chill to every home. [He would not speak ill of the dead, who had been in the shop on a Sabbath, but] he hoped that the fearful lesson would be inscribed on every dram-shop door in letters of blood, to deter young men from entering such places.

The writer (quite possibly Greeley), ostensibly summarizing Cuyler, then noted that the proprietor had been arrested, squeezed in a reference to the upcoming McFarland trial ("The stereotyped plea of insanity was the defense of every murderer, and it was a strange circumstance that in every case no one had ever heard of such a case until the deed had been committed") and "concluded by denouncing the vendor of alcoholic poison as an accomplice to every murder that was committed by those to whom he sold it."[29]

Other Observations

The scientific approach to problems, already evident in the antebellum period, became more pronounced after the Civil War. David T.Z. Mindich examined journalistic coverage of cholera epidemics in 1832, 1849 and 1866 and found that "religion was a filter through which the cholera epidemics of 1832 and 1849 were seen," even to the point that some newspapers were still calling for a day of fasting, but that by 1866 both the medical and journalistic communities

[29] 21 February 1870.

were viewing the disease through a lens of "naïve empiricism," a "sense that the world was knowable and nameable if only we roll up our sleeves and investigate it."[30]

The *New York Times* editorialized that "there has been a large increase lately of sudden deaths. There must be a reason for this, and it should be investigated." The paper noted how a London amateur scientist has complained that common foods are often "adulterated" and this seriously harms public health. "Many of the substances used to adulterate liquors are rank poison, and powerfully affect the nerves, circulation and delicate brain tissues," while milk "is too often swill," and flour is mixed with a whitening compound. "The laws of some countries are very severe upon these practices—here and in England it is just the reverse, and people accordingly are killed by scores."[31]

"Since Professor Pierce has settled the matter of health and longevity of the male sex when educated," began an item in the *Courier*, some have been investigating "the education of the gentler sex, and come to the opinion that not only are the girls killed by the forcing and confining processes of their education, but after graduation they drag out a short existence." The article then examined the death rates of female college graduates, compiling the mortality data on female Mount Holyoke Seminary graduates over the previous 30 years from an examination of the Memorandum Society's memorial volume. The point of the

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[30] David T.Z. Mindich, *Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 102, 98. Mindich provides a good discussion of the increasingly scientific approach to disease, in Chapter 4, "Facticity: Science, Cholera, and the Rise of Journalism's 'Naïve "Empiricism,' 1832-66."

[31] Reprinted in the *Charleston Courier*, 28 April 1870.

article, it turned out, was to show, calculating and comparing the mortality rates of the different schools down to three decimal places, that the Holyoke Seminary graduates, educated in good Southern fashion, were far better off than female graduates of those New England colleges like Amherst, Dartmouth, Harvard, Williams and Yale. Clearly, this is an early example of a journalistic plunge into social science research.

Newspapers continued to pay significant attention to suicide, and would until the middle of the twentieth century. A series of deck headlines from the *Herald* gives the outline of a complete suicide story: "Tragic Fate of an Actor: James W. Lingard, the Ex-Theatrical Manager, Destroys Himself by Drowning—Recovery of the Body—The Causes Leading to the Fatal Deed—His Domestic Relations—Personal Sketch of the Deceased."[32]

The *Herald's* analysis of a suicide and murder in Baltimore is titled, "Religious Fanaticism and It's Fatal Effects."[33] It is signed "A Layman" but strongly reflects Bennett's style and antipathy for institutionalized religion. The essay argues that Mrs. Marsh was driven to murder her own children and a young man to suicide by "erroneous religious teaching as to the state and destiny of the dead." Mrs. Marsh "gave as a reason for the deed she committed that her children had 'gone to heaven' and were so much better off." Thomas Henry Hopps visited the scene of the tragedy and later heard the preacher at the children's funeral declare "I have only to assure you in the name of faith that the souls of these innocents are now in heaven, and it is enough." Hopps killed himself soon after.

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[32] 9 July 1870.
[33] 1 May 1870.

If the Christian doctrine is true, asked Layman, we can only admire the "stern faith and heroic love" of Mrs. Marsh. If not, "is it not a shame, a folly, and a crime to continue to teach it, and therefore produce, with weak-minded mothers and simple children, the dreadful evils we see?"

As Catholic and Protestant clergy, alike bound to their dogmas, cannot be expected to investigate the question, Layman asked,

> What, then, is death, and what the state of the dead? Can there be life in death? Are the dead conscious? Must we discard common sense and experience in order to preserve our theological orthodoxy? If we consult our experience and observe facts familiarly known to us they contradict flatly the current theory.

What happens to the souls of those who "die" (enter a state of suspended animation after drowning, seizures, swoons) and come back to life? he inquired. Why do we hear no stories of "beautific visions from those who return to life and consciousness?" (This was before the modern phenomenon of the "Near Death Experience," after which people do report such visions.)

He continued: "But surely there is one true source of knowledge on this subject, and that is the Bible." He cited several passages that he argued portrays the righteous dead as "sleeping in Jesus," a state of "profound unconsciousness, as sleep, a state of forgetfulness."

The essay rejected the common notion of the fate of Christian believers—that their souls went immediately to heaven to be with Jesus and the saints. Mark Twain and others would satirize this idea,[34] but it had (and retains)

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[34] Twain has Huck consider issues of heaven and hell repeatedly in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but his most biting satire of common beliefs about the afterlife was a short story, *Extracts from Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*. In it, he mocks common ideas about heaven: it is a place where the winged residents spend all their time floating on clouds, playing

considerable cultural force among Christians due to the Apostle Paul's statement (quote below in the King James version) in 2 Corinthians 5: 6-8

> Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: (For we walk by faith, not by sight) We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.

Spiritism peaked about 1870, according to Ahlstrom, claiming 11 million members. In Boston the movement had a stable and well-respected position including an "enlightened and liberal membership, a fine edifice in the Back Bay, and a well-edited paper, the Boston Banner of Light."[35] The popularity may have been a result of the many who wished to communicate with loved ones lost in the Civil War. Many journalists, like others, were skeptical of claims of contact with the dead. "A Summons from Spirit Land" recounts how three Swiss siblings, reduced to poverty in Mexico, gassed themselves to death with carbon monoxide from a stove "in obedience to a communication from their mother, who from the spirit land declared that nothing was wanted to complete her happiness save the company of her children." The *San Francisco Chronicle* added a paragraph of local speculation from Guadalajara that the siblings, "who had been raised in opulence, were tired of manual labor and heartbroken with homesickness."[36]

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harps and singing from hymn-books; that everyone imagines themselves (but not others) as youthful adults; how everybody on earth intends, when he gets to heaven, to "fling his arms around Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and kiss them and weep on them," but if the authorities allowed that the patriarchs "wouldn't have anything to do, year in and year out, but stand up and be wept on, thirty-two hours in the twenty-four. They would be tired out and as wet as muskrats all the time" (in *Mark Twain's Best: Eight Great Short Stories by America's Master Humorist* (New York: Scholastic Inc., no date), 129.

[35] Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 490.

[36] 17 April 1870.

The January 30, 1870, *Chicago Tribune* reported "A Strange Delusion in Massachusetts," according to when a Danvers girl who had died of pneumonia looked so healthy, "like a sleeper, and wondrous fair," that a rumor started that she had been buried alive. The townsfolk dug her up and found no trace of life, but a week later "otherwise intelligent persons were ready to make oath that her flesh [had been] warm to the touch." Still the rumor spread when someone had a dream or a "communication from the spirit world" that she had been entombed alive. It was, said the *Tribune*, "a matter of astonishment" that so many believed.

CONCLUSION

In 1870 most Americans encountered a lot of death in their newspapers. Up to this point, the average number of deaths in each newspaper's two-week sample had been fairly consistent, with a drop in the essay-oriented Partisan Press era: in the 1745 sample there were 23 death-related stories per paper (92 death-related stories, four papers in the sample); in 1775 the per paper average was 18 (90 stories, five in the sample); in 1810 it fell to 7 (36 stories in five papers); but by 1840 had rebounded to 22 (132 stories in 6 papers). Given that newsholes had been increasing and there was no war on in 1840, the numbers represent a gradual, modest increase through the middle of the nineteenth century in the attention paid to fatal events. But in 1870 the average number of deaths reported in each paper's two-week sample shot up to 52 (364 stories in seven papers).

While some of the increase is the result of a still larger news hole and an increasing emphasis on local news, editors were not obligated to fill their extra space with fatal accidents or send their reporters to the morgues to look for

stories. The “King of Terrors” was on the move in the pages of American newspapers.

The 1870 sample also demonstrates a continuing trend in how newspapers interpreted death. News stories articulating explicit Calvinistic teleology, either in the voice of the reporter or through quoting official or religious sources, were increasingly rare through the 1810 and 1840 samples; there were none in the 1870 sample. Probably some examples could have been found in the *New York Times* (or other selected newspapers) due to the continuing influence of Henry Raymond even after his death in 1869, but as later chapters will show, even the *Times* drifted steadily further away from the course Raymond had set and toward a more secularized worldview.

Chapter 8: The Age of the Yellow Press

A New York trolley "ran over and killed little Ethel Denham in Bergen street, Brooklyn, last Friday," ran the lead in a July 29, 1895 story in the *New York World*. "The child's life was crushed out before her mother's eyes."

The driver was arrested, but with some diligent questioning of the driver's landlady and co-workers, *World's* reporter discovered some significant factors, as the headline and decks made clear:

> MOTORMAN HALF ASLEEP; Frederick Bliss, Who Killed Ethel Denham, Had Had but One Hour's Rest; Went to Bed at 2, Got Up at 3; Asked to be Relieved for the Day and Was Ordered to Take His Car Out on the Line; But 'The Company Obeys the Laws.'; So Says Its Secretary, Benjamin Frick, in Answer to Questions about Responsibility.

Bliss's landlady said that he had fallen asleep at the table before heading to work, and his co-workers called him a "careful, sober and industrious" employee who warned his supervisor that he was "unfit" to work. The story ran on page 2.

Deep in a *World* Sunday paper later that year was the headline, "STRANGLED BY A TREE; Horrible Snake-Like Coils of a Strange Tree in Madagascar; Natives Dance Wildly About It; They Give It a Woman Victim and Watch Her Death Struggles in its Embrace."[1]

The wood-cut illustration showed pygmy-like Africans circling an eight-foot high pineapple-like plant with long leaves sprouting from its top. They have just, according to the story, forced one of their women to climb to the top and

[1] 8 December 1895, p. 35.

drink from a puddle of the narcotic liquid that the tree-god secretes. “One of the tendrils coils around her neck—others wind around her arms and legs . . . like great green snakes with relentless force.” The victim shrieked “demonically” for a while, then stopped.

> Now, almost incredibly, the eight monster leaves raise their tips from the ground; they rise higher and higher, until they inclose the victim in a case of iron; they press closer and closer until—oh, horror! the serpent tree’s store of [narcotic], mingled with the blood of the human sacrifice, oozes through the interstices. With a yell of mad delight the savages rush to the tree and lap up every drop of the horrid fluid. The god is appeased. After hideous orgies the participants sink down one by one in convulsions and delirium to long insensibility, while the grim black tree continues to hold its victim in tight embrace.

Of course, the story is absurd, but it was not intended to be read as news. It was on the back pages of the Sunday paper in the “feature” section, along with some others nearly as implausible.

These stories illustrate how crusading, progressive politics and sensationalism drove death coverage in major urban newspapers in the last years of the 1800s. In the trolley story, the reporter interpreted a tragedy, the death of a child, primarily as the responsibility not of the individual worker but as the fault of a large, impersonal institution that created a dangerous situation by sending a worker who was obviously unsafe out into crowded streets. Secretary Frick insisted that drivers worked overtime voluntarily, but the reporter’s questions, printed verbatim, showed he was clearly skeptical. “Do your company’s regulations ever require a motorman to return to work without a minimum of seven hours sleep?” he asked.

The killer tree story is an extreme example of the sensationalism that made *World* publisher Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst of the *New York Journal* famous as the purveyors of "Yellow Journalism." The account is breathless, violent, graphic, factually suspect and presented using the major attention-getting techniques of the day: bold headlines, detailed decks and a drawing of the horrid affair.

Both impulses—reformism and sensationalism—share a Judeo-Christian morality. The reformer seeks to correct injustice, the sensationalizer emphasizes things that shock or disgust his readers, but both rely on their readers having a moral sensibility that the newspaper can offend, and both make news value decisions based on what they perceive to be the public's sense of morality.

As has been shown in this paper, much of American journalistic coverage of death since the Puritans has been at different times more or less sensational, reformist and moralistic. This period is distinguished by these characteristics, even though the religious context in which these moral impulses were expressed was continuing to change.

HISTORICISM, DARWIN AND DEATH IN AMERICAN RELIGION

The public morality of the late nineteenth century was based largely on Judeo-Christian principles, as it had been since colonial days. But the evangelical backbone of Christianity and the cultural authority of the Bible that characterized much of American society in the early and middle parts of the century were crumbling by 1895, largely as a result of two developments: Darwinism and historicism.

Darwinism, first popularized in the 1860s, did not become one of the most powerful intellectual movements in American history when it did because the principles of evolution were, once popularized, self-evident. Rather, the foundation had been laid in the shift to theistic Enlightenment science in the first years of the nineteenth century.

> In the decades after the Revolution, American Protestants so effectively mastered the new nation's most powerful communication systems and its most pervasive system of interpretation that, by the time of the Civil War, the United States had become a Christian nation. In the same decades, American Protestants were so thoroughly mastered by the nation's most pervasive system of interpretation that, by the start of the First World War, they had lost their intellectual way.[2]

Theistic Enlightenment science had been a creative way to fuse together subjective, humanistic learning and objective, scientific learning and methods. Before the Civil War, Protestants had assumed the methods of naturalistic science, the gathering of supposedly value-neutral facts, would support traditional views of Christianity. But after the Civil War and with the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, when evolutionism and a naturalistic view of Nature came into conflict with biblical teaching on a variety of levels, science was the dominant paradigm, the "royal road to truth," as Noll put it.[3] The effects of the evolutionary mindset permeated every aspect of thought. "Darwinism," observed Loewenberg, "attacked the whole American *Weltanschauung*."[4] "In every

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[2] Mark A. Noll, "The Evangelical Enlightenment and the Task of Theological Education" in *Communication and Change in American Religious History* edited by Leonard I. Sweet (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 270.
[3] Noll, "The Evangelical Enlightenment," 295.
[4] Bert James Loewenberg, "Darwinism Comes to America, 1859-1900" *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* Vol 28, No. 3 (December, 1941): 339.

discipline, from physics to biblical criticism," wrote Ahlstrom, "myth and error were being dispelled, and the result of this activity was a world view that raised problems of a most fundamental sort."[5] American Christianity, for the most part, defused the threat of modernity by embracing it, bringing traditional views about God and the Bible into line with contemporary beliefs about origins and progress.

> Faith in the Bible was not in principle antagonistic to scientific inquiry. If, however, it was made to rest so heavily on the latest scientific findings it was always liable to disruption by what might appear on tomorrow's front page or in next month's scientific journal. For nineteenth-century Americans this vulnerability became startlingly apparently with the coming of Darwinism—science consistently without the tacit Christian premises of design and purpose. Almost without warning one wall of their apologetic edifice was removed and within a generation the place of biblical authority in American intellectual life was in shambles.[6]

The *Chicago Tribune* ran an example of this synthesis of science and Christianity in its regular Monday report of sermons in the city the previous day. The Rev. Dr. Philip Krohn, preaching in the People's Church, railed against materialism by arguing that the afterlife is the natural result of evolution. "If we perish utterly like the beasts in the field then this life is robbed of its highest and noblest motives and the plan of the universe is a failure," he declared.

> Man is more than matter. He is matter and spirit cojoined. Those who deny the immortality of the soul base their denial upon the theory of evolution. And yet what is evolution? Simply this—that man came into being by natural causes, under the law of the survival of the fittest. Grant that man is but highly organized protoplasm—has he reached the limits of evolution or development? Have the productive forces of nature been

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[5] Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 764.

[6] George M. Marsden, "Everyone One's Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth Century America," in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* edited by Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 94.

> exhausted with man in his present state? Or does it not logically follow, according to the theory of evolution, that the process of evolution shall continue, and having evolved man from the atom carry him still on up until by the force of it he is projected into another life? If man sprang from inferior life may he not in turn become the parent of superior life? Logically considered, Darwinism proves man's projection into superior life.[7]

A related issue was the rise of historicism, which Wacker describes as "the dynamite that finally blew up biblical civilization." This is the notion that all culture is the product of its own history, and that ideas, values and institutions of every sort are wholly determined by their historical setting. For the radical historian, all knowledge was the product of a "fluid social process" and acceptance of this approach was the hallmark of the modern mind. The effect on biblical authority was that "the average person did not simply disavow the Bible so much as simply abandon it." [8]

A scientifically-oriented worldview, combined with the optimism inherent in evolution, contributed much to the rise of liberal Christianity and, in particular, the Social Gospel. The main characteristics and beliefs of this trend are that sin equals error (often the result of social underprivilege) and can be overcome by education and the example of Jesus; the denial of foundational doctrines of orthodoxy such as original sin, depravity, and the divinity of Christ; an emphasis on ethical preaching and moral education; a fervent optimism about the future of the human race; a this-worldly interpretation of the "Kingdom of God"; and a

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[7] 2 September 1895, p. 10.

[8] Grant Wacker, "The Demise of Biblical Civilization," in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* edited by Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 125, 122.

view of the Scriptures, creeds and documents alike as historical constructions.[9] Reflecting the influence of Karl Marx and various strains of socialism, the Social Gospel also emphasized that for mankind to reach its latent perfectibility government had to control social forces. The political agenda tied to the drive to control social forces was, in essence, that of the Reformers: tax the wealthy and redistribute wealth in an attempt to bring about "social justice."

Meanwhile, in a society enlightened by liberal Protestantism, some began to insist that death itself was nothing to fear. "Death is still hailed King of Terrors, and his presence and court are yet ghastly enough; but in these days of reason and science he is in constant danger of dethronement, if indeed he is not already dethroned," declared journalist Junius Henri Browne.[10] Browne conceded that "the multitudes" still fear death (although "individuals and classes have overcome fear of death") because "whatever is mysterious is apt to be alarming; mystery is the father, if ignorance is the mother, of superstition."

The *Chicago Daily News* editorialized that death is really an ally, viewed up close:

> Formidable as [death] appears from a distance, the more one looks into the subject the more certain it becomes that mankind, when brought to a practical acquaintance with it, have agreed in some blind way to recognize in the enemy, whose approaches they have been so unremitting in their efforts to ward off, something altogether different from the terrible and hostile force which they have been accustomed to consider it. "We fall on guard and, after all, it is a friend who comes to meet us."[11]

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[9] Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 779.
[10] Junius Henri Browne, "The Dread of Death" *The Forum* 6 (October, 1888), 212.
[11] 9 March 1895, p. 4.

AMERICAN JOURNALISM AND RELIGION

American religion, of course, involved far more than liberal Protestantism. Of the 25 million immigrants who flooded into the country between 1860 and 1914, many from Europe were Catholic or Jewish, while those from Asia (a much smaller number) included Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus. In the nineteenth century new sects like the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, and Christian Science were forming and gaining influence. Moreover, even as liberal intellectual trends undercut traditional religious belief, revivalism was sweeping the country through the efforts of Dwight L. Moody and others. [12]

But the many Christians who retained their traditional views of Christianity and biblical authority, generally, had little effect on the most powerful institutions of American journalism in this period. Partly in reaction to contemporary anti-biblical currents and partly due to growing theological trends such as premillennialism (which emphasized an approach to biblical prophecy that teaches God will inevitably allow the world to become increasingly wicked until the Second Coming of Christ, who will then restore righteousness and justice), the revivalist tradition was individualistic and evangelistic. Those in this tradition focused on "saving" (that is, converting to a belief in Christianity) as many people as possible before it was too late rather than attempting to transform American culture, which they thought was doomed anyway, or deal with its many social issues. "The anti-Christian trend and separatistic Christian reaction combined to end the Christian presence in newsrooms," Olasky wrote.

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[12] Edwin Scott Gaustad, *A Religious History of America* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), see Chapter 16, "Faith Immigrants and the 'Variety of Religious Experience,'" 178-197.

> As journalists who had embraced materialism and/or pantheism advanced in newspaper and magazine work, Christians who had embraced separatistic revivalism retreated. Some Christian newspapers may have died after being overrun, but many evacuated the social realm without ever engaging the invading forces.[13]

In American journalism, then, the strongest religious influence was liberal Protestantism. The progressive, reformist morality presented in the newspapers of Pulitzer, Hearst and others was shaped in large part by the religious trends described above. Biblical authority had collapsed, but Judeo-Christian morality was still highly influential in part because of the deep connections between Protestantism and Progressivism. "The Progressive mind, as I have said," wrote Hofstadter, "was preeminently a Protestant mind, and even though much of its strength was in the cities, it inherited the moral traditions of rural evangelical Protestantism." Hofstadter added that a crucial feature of this mindset was its "ethos of personal responsibility."[14] As one of Pulitzer's main editors, John Cockerill, put it, news is

> any hitherto unprinted occurrence which involves the violation of any one of the Ten Commandments and, if it involves a fracture of the Vth, VIth, VIIth, VIIIth, or IXth Commandments and by those people who names people have heard and in whose doings they are specifically interested by knowledge of their official or social position, then it is great news.[15]

But the personal responsibility of the Progressive mind was very different from the personal responsibility of the Puritan mind. Puritans saw the individual as responsible to God, who would judge him for his actions in the next life and, if

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[13] Marvin Olasky, *Prodigal Press: The Anti-Christian Bias of the American News Media* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1988), 25.
[14] Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 204-5.
[15] Quoted in Brian Denis, *Pulitzer: A Life* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2001), 1.

he failed to seek forgiveness, possibly punish him in this one also. Liberal Protestant theology taught that individuals had a responsibility to do good, but that there were no real consequences for sin; God did not judge in this life and Hell was an unpleasant fiction. Salvation was found in social action.

Much like the theology of James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald* and in keeping with the theological tone of the day, many newsmen held that true Christianity was not to be found in traditional expressions of Christian faith. An approving editorial in the *San Francisco Chronicle* described how the Czar of Russia, when presented with a list of officers for promotion, crossed out the religious affiliation of the soldiers "declaring that that was a question that did not concern him." Given that the Czar of Russia is the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, and the national religion of Russia is Orthodox Christianity, the decision to

> close his eyes to the religious distinctions heretofore observed so carefully, especially in the army, it is a matter of equal moment with the removal of the political disabilities of Roman Catholics and Jews in Great Britain, which it took centuries to accomplish. The world does move, after all, spiritually and intellectually, as well as physically. Religion, at its highest and best sense, is gaining ground, while theology, creed and dogma are losing.[16]

Liberal Protestantism and certain aspects of the Social Gospel affected journalism of various types and had a profound impact on many of the era's leading magazine muckrakers, as Bruce J. Evenson showed in "The Evangelical Origins of the Muckrakers." Ida Tarbell, for example, grew up in a rigorously religious Pennsylvania family. As an adult she retained a "conviction of divine

[16] "Religion in Russia," 4 January 1895, p. 10.

goodness at work in the world" even as she "embraced Darwinian evolution and lost the sense that God had a human outline."

> She saw her whole life as having been spent in a 'striving in solitude and silence to enter into a fuller understanding of the divine.' But that understanding, she insisted, was the only means by which the 'moral diseases'—pride, greed, hypocrisy, cruelty, irreverence, and cowardliness—that so afflicted the age could be overcome. If the Bible gave men and women anything, it gave them a conception of how they ought to live. What is more, it showed them a way in which the 'essential brotherhood of man' could be brought into being. She was convinced it came by bearing witness to an 'inner light,' a light that, if encourage to develop, was alone capable of binding men to other men. Men would either 'hunger and thirst after righteousness,' she wrote, or give way to the 'poisonous' selfishness implicit in modern living.[17]

Similarly, Ray Stannard Baker "for a lifetime fought a 'spiritual unrest' as he attempted to reconcile his old familiar faith with the higher criticism then engulfing much of the church." He accepted the "new social mission" advocated by Social Gospel theologian Walter Rauschenbusch that sought to "save man and his society."[18] In his autobiography, in which he laid out his interpretation of why governments are corrupt ("good" people contribute to the corruption of a bad capitalistic system because they selfishly pursue their own self-interest), Lincoln Steffens both advocated communism and explained his view of Jesus and the Bible. After recommending to his readers that they sit down and "re-read the New Testament as I read it, without reverence, with feet up on a desk and a pipe in the mouth, as news," he declared that Christ had come to his conclusions:

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[17] Bruce J. Evenson, "The Evangelical Origins of the Muckrakers" in *Media and Religion in American History* edited by William David Sloan (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2000), 193.
[18] Evenson, p. 194-5.

> Did Christians know [that the "good" people had crucified Christ]? Did the churches preach it, and the rest of his teachings, the economic changes he must have taught his followers? The Acts of the Apostles showed them practicing communists!—as if he knew that they could not practice Christianity under the system; they could not love one another under our intense competition. He had evidently tried not only to preach Christianity, but proposed also a scheme to make it possible! The Christian churches seemed to have overlooked that detail. They overlooked the vision, too . . . I have never heard Christianity, as Jesus taught it in the New Testament, preached to the Christians. But I did see it practiced, in politics. It was an element in every reform movement that won the support of the people. I saw it applied to individuals, to bad men, women and children. I began to try it myself, and it worked. Christianity, unpreached and untaught and unlearned among the righteous, works wonders still among sinners.[19]

Some major urban newspapers also began to endorse a political agenda that found a receptive audience in a culture soaking in the theology of the Social Gospel. Just as the Puritans used sensationalism to teach about depravity and grace, Olasky wrote, Pulitzer's *World*

> juxtaposed current horror with future social salvation; it transmitted a message of hope through science and material progress, evenly distributed by benign government agents . . . In one sense Pulitzer was merely imitating the methodology of the Puritan press two centuries before: emphasize bad news so that the need for the good news becomes even greater. But the message was totally changed: Instead of pointing readers toward man's corruption and God's grace, the *World* portrayed itself as the battler against systemic oppression, and proposed running over anyone who stood in the way of "progress."[20]

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[19] Lincoln Steffens, *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1931), 526.
[20] Marvin Olasky, *Telling the Truth: How to Revitalize Christian Journalism* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1996), 210-1. Mitchell Stephens observed that Pulitzer's recipe for success was "one part sensationalism . . . one part crusading progressive politics (Pulitzer's ten-line editorial program, announced in 1883, included: 'Tax Luxuries. 2. Tax Inheritances. 3. Tax Large Incomes. 4. Tax Monopolies. 5. Tax the Privileged Corporations . . .'); one part attention-getting campaigns . . . and one part aggressive, intelligent news coverage—specifically including coverage of the concerns of the city's huge population of impoverished immigrants." *A History of News* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997), 198. In a similar vein, Patricia Bradley suggests that the way to reconcile Pulitzer's sensationalistic tendencies with his reformist philosophy is to

While many of the muckrakers were clearly sincere about their beliefs, it is less clear that is true of newspapermen of the era, like those in *World*'s newsroom. Theodore Dreiser, writing some years later, observed that

> While the editorial office might be preparing for the most flowery moralistic or religionistic editorials regarding the worth of man, the value of progress, character, religion, morality, the sanctity of the home, charity, and the like, the business office and news room were concerned with no such fine theories. The business office was all business, with little or no thought of anything save success, and in the city news room the mask was off and life was handled in a rough-and-ready manner, without gloves . . . Pretense did not go here. Innate honesty on the part of anyone was not probable. Charity was a business with something in it for somebody. Morality was in the main for public consumption only.[21]

On the other hand, as the turn of the century neared reporters were more educated than ever and hence more likely to have been exposed to the teachings of Protestant liberalism through their college education. The drunk, hard-bitten hacks of the antebellum years were slowly giving way to a new generation. "The new reporter was younger, more naïve, more energetic and ambitious, college educated, and usually sober," wrote Schudson. "He was passionately attached to his job and to the novels he felt his experience as a reporter would prepare him to write."[22]

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cast him as a Hegelian: "Joseph Pulitzer as an American Hegelian" *American Journalism* 10 No. 3-4 (Summer-Fall 1993), 70-82. She notes that Pulitzer had some connections to the circle of Hegelians in St. Louis when he began his career as a reporter, and that these circles were enthusiastic about the power of newspapers to propagate their ideas. "Thus, it is to misrepresent Pulitzer to say his front page was like a shop window to attract the readers inside. The front page was the first page of a Hegelian primer leading to the editorial page that exhorted societal involvement" (82).

[21] Theodore Dreiser, *A Book About Myself* (New York, 1922), p. 151-2; quoted in Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 191.

[22] Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 69.

News articles seldom mentioned religion. Reporters who could not avoid it offered a condescending acceptance. An extreme example of this is a first-person account from a New York reporter who tried to show her readers the true character of religion, as illustrated by the death of her recently-deceased neighbor: "A VERY HUMBLE TRAGEDY: The Poor Old Maid Who Grumbled at Everything; Her Religion Only Made Her Unhappy."[23] The tenants in the building, including the reporter, mocked the miserly old grump behind her back and complained about her ill temper. One day the writer found her sobbing in the hall because a close friend had died. Old Miss Nebbs said that there was no pleasure for her in this life, but "in the life to which I shall be called all suffering will be forgotten." The writer mused that

> My hopes for a future life where things will all be squared up are just as shaky as modern logic can make them; but I realized, as the old maid said this, that religion, if a mistake is a comforting mistake and ought to be encouraged for the solace of those persons who have missed the flitting possession of the real prizes of life.

Some months later the landlord found Miss Nebbs dead in her room (eight days passed before anyone missed her) and the tenants were ashamed of how they had treated her:

> I felt glad when tears came to my eyes, to think that there was one person to cry for this neglected traveler who had had no one to see her off on her risky journey to the great unknown. While the men whispered over the little tragedy I stood aside and wondered whether there is not, after all, a heaven somewhere for those poor starved souls who have no kind of heaven on earth.

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[23] *Chicago Daily News*, 24 September 1895, p. 5.

DEATH IN THE YELLOW PRESS NEWSPAPERS

For the 1895 New Year's day issue of the *Chicago Tribune*, the editors added up all the deaths by disaster, epidemics, war, and accidents reported in their paper from around the world. The totals were sobering: died at sea—6,804; inland waters—77; rail—3,648; "disasters abroad"—25,073; "disasters at home"—7,716; in battle—82,570; by "pestilence"—175,910 for a reported total of 305,790 (the actual total, when you add up the numbers, is 305,798).

The world's mortality rate or totals may not have changed much between 1870 and 1895, but newspapers certainly paid more attention to death. The number of death-related stories per newspaper's two-week sample rose from about 52 in 1870 to just over 86 in 1895.

Deaths of Public Figures

Much of this increase came from a rise in obituary-like stories reporting the death of an individual; that figure rose five-fold between the 1870 and 1895 samples, from 40 to 207, and had the largest total of the 1895 sample. Obituaries, death notices, and stories noting the passing of a notable figure (whether local, national, or international) would become by far the most common type of death-related story in the last half of the twentieth century.

The increase, as in other years, was facilitated in part by better communication and an ever-expanding news industry. As the number of newspapers increased (nearly 2,000 American dailies by 1900[24]) and better

[24] For a good discussion of the social and technological factors in the newspaper boom of the 1890s, and the specifics of its growth, see George Everett, "The Age of New Journalism, 1883-

transportation systems allowed for the farther and faster spread of news, editors had a growing pool of non-local news from which to choose. They chose stories about people who had died, even as their own reporters continued to cover the deaths of notable local figures.

Editors regarded obituaries as so newsworthy in part because they continued to recognize the news value of the human interest story. The penny press had turned the death notice into the human interest story, as Helen McGill Hughes argued (see Chapter 6), and newspapers in the last third of the nineteenth century continued the trend.

The choice of whose death to cover shows how societal values had shifted since colonial days, and how news values reflected those shifts. Colonial papers noted most frequently the passing of clergy, public officials, and businessmen, on the grounds that their deaths were news because they were a serious loss to the community. After the American Revolution military men made the list more often, and generally speaking for the first half of the nineteenth century natural deaths covered as news were limited to those with high social or political status.

By the end of the nineteenth century journalists were covering a much broader array of deceased persons. While continuing to cover traditional figures, newspapers also noted the passing of gamblers, criminals, athletes, entertainers, strongmen, and others who, by reason of their accomplishments or perhaps some other less exemplary quality, the editors judged interesting enough to warrant public notice.

1900" in *The Media in America: A History* edited by Wm. David Sloan and James D. Startt 4th ed. (Northport, Ala.: Vision Press, 1999).

One frequent motif, especially in the West where many of those who were wealthy had created their fortunes in mining or agriculture, was the rags-to-riches story. Perhaps nearly as common was the reverse, the riches-to-rags story: "THE BAY WAS HIS FATE; A Noble Hungarian Becomes a Pauper and Dies Demented; Ferdinand Oswald, a Cultured Physician, Spends His Fortune and Dies a Flower Peddler in This City."[25]

These stories frequently underlined religious and cultural values of the day. Under a heading of "Good Stories for All," the *Boston Daily Globe* reported "Eccentric Francis Dunlop of Washington Dead."[26] The article described a man "born in the lap of luxury," but after graduating from Princeton, "Suddenly his mind grew crotchety. No one has ever been able to determine exactly the cause of his mental failure, or rather, the sudden exaggeration of its whimsical tendencies." Dunlop apparently transformed from an aristocrat into a "secretive misanthrope, with apparently but one idea in the world and that was to outrival Beau Brummel in his apparel and the Count d'Orsay in his walk and actions." He favored very high-heeled shoes, coats with enormous shoulder pads, and trousers with "immense flaps" over his insteps and made from cloth with "extravagant patterns." He walked with "mincing steps," had a fine eye for art and gems, and enjoyed window-shopping. The article does not mention a cause of death, noting only that he was 67 years old. For 40 years he drew comments for his appearance, "and for as long a time he was the inspiration of the jeers of the heartless and ignorant and the pity of the charitable."

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[25] 14 March, 1895, p. 9.
[26] 21 February 1895, p. 9.

"'Big Mike' Murray is Dead," announced the June 15, 1895 *New York Times*.[27] Big Mike, "one of the oldest and richest of the professional gamblers in the United States, died suddenly" from heart disease. The story noted that he had quit drinking and smoking 12 years earlier and consumed instead considerable quantities of ice water. "His friends believe this hastened his end." Moreover, he was "known as a square gambler, and his word was taken among his associates without question."

Other times reporters drew moral lessons in describing the lives of the deceased. Two of the original five owners of the Comstock mine died within six days of each other around New Year's, 1895. One, named Fair, "gave up the ghost surrounded every luxury that money could buy, the other [Jonas Walker, most recently deceased] had hardly the wherewithal to keep the wolf from the door," the result of a career of unfortunate business decisions and a lavish lifestyle. "The lesson," sermonized the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "is a striking one; two prominent figures have died that it might be given."[28]

Each of these three stories illustrate how journalists applauded cultural values consistent with Protestant liberalism. The eccentric Dunlop should be viewed with charity, despite his odd habits; Mike the gambler was "square" and temperate despite his unseemly profession, and the unfortunate Walker "illustrates the vicissitudes of fortune."

Not every obituary or story contained such explicit moralizing, but whatever moralizing occurred generally supported the reformist or liberal

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[27] P. 9.
[28] 4 January 1895, p. 12.

Christian point of view. "To say that Mrs. Roberts was a good woman is superfluous," said one of her eulogists. "That she was a Christian we all believe; she manifested it by her work." He added that "It is good to contemplate the work that this woman has done for those men who were most neglected, but I hardly dare say most sinful, as I contemplate the great ones who help to manipulate and perpetuate those conditions under which they fell."[29] Here the concepts are intertwined: a good Christian is defined not by predestination or what she believes, but by her "good works" for poor and "neglected" men, whose sufferings are the fault of those who "perpetuate" social conditions leading to poverty.

The southern *News and Courier*, unsurprisingly, often noted the deaths of Confederate soldiers and officers, and the politics of the region on occasion slanted the coverage in direct ways. One uncharitable headline was "Death of a Man Untrue to His State," about a federal pay official, residing in Charleston, who died of apoplexy.[30]

Crime

The main features of sensationalism in the Yellow Press are well-known: big headlines, graphic and lurid details, a sense that the issue has been blown out of proportion, and a disrespect for strict accuracy. Historians seldom discuss the most significant feature of sensationalism, however: At its core sensationalism is about society's reaction to social and moral disorder. It requires a public sense of morality, for if there is nothing to offend there can be no such thing as

[29] 21 March, 1895, p. 10.
[30] 9 January 1895, p. 6.

sensationalism. Truly sensational crime news, as discussed in Chapter 3, reports the extreme edges of behavior in society. It reports not what the boundaries of acceptable behavior are but the worst of what has been done so far. The unstated implication is that, if left unchecked, such behavior might become more common.

Journalists who gained a reputation for sensationalism knew how to emphasize those elements of social or moral disorder in a particular story that were most offensive and shove those in the reader's face through pointed leads and large and loud headlines, decks and illustrations.

Possibly the most commonly sensationalized murders involved family relationships; the frequency of such stories showed that newsmen recognized that to portray a violation of such intimate relationships was deeply offensive to their readers. Along with the bare fact of a killing, reporters would look for some other ironic or particularly horrifying aspect of the story. Husbands murdering wives was the most common, but there were others: "MRS. TUSKOLKA CUT TO DEATH: Charles Tuskolka's Stepdaughter Describes a Scene of Butchery—His Wife had Refused Him Money"[31]; "ACCUSED OF SLAYING HIS SON: Terrible Crime for Which an Aged Covelo Man is Now Held to Answer; Frank Knight Killed in His Own House, and His Body Cremated in His Own Fireplace"[32]; "TO SAVE WIFE'S LIFE: Why Charles Thompson Killed His Brother; Quarrel at North Carmel, Me., Ends in Tragedy; Victim, Crazed with

[31] *New York Times*, 29 August 1895, p. 2.
[32] *San Francisco Examiner*, 11 March, 1895, p. 3.

Drink, Commences the Fight; Turns on Sister-in-Law with Murderous Blows; His Brains Dashed Out by the Woman's Husband."[33]

For the modern reader, at times the horror seems so gruesome it must have been parody. Most of the really bizarre accounts, such as the woman-eating tree, came from overseas; the difficulty of disproving such stories suggests that they may not have been wholly accurate. For example, the headline and decks of an October 29, 1985 issue of Hearsts's San Francisco *Examiner* (in a rewrite of a *New York World* story) read: "SHE SUPPED ON HER FATHER: European Criminologists Aghast at the Extraordinary Case of Anna Jungnitsch; After Murdering Her Parent She Salted His Flesh to Use for Food; Surprised Into a Confession; When the Police Came to Investigate She Offered Them Sausages Made of the Flesh of Her Victim." The story asserted that she had in the house a German translation of Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (a satire proposing that the Irish aristocracy solve poverty by eating poor children) and, when caught, said, "I have killed my father and he makes excellent eating."

On the other hand, some stories were believable in part because they were graphic and detailed. A story from southwest Arizona told in a lengthy narrative how robbers murdered a shop keeper and his son and then hacked off their ears and noses and otherwise mutilated the corpses. The wife barely escaped by hiding in the mesquite bushes outside the store, then hiked three miles to the next town.[34]

Journalists frequently explained such horrible deeds as insanity. Such an assessment appearing in a newspaper was not normally a clinical assessment but a

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[33] *Boston Herald*, 20 March 1895, p. 7.
[34] "MURDER FOR ROBBERY," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 January 1895, p. 6.

popular verdict or assumption. "SLAIN BY AN INSANE SON," said one *New York World* headline. "Young Hurd Says an Impulse Came Over Him that He Could not Resist; Victim [Hurd senior] Once Tried for Murder."[35] The article added that "While it is generally believed that young Hurd is insane, he shows no signs of insanity, unless his indifference may be so regarded. He has always been regarded as peculiar." In an age that had rejected doctrines such as original sin and the depravity of man, many journalists seemed to regard insanity as the best explanation.

Insanity as legal defense was common enough that the *Examiner* editorialized that it should be abolished. The conflicting testimony of dueling experts in the courtroom, complained the *Examiner*, "is often little better than a farce." It continued: "A person who knows the difference between right and wrong, who fears punishment and seeks to escape it, should be subject to the same laws as other people" as a deterrent and a means of preserving public safety.[36]

Newspapers continued to be alert to social disorder that indicated the presence of larger issues. The San Francisco *Examiner* reported that a rancher shot a neighbor with a shotgun after an evening together: "The murder is one of many that have been committed from quarrels growing out of water rights, and is the second reported from Cajon Pass within a few months."[37]

The next day, the *Examiner* reported that rioting dockworkers in New Orleans had killed five black laborers and seriously wounded several other

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[35] 8 December 1895, p. 38.
[36] "Insanity as a Defense," *San Francisco Examiner*, 15 March 1895, p. 6.
[37] 12 March 1895, p. 4.

people: “The riot was far more serious than the loss of life indicated, for it showed the mob to be in complete control and able to defy and override the police, and the commerce of the city was completely at its mercy.”

The conflict started

> over labor matters [and] has in time changed to a bitter race war. The white screwmen who load cotton on vessels, who constitute one of the strongest labor unions in the country and who have a large sum of money in their treasury and have been masters of the cotton situation in New Orleans for years, decided that there was not enough money in the business for them and the negroes.[38]

The *Examiner*, in its three-column story with woodcut illustrations, sympathized with the black victims and the merchants who employed them. “The avowed purpose of the riots today,” charged the paper, “which were pre-arranged in every detail, was to carry terror to the hearts of the negro laborers engaged in loading vessels, and the ship agents, merchants and others who were employing and abetting them.”

The above example also illustrates how editors, in the North and South, were very race-conscious in this period; accounts of race-related conflict and death were more frequent in the 1895 sample than any other. This is not surprising in a period in which segregation was enforced and reports of lynching were common. In the *Charleston News and Courier* of April 22, 1895, “A FIVE-FOLD LYNCHING” tells how “Two Negro Men and Three Negro Women Summarily Disposed of for Murder Near Greenville, Ala.” The nephew of the ex-governor of Georgia had been waylaid, killed and then cremated. One of the

[38] 13 March 1895, p. 2.

household servants, "Zeb, finally told what he knew of the missing man. His confession involved four others and it was reported that all of the parties lynched confessed the crime before they were swung up."

Reports of lynching in the *News and Courier* often asserted that the victims had "confessed" (given the dark history of lynching, the vast majority of such reported confessions would seem, at best, highly suspect). This convention had undergone an ironic twist since colonial days. In the 1700s sermons and news stories quoted or at least summarized confessions of penitent and sorrowful criminals. The purpose was to show that that the accused had made his peace with God; the hanging executed lawful justice and restored moral order in society. By the late 1800s reports of confessions by victims of lynching were never quoted or summarized and the purpose of the accounts was to legitimate the killings so that society, in a sense, could make peace with itself.[39]

The "FIVE-FOLD LYNCHING" is an excellent illustration. The victims were black. The party of guards taking the accused from Butler Springs to Greenville for trial was "of brave and determined men." They were stopped and

> commanded upon pain of instant death, to be still. Probably a hundred brave and desperately determined men, with arms in their hands, took the five prisoners from the guards and hanged them to the limbs of trees and left their bodies dangling in that position.

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[39] Ida B. Wells and others would arouse the national conscience and make lynching a national issue with their work in the 1890s and first decades of the twentieth century, but the 1895 sample for this study (which did not include any of the burgeoning number of black newspapers) had little evidence that journalists in the major urban newspapers of the day were prepared to air serious doubts, if they had any, about the justice of a good lynching party. For a more thorough discussion of lynching coverage, in the *New York Times* in particular, see Chapter 5, "Balance: A "Slanderous and Nasty-Minded Mulatress,' Ida B. Wells, Confronts 'Objectivity' in the 1890s," in David T.Z. Mindich, *Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

From the writer's perspective, the guards are "brave and determined" men for they intend to see justice carried out through the proper channels. The lynch mob was also "brave" yet "desperate," for they were determined to see justice carried out immediately. The story ends that "it was reported" that the victims confessed to emphasize that, as far as the writer could see, justice would have been done either way, but lynching was quicker.

Reports of lynching originating from the South consistently attempted to legitimatize lynching using such strategies and others. Sometimes the reports described the original crime in great detail to justify the anger of the community, such as when a 15-year-old black lad, accused of attacking a 12-year-old white boy with an axe ("The victim's head was literally cut to pieces") was captured and gunned down by a mob, "it being estimated that five hundred shots were fired. His body was riddled with bullets."[40] One account told how, after an "unknown Negro" had knocked down his wife, a white Louisville farmer got his shotgun and hunted the man down. He was acquitted, "there being no doubt of the negro's identity."[41] Nor, apparently, was there any doubt in the journalist's opinion that such an offense justified gunning down the offender.

And if blacks were killing their own, who could doubt that the accused deserved it? A story datelined from Springfield, Ky., was headlined, "Negro Lynched by Negros." "The mob did its work in a quiet and orderly way," it asserted, and "in the opinion of many" the mob was composed of "colored

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[40] *Charleston News and Courier*, 13 December 1894.
[41] "A Husband's Quick Vengeance," 22 February 1895, p. 1.

men."[42] Another from Kingston, Mo., claimed that a black mob shot through the jailhouse bars a black man accused of killing his own wife.[43] Even the courts (at least in New Orleans) recognized the right of blacks to lynch another black. "LYNCH LAW SANCTIONED," read a headline in the *Boston Daily Globe*, "No Color Line When It Comes to Punishing Murderers."[44] The brief story told how the black neighbors of a "worthless colored man [named] Bob Williams," who was accused of murder, lynched him "in the most orthodox fashion":

> This novel departure on their part caused great excitement, and the men who were engaged in it were promptly indicted by the grand jury for murder. The petit jury, however, laid down the proposition that they have the same lynching privileges as the whites, and yesterday acquitted all the prisoners.

In the West whites were also lynched, but newspaper accounts sometimes treated the victims as human. Where accounts of lynching blacks might or might not provide the names of the victims, a San Francisco *Examiner*[45] piece described in considerable detail a ranch hand who had ambushed a cowboy from a rival ranch (the bad blood was over accusations of rustling). The murderer, identified by his victim before he died, was captured, shot while trying to escape and then hung "in a dying condition." The notable feature of the story is how much personal information it provided about the lynched man: the family background of Albert Littlefield, details of his capture, and even a drawing two columns wide,

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[42] *New York World*, 27 July 1895, p. 8.
[43] *New York World*, 18 February 1895, p. 8.
[44] 13 January 1895, p. 7.
[45] "Lynched While Gasping His Last," 2 October 1895, p. 1.

based on a photograph, of Littlefield himself sitting cheerfully on a box, ankle resting on his knee.

Still, most treatment of lynched murderers was considerably more terse. In Wichita, Kan., were "Three Outlaws Lynched," according to the January 5, 1895 *San Francisco Chronicle*. They were captured and "hanged without delay, their bodies shot to pieces and left hanging as a warning to their kin."

Coverage of lawful executions continued as well. The *San Francisco Chronicle*, apparently in an attempt to mimic the style of the *Examiner*, provided saturation coverage of a triple hanging in June of 1895. The front-page headlines tell the story. June 5: "THEY WILL BE HANGED; Five Murderers Will Die on Friday"; June 6: "THREE MEN MUST DIE; San Quentin's Gibbet in Readiness"; June 7: "THE SHADOW OF DEATH; It Rests Upon the Three Murderers; Garcia, Azof and Collins Die To-Day"; June 8: "THREE CRUEL MEN DIE ON THE GIBBET; Killed by San Quentin's Executioner."

Newspapers seldom referred to religious issues in their crime coverage. The one exception in this sample was in the *Chronicle*'s June 8 account of the actual hanging. Both woodcut illustrations in the long, front-page story featured priests prominently. The second paragraph began, "The three men passed from one life to another with a stolidity which embarrassed the guards who pinioned them." Garcia died first. He yelled good-naturedly, "Good-bye," to the spectators, then as priests prayed for him in Spanish the trapdoor opened and he "shot through the hole and hung at the end of the rope." His pulse failed in 13 minutes, then he was cut down. Azof showed similar bravado. He "exclaimed in a queer,

piping voice, ‘Good-by, fellows; here goes a brave man,’” and “died without a struggle.”

Collins, however, was terrified of death. He,

> weak and anguish-riven, tottered forth to meet the fate he had so completely earned. To all intents and purposes Collins was a dead man before the noose encircled his bare neck. Had they dropped him through without the rope he would have died just the same.

Collins, who had stabbed his wife with a jackknife 35 times, was able to maintain a semblance of composure only through a “mild sort of religious frenzy.” He was “deeply penitent” and spent many of his last hours with a priest. In a way that resembled a Puritan hanging, the priest delivered the confession, stating that Collins had “made full reparation for his crimes, which were caused by whiskey . . . He dies in the faith of the Catholic Church, fully repentant and sorry for what he has done.”

> Yet the abject misery of the dying wretch excited no pity. His brutal, drunken rage had robbed a family of worse-than-fatherless children of a faithful mother. The crime was one of the most brutal on record, but Collins had more than atoned for his sin. For weeks he suffered a living death, and, when the time came for him to stand on the trap-door, he scarcely realized the fact. His hopes were set on heaven and he expressed, through his spiritual adviser, his willingness to go there.

This account resemble a Puritan execution sermon in some ways, but a Puritan would never say that mental anguish (rather than Christ’s death) had “atoned” for a murderer’s sin. In a society where liberal Protestantism was the major religious influence, however, such an assertion was acceptable.

Only one story in the 1895 sample mentioned abortion, and that was in the context of crime—until the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision it

was a crime in many states. Marvin Olasky's *The Press and Abortion, 1838-1988*[46] is the major work on abortion coverage in American newspapers. He describes how in the early nineteenth century, in the few newspapers that covered the subject, abortion stories were filled "with specific detail concerning the depravity of abortionists, the misery of young women who sought them out, and the tragedy of unborn children victimized."[47] Other papers, particularly in New York, chose not to antagonize the abortionists who advertised heavily in their pages and paid little attention to it. Despite this, due to public pressure in the late 1800s laws against abortion were tightened and some newspapers covered the arrest of abortionists whose work led to the deaths of young women.

The *New York Times*, due to the Christian influence of its founder Henry Raymond and later George Jones, who owned the newspaper through the 1870s until he died in 1891, was one of the few newspapers to strongly oppose abortion and abortionists. In 1896 Adolph Ochs bought the *Times* and soon decided that abortion was not among the topics covered by the slogan, "All the News That's Fit to Print." Other journalists agreed, and Olasky argued that by ignoring abortion in the first half of the twentieth century, newspapers helped the practice to continue.

The front-page story in the May 25 *Times*, "SOLOMON H. MANN DEAD" and the preceding story the day before illustrate some of these key characteristics. Plumber David Hannigan had shot Mann on the street in revenge for the death a few months earlier of his sister, Loretta, a typist in Mann's shop.

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[47] Olasky, *The Press* Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1988*and Abortion*, xii.

Mann had gotten her pregnant and she had fallen deathly ill after having an abortion. The coroner assembled an impromptu grand jury in the girl's room. She stated that she was dying "from the results of a criminal operation [a euphemism for abortion] performed by Dr. Henry Pettingill." Later, when asked if anyone in the room had wronged her, she

> raised a trembling finger toward now the man now lying in hospital and feebly said, "Yes, that man, Solomon H. Mann." At this point the rear door of the room was opened and [Hannigan], rushed into the room, revolver in hand, and exclaimed, "Let me get at him! Let me kill the man. I will fill him full of holes."[48]

Loretta died a few hours later. Pettingill was never charged, as the panel of surgeons that performed the autopsy could not agree that she had had an abortion. Mann was charged with manslaughter but the trial was pending when Hannigan killed him.

The *Times* clearly sympathized with Hannigan. It reported that as Hannigan was marched from prison to court "there was a crowd in front of the station, and there was shouting and some cheering as Hannigan appeared. The majority of those in the throng were women, and they were plainly in sympathy with the prisoner." The paper included a touching account of Hannigan's meeting in court with his father, his inquiries about his mother, wife and child, and added an expert assessment: "Ex-Judge Flammer said no jury in the world would convict Hannigan of the murder of Mann."

This account illustrates how newspapers covered the deaths of young women who died as a result of abortion, but abortion itself was not the focus.

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[48] "Tries to Kill S.H. Mann," *New York Times*, 24 May 1895, p. 1.

Rather, Hannigan—and the *Times*—clearly regarded Mann as the primary wrong-doer, the one who had "betrayed" Loretta, not the abortionist. The unborn child was nowhere mentioned. In a society where lynching was relatively frequent, the applause and cheering shows that there was considerable public support for the idea that the brother of a woman betrayed should take the law into his own hands, and the *Times* reflected that support.

Accidents

The 1895 sample had 173 reports of fatal accidents, third-largest category for that year. Deaths involving trolley cars and trains characterized accident coverage in the period. In 1895 both the San Francisco *Examiner* and the *New York Times* covered such deaths, but they took opposite positions on the best way to deal with the problem.

"The killing of over 100 persons in Brooklyn by the trolley cars has aroused the people and also officials of that city to the imperative necessity for some measure or device that will put an end to this terrible slaughter," began a March 8, 1895 report in the *Times*.[49] It asserted that there is a "great public outcry" for fenders on trolley cars and insisted that the drivers slow down. "An investigation of the whole subject by the New-York Times leads to the conclusion that the saving of human life in Brooklyn is a question not so much of fenders as of speed" and that the motormen should drive more carefully. The report quoted several officials who, denying public complaints that the trolley car firms think fenders are too expensive, insisted that they would gladly install fenders if they

[49] P. 8.

could find one that worked. The report ended with a listing of over a dozen cars observed exceeding the 10 miles per hour limit ("Car 4,305 Nostrand Avenue line, Clymer to Wilson Street, approximate rate of speed 17 3/4 miles an hour") and a threat from the mayor to arrest the trolley car company presidents if their motormen refuse to slow down.

On the other coast, Hearst's *Examiner* declared that "ANOTHER CHILD IS MURDERED."[50] The decks ran as follows: "Little Louis Giorno run Down by an Electric Car on Broadway; The Front Wheels Passed Over His Body, Crushing It in a Frightful Manner." The editorial introduction stated that 19 people had been crushed since the electric cars arrived on city streets, and the story itself led with, "Had the car that struck little Louis Giorno, on Broadway, opposite the County Jail, yesterday morning, been properly protected by fenders, his life would in all probability been spared." The front-page story included a large cartoon of a trolley car in the shape of a huge skull, shown from in front, driven by a grim, shady-looking character. The foot, arm and umbrella of a victim protrude from beneath the grinning jaw. Watching all this are a couple of clean-cut children holding hands, clearly dismayed, a couple of outraged citizens, and an undertaker, standing beneath a sign that says "Morgue," looking on approvingly. The office advertising "Accident Life Insurance" on the other side of the street is "Closed." The caption: "The Trolley Monster of the Reckless Monopoly."

The paper provided many details about the Giorno family designed to tug on the heart strings of *Examiner* readers: the father, a tailor, had arrived three

[50] 1 October 1895, p. 1.

months ago and “by dint of hard struggling and saving he managed to gather money enough from his wages to send for his family.” They had arrived from San Antonio just 10 days earlier. The parents “are in very straightened circumstances and the battle for break was hard enough without having their misery added to by the violent death of one of their babies.” Louis was nine.

The reporter conceded that he found no eye-witnesses to tell how the boy fell beneath the wheels but described a grim scene with the boy trapped under the car: “The wheel had not passed completely across the body, but rather sidewise, partly disemboweling the child.” “Sickened” bystanders, with a heroic effort, lifted the car off the track to extract the boy, but he died traveling to the hospital.

The reporter quoted the motorman insisting that he had been traveling only four miles per hour and that the boy, running from some friends, had collided with the trolley because he wasn’t watching where he was going. The reporter charged that the driver’s story conflicted with that of the boy’s siblings and asserted that the boy was “the latest victim of the criminal carelessness of the Southern Pacific Company.” “The residents along Broadway say that the cars are run with an utter disregard for life, and that it is strange that there have been so few deaths.”

The two reports illustrate the difference between the sensational approach to accident coverage and the alternative. Even in 1895 the *Times* (Adolph Ochs would not purchase and bring to the *Times* his reserved, respectable brand of journalism until the following year) could report 100 deaths in Brooklyn alone yet produce a sober report calling for more responsible driving habits. The *Examiner*

turned the death of one boy (quite possibly due to his own carelessness, along with 19 accidents for which the *Examiner* provided no details) into an opportunity to call the Southern Pacific Company a bunch of murderers.

Hearst had a long-standing battle with the Southern Pacific Company, but the charge of "murder" for accidental deaths was not uncommon, as journalists simply took further the practice that became more common in the era of the Penny Press of assigning moral culpability for accidental deaths. "MURDERED BY CONTRACTORS," read an October 7, 1895 *News and Courier* headline after a "Platform Holding a Thousand Spectators, at the Laying of the Corner-stone of a Roman Catholic Church, Gives Way on Account of Rotten Timbers." A sermon summarized in the *Chicago Tribune* explained the commonly held attitude, that society has to balance the risks involved in everyday activity with the moral responsibility to preserve human life and strive for progress:

> The fact that more than 300 lives were lost in the sinking of the *Elbe* should not discourage the use of steamers and travel by ocean, but should for greater care in avoiding all possible dangers. If man is to give up everything that has in it the element of risk the seas would never be sailed nor continents crossed.

On the other hand, thousands of people die annually, sacrificed on the "altars of the god of wealth; other thousands on the foolish altars of fashion, pride and ambition; and hundreds of thousands are shortening their days in the fierce competition of business and the struggles for place and power." "Any lack," continued Dr. Thomas, "of all possible care or of insufficient help or of the

overworked watchman, switchman, engineer to save money at the risk of lives, is murder. Life is worth more than money."[51]

Newspapers, as always, favored stories about highly unusual or otherwise sensational accidents. A front-page story in the May 10, 1895 *Boston Herald* was headlined, "HEAD CUT OFF." A drunken couple either lay down to sleep or collapsed in a rail yard and both were run over when rail workers moved some cars the next morning. The story described the woman's "frightfully mangled head lying outside the rails" and her companion's mangled legs.

If there were witnesses to an accident, reporters seldom failed to describe their reaction, likely to provide the reader a sense of being there alongside them, seeing and feeling the horror vicariously. "FELL A THOUSAND FEET TO HER DEATH," declared the San Francisco *Examiner* of the "aeronaut" Nellie Hagel when her parachute failed to open after she let go of her balloon.[52]

> She could be seen for a moment, vainly clutching at imaginary ropes to stay her descent, and the spectators turned sick with horror. Men groaned and wrung their hands, women shrieked and fainted, and children ran screaming from the sight. It was all over in a moment. She came to the ground not fifty feet from where she went up, and the crazed husband, followed by the throng, rushed to the spot where his wife lay, a bleeding, crushed, shapeless mass, bearing no semblance to a human being. She had struck her head, and it is impossible to describe the awful way in which she was mangled.

The story was datelined from Monrovia, and the *Examiner* added a supplementary story describing how Hagel's first wife had been killed when he was in San Francisco. He sent her up to the do the act on a blustery day and the

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[51] "Real Value of Life," 4 February 1895, p 4.
[52] 29 September 1895, p. 1.

wind caught the balloon carrying the first Mrs. Hagel, "a pretty little waiter girl who had become smitten with him" on only her second day on the job, and dashed her into a building where her rigging became entangled. "She clutched at the eaves with all her weak strength, but time after time was her frail body smashed against the boards. The horror-stricken crowd seemed incapable of doing anything but gazing at the awful spectacle." She eventually fell about 50 feet, and died the next day. "Hagel did not dare appear in public for a long time, and he never attempted to make another ascension in the city."

Accidents with technological failures continued to be unusual; only four percent of the details classified in the 1895 sample marked a technological failure. One of the few was about a man and a boy killed demonstrating a fire escape. When the rope broke, the ladder they were on fell six stories to the ground "with frightful velocity."[53]

It was hard to express faith in science in the context of accidental death, but at least one reporter managed it. A noted New York bacteriologist named Dr. John M. Byron contracted consumption, but before he died he said that he must have inhaled some dried germs that floated into the air like dust:

> I was doing some experimenting with tuberculosis bacteria, and I suppose that some of them had been allowed to dry—how I don't know—but may be that some were brushed to the floor during our researches, or that the bottles were not thoroughly sterilized, or in any of the thousand and one ways in which carelessness may exhibit itself.

[53] "Met a Terrible Death," *Boston Herald*, 17 March 1895.

The *Boston Herald* led its story on his death by calling him "a martyr to his scientific work in the interests of humanity."[54]

Suicide

On August 21, 1894, a happy, young, adulterous couple committed suicide in New York's Central Park. Julius Marcus, "a handsome and romantic young Hebrew, shot Mrs. Juliette Fournier through the heart, and then put a bullet in his own temple."[55] She, married to a Brooklyn painter, was only 17. In Marcus's pocket were suicide notes and a copy of a *New York World* column headlined "Suicide is Not Death." It was part of a series called "Is Suicide a Sin?" Popular agnostic writer Col. Robert Ingersoll's answer was a definite no:

> Under many circumstances a man has a right to kill himself. When life is of no value to him, when he can be of no real assistance to others, why should a man continue? The old idea was that God made us and placed us here for a purpose and that it was our duty to remain until he called us. The world is outgrowing this absurdity. What pleasure can it give God to see a man devoured by cancer; to see the quivering flesh slowly eaten; to see the nerves throbbing with pain? Is this a festival for God? Why should the poor wretch stay and suffer? A little morphine would give him sleep—the agony would be forgotten and he would pass unconsciously from happy dreams to painless death.

The *Times* went after Pulitzer and the *New York World* over the issue, running a two-and-a-half-column essay blaming the deaths of the couple on "satanic" journalism ("ITS TRIUMPH IS IN DEATH: Satanic Journalism Has Had its Double Sacrifice"[56]), one story pinning another suicide on the series ("SHE READ INGERSOLL'S ARGUMENT: Then Mrs. Emma R. Gould

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[54] 9 May 1895, p. 2.
[55] *New York Times*, 22 August 1894, p. 8.
[56] 26 August 1894, p. 17.

Discussed It and Finally Killed Herself"[57]), and another asserting prosecutors were warning that "TO ADVISE SUICIDE A CRIME: Those Who Have Done So May be Severely Punished."[58]

Suicide was never so frequently reported as in the 1890s; the 1895 sample for this study included 81 suicide stories, more than double the 1870 total. The number drops to 52 in 1925 and then steadily on down to 7 in the 2000 sample.

The attitudes of the two papers toward suicide reveal much about the differences in coverage between sensational papers, like Pulitzer's *World* and Heart's *Examiner*, and the more moderate journals. Suicide stories in the latter often paralleled those in the Penny Press, which pointed out how wrong-doing leads to despair which leads to death. "Suicide of a Defaulter" told how the treasurer of Bailey Manufacturing Co. in Hartford shot himself through the heart the day after the company president charged the accounts were short. "Robinson's downfall is attributed to poker playing," observed the March 17, 1895 *Boston Herald*. A well-known Brooklyn bandmaster gassed himself in his apartment because "domestic troubles, drink, failure in business and worriment over his connection [to a local scandal] drove him, it is supposed, to the act."[59]

World and the *Examiner*, on the other hand, less often found a moral failure to account for the despair; rather, poverty, illness and unrequited love—things not the responsibility of the deceased but rather of forces beyond their control—were among the most commonly reported motives. In a story

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[57] 27 August 1894, p. 8.
[58] 29 August 1894, p. 8.
[59] "HAD TURNED ON THE GAS," *Boston Daily Globe*, 8 January 1895.

summarizing five different suicides the previous day, the December 15, 1895 *World* headline ran, "BY ROPE, POISON, PISTOL: The Life-Weary and Desperate Men and Women Succeed in Killing Themselves." Richard Birch had left town three weeks earlier to avoid his heartless creditors. His wife descended into despair and neighbors had to feed her so she would not starve. When he returned and saw her, "his wife's pitiful condition capped the climax of his woes," and he hanged himself. But nothing in *World* suggested any of this was a moral failure; instead, it printed the suicide note in which "your affectionate, miserable husband" claimed to be "wretched. I cannot help it." Another young German man's note said that "life had no charm for him, he said, he suffered from an incurable disease." One mother, 34, "Followed Her Dead Father" to the grave, and Mary Maleniff, "Only Seventeen, and Pretty," with no known motive and apparently cheerful, took poison. "LOVE DROVE HER TO DEATH," reported the *Examiner*. "Rose Hayes, Deserted by the Man She Worshiped, Ends Her Life With Carbolic Acid."[60]

World and the *Examiner* told dramatic stories about the people who had killed themselves, in accord with their reputation for sensationalism. But their sensationalism did not necessarily translate into more suicide stories. In the two-week sample, *World* ran seven suicide stories and the *Examiner* 10. The average number in the two-week sample of a single newspaper was about 10. The papers with the highest numbers of suicide stories were direct competitors with the

[60] 16 March 1895, p. 8.

Pulitzer and Hearst papers; the *San Francisco Chronicle* with 17 and the *New York Times* with 14.

Given the modest sample size, the differences in the number of suicides reported between the sensational and moderate papers may not be of major significance, but it does suggest that moderate papers attempted to compete, at least to a degree, by dealing with sensational topics even if their style was less so. As Hearst's business manager, T.T. Williams, told an interviewer in 1897,

> Sensationalism is largely a matter of type—of head lines, display, illustrations. The most eminently respectable newspapers in this country at times print matter that the so-called sensational newspaper would never dare to print—but the so-called respectable newspaper escapes uncriticized because it does not look sensational.[61]

What accounts for the spike in suicide reporting? The same factors that led to an increase in death reporting generally; a larger newshole, the increasing availability of sensational out-of-town news, and an increasing reliance on reporters to find and deliver interesting local news prompted editors to turn to that ever-reliable subject, death. In the same period, from 1870 to 1895, crime stories almost doubled in the sample from 94 to 185 while accident stories increased from 111 to 173.

Other Death Stories

Natural disasters, disease and military deaths all continued to receive prominent coverage depending on the number of people who had died, whether there was a notable American interest, and other factors. Increases in coverage for

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[61] Charles Austin Bates, ed., *American Journalism* (New York, 1897), 314; quoted in Everett, "The Age of New Journalism," 234.

these categories were, proportionately, comparable to those of coverage for public figures, accidents, crime and suicide, but the number of stories about natural disasters, disease and war were in a lower class.[62]

This simply reflects the availability of news and the nature of events. A reporter who needs a local story can easily report on the latest murder or accident; he cannot simply find the latest local epidemic, hurricane or war (despite Hearst's infamous alleged cable to the illustrator who wanted to come home from Cuba on the eve of the Spanish-American war in 1898—"You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war"[63]) because these things, unlike murder and accidental death, do not happen every day.

Society had been viewing epidemics with an increasingly scientific eye since the mid-1800s, so that by 1895 the Puritan approach—that epidemics were a judgment of God—was dead. Journalists saw disease as a public health issue. The science was not, by modern standards, objective but the empirical approach was clear. The headline about the aftermath of a killing frost in London was "DEATH RATE JUMPS: Shows an Increase of 50 Percent in London."[64] Coverage was typically tinged by cultural influences of various sorts: "The cholera [epidemic raging in China that had killed thousands] is all attributable to the filthy habits of the Chinese and the weather," according to an interview with a journalist recently returned from Asia. "It is no uncommon sight to see the dead bodies of the cholera victims lying on the street in one block, and in the next a lot of Chinese

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[62] Number of stories, 1870 and 1895: natural disasters, 9 to 21; war, 31 to 41; disease, 28 to 51.
[63] See Everett, "The New Journalism," 235, for the rest of the context.
[64] *Boston Daily Globe*, 24 February 1895, p. 2.

gorging themselves with raw cucumbers and melons."[65] At other times the science seems decidedly unscientific:

> GREEN MEANS CONSUMPTION: Colored Flames Seen by a Person in a Trance Diagnose Disease; A New Hypnotic Phenomenon Discovered by Professor Luys, the French Scientist; A Magnet that Absorbs Emotions; Strange Fire Issuing from the Nostrils and Ears That is Invisible to Ordinary Eyes.[66]

Whereas earlier generations of journalists had included pathological details of illness so their readers had more information with which to assess cases in their own area, by 1895 readers had enough faith in medical science that they were less inclined to do home diagnoses; mentions of blood pouring out of noses and ears and rattling throats are absent. When sudden deaths by disease are reported, journalists focused on circumstances surrounding the deaths. "DEATH AFTER A HAPPY DAY: Heart Disease Kills a Mother Returning from an Outing" as the widow walked home from the park with her two small children.[67] Another young mother died while leaning on her dresser, gazing unblinking into her mirror from eight to eleven a.m. while her child played nearby, "totally happy and unconscious of the terrible truth."[68]

Newspapers, as they do today, generally paid more attention to wars in which the United States had some interest, especially, in 1895, those in Latin America, as coverage of the 1898 Spanish-American War showed.[69] The Spanish,

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[65] "ARE DYING BY HUNDREDS," *Chicago Daily News* 21 September 1895, p. 3.
[66] *San Francisco Examiner*, 29 September 1895, p. 16.
[67] *New York World*, 26 July 1895, p. 1.
[68] "Found Dead Before a Mirror," *Chicago Tribune* 3 April 1895, p. 7.
[69] For a brief account of the war and its coverage by Hearst and Pulitzer, see Everett, "The New Journalism," 235-6.

of course, fared poorly in such coverage: "DIRE DEEDS OF BLOOD: Spanish Soldiers Accused of Killing Women and Girls; Insurgents Driven Out of a Captured Fort and Horrible Atrocities Are Reports to Have Followed—Six Year Old Girl and Her Mother Killed—Young Cuban Girl Hanged and Exposed to the Mob—Widow Robbed of All Her Money."[70]

Journalists, knowing that their readers would identify with the victims, were also alert to the persecution of Christians: "MASSACRE IN CHINA: Christians Killed Without Mercy," according to the June 9, 1895 *San Francisco Chronicle*. Similarly, "ISLAMISM OR DEATH," began a December 16, 1895 *World* story about the Turkish government's attempted genocide of the Armenian Christians:

> Word is being received here daily of thousands of Armenians who are offered the choice between Islam and death. At Marash an Armenian who was ordained an Anglican clergyman rejected Islam and was killed by slow torture. At Harpoot two Protestant preachers and a Syrian priest were murdered for the same cause. At Archmo fifty-two persons died as martyrs to their religion.

CONCLUSION

A New York tramp named Cripps decided to wash up from a dock near the Staten Island Ferry House one September evening. As he bent down to splash some water on his face, the bright moon showed in the black water "the arms and head of a man, ghastly and dripping in the moonlight, and its eyes looked straight into his." With a terrified yelp Cripps started back, slipped, and fell into the water next to the corpse. As he struggled and hollered, sailors from the boat next to him

[70] *Chicago Tribune*, 6 September 1895, p. 3.

mistakenly thought there were two drowning men and threw a rope over both. "And while he battled madly to get free from the body, both were drawn on the cutter together with the rope tangled about them in so intricate a way that a full minute elapsed before the living could be freed from the dead." Cripps, noted the article, needed "some spirits" and several hours to recover.[71]

While journalism historians think of sensation in terms of the worst excesses of the Pulitzer-Hearst circulation battles and coverage of the Spanish-American War (and these factors are important), sensationalism was in many ways also an attempt to throw a rope over readers and bind them face-to-face with Death, if only for a few paragraphs. Journalists, at least some of them, believed that their readers resembled Cripps the tramp. Newspapers could horrify the reader with gore and guts, social and moral disorder of every kind, but he would soon recover and likely would be back the next day for more. All newspapers resorted to sensationalism, at least on occasion. The label of "Yellow" journalism was a question of the frequency and degree of sensation, not the mere presence of blood.

Neither journalist nor reader saw much eternal significance in the murders, accidents and suicides that filled newspapers. Christianity had not disappeared as a cultural influence, but the Christianity in vogue in 1895 was heavily influenced by scientism, materialism, historicism and naturalism. With the authority of the Bible dying, if not yet dead, even those in the Christian tradition downplayed God's existence and rejected the notion that he would interfere in the affairs of

[71] "Tied to a Dead Man in the Water," *Chicago Tribune*, 4 September 1895, p. 5.

men. Among journalists, religion itself was seldom mentioned in news articles and the afterlife was absent.

Journalists did not deny death, but they distanced themselves from traditional Christian interpretations by both belief and journalistic technique and conventions. To scientifically-minded reporters, the world was explainable in terms of what they could see and hear, and that made talk about heaven and hell, sin and redemption, irrelevant to the vast majority of the things they wrote about, even stories involving death. Journalists assumed that people commit horrible murders because they are insane, not because they are depraved or evil, and people commit suicide because they are ashamed or despondent or desperate, not, as a Puritan would have said, because without faith in God their sin led them down dark paths. Coverage of death, therefore, in reflecting the Progressive agenda emphasized instead the social factors that led to the murders, accidents and suicides, things like evil monopolies and heartless bureaucratic structures.

But the sensationalism of the 1890s had within it the trends that would lead to its eventual decay. Many journalism historians believe that the gradual decline of sensationalism after 1900 was the result of a combination of factors: public fatigue with the style of Pulitzer, Hearst and their imitators came to a head after the excesses of their coverage of the Spanish-American War; the rise of an alternative, respectable, professional and objective journalism with the *New York Times* leading the way; the beginning of a tradition of press criticism that exposed the Yellow Press as shameless panderers to vulgar public tastes.

Another factor was that, in terms of religion, sensationalism is fundamentally at odds with the Progressive worldview and liberal Protestantism, even if Pulitzer could (for a time) use sensation to further a Reformist agenda. If the King of Terrors is dethroned by a scientific and Progressive optimism that insists death is, at worst, a mere cessation of being, that takes away from stories of murder and mayhem the urgency, edge, and at least some of the horror. Puritan death coverage was intended to shock people into personal, individual transformation; but if the way to improve society is through collective social action, what need is there to upset people with blood and gore?

Moreover, by leading readers to the extreme edges of human behavior sensationalism says, "Isn't this awful? Have you ever seen or heard of anything like this? Isn't the world getting worse?" Progressivism believes, with all the evolutionary optimism it can muster, that the world ultimately is getting better and better; accounts of blood spurting across the room and bodiless heads lying beside railroad tracks clash with this worldview. They can co-exist for a while, as they did on Pulitzer's *World*, but eventually either the Progressivism will tone down the sensation or the sensation will drive out any pretence of Progressivism. In the end, the Progressive worldview prevailed and in the decades afterward the professionalization of journalism locked into place a secularized version of the Progressive worldview, as the next chapter will show.

Chapter 9: The Modern, Professional Era

The American news media industry went through massive changes in the twentieth century as American society endured a string of major wars (World War I and II, Korea, Vietnam) and periods of tremendous social and political upheaval in between: the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, the Cold War, the Sixties and Watergate, to name a few. While contending with competition and the transformation of American society arising from the development of radio and then television, newspaper journalists also had to adapt to aggressive consolidation efforts by publishers and owners, new printing and photographic technologies, and the rise of the public relations and advertising industries, among other things.

The striking thing about coverage of fatal events in the midst of all this change is how consistent journalists' fundamental approach to death remained. The circumstances, social conditions and issues vary from decade to decade, but a headline such as "Father, 5 Children Perish in N.H. Fire" and the bland, impersonal story that ran under it could have appeared just as easily on the pages of the *Boston Globe* in 1925 or 1975 as its actual date, March 7, 1950.

The message journalists consistently reinforced with death coverage throughout this period was that death, especially untimely death, is the worst of all possible evils. Ideally it would, and likely should, have been prevented. This seems too obvious to state—except that, as previous chapters showed, there are alternatives. The Stoic teaching that death doesn't matter, that it is one of those

things that Nature wills, is absent. The colonial notion that death is the will of God, either punishment or reward (depending on the character of the deceased), is missing along with any hint of a discussion of an afterlife. In this century's newspapers the idea that death in battle is a worthy sacrifice in the service of one's country is present, as in the Revolutionary Press, but in the twentieth century this notion was somehow divorced from the military and moral virtues of the soldier or his cause. Modern journalists certainly do not ignore death, as in the Party Press era. Romantic or Transcendental ideas about death, that it is to be ardently desired as a deliverance from this mundane world or a re-unification with the Great Universal Oneness, are gone by 1900. Journalists in the twentieth century tended to look for the meaning of fatal events in social conditions, not religion, and seldom ventured much beyond decorous and well-established limits when it comes to the grisly details, unlike their nineteenth century predecessors.

A major factor in this consistency after 1900 is the professionalization of journalism. Professional standards and approaches combined with religious attitudes and worldviews current in American society to set the direction and tone for death coverage at the time and this continues, in various ways, even today.

RELIGION, DEATH AND THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF AMERICAN JOURNALISM

Some of the characteristics of a profession are that it can educate, regulate and define its membership; that is, when it develops educational programs, its own standards of conduct and its own systems of enforcement and accreditation.[1]

[1] "Any occupation wishing to exercise professional authority must find a technical basis for it, assert an exclusive jurisdiction, link both skill and jurisdiction to the standards of training, and

In journalism, the process began in the 1870s. Professional societies of journalists began appearing after the Civil War; the Missouri Press Association, for example, was formed in 1876. The first School of Journalism opened at the University of Missouri in 1908, but the University of Pennsylvania had already been offering a degree for 15 years, and Cornell University offered a certificate in journalism beginning in 1874.[2] Journalism ethics standards began appearing in the early twentieth century; the best known of several ethics codes was the American Society of Newspaper Editors' 1922 Canons of Journalism. Journalism still has no formal accreditation process,[3] but the industry has other ways of deciding who is "in" and who is "out." The primary criteria through most of the twentieth century has been adherence to the ideals and techniques of "objectivity," cited in some of the more prominent ethical codes that appeared at this time. The professionalization of journalism, which occurred alongside other occupations, continued well into the twentieth century; even up to the 1980s some journalists thought society failed to grant journalism respect as a profession.[4]

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convince the public that its services are uniquely trustworthy." Harold L. Wilensky, "The Professionalization of Everyone?" *The American Journal of Sociology* 70 No. 2 (Sept. 1964): 138.

[2] David T.Z. Mindich, *Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 115-6.

[3] And in some journalistic circles there is still considerable skepticism about the value of journalism education. Attitudes have not changed much since the *Moberly (*Mo.*) Democrat* sniffed when the journalism school at the University of Missouri began, "As long as men can embark in the newspaper business without education, character, brains or money, there is very little inducement to take higher courses in journalism." Quoted in Maurine H. Beasley, "The Emergence of Modern Media," in *The Media in America: A History* edited by Wm. David Sloan and James D. Startt 4th ed. (Northport, Ala.: Vision Press, 1999).

[4] For a more complete discussion of the professionalization of journalism and the rise in prominence of national news media in the twentieth century, see S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman and Linda Lichter, *The Media Elite: America's New Powerbrokers* (New York: Hastings House, Book Publishers, 1986), 1-19.

Mindich's study of the history of the development of objectivity identifies five components of the concept—detachment, nonpartisanship, the "inverted pyramid" story structure, naïve empiricism (a reliance on "facts" to communicate truth) and balance—and describes their development. By the late 1890s the concept was complete, he argued, when the *New York Times* began striving for "balance."

The concept may have been complete before 1900, but then it was called "realism," the belief that if reporters just dug out and arranged the facts the truth would emerge.[5] The term "objectivity" was not commonly used nor did the concept become a near-universal ideal until after World War I. Michael Schudson proposed that the ideal of objectivity arose at that time in part as a reaction against the radical skepticism current in American society: "It was not the final expression of a belief in facts but the assertion of a method designed for a world in which even facts could not be trusted."[6] Mindich calls it "remarkable" that years after

> consciousness was complicated by Freud, observation was problematized by Einstein, perspective was challenged by Picasso, writing was deconstructed by Derrida, and 'objectivity' was abandoned by practically everyone outside newsrooms, 'objectivity' is still the style of journalism that our newspaper articles and broadcast reports are written in, or against.[7]

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[5] Bill Kovach and Tom Rosestiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 72-73.
[6] Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 122.
[7] Mindich, *Just the Facts*, 5.

On the contrary, there is nothing remarkable about it. As Schudson points out, objectivity arose as an ideal because, although it may have been unattainable, journalists needed some way to reassure the public and possibly themselves that journalism could still be trusted. Had there been no epistemological doubt, there would have been much less need for the ideal of objectivity or for the methods that communicated to the reader that that reporter was striving for it—balance, attribution of sources, verifiability, and a neutral tone. Kovach and Rosenstiel argue that, in the beginning, journalists understood "objectivity" to be a "scientific" method designed to counter journalistic bias, not a characteristic of the reporter. One of the most important figures in the drive for the professionalization of journalism and a scientific approach to objectivity was Walter Lippmann, who wrote: "It does not matter that news is not susceptible of mathematical statement. In fact, just because news is complex and slippery, good reporting requires the exercise of the highest scientific virtues." Over time, the original meaning was lost and, beginning in the 1930s, journalists increasingly began to question "objectivity" (referring to a characteristic of the journalist instead of a method) as unrealistic.[8]

The idea that objectivity arose as an ideal in reaction to skepticism finds support in the history of the historical profession. It went through a similar

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[8] Kovach and Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism*, 73-75. Walter Lippmann's best-known works, in which he sets out his ideas of objectivity and the role of the press in society, include *Liberty and the News* (New Brunswick, N.J. and London: Transaction Publishers, 1995), and *Public Opinion* (New York: Hartcourt, Brace & Co., 1922). For a good discussion on Lippmann's view of objectivity, see Marion Tuttle Marzolf, *Civilizing Voices: American Press Criticism 1880-1950* (New York: Longman Publishing Group, 1991), 112-4. Marzolf adds that another factor in the rise of objectivity was concern about the dangers of propaganda in the aftermath of attempts to manipulate public opinion in World War I.

process, as Peter Novick describes in his detailed study, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession.*[9] His outline shows the progression: I. Objectivity enthroned [1870s to World War I], II. Objectivity besieged [World War I to World War II], III. Objectivity reconstructed [World War II to early 1960s], IV. Objectivity in crisis [1960s on]. Novick describes how in the 1920s and 1930s the "relativist critique" of the "received epistemology" resulted, for a minority of historians, in the collapse of the profession's "founding myth."

> After the Armistice the floodgates opened. New canons of representation in literature and art, new conceptions of mathematics, logic, and empirical science, and new currents in academic disciplines combined to render problematic nineteenth-century certainties in every realm of thought and culture.[10]

Novick singles out the "revolution in physics" as crucial, and dates it from November 1919, when astronomical observations confirmed Einstein's General Theory of Relativity. The result was a widespread "conflation of relativity and subjectivity" in the public mind.[11]

The ideals of objectivity have had a dramatic influence on the nature of death coverage in this century. First, the ideal of objectivity, as it was defined, reinforced among journalists a materialistic way of looking at the world and presenting it to their readers. The existence of an afterlife, for example, cannot be empirically verified. Even though Puritan Increase Mather asserted of a particular death that "the displeasure of Heaven is plainly written upon it in legible

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[9] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
[10] Novick, 134.
[11] Novick, 136-7.

characters," from a modern reporter's perspective God is not available for a sit-down interview to confirm the metaphysical rationale for any particular death.

Second, this emphasis on empiricism, a naturalistic worldview and a "scientific" approach to news also tended to produce journalism that was hostile to particular types of religious faith. Although today some scholars insist that true science is not logically incompatible with faith or even a "fundamentalist" approach to the Bible, in early twentieth century America many saw religion and science as irreconcilable opponents.

For most of the last century, particularly in the first half, religion in America was sharply divided by the "modernist vs. fundamentalist" controversy, a dispute that raged in Catholic, Protestant and Jewish circles. Numerically speaking, American religion was growing at a healthy clip. In 1900 one-third of America's 76 million people were on the membership rolls of synagogues and Catholic and Protestant churches; by 1950, that was true of half of the population of 150 million. That is, churches as a whole grew both in terms of absolute numbers and as a percentage of the population.[12]

But churches and denominations were wracked by controversy (many split) and ultimately the central debate was over the authority of the Bible. In the first century the test of Christian orthodoxy was "What think ye of Christ?" From a fundamentalist perspective, in the twentieth it was "What think ye of the Bible?"[13] The fundamentalists[14] believed that the Bible was the "inerrant" Word

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[12] Edwin Scott Gaustad, *A Religious History of America* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 245-6.
[13] *A Religious History*, 273.

of God, literally true taken as a whole and in all its particulars (but recognizing figures of speech and other literary techniques)—and that included the Creation accounts in Genesis. The modernists (in general, the theological liberals described in Chapter 8) asserted that the Bible was a human creation that might point one way to God but should not be expected to provide "truth" about matters outside its dominion—particularly questions involving science.

Even though many journalists continued to subscribe to a morality based at least partially on Judeo-Christian ethics,[15] insofar as they were religious at all, journalists tended to be highly sympathetic to the modernist stance. Caudill's "A Content Analysis of Press Views of Darwin's Evolution Theory, 1860-1925" describes how, in newspapers, journalists transformed the frame of the conflict over Darwinism from evolution's challenge to religion in 1860 to religion's challenge to scientific fact by the 1920s.[16]

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[14] I use this word referring not, as the current stereotype has it, to uneducated and easily-led rural rubes but sincere Protestants who held theologically conservative views, articulated most completely in a 12-volume set of essays written by 64 American and British scholars between 1910 and 1915 called *The Fundamentals; A Testimony to the Truth* (Chicago: Testimony Pub. Co., 1915).

[15] "Despite the secularization of the profession of journalism, for example, Christian moral and ethics provide a foundation for thinking in American culture and for many practices of journalism." Wm. David Sloan, "Introduction," in *Media and Religion in American History* edited by Wm. David Sloan (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2000), *x*. Doug Underwood agrees, stating that even though journalists tend to regard themselves as "heirs of Enlightenment individuality and rationality," journalists "are solidly connected to the nation's moral and religious heritage and operate, in certain important ways, as personifications of the old religious virtues . . . [journalists] draw much of their professional inspiration from the Bible's prophetic complaints about moral corruption, as well as the calls for reform that grew out of the Protestant Reformation, the Progressive and Populist movements, and the muckrakers and Social Gospel campaigns in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries." See Doug Underwood, *From Yahweh to Yahoo!: The Religious Roots of the Secular Press* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 5.

[16] Ed Caudill, "A Content Analysis of Press Views of Darwin's Evolution Theory, 1860-1925" *Journalism Quarterly* 64 (Winter 1987): 782-86, 946.

Many journalists were openly hostile to the fundamentalist position. The classic example is coverage of the Scopes trial, as Olasky has shown. In 1925 the ideal of objectivity was still being developed, yet the pro-science/anti-fundamentalist bias that would lead journalists to embrace it fully in the next few years was powerful:

> In theory, trial coverage could have been an opportunity to illuminate the theological debate that lay behind the creation vs. evolution issue. But in practice, with few if any Christians among those reporters, the position established early on by columnist H.L. Mencken went apparently unchallenged: "On the one side was bigotry, ignorance, hatred, superstition, every sort of blackness that the human mind is capable of. On the other side was sense."[17]

The attitude of many journalists was illustrated by a lengthy *New York Times* article detailing an address from a noted Yale botanist to the Yale Divinity School, "Merger of Science and Religion Urged."[18] Dr. Edmund Sinnott (who was ill—his paper was read by another professor) insisted that science and religion had to stop their "sniping" and "bickering" because Man needs science but "he is a creature of the spirit, too, and needs high faith by which to live." Materialists could be too hostile, he conceded, but the real problem was "fundamentalist churchmen" who were "insisting on the verbal accuracy of the Bible" and argued about "how Adam's rib could ever become a woman." "Such a deliberately unintelligent religion," he noted, "has little to offer a troubled world today." The answer, according to Sinnott, lay with those who embrace "a sane and

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[17] Marvin Olasky, *Prodigal Press: The Anti-Christian Bias of the American News Media* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 1988), 27. For a more complete discussion of the coverage, see pp. 26-30.
[18] 20 April 1950, p. 31.

liberal religion" who, "though accepting the valid conclusions of science, looks to something deeper for an understanding of that wide area of the unknown about which science can say so little." The article contained no contrary perspectives.

Journalists' pro-science, pro–modernist\anti-fundamentalist biases were reinforced by intellectual trends from various spheres of society. For example, John Dewey, "without question the most influential American philosopher of the first half of the twentieth century," set out to "reconstruct" American society through the means of investigation, experiment and inquiry. Anthropology, history and literary criticism, he wrote, have "furnished a radically different version of the events and personages upon which Christian religions have built."[19] Historian Paul Johnson suggests that the three most influential nineteenth century scholars—all German atheists—whose work offered comprehensive explanations of human behavior, providing a "corpus of thought the post 1918-world inherited," were: Marx, who "described a world in which the central dynamic was economic interest" and religion as an opiate; Freud, for whom "the principal thrust was sexual," saw religion as a "mass delusion"; and Nietzsche, who saw "God not as an invention but as a casualty," and for whom the principal principle was the "will to power."[20]

Gaustad cites, as a journalistic opponent of the fundamentalist point of view:

> Walter Lippmann (1889-1974) for example, as a remarkably influential journalist and widely read author, convinced much of the literate

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[19] Quoted in Gaustad, 264.

[20] Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: The World From the Twenties to the Nineties, Revised Edition* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), 48.

> American public that traditional religion was all washed up and finished. In *A Preface to Morals*, published in 1929, Lippmann explained that the old cultural cohesion had been dissolved by "the acids of modernity." Men and women have now become "brave and brilliant atheists who have defied the Methodist God."[21]

Third, the ideals of objectivity continued to encourage journalists to interpret events as a result of social factors rather than individual choices. Journalists, already becoming more aware of the social context of their stories as shown in Chapter 7 and 8, continued their tendency to deal with death not always as an individual event but as one of many deaths caused either by institutions or social forces of various kinds. This approach meshed well with the scientific emphasis in journalism advocated by Lippmann, and as the century wore on it became more important to newspapers needing to compete with the rise of radio in the 1930s and 1940s and the advent of television soon after that. The years 1900-1950 were a period of transition, explain Barnhurst and Mutz, in which newspapers, "having lost their monopoly on timeliness" to radio and TV, attempted to provide more context and explanation. After 1950 Barnhurst and Mutz observed a "substantial" increase in the amount of interpretation in news stories. They tended to be longer with more analysis, emphasize groups rather than individuals, quote expert sources more, and explain a single event more often by referring to history or time frames outside the story.[22]

Modern journalism is often "fiercely dull," complained Barnhurst and Mutz, but declining competition among newspapers by the latter part of the

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[21] Gaustad, 265.

[22] Kevin Barnhurst and Diana Mutz, "American journalism and the decline in event-centered reporting" *Journal of Communication* 47 No. 4 (1997): 45.

twentieth century meant that newspapers no longer needed to "captivate" readers with compelling narratives. The short item reporting the death of a child run over by a cart in the street in 1894 had all but disappeared by 1994, they wrote. "For a story to qualify as news, journalists now supply a context of social problems, interpretations, and themes. This trend springs from the workings of the news market and the culture of journalism."[23] It also springs, this paper argues, from the same religious worldview that contributed to journalists adopting the ideals of objectivity.

Fourth, the ideals of objectivity, as they developed in the 1920s and 1930s, deter journalists from using sensationalism. The emphasis on summary leads and a "hard" news style (or the inverted pyramid style) tends to push journalists away from narrative style and human interest emphases. Narratives lend themselves more easily to sensational stories, allowing reporters to use rhetorical devices and language that both highlight the most offensive and "disorderly" aspects of a particular death and describe them in graphic terms.

Mitchell Stephens suggested that the decline of sensationalism was related to the decline in newspaper competition.[24] While that may have been a factor in the last half of the twentieth century, when chain ownership became prevalent and one-paper cities the norm, sensationalism was under attack from within the industry long before then.

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[23] Barnhurst and Mutz, 27.
[24] Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997), 284.

The newly-formed codes of ethics themselves often denounced the use of sensationalism. Item VII, on "Decency," of the 1922 American Society of Newspaper Editors' Canons of Journalism declared:

> A newspaper cannot escape conviction of insincerity if, while professing high moral purpose it supplies incentives to base conduct, such as are to be found in details of crime and vice, publication of which is not demonstrably for the general good. Lacking authority to enforce its canons, the journalism here represented can but express the hope that deliberate pandering to vicious instincts will encounter effective public disapproval or yield to the influence of a preponderant professional condemnation.

The wording reveals the common attitude toward the publication of sensational facts: it encourages "base conduct" by providing the "details of crime and vice" and is a "deliberate pandering to vicious instincts." People who read about horrible crimes are more likely to commit them, went the reasoning, because media messages have a powerful influence. "It was widely believed that readers of the yellow press were especially susceptible to the power of suggestion and would model their behavior on what they read," observed Marzolf.[25] She quoted one contemporary newspaper reader who pointed out that the "so-called best newspapers" contained just as much "educative material" as the yellow press: "In these several cases the lesson in crime was patiently and lovingly unfolded and explained, so that any one so caring to do could add it to his or her repertory."

This belief was connected to fear about propaganda in the aftermath of World War I and was consistent with contemporary thinking and scholarship regarding media effects. Scholarly opinion on the power of media effects would fluctuate during the twentieth century, but the "powerful effects model," an

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[25] *Civilizing Voices*, 37.

"essentially naïve and simplistic view [that] predicts strong and more or less universal effects of mass communication messages on all audience members who happened to be exposed to them,"[26] was dominant when professionalization was setting the direction of journalistic attitudes and methods. Having decided that the publication of gory details was harmful to the public in the first two decades of the 1900s, journalists have maintained the attitude throughout the century and the standard is now entrenched. To "sensationalize" is still a pejorative term even though journalists have continued to use sensation, to varying degrees and in varying contexts.

Sensationalism was also regarded as contrary to or undermining the "civic duty" and "high public trust" journalism enjoys by virtue of the First Amendment clause guaranteeing, as it is popularly known, "freedom of the press." From the preamble of the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics, 1927:

> We BELIEVE the agencies of mass communication are carriers of public discussion and information, acting on their Constitutional mandate and freedom to learn and report the facts.
>
> We BELIEVE in public enlightenment as the forerunner of justice, and in our Constitutional role to seek the truth as part of the public's right to know the truth.
>
> We BELIEVE those responsibilities carry obligations that require journalists to perform with intelligence, objectivity, accuracy, and fairness.

Overall, sensationalism was seen as corrosive to society and the individual. Doctor Frederick Peterson in *Collier's* magazine warned that a steady diet of yellow journalism would "gradually wear out the power of the brain cells

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[26] Werner J. Severin and James W. Tankard, *Communication Theories: Origins, Methods, and Uses in the Mass Media 4th ed.* (White Plains, N.Y.: Longman, 1997), 298

to take impressions," inhibit memory, stunt growth and create a "morbid craving for emotional excitement." It would waste away the moral fiber of the nation just as bacteria poisons the body.[27]

This was the opposite approach to sensationalism, in certain respects, of previous generations of American journalists, going back to the Puritan preachers. While Benjamin Harris of *Publick Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestick* would have agreed with the SPJ's insistence on accuracy (and just as vehemently condemned journalists who fabricated stories as any modern press critic) he saw it as his public duty to report even scandalous facts that he considered relevant to his overall message—even to the point of publishing a salacious accusation against the King of France (see Chapter 3). News of a suicide was indeed shocking; such news was supposed to shock so that appalled readers would not do the same. Harris, Cotton Mather, and their ilk were providing negative moral examples.

Olasky describes some early journalists as practicing "biblical sensationalism," a willingness to print shocking facts, provided they were true, in shocking language. "Shall vice and sin be concealed, or exposed?" asked the Rev. J.R. McDowall, editor in 1834 of the "hard-hitting New York monthly appropriately titled, *McDowall's Journal*." He continued, "In deciding this question, I inquire, What does the Bible TEACH and What does the Bible PRACTICE?" The Bible, he concluded, taught "THAT IT IS OUR DUTY TO EXPOSE LICENTIOUSNESS." While some American journalists and press

[27] Quoted and summarized by Marzolf, *Civilizing Voices*, 36.

critics in the early 1900s worried that to publicize the gory details of death would encourage the public to do likewise, McDowall argued that journalists have a duty, along with government, to detect and expose vice and crime. If sin was not detected, exposed and punished, "then you shall see commence the Reign of Terror and the Misrule of Anarchy. Then shall the assassin plunge the dirk and the dagger at noon-day, and blood shall deluge the land . . .."[28] Bloody accounts on the pages of newspapers, McDowall believed, would prevent more blood being spilt in the land.

Modern commentators have occasionally offered similar defenses of sensationalism or ways to distinguish between "good" sensationalism and bad. Slattery suggests that "pernicious" sensationalism is removed from a broader moral context and appeals to prurient interest, while good sensationalism points out an injustice or social evil that requires the community's attention.[29]

This sort of defense of sensational crime reporting was raised occasionally after 1900, according to Marzolf, but many journalists and much of the public found it unpersuasive:

> When a defender of the yellow press tried to justify crime reporting as a deterring lesson about the punishment of evil, the typical retort was that most of the interest in such criminal proceedings is due to a distinctly morbid curiosity. The *Independent* warned that a natural abhorrence toward these crimes is lessened by familiar repetition. "It is well known now that suicides, as reported in the papers, constantly furnish suggestions for further unfortunate being to put an end to their existence."[30]

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[28] Quoted in Marvin Olasky, *Telling the Truth: How to Revitalize Christian Journalism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1996), 255-6, 260.
[29] Karen Slattery, "Sensationalism vs. news of the moral life: making the distinction" *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 9 No. 1 (1994): 5-15.
[30] Marzolf, *Civilizing Voices*, 37.

This is not to say that sensationalism, in general, disappeared from newspapers. It did not. Some journalists thought, or at least wanted readers to think, that only the only people complaining about sensationalism were old women and preachers. The *New York World* ran two stories about mid-Western dailies who had turned their pages over to community leaders for a day under the headline, "Clergymen and Club Women Edit Papers, Minimizing Crime News: Four Preachers Run Minneapolis Daily Star—Sordid Details Kept from Sioux Falls Press by Group of One-Day Editors."[31] *World* editors, with some justification, probably felt that they would soon be out of business if they cut out news of prize fights and crime, along with the comics, in the words of the president of the Sioux Falls History Club, to "make way for better stuff" such as "feature articles of institutions doing humanitarian work," "statements of good will," and complete grain and livestock market reports. *World* editor Bayard Swope told the 1925 meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors that his definition of journalism was: "Life reflected in ink and must partake of the ugliness as well as the beauty." The *Boston Herald* article added that some had criticized "some phases of the profession" but "Deletion and suppression of crime news was touched on and declared to be unsound, it being said that 'expression can never be so bad, for the individual or the group, as suppression.'"[32]

In the 1920s and 1930s, "Tabloid journalism, new on the scene, intensified the debate with its excesses that seemed a throwback to 'yellow journalism,'" as

[31] 25 November 1925, p. 5.
[32] "Says Journalism Is 'Life In Ink,'" Boston Herald, 17 January 1925, p. 4.

Marzolf explained.[33] At the very least, however, critics tamped down the sensationalistic impulse in many papers. Editors still ran sensational stories of violence and murder but they did not run as many sensational stories and there were conventions, depending mostly on how much blood the newspaper editors believed their readers would tolerate, that determined how much blood a reporter could portray.[34] While the most sensational accounts in the twentieth century were in some ways comparable to the bloodiest of the nineteenth, as a whole depictions of violence were far less graphic after 1925 than before.

In this context, Adolph Ochs' approach to sensationalism—embodied by the 1897 slogan, "All the News That's Fit to Print"—perfectly positioned the *New York Times* to become America's journalistic leader. In the first two decades after 1900 he took advantage of a growing backlash against sensationalism, likely made stronger by the excesses of his New York competitors at the *World* and the *Journal*, and the *Times* has continued that philosophy to the present. Melville Stone, writing in the September 19, 1926 *Times* celebrating the paper's 75th anniversary, observed that Ochs defied the notion that only sensational papers could attract large readerships: "He in the end taught [his competitors] that decency meant dollars."

Meanwhile, in the twentieth century attitudes toward death itself in Western Civilization were undergoing significant changes. British sociologist

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[33] Marzolf, *Civilizing Voices*, 76.

[34] For a case study of one journalist's decision-making process regarding blood, see P.R. Parsons and W.E.R. Smith, "Budd Dwyer: a case study in newsroom decision-making" *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 3 No. 1 (1988): 84-94.

Geoffrey Gorer, in his oft-cited article, "The Pornography of Death,"[35] asserted that between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries natural death became taboo, replacing sex as the subject unmentionable in public. Fictional portrayals of unnatural, violent death, rather like sexual pornography, increasingly came to be regarded as titillating, and hence became a central feature in some forms of entertainment such as movies, comics and books.

The French historian Philippe Aries in a noted article, "The Reversal of Death: Changes in Attitudes Toward Death in Western Societies," observed that, despite an explosion in the latter part of the twentieth century in scholarly and popular literature on death, grief and mourning, dying people have "lost control" of their own deaths. That is, doctors and families never discuss impending death with the dying person, much less organize a "deathbed scene" in which the dying person says good-bye to loved ones and makes known his last wishes. Aries also recounts how public displays of grief are now considered unacceptable and describes the new funerary ritual that developed in the United States. The result is that "ordinary men have become mute and behave as though death no longer existed. The chasm between the discussion of death in books, which is still prolific, and actual death, which is shameful and not to be talked about, is one of the strange but significant signs of our times."[36]

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[35] Originally published in *Encounter* in 1955, it is reprinted as an appendix in *Death, Grief and Mourning* (New York: Doubleday, 1965).
[36] Philippe Aries, "The Reversal of Death: Changes in Attitudes Toward Death in Western Societies" *American Quarterly* Vol. 26 No. 5, Special Issue: Death in America (December 1974): 537.

Laderman supports Aries' interpretation when he notes that, after the Civil War, the rise of the funeral profession allowed people to distance themselves from death. In funerary rites there was a decreasing emphasis on the corpse, particularly in Protestant circles. By 1900, in part because of a Social Gospel emphasis on the here and now rather than the hereafter, "the physical remains of the dead were persona non grata, so to speak . . . the corpse itself had become useless to religious instruction." Embalming, he added, "enabled [Northern Protestants] to look at the face of death and not be confronted by the gruesome details of composition and decay, or to be worried about the liminal status of the body before its final exit." The corpse became a neutral figure, and funeral directors the "new high priests."[37]

LIFE ISSUES

All these things together set the stage for sympathetic coverage of euthanasia and abortion in the middle years of the century.[38] This paper will deal with them here, as separate categories, rather than in the context in which journalists traditionally handled deaths related to abortion and euthanasia, as crime. These "life issues," as they are known among opponents of these practices, differ from normal death coverage in that for most of the century both were regarded as illegal (the U.S. Supreme Court legalized abortion in all states in its

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[37] Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 170, 174.

[38] No history of death in American newspapers can ignore euthanasia and abortion, but this study does not include a detailed investigation of either topic. Marvin Olasky has already written a major history of newspaper coverage of abortion: *The Press and Abortion, 1838-1988* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1988). To repeat his work here would be pointless. Further, this study uncovered too few examples of abortion and euthanasia to allow a thorough analysis of either topic.

landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling; euthanasia is still, broadly speaking, illegal) but have had proponents who generated significant controversy in their attempts to shift societal values in favor of these practices.

The major history of newspaper coverage of abortion is Marvin Olasky's *The Press and Abortion, 1838-1988*. It

> reports the sensationalism of 19th century abortion stories filled with specific detail concerning the depravity of abortionists, the misery of young women who sought them out, and the tragedy of unborn children victimized. It shows the triumphs of the anti-abortion campaigns—legislation passed, abortion advertising turned down, abortionists arrested or publicly disgraced—but also points out press tendencies to back away from hard-hitting exposes that could alienate some readers and advertisers. The history shows that when investigative journalism lagged, public interest decreased and laws against abortion were not enforced rigorously.
>
> The early 20th century brought both victory and defeat for anti-abortion forces. Doctors in Chicago and other cities pushed hard against newspapers that continued to accept abortion advertising. Although anti-abortionists were winning the advertising wars, they were losing the news pages. News stories emphasized the greed of abortionists but not the evil of abortion, and coverage shifted from concern for the unborn child to issues of corruption that supposedly could be dealt with through legalization of abortion. As pro-abortion public relations slowly emerged, reporting of abortion became neutral and a new set of cozy relationships developed. Newspapers from mid-century on both set a pro-abortion agenda and were used by those setting agendas.[39]

The features of the twentieth century press that professionalization and the ideals of objectivity advanced are consistent with Olasky's findings for the period in a couple of important ways. First, abortion coverage generally reflected a worldview that was deferential to the opinions of "medical science" and hostile to

[39] Olasky, *The Press and Abortion*, xii.

particular types of religious belief, especially that which opposed abortion. Olasky describes the public relations strategies of some notable abortion proponents in the 1960s. Freelance journalist Lawrence Lader's tactic, for example, was to appeal "to religious prejudice by making the abortion fight a battle against Catholic leaders." Lader himself wrote that

> a single person isn't quite what we want, since that might excite sympathy for him. Rather, a small group of shadowy, powerful people . . . the Catholic hierarchy. That's a small enough group to come down on, and anonymous enough that no names ever have to be mentioned, but everybody will have a fairly good idea whom we are talking about.[40]

Many reporters followed Lader's lead. Similarly, a professor of obstetrics at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York, Dr. Robert Hall, was president of the Association for the Study of Abortion. He provided journalists and other opinion-makers with an inaccurate version of the history of abortion and portrayed the debate as one of "theological metaphysics" against medical science. Such ideas were "disseminated widely," via newspapers and other channels, noted Olasky, so that "a pro-abortion stance in the mid-1960s was eminently respectable, and becoming almost obligatory, in 'establishment' publishing, legal, and philanthropic circles."[41]

Second, while many abortion stories focused on particular cases, journalists also interpreted abortion as a social issue. Many helped promote abortion by framing it as an issue that affected hundreds of thousands, if not

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[40] Olasky, 104-5.
[41] Olasky, *The Press and Abortion*, 106.

millions, of women and generalizing on the types and frequencies of abortion and the number of women who died annually from "back-alley" abortions.[42]

Third, in keeping with the societal transition that interpreted abortion as a medical procedure instead of a crime, abortion coverage became less sensational and graphic. In 1926, noted Olasky, the July 14 New York *Journal*

> graphically described the body [of a woman who died after an "illegal operation"] cut into eight pieces and put in the box, along with a 'blood-soaked' bundle containing a tablecloth, several towels and female apparel; the legs of the corpse still had stockings on them.[43]

But by the 1980s what little abortion-related sensation journalists reported was reserved for the murders of abortion doctors and (rarely) unlicensed or unsanitary abortion mills. The deceased unborn children themselves were "invisible creatures" (and had been since the 1950s) and reporters seemed reluctant to challenge the notion that legalized abortion was safe by detailing the cases of women who died as a result of such abortions. [44]

This study found three cases of euthanasia that generated national attention. In 1925 an elderly doctor in Littleton, Colorado, was accused of suffocating his crippled and deformed daughter, 32, with chloroform. The *Chicago Daily Tribune's* headline as the trial approached was "No Soul, No Murder, Claim of Physician."[45] The obliging reporter emphasized the defense counsel's interpretation:

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[42] Olasky, *The Press and Abortion,* 90-1, 111 for examples.
[43] Olasky, *The Press and Abortion,* 63.
[44] See Olasky, Chapter 14, "Ideology Versus Investigation, 1978-1985," for examples.
[45] 4 November 1925, p. 1.

> Did the "human husk," without speech or expression or reason, without legs or arms or hope, that lay helpless for thirty-two long years of misery until its father chloroformed it last February, have an immortal soul that could make its forced exit murder? "We will prove," [defense counsel Lewis] Mowry announced, "that Hazel Blazer was not a human being, such as the law is concerned with when it says one man may not unjustly kill another. We will prove that when this old, kindly country doctor humanely chloroformed his daughter Hazel he was no more morally wrong than had he chloroformed a helplessly crippled dog."

The prosecution's perspective, that any human has the right to live and that Blazer left a suicide note (he tried twice to kill himself) explaining his motives, got two brief paragraphs near the end of the story. Other *Tribune* stories on the trial referred repeatedly to the victim's deformities and her inability to communicate. The "son-in-law of the defendant" (not "the brother-in-law of the victim") called her a "scrap of breathing flesh, unable to feed, clothe herself, or otherwise care for her own personal needs. The only exercise she ever got was when she was placed on the floor when the weather was warm and allowed to roll around."[46]

To complicate the Blazer trial still further, the question of whether souls existed was a debatable matter in 1925. Camille Flammarion, a French writer and astronomer who sought to prove "scientifically" that the soul continued to exist after death, was famous, and his death on June 4, 1925 prompted a flurry of newspaper coverage. "Where Now is Soul of Flammarion?" asked the June 7 *New York World*. The article went on to quote one of Flammarion's books:

> One this earth, taken as a whole, nearly 100,000 human beings die in a day. The great majority of these dead beings are unconscious nomads. The

[46] "Pick Jury To Say If Hazel Was a Soul or a Husk," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 7 November 1925, p. 6.

> atmosphere is full of them. It would appear that souls still in a low stage of evolution—in an embryonic state, so to speak, remain for some time in the atmosphere, and that the vast majority of them are unconscious. The constitute a cosmic environment of diffused unconsciousness. This mingles, at times, and under certain conditions, with the individual, subconscious minds of the living.

Another *World* Sunday feature story proposed to show "Why Science Thinks Animals Have Souls: Recent Experiments Reveal a High Order of Intelligence Even Among Such Creatures as Rats, Which Leads to the Conclusion That All of Them Have Souls in Proportion to Their Brain."[47] A July 7, 1925 *San Francisco Examiner* editor asserted that "Belief in Life Beyond Abides," apparently contrary to reason, in the writer's opinion:

> There has been an effort to establish immortality upon a basis of reason. But immortality is essentially unreasonable. If men believe in a life beyond the grave, they do not do so because it is based upon knowledge. …The Western mind does not like to sink into Nirvana. There is an instinct in us which is too strong to preserve our individual existence and it is this feeling that is the basis of our ground of immortality. This does not lessen our belief in immortality, but rather strengthens it. It was not formed in the first place by reason and it cannot be destroyed by reason. It was formed by feelings that lie beneath reason, and until the nature of the human being is changed he will always cherish the hope of continued life.

When euthanasia came up again in 1950, the question of whether the victim had a "soul" at the time of her death was no longer relevant. Editorial and news opinion generally ran in favor of "mercy killing." A *San Francisco Examiner* story recounted in detail how a college senior sobbed and thanked the jury that acquitted her of killing her cancer-stricken father on the grounds of "temporary insanity."[48] The story included no comments from the prosecution or

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[47] 11 January 1925.

[48] "Jury Acquits Mercy Killer of Sick Father," 5 February 1950, p. 1.

any who opposed the verdict, but it did quote "Dr. William H. Anderson, a Methodist minister, who comforted Carol in the county jail," as saying, "I think it is wonderful. The verdict is a just one." It also quoted the girl's mother: "We stormed the heavens for her, and prayed for the miracle, and now it has come forth."

On December 4, 1949, a nurse saw Dr. Hermann N. Sander of Boston pump four syringes of air into a dying cancer patient, Mrs. Abbie Borroto. He was charged with first degree murder and tried in February and March of 1950.

Press accounts often described Sanders as a heroic figure. A *Boston Herald* article suggesting that he may have "deliberately implicated himself" in an attempt to "provide a cause celebre for euthanasia" said that "All his friends know Dr. Sanders as a deep, intense man with a desire to know the truth. It was this desire that prompted him to tour Europe last summer at his own expense to ascertain the facts of socialized medicine."[49] In the middle of the trial, the *Boston Globe* ran a six-column banner headline on an inside page, over a lengthy and detailed report of glowing character witnesses for the doctor, that read, "'Dr. Sander Was Popular, Serious and Respected in College,' Classmate Says."[50] The next day's trial coverage was headlined, "Sander Always on Call: Secretary Kept 'After Him to Send Out Bills.'"

When placed on the stand in early March, Sander insisted that he did not attempt to kill his patient because he believed she was already dead when he injected the air. He was unable to account for his actions, however. "As I looked

[49] 10 January 1950, p. 1.
[50] 3 March 1950, p. 7.

at her face and all the thoughts of the past went through my mind, something snapped in me and I felt impelled or possessed to do something, and why I did it I can't tell," he testified. "It doesn't make sense."[51]

Journalists seemed to place little emphasis on testimony helpful to the prosecution, and at times even attempted to discredit it. The *Chicago Tribune* reporter wrote that, "Earlier, the sage defense counsel tripped up the state's star witness, Miss Josephine Connor, 40, buxom hospital recorder who first reported Dr. Sander to the authorities."[52] But there was little in the story to show how Miss Connor was "tripped up," and nothing in the headlines pointed to her spectacular testimony buried at the very bottom of the account. She recounted a conversation she overheard in which Sanders admitted to a Dr. Birton, when asked if he knew he had broken a law by deliberately killing the patient, that "he had been through stop signs" before. Connor also testified that "Dr. Sander said he assumed the medical profession would probably reprimand him for it and tell him not to do it again." Similarly, the *New York Herald-Tribune* buried at the end of a story Dr. Biron's testimony: "[Dr. Sander told him] that in a weak moment he injected the air. He stated that he had broken laws before and had not always stopped at stop signs."

The jury had to sort through conflicting medical testimony on whether the amount of air Sander injected (25-30 cubic centimeters) was enough to kill the patient, and whether she was already dead when he did it. The jury acquitted Sander; perhaps jurors were convinced by the medical evidence that it simply was

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[51] *New York Herald-Tribune*, 7 March 1950, p. 1.
[52] 25 February 1950, p. 1.

not murder, or perhaps they agreed with the *Boston Herald*, which argued in a January editorial that Dr. Sander certainly did not deserve the fate of "a gangster who executes a rival, a burglar who kills a policeman, or a professional murdered who slays for cash … No jury would so doom such a defendant."[53]

The *Herald* also interpreted the debate over euthanasia as, not religion versus science, but particular types of religion versus science. One story quoted a rabbi and a Methodist editor as favoring euthanasia—"We are kinder to suffering animals than we are to suffering people," according to Emery S. Buck, editor of *Zion's Herald*—and an Episcopal bishop who insisted that "my convictions on the subject of euthanasia run counter to those of Dr. Sander" but hoped Dr. Sander would not be punished. "Whether we agree with him or not, we must know that he has fearlessly and unselfishly exposed a vital uncertainty in human relations that demands an uncompromising decision," said Bishop Charles F. Hall. The strongest statements came from Harvard anthropologist Earnest Hooten, who compared the upcoming Sander trial to the Scopes evolution trial and said doctors should "stand up and fight this euthanasia issue out" because "they practice it anyway." Further, "It is high time for society to rise up in righteous wrath and revoke such cruel, senseless and barbaric laws as permit a noble humanitarian like Dr. Sander to be indicted," he said. "If 'Thou shalt not kill' is a 'law of God' that convicts Dr. Sander of murder, let us have done with such a savage and subhuman deity and substitute a God of mercy and loving kindness."[54]

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[53] "If This Be Murder . . ." 7 January 1950, p. 6.
[54] "Death's Nearness Seen 'Mercy' Key," *Boston Herald*, 7 January 1950, p. 1.

The "barbarians" had no chance to respond in that article, but were represented in a separate one by evangelist Billy Graham, who was preaching that week at a Boston crusade. The lead on the story about his meetings, placed next to the story with Hooten's quotes, promised that Graham would reply to Hooten the next day.[55] That story, reporting the position of "Fiery Billy Graham, armed with the testimony of the Bible" ("I don't say he [Dr. Sander] deserves death, but if we let this pass, who is to say who is to die and who to live? Some judgment and some punishment must be meted out to make an example"), was next to an interview with the "president and founder of the Euthanasia Society of America," Dr. Charles Francis Potter. He asserted Dr. Sander was obviously attempting to "bring attention to the need for euthanasia in medicine."[56]

Throughout the coverage, death was defined entirely in medical and scientific terms. This trial would, interpreted one *Herald-Tribune* writer, reveal "the innermost secrets of death. At what exact moment does death occur? Do some organs and tissues live on for a time? Is a person dead then, or still alive? What is death?"[57] To make sense of the whole thing, the Associated Press called on its science editor, who began:

> The Sander mercy murder trial is the first public clinic on life and death. It is answering these questions: How much suffering is in a lingering death? Does death reach out in advance to ease some pain? Why do doctors keep

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[55] "Judgment Day Certain, Says Billy Graham," *Boston Herald*, 7 January 1950, p. 1.
[56] "Billy Graham Urges Doctor Be Punished," "State May Request Dr. Sander Testify," *Boston Herald*, 9 January 1950, p. 1.
[57] "Autopsy Doctor Declares Sander's Act Was Fatal," 2 March 1950, p. 1. See also the *Boston Globe's* 2 March "Extra: Sander To Say He Gave Air."

> us alive after hope is gone? In language of the first grade, all this is told to a jury.[58]

Abbie Borroto was present only as the dying patient. The underlying question that seemed to drive journalists with respect to her or her condition was, "How much pain did she feel?" The more pain she felt, went the reasoning, the more justified Sanders was in ending her pain by ending her life. An Associated Press reporter was still promoting this position in 1975 in a story headlined, "All California cancer victim wants is a quiet death—and she wants it now."[59] Marjorie Berg had anywhere from a few weeks to several years to live, she said, but the pain had made her suicidal. She was angry with a good Samaritan who had called an ambulance after discovering her unconscious in the hotel room where she had attempted to commit suicide: "Why are there human beings who like to play God?" The story concluded, perhaps in a rhetorical flourish that probably seemed appropriate only a few years after *Roe v. Wade* found a Constitutional right to abortion: "The Declaration of Independence proclaims the right to the pursuit of happiness and 'my pursuit of happiness would also include my ability to put an end to my suffering,' she says. 'I've never been afraid of death.'"

For some, such as Billy Graham, who regarded life as a gift of God that continues past physical death, humans have no authority to "say who is to die and who is to live." But for those with a materialistic worldview, if the relief of non-existence outweighs the pain of living and religious objections are considered irrelevant, "savage" or "sub-human," euthanasia makes perfect sense. Many

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[58] "Sander Trial Gives Public Hidden Life-Death Details," *Boston Globe*, 5 March 1950, p. 6.
[59] *Boston Globe*, 3 April 1975, p. 15.

reporters seemed comfortable with this position, and it would continue to characterize much coverage of euthanasia throughout the twentieth century.[60]

DAILY DEATH COVERAGE

The professionalization of journalism and the gradual acceptance of the ideals of objectivity in the twentieth century led to a consistency of approaches to fatal events that persists today, even though contexts changed over the decades. The result was that the tone and angle of death-related stories is recognizable in stories in all three sample years, despite the fact that circumstances changed and the number of the different story types varied between periods.

Obituaries

The number of obituaries peaked in the middle part of the century, with 515 in the 1950 sample (the largest single category total in this study), up from 207 in the 1895 sample and 197 in 1925. The total fell to 342 in 1975 and 304 by 2000. Newspapers in 1950 gave whole pages and more to dozens of brief death notices of local people surrounding lengthier obituaries of notable figures from across the United States and from other countries.

Journalists did not regard the news value of obituaries in direct proportion to their numbers with respect to other categories of death stories; the fact that there were nearly five times the number of obituaries as murder stories in 1950, for example, does not mean that journalists thought obituaries were five times as newsworthy. The deaths of public figures deemed especially important made the

[60] For a helpful discussion on the legal and public relations strategies of the pro-euthanasia forces in the 1980s and 1990s, see Wesley J. Smith, "Death wars: as euthanasia advocates press their case, the moral health of the country is at stake" *National Review* 14 July 1997, p. 36-7.

front page, but the large majority of hundreds of brief obituary items were probably regarded as much less significant. Still, the fact that journalists continued, as they had since colonial days, take note of the passing of major public figures as well as so many lesser-known people indicates that journalists hold the end of a man's life to be a significant event.

The most notable thing about these pages was the focus on the deceased's life. The stories rarely mentioned death directly. Except for a brief reference somewhere in the lead, readers sometimes had to infer the fact of death from the announcement of funeral services. Although some stories mentioned the cause of death in oblique terms (such as "after a lengthy illness"), these stories rarely even hinted at the manner of death. Unless the cause involved some feature that dragged it into the news columns, such as in the context of a crime or an accident, in the twentieth century death was a private matter.

As noted in Chapter 3, obituaries in colonial days tended to focus on those people with social standing, in a reflection of the communities' worldviews and values—Boston eulogized clergy and Charleston favored businessmen. By the twentieth century the deaths of clergy were still noted in the samples, and the types of individuals varied from businessmen to politicians to entertainers to figures of various types. Religious references were absent. Janice Hume, in her comprehensive study of American obituaries, noted that

> Apart from the descriptions of sudden deaths, the powerful death imagery and religious rhetoric that were so important in nineteenth century obituaries were not a part of obituaries in the 1910 sample weeks, likely because of changing ideas about religion and the press's increasing professionalism . . . Citizens who died in 1910 concentrated on the parting,

> on family, good-byes, rather than on the promise of Christian resurrection or a visitation from the "King of Terrors."[61]

She added,

> The way obituaries framed the act of dying reveals, too, a cultural evolution in America. Men and women in the Jacksonian era met death without a murmur, bravely, while in the heart of the sentimental Victorian era they were visited by the "King of Terrors." Death was no longer something to use as a final witness, an example of Christian faith, but was fearful and unavoidable, worthy of obsession, something to struggle against. During the early twentieth century, however, as the public expression of Christianity waned in the dominant culture, death lost its sentimental significance. It was often presented simply as the end of a career, implying that somehow the value of a life was related to success in business in this industrial age; in death, business potential was the most important loss.[62]

Crime

The number of murder stories, after declining in the first quarter of the twentieth century (to 146 in the 1925 sample) fell yet again to 112 in 1950 before rising again to 202 in 1975, the highest level in this study. These figures roughly correspond to homicide rates for those years. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the U.S. homicide rate (per 100,000 population annually) peaked in the early 1930s at around 9, fell in the 1940s and 1950s to the 4-6 range, and then rose again to the 8-10 range through the 1970s and 1980s until beginning a gradual decline in the 1990s.[63]

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[61] Janice Hume, *Obituaries in American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 112-3.
[62] Hume, *Obituaries*, 153.
[63] Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Homicide rate 1900-2000" (http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/glance/tables/hmrttab.htm, accessed November 22, 2003).

These preliminary results suggest that in the twentieth century the number of murders committed affected the number of murders newspapers cover, but there is no necessary connection. Far more murders typically occur in major cities than newspapers can or will cover.[64] Keplinger and Habermeier call the public's belief that if something happens more frequently, more articles about it will appear, the "correspondence assumption."[65] A rigorous analysis would be necessary to prove that more murders committed resulted in more newspaper stories. It is possible, for example, that other factors are responsible for the drop in murder stories in 1950; perhaps news of the Korean War pushed out crime news, for example. Another possibility is that the rise of tabloid journalism in the 1920s just happened to coincide with a rise in the murder rate.

Newspaper coverage reflected not only social concern with the number of murders, but also the contexts in which the crimes were committed. In the 1925 sample many of the murder stories were tied to Prohibition. Many involved bootlegging, such as "Booze King's Slaying Fans Coast 'War,'"[66] "Two Policemen Die By Bootlegger Law: Kansas City Patrolman and Aid Are Slain at Cache Where They Filched Liquor,"[67] "Tony Genna Killed by Bootlegging

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[64] J.W.C. Johnstone, D.F. Hawkins, A. Michener, "Homicide reporting in Chicago dailies" *Journalism Quarterly* 71 (Winter 1994): 860-72. Their study found that less than a third of the murders that occurred were reported. Those that were covered were more likely to: be "high ampiltude" in that they involved someone well-known or were particularly gruesome; involve more than one victim; involve a male offender and a female victim; have a white victim.
[65] H.M. Keplinger and J. Habermeier, "Impact of key events on the presentation of reality" *European Journal of Communication* 10 (September 1995): 371-90. They argue that sensational coverage of "key events," such as a plane crash or an earthquake, can spark a wave of coverage of similar types of events as journalists' news values actually change for a period.
[66] *San Francisco Examiner*, 7 January 1925, p. 1.
[67] *New York Times*, 23 February 1925, p. 2.

Gang,"[68] "Gotham Gangster Burned to Death,"[69] "6 Killed in 8 Days in Bootleg War,"[70] and "Iowa Woman, Dry Worker, Is Killed: Shot Through Window Believed to Have Been Fired by Member of 'Wet' Element."[71] Journalists also paid particular attention to alcohol-related deaths that may have had a criminal aspect, such as the Sacramento case of a teen girl who died of alcohol poisoning at a party.[72]

Newspapers in 1925 and later gave more space and more sensational coverage to multiple murders, many of them domestic. From 1925, for example: "Kills His Wife, 'Star Boarder' and Himself: Everett Home Scene of Triple Tragedy, Due to Jealousy,"[73] "Heat-Crazed Ohioan Kills 8 Relatives: 50 Shots Fired Into Bodies of Mother, Sister, Nieces and Nephews."[74] From 1950: "Berserk Rampage: Estranged Wife and Relatives are Shot Down,"[75] "Madman, 19, Roams Street and Slays 4: Slashes 3 Others in Brooklyn Foray."[76] From 1975: "4 Sought in Death of 2 Ex-Mormons."[77]

Charles Merz, writing in 1925, observed that the biggest murder trials that year had several elements in common: each involved a "fight" or a contest, the contest is between personal antagonists (not social forces) who are well-known to the public (or becomes well-known through the course of the trial), and each had

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[68] *Chicago Daily News*, 8 July 1925, p. 1.
[69] *South Carolina News & Courier*, 6 September 1925, p. 1.
[70] *New York World*, 23 November 1925, p. 15.
[71] [71] *South Carolina News & Courier*, 9 September 1925, p. 1.
[72] "Girl's Death at Party Probed," *San Francisco Examiner*, 7 January 1925, p. 14.
[73] *Boston Herald*, 18 January 1925, p. 1.
[74] *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 June 1925, p. 4.
[75] *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 November 1950, p. 1.
[76] *New York Herald-Tribune*, 6 March 1950, p. 1.
[77] *New York Times*, 5 January 1975, p. 22.

strong elements of mystery or suspense.[78] Brazil noted that in the 1920s the biggest murder stories were, not those involving either the most gruesome crimes or the best-known people, but about average people and crimes that were not very macabre, especially compared to some that received only passing attention. The implication, suggested Brazil, is that "the newspaper public wanted not 'real' murder but a particular kind of murder, one that involved situations and central figures with whom it could identify."[79]

That is likely a good observation about murders that receive national attention or heavy coverage locally. It certainly helps explain the massive amounts of attention journalists gave to, for example, school shootings that have occurred since the mid-1990s. Moreover, while day-to-day coverage in the urban dailies in this study found large numbers of garden-variety killings related to drugs and gangs, the stories that attracted feature-level attention were often either "high-amplitude" or they involved ordinary people, with whom many readers could identify, who did awful things. A front-page *New York Times* story in 1925, for example, was about a policeman (married with two children of his own) who chased a friend's wife through her apartment, shot her and then himself while in a drunken craze. The only witnesses were the victim's two young boys, who knew the killer as "Uncle John." The victim's husband, a chauffeur, told the reporter, "I

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[78] Charles Merz, "What Makes a First-Page Story" *The New Republic* 30 December 1925, p. 156-58.
[79] John R. Brazil, "Murder Trials, Murder, and Twenties America" *American Quarterly* Vol. 22 No. 2 (Summer, 1981), 168.

have lost two good friends. Edwards would never have done this if he hadn't been drunk."[80]

As the century progressed, regarding murder four themes rose to the top of journalists' agendas (at least in the major cities in this study): gangs, race, drugs and guns. Murders were common enough in New York and other major centers that newspapers not only did not report all of them, they sometimes reported them in bunches, when volume apparently made up for a lack of novelty. "Teen is 7th murder victim in 24 hours," read one *Chicago Tribune* headline[81]. The *New York Times* began keeping track of garden-variety murders in a regular item called "From the Police Blotter," which tallied 28 such deaths in two weeks. A typical entry from June 1, 1975: "A woman returning home from a bingo game was accosted in the hallway of her building at 138 Stanton Street and was beaten to death, apparently after she had resisted efforts to rob her. The victim was Mrs. Herbita Heyn, the mother of a 10-year-old son."

Journalists paid more attention to more horrible crimes, but typically used a matter-of-fact tone for even the most brutal events. "A drug addict was charged yesterday with murdering three elderly widows and raping one of them in the Bronx neighborhood where they all lived," read one lead in the *New York Daily News*.[82]

Reporters sometimes loosened the rhetorical straight-jackets of the objective tone in features and analytical pieces. "No Way to Tell How Many 'Jack

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[80] "Policeman Murders Woman In Her Home Before Her 2 Boys," *New York Times*, 23 July 1925, p. 1.
[81] 21 August 1975, p. 12.
[82] "Charge He Killed 3 Elderly Widows," 7 September 1975, p. 3.

the Rippers' Walk the Streets," declared a 1925 *New York World* headline over interviews with a neuropathologist and a psychiatrist.[83] The scientism of the era is obvious: "In all these cases," Dr. Schlapp commented, "one general diagnoses may be made. So strong a sex wave swept through the nervous mechanism of the individual that he was rendered dead to every [moral inhibition] in the carrying out of his overpowering impulse." "Is Alcohol One of the Chief Causes of Crime?" asked the *Boston Globe* in 1950.[84] The story, by a criminologist, related anecdotes about youths led into crime through drinking, and said near the end: "Drunkenness is a disease as well as a sin. We have long since legislated for its punishment; let us no longer delay to legislate for its cure."

By 1975, although the majority of stories were "straight," some had a narrative style. As in earlier years, to help readers identify with the characters in the story, reporters often emphasized how apparently ordinary people could do something extraordinarily terrible. "The Star-Crossed Lovers: They came from sharply contrasting world and their unconventional romance led to a modern American tragedy," read a *New York Daily News* headline.[85] The narrative detailed how a well-known and white Harvard-trained lawyer began dating and then moved in with an attractive black mother of three. After some months, Burt Hollister finally began taking her to meet his friends and family—but one night he was found shot to death in his office. Police eventually charged JoAnne Brown with second-degree murder; she had been afraid Hollister would abandon her for

[83] 7 June 1925, p. E1.
[84] 5 March 1950, p. 17.
[85] 6 April 1975, p. 22.

another woman or "travel in other circles and exclude her." The story sometimes took the perspective of the police detectives as in a murder mystery. The writers do not reveal that Brown was a suspect until over halfway through a 2,000 word story.

Columnists sometimes added their own literary flair to murder coverage. Bob Greene of the *Chicago Sun-Times* led a compelling narrative about a man who shot one man and wounded two others at a late-night "informal get-together" by complaining about how feminists had wiped out society page reporting: "Call me old-fashioned, but one thing I miss most in modern newspapers is party stories."[86]

Mixed with the reporting were reminders that crime is a social problem, not just an individual evil as many citizens viewed it. "His best friend and wife remember Lee Veno, a victim of the times," went a *Boston Herald-American* headline. "Something sinister has invaded the community," wrote the reporter, and went on to quote the friend:

> "It's not the neighborhood that's bad, but some of the people that creep into it," he explained. "Drug addicts, hop-heads. They ought to put them away for a long time and then there wouldn't be anyone around to buy the stuff and the dealers would go out of business," he continued. . . . Is he bitter about a murder rate that increases every year, about a statistic that has grown so fast that it has ensnared him in its grip. "I guess you'd have to say yes," he said, and he didn't have to say it because it was written all over his face where his sorrow mixed violently with his anger.[87]

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[86] 15 October 1975, p. 10.
[87] 6 December 1975, p. 3.

Faced with rising murder rates, as the writer above noted, journalists' worldviews typically led them to social answers to social problems. High on the list of preferred solutions was gun control. The *New York Times* editorialized that,

> there may be no way to explain—or prevent—such occasional tragedies triggered by some hidden mental defect. And yet—the fact remains that the actual trigger is that of a weapon, and the demented moment might have passed had the weapon not been at hand. . . . Logic and the weight of experience in other countries leave no doubt that the appalling slaughter so plainly attributable to the uncontrolled ownership of guns will not abate until the ownership of guns is effectively regulated by Federal laws which can and will be enforced. Those who continue to lobby against realistic legislation bear a heavy share of responsibility for the mounting number of lives claimed by lawless or careless gunfire.[88]

The preference for gun control showed up in the news columns through a focus on gun-related deaths. A poignant account of a crusty but popular San Francisco waitress gunned down by a couple of robbers ("Suddenly, the second man swatted aside his compliant companion, jabbed a .38-caliber revolver at her bosom, and fired. She fell onto the dirty sidewalk, and the two men ran.") appeared next to a federal gun control legislation story headlined, "Handgun Proposals Called Inadequate."[89] A 1994 study showed, for example, that newspapers ran nine times as much coverage of firearm mass murders as of mass murders by arson, even though victims of arson in such cases outnumbered victims of firearms. Cramer noted further that, nationally, murders by "cutting objects" or "blunt instruments" accounted for 29% of all murders yet received almost no national coverage.[90]

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[88] "Guns Against Society," 3 January 1975, p. 26.
[89] "A Killing Touches The Tenderloin," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 June 1950, p. 1.
[90] Clayton Cramer, "Ethical Problems of Mass Murder Coverage in the Mass Media" *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 9 No. 1 (1994): 26-42.

Accidents

In the 1925, 1950 and 1975 samples, journalists paid the most attention to accident stories with a high degree of human interest generated either by poignant personal circumstances of the deceased and their rescuers (especially in cases where the deceased were the would-be rescuers), a large number of victims, or where the individuals involved were already known to the public. They paid the most attention to stories that combined more than one of these elements.

A good example is *Boston Daily Globe* coverage of the 1925 crash of the *Shenandoah* dirigible. On September 3 it left Lakehurst, N.J. and headed west. Over Ohio it hit a heavy storm that first yanked the craft up to 6,500 feet and then ripped it apart. "14 Die As Shenandoah Falls, Torn to Pieces Mile in Air: 26 Escape Death, Dozen After Wild Ride of 12 Miles in Nose of Airship, As Three Sections, Rent Apart by Gales, Crash to Ground just After Dawn in Country Section of Ohio." Assorted coverage filled several pages of the September 4 and 5 editions. The stories included amazing accounts from survivors and witnesses:

> "When the crash came I was on the ladder leading from the control cabin to the rear portion of the ship. As I started to fall I clutched a girder to which I hung suspended, finally swinging my body over it and crawling 40 or 50 feet back into the ship," said Col. C.G. Hall, an Army observer.
>
> The Davises and Nelsons heard the whirring of propellers of the Shenandoah shortly after 5 o'clock. Dawn was breaking, they said, but the dirigible was still carrying her lights. At first there seemed to be nothing wrong. Then suddenly the big ship became motionless in the heavens. She was poised thus, as though detained by unseen hands. Then the disaster came. Parts of the giant came to earth and, watchers said, with a crash that sounded like the falling of a forest of trees.

The headlines showed what other angles reporters pursued: "Widow Claims [ship Captain] Landsdowne Declared Journey Unsafe: Blame Wilbur For Sending Big Shenandoah Out on Last Trip—Secretary Denies Charge of Bereaved Woman," "Navy May Close Airship Station," "Two Boards to Probe Wreck for Cause," "Bay State Pair Lost in Wreck," "Record of Disasters to Airships in the Past." Coverage the next day, September 5, included the following: [banner] "Wreck Looted: Futile Now To Try Salvaging—Everything Detachable Gone, Handicapping Inquiry," "Arlington Man's Story of Shenandoah Crash: Tobin Fell 60 Feet and Lived," "Five Shenandoah Officers Who Lost Lives in Disaster," "Wives Sob With Joy When Survivors Return."

This style of coverage is familiar even to late twentieth century readers. Besides personal testimony from participants and witnesses, it included reaction from government officials and grieving relatives and a discussion of possible causes of the crash. Unlike journalists in the mid-1800s, however, none of the reporters covering the Shenandoah thought to ask survivors (or thought to include in their stories, if they did ask) questions like, "Did you think you were going to die? What was going through your mind?" The vast majority of accident stories in both centuries, of course, were fairly brief and not suited to in-depth theological discussions. But in the nineteenth century a reporter could, if he wished, raise religious issues when covering an accident. As noted in Chapter 6, for example, one writer at the 1860 *New York Times* went around asking survivors of the *Central America* steamship if they had been afraid to die; an editorial suggested that the survivors who "are speaking to us now with such fresh and thrilling

eloquence of God's wonders on the deep, have also a testimony to be rendered in regard to the possible causes of the disaster." By 1925 reporters no longer considered those types of questions relevant; the accident stories in the twentieth-century samples for this study uncovered not one reference to religion, an afterlife, God, or even fate or Providence.

There were, however, some changes in accident coverage as the century progressed. In 1925 car crashes dominated accident coverage. The automobile had been common on American roads for less than two decades—while it may be an overstatement to call it a novelty, it certainly did not yet occupy the central place in American society it would capture after World War II. Some journalists in 1925 treated the advent of the automobile, whatever benefits it brought to American society, as a public scourge of epic proportions.

"AUTO TOLL IN YEAR 19,000" blared a front-page banner headline in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, "450,000 Hurt; Of Dead, 5,700 Were Children."[91] The story, describing 1924 statistics compiled by the National Bureau of Casualty and Surety Underwriters, added other auto-related death figures: 684 people in Cook County the previous year; 227 in Cook County in 123 days so far in 1925; 52 people per day nationally. "Graphically emphasizing the immensity of the army of victims, the underwriters show that the dead and injured, if gathered together, would make an assemblage about equal to the population of Washington, D.C., Newark, N.J., or Cincinnati, O." The article included an

[91] 4 May 1925. The figure of 19,000 is probably not accurate; according to the National Center for Health Statistics, that would have placed auto accidents tenth on the list of top ten leading causes of death. See "Historical Data: Leading Causes of Death" National Center for Health Statistics (http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/statab/lead1900_98.pdf accessed November 28, 2003).

illustration of a three-handed clock that the *Tribune* used regularly in its auto accident stories, called "Hands of Death." These noted the number of fatalities in Cook County so far that year due to autos (always the highest), followed by guns and moonshine. A front-page cartoon a few weeks later showed the Grim Reaper riding in the back of an car labeled "Reckless Driving" and waving to War, portrayed as a mounted Roman soldier, and saying, "I won't need you anymore! You're too uncertain!"[92] It is titled, "The Modern Method of Slaughtering Ourselves."

Most stories either reported a single incident or a short listing of incidents (e.g. "Trio of Names Added to Death Toll of Speed"[93]). Others saw trends ("Autos Slay 15 During First 4 Days of May"[94]) and these were sometimes front-page news. "Autos Kill Fifty In 15 Days," declared one banner headline.[95] The clock illustration was still appearing that November. A story headlined "Auto, Speeding Without Lights, Kills Pedestrian," noted that the toll for autos had shot up to 653 since May 4 (a rise of 426). In that same period, according to a comparison of the two illustrations, deaths by firearms had gone from 130 to 305 (+175) and by moonshine from 89 to 184 (+95).

Other newspapers, although this study found no other campaigns as determined as the *Tribune's*, often covered auto deaths several times per week: "Weekend Accidents Cost Big Death Toll,"[96] "4 Killed, 21 Hurt in Week-End

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[92]*Chicago Tribune*, 5 May 1925, p. 1.
[93] 3 May 1925, p. 10.
[94] 5 May 1925, p. 1.
[95] 2 November 1925, p. 1.
[96] *Chicago Daily News*, 6 July 1925, p. 7.

Auto Crashes: Prominent S.F. Men Drop 200 Feet Into Deep Canyon,"[97] "Baby, 2 Years Old, Killed by a Truck: Grandmother Tries to Attack Driver When She Learns Child Is Dead,"[98] "Nine Die, 87 Hurt in Auto Accidents: Crashes on Holiday Take Heavy Toll on Highways of New England,"[99] "Five Persons Are Killed in South Carolina Traffic."[100]

Newspapers tended to be more aggressive when the death involved a crime. The *Boston Globe* ran, for example, a lengthy story recounting how a man in a "borrowed" auto picked up three women and a male companion, then lost control while going "at express train" speed down a country road, according to a witness, and hit a tree. All five occupants were thrown from the car; the two men got up and left without seeking help for the women. Two of them, who were sisters, died at the scene and another was sent to hospital with a fractured skull.[101] Police tracked the driven to his hotel, where they found him asleep, and charged him with manslaughter, operating a vehicle without a license, and leaving the scene of an accident. The front-page story had banner headlines and photos of the two victims. Other typical headlines: "Auto Kills Furrier: Woman is Arrested,"[102] "Girl Killed by Fall From Auto in Crash: Brother, Driving Car Said to Have Been Stolen, is Held on Charge of Homicide,"[103] "Charge Motorist With Two Deaths."[104]

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[97] *San Francisco Examiner*, 6 July 1925, p. 1.
[98] *New York Times*, 23 July 1925, p. 21.
[99] *Boston Globe*, 8 September 1925, p. 1.
[100] *South Carolina News & Courier*, 24 November 1925, p. 15.
[101] "Auto Hits Tree, Two Women Dead," 9 March 1925, p. 1, 12.
[102] *New York Times*, 26 July 1925, p. 3.
[103] *New York Times*, 23 February 1925, p. 2.
[104] *Boston Herald*, 15 January 1925, p. 7.

Newspapers began about this time to reflect a serious public frustration over the issue, often by quoting judges. "The day of reckoning for drunken chauffeurs has come. Wanton reckless and disregard for human life must be ended. Under present conditions citizens are not safe in their homes nor on the streets," New York General Sessions Judge Mancuso told a drunk driver, just before sentencing him to two-to-ten years for killing a woman with a stolen auto. "The public is not safe while you are at liberty." The *San Francisco Examiner* editorialized that "every drunken driver should be given at least three years on the stone pile in which to think it over. This, when he doesn't kill anybody. If somebody dies as a result of it, he should be treated as a common murderer."[105]

"I wish it were possible," said Judge Cutler of Boston

> to punish the corporation, or the individual in the corporation who holds a soft job and to save money hires a boy, who has not good judgment, to drive a heavy truck, a powerful machine, that requires a skilled operator as well as a locomotive or a steamboat. The lives of two children have been taken away, but no doubt the dividends are being received as usual by the company.[106]

New York even empanelled a grand jury to look into fatal car crashes: "Coincident with their inquiry into twelve recent automobile killings in Manhattan, the Grand Jury yesterday began an investigation into motor vehicle accidents at the request of Judge McIntyre of General Sessions."[107] Still some journalists felt that the public was not outraged enough. Americans "get very much interested, and properly, in the plight a man caught in a cave in Kentucky,

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[105] "Road Crimes" 8 January 1925, p. 12.
[106] "Judge Flays Firm That Had Boy Drive Big Truck," *Boston Globe*, 3 September 1925, p. 2.
[107] "Grand Jury Widens Auto Death Inquiry," *New York Times*, 24 July 1925, p. 15.

but do not seem to become at all aroused over the fact that 20,000 persons were killed in traffic accidents in this country in a single year," complained the *Detroit Free Press*.[108]

By 1950, although newspapers still regularly reported fatal auto accidents as local news, coverage had dropped off dramatically. Newspapers treated auto deaths in a national context only rarely.[109] This certainly was not because there were fewer auto-related deaths—between 1925 and 1950 they nearly tripled to 56,486, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.[110] As with murder, more study is required, but one possibility is that journalists paid so much attention to automobile deaths in 1925 because the phenomenon was relatively new. Reporters saw car crashes as a serious threat and were uncertain about how society would deal with the issue and whether the situation would continue to get worse. In 1915 the category of "accidents" was the seventh leading cause of death with over 42,000 fatalities in the U.S., but motor-vehicle accidents, tabulated separately, did not make the list of top ten. That happened in 1926, when the total hit 20,625.

As motor vehicle fatalities became more common they lost their news value. The number rose steadily, both in total and in rank until World War II (1935—8th at 36,369; 1940—6th at 62,384), dropped during the war but then rose again after (1950—5th at 56,486), and then fluctuated between the high 30,000s

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[108] Quoted in "Queer Lot, Aren't We?" *Boston Globe*, 6 March 1925, p. 32.
[109] The only one in the 1950 study sample was an Associated Press story, "Holiday Death Toll To Date Less Than Last Year's Record," *Boston Globe*, 5 September 1950, p. 1.
[110] National Center for Health Statistics "Historical Data: Leading Causes of Death" (http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/statab/lead1900_98.pdf accessed November 28, 2003).

and the mid-50,000 range for the next four decades. In 1975 the number was 45,863. Through the 1990s the figure ranges from near 40,000 to around 48,000 and was usually one of the top six.

The situation with accidents overall was analogous. The number of fatal accident stories in the three sample years declined as the century progressed, from 202 in 1925 to 210 in 1950 to 72 in 1975. Reporters still covered all kinds of accidents regularly, such as train collisions, plane crashes, drowning, mine explosions, house fires, electrocutions, gas poisonings, but those that did not involve either a poignant personal story or some new and interesting aspect were less likely to be covered as news.

The most striking example from 1950 was "Two Blown Out of Airliners; One is Unhurt." The United Press International story[111] told of two separate incidents on the same day in which airliner doors failed, popping open, and 28-year-old male flight attendants were sucked out the opening. One fell to his death on Long Island, on another flight over Florida, the attendant hooked a door chain with his feet and then hung on to the edge of the doorway for eight minutes until the plane could land.

Disease

Similarly, journalists essentially stopped reporting on the deaths of individuals by disease in the early 1900s. Colonial-era stories about people who dropped dead for what appeared (at the time) to be no clear reason provided pathological data to help readers identify similar symptoms, if necessary. But as

[111] *San Francisco Examiner*, 12 February 1950, p. 1.

medical science provided explanations for most deaths by disease, and as society increasingly regarded death as a "private" matter increasingly hidden away in hospitals and institutions as the twentieth century progressed, such deaths became for reporters both less newsworthy (what new thing can be said about another middle-aged man having a heart attack?) and less accessible.

As a result, the type of story exemplified by the headline, "Ashmont Man Dies Suddenly on Street"[112] had all but disappeared by 1950. In its place stories such as "Heart Disease Gains, Insurers are Told: Tuberculosis is Displaced as Leading Destroyer of Life, Dr. J.A. Patton Says,"[113] "Tuberculosis Deaths 1,264 Here This Year,"[114] and "'Crib Death' Is Silent Killer"[115] became increasingly common as the century progressed. News values had not changed—reporters were still looking for relevance, human interest, and so on—but the social context in which the news values were applied had changed and that led to different story decisions. Meanwhile, the journalistic tendency to view death in an increasingly social context led them to interpret certain types of deaths less as about the fate of individuals and more as social indicators of the times in which they lived.

Why did newspapers choose, as in the above examples, heart disease, tuberculosis and 'crib death'? Adelman and Verbrugge, in a detailed study, compared how often newspapers write about particular diseases with the rates of mortality and prevalence for each disease over a 20-year period. They found that newspapers pay more attention, not merely to fatal diseases, but to those diseases

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[112] *Boston Globe*, 9 February 1925, p. 13.
[113] *New York World*, 5 June 1925, p. 13.
[114] *New York Times*, 13 October 1950, p. 18.
[115] *South Carolina News & Courier*, 29 November 1975, p. 1B.

with higher rates of mortality. Coverage of particular diseases increased as mortality rates rose sharply and decreased when mortality rates dropped. They also found that coverage of new and lethal diseases (they examined coverage of AIDS and Alzheimer) go through stages, peaking shortly after the disease emerges and then declining along with mortality rates.

War

America was not at war in 1925, but was embroiled in Korea in 1950 and was finishing up a disastrous experience in Vietnam in 1975. Earlier parts of this study have noted the willingness of journalists to root for the home team in the American Revolutionary and Civil wars; this continued through World War II and the Korean War.

A detailed discussion of war coverage in the twentieth century is far beyond this paper; however, there are some interesting points of comparison between journalistic approaches in this century and in previous centuries.

First, war reporting in the twentieth century was much superior to previous generations in terms of the quality of the information and the ability to provide context. American authorities certainly suppressed much information, for tactical and public relations purposes, but the stories offered more reliable and contextualized information than the letters home from British officers that colonial newspapers published as war news, or the at times highly-suspect reports from Civil War correspondents. This is not to say it was perfect or even adequate, but it was unquestionably better.

But in adhering to the ideals of accuracy and, in particular, the ideals of objectivity, war correspondents in the Korean War also gave up the personal tone that previous generations occasionally used in favor of a tone that was not exactly neutral, but at least dispassionate. A typical report:

> Spearheads of a Communist force of 100,000 men rammed the United Nations defenses on three critical fronts yesterday, capturing two towns in the north and again menacing Pohang. In the northeast the Reds took Angang-Ni, eight miles southwest of the port city of Poang. It is important because it lies across supply roads to Pohang from Tsegu and Pusan. . . . But in the north the Communists were stopped cold in their drive to Masan, the gateway to the plains before the port city of Pusan.[116]

Second, even though the tone was usually objective, the content was not, particularly when the deaths of American troops or South Korean civilians were involved. Most often, depictions of deaths emphasized the brutality and treachery of the North Korean forces. A sampling of headlines: "1,100 Civilians Found Slain by Reds in Taejon: 30 G.I.s Also Discovered in Mass Graves,"[117] "32 Koreans Slain by Bamboo Spears: Pro-Red Renegades Raid Village at Dawn,"[118] "500 Captives Slain by Reds In Wonsan: Survivors Tell of Slaughter of Political Prisoners Few Days Before Liberation,"[119] "56 Political Prisoners Shot by Korea Police: 17 Still Alive Crowded on Refugee Train."[120]

Often journalists maintained this dispassionate tone despite reporting appalling and bloody events. A brief Associated Press item began

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[116] "100,000 Red Hit Yanks in See Saw Battle," *Boston Globe*, 4 September 1950, p. 1.
[117] *New York Herald-Tribune*, 3 September 1950, p. .
[118] *New York Herald-Tribune*, 4 September 1950, p. 3.
[119] *New York Times*, 16 October 1950, p. 1.
[120] *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 7 December 1950, p. 15.

> A Red Korean girl guerrilla tommygunned seven bound American prisoners last night, killing five of them. She shot them in a tent where they had been captured in their sleep behind the United States lines by a guerrilla band of three women and seven men disguised as South Korean troops.[121]

A *New York Herald-Tribune* column, in discussing the discovery of mass graves of civilians as American and South Korean forces advanced toward the end of the conflict, even compared the North Koreans unfavorably to the Nazis:

> Buchenwald and Dachau left their ineffaceable scar upon the minds of the living generation; it was hardly to be supposed that before another decade has passed we should reading of mass graves and seeing again the grisly evidence of twisted, anonymous bodies, cut down in cold blood …Even foreknowledge of the enemy's character, however, could not deaden the shock of the discoveries at Taejon and Seoul. Eleven hundred civilians reported slain in the former, two thousand in the latter, are witnesses to a kind of cruelty that can only be explained as natural depravity refined and heightened by a monstrous ideology. . . . The crimes of the Nazis, black though they were, possessed a stark, nightmarish logic. They represented the culmination of Hitlerian doctrines of racism and anti-semitism. The present atrocities have not even this perverted justification.[122]

Third, compared to the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, in the twentieth century American journalists rarely described American soldiers killing their enemies. Occasionally individual soldiers became heroes because of their exploits: Corporal Alvin York alone killed 25 Germans and captured 132 more in World War I, and Lieutenant Audie Murphy dispatched 240 in World War II. But in the Korean War at times journalists literally wrote around having to describe Americans killing North Koreans. One story, headlined, "Treachery Fails—50 Reds Killed, No G.I. Casualties," described how 50 North Koreans faked a

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[121] *Boston Globe*, 5 September 1950, p. 2.
[122] 4 October 1950, p. 26.

surrender then lobbed a grenade into the American position. The Americans, presumably seeing it coming, avoided the explosion and fought back, but the writer uses the passive voice to avoid assigning credit or blame: "When the smoke cleared, the attack had failed. All 50 North Koreans were killed."[123]

Things changed in Vietnam. Journalists were no longer always willing to suppress information that would damage the image of American forces at home; some portrayed American troops killing enemy soldiers and even civilians. Morley Safer of CBS, for example, provided the commentary for 1965 television footage showing U.S. Marines burning a Vietnamese village, Cam Ne, and Seymour Hersh reported the massacre of hundreds of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai. Lichtman, Rothman and Lichtman in *The Media Elite* portrayed this willingness and the growing antagonism between journalists and government in the 1960s partly as a result of professionalization—reporters' growing independence from editorial supervision—and partly a consequence of their liberal-leaning worldviews that led them to "the exhilaration of acting as patrons of the oppressed." [124]

Since Vietnam, Jonathan Eig observed in a recent *Wall Street Journal* column, "much of the country has tended to venerate survivors more than aggressors, the injured more than those who inflict injuries."[125] Gene Edward Veith in *World Magazine* similarly observed that the exploits of Captain Zan Hornbuckle and his 80 men, who fought off 300 Iraqi and Syrian soldiers for

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[123] *Boston Globe*, 7 September 1950, p. 2.
[124] *The Media Elite*, 14, 44.
[125] 11 November 2003, p. 1A.

eight hours and killed 200 of them in the early stages of the Iraqi war, are unknown compared to Private Jessica Lynch, who was captured and then rescued by American forces.

> Nothing against Private Jessica, who has suffered for her country. The fact is, the reaction of Americans to the men and women stationed in Iraq is overwhelmingly one of sympathy, of weepy commiseration for their plight, for the danger they are in, for having to be away from their families, and for having to have lived through such horrible experiences. While they deserve our concern for these sacrifices, what happened to our appreciation for the martial virtues—courage, toughness, victory—that the members of our military have been displaying every day?[126]

"We want to fight wars but we don't want any of our people to die and we don't really want to hurt anybody else," as Veith quoted military historian John A. Lynn.

One way to explain this is Lule's assertion that the tendency to portray victims as heroes is a modern convention that attempts to find positive meaning in meaningless loss. The journalist elevates the status of the victim because that is who the journalist believes the reader will identify with; the deceased becomes then not a powerless victim but a sacrificed hero. The grief of the relatives testifies to the worth of the hero. Hence, "even in the face of the meaninglessness of life that must end in death—symbolized so well by my meaningless, senseless death—I can see after all that my life had meaning."[127] Lule correctly sees that this tendency to turn victims into heroes has become so pervasive that it is considered normal and has even prompted journalists to downplay the "strong"

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[126] Gene Edward Veith, "Victims as heroes" *World Magazine* 29 November 2003, p. 27.
[127] Jack Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001), 55-6.

military heroes in favor of the victims, as Eig and Veith observed.[128] All this is a huge shift from the expectation of colonial printers that readers would identify with tough, aggressive, victorious soldiers, an attitude displayed in the 1760 letter in the *Boston Gazette* describing British troops rampaging through Cherokee villages, which the editor provided "*for the Information and Satisfaction of the Public*."

Another, related possibility is that journalists (along with the American public) are taking an increasingly Hobbesian perspective on death: death is the greatest of all evils; therefore, they venerate those who risk their own lives over those who take the lives of others. If there is no afterlife, if death is the cessation of existence and nothing more, if this life is all there is and every man seeks above all his own continuation, then even the one who kills in a socially justifiable context, such as a soldier in war, participates in evil. The military victim, on the other hand, is not tainted in the same way. The editor of the 1760 *Boston Gazette*, in contrast, did not regard soldiers who killed as morally suspect. In the Puritan worldview, death in battle was unfortunate but justified because soldiers killed in the service of a greater good and of higher principles.

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[128] A discussion of the relationship between this journalistic focus on victims and journalists' interaction with the American government's foreign and military policy is far beyond this paper, but there are likely connections. For example, Tom Bowman, writing in the *Baltimore Sun*, described an increasing tendency among military commanders to adopt a policy called "casualty aversion," which instructs soldiers to place their highest priority on safety instead of minimizing casualties while completing the mission. Critics of the trend (both in and outside the military) "say that military leaders and politicians fear a reaction against the spilling of American blood. But polls show Americans will support deadly operations as long as the reasons are clearly explained and the United States sees it through to completion." In short, Americans will tolerate a military policy that results in the deaths of American troops as long as they can find a positive meaning in it all. The aversion began in 1983, the article asserted, when 18 U.S. soldiers were killed in Somolia and their bodies dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. "Debating a no-casualty order," *Boston Globe*, 9 April 2000, A21.

Suicide

The number of suicide stories tailed off steadily in the twentieth century. From a high of 81 in the 1895 sample, the figure dropped to 52 in 1925, 47 in 1950 and finally 17 in 1975. They had all but disappeared by century's end with 7 in 2000.

This is probably related to the culture's increasing distance from and discomfort with death. As death and grief became more private, reporters were increasingly unable or unwilling to intrude on a family's grief, even as fictional portrayals of death became ever more bloody and graphic.

In 1925 and 1950 reporters interpreted suicide according to a few well-defined formulae. Most often the stories emphasized the motive for the act, mainly legal or business difficulties, ill health or struggles in personal relationships such as rejection by a would-be lover or family member. The suicides of well-known individuals were more likely to make the newspapers. For example: "E.W. Wagner Leaps to Death In Chicago: Pioneer Grain Broker, Who Failed for $10,000,000, Jumps from 15th Story; Had Attempted a Comeback; Failure To Do So, Friends Say, and Ill-Health Caused Suicide,"[129] "G.G. Haven A Suicide, Due to Ill Health: Banker and Opera Patron Shoots Himself After Vain Struggle to Recover,"[130] "Marine Trying to Force Girl to Wed Kills Self,"[131] "Philadelphia Vice Squad Chief Takes Own Life [hours after being summoned to

[129] *New York Times*, 21 July 1925, p. 7.
[130] *New York Times*, 22 July 1925, p. 1.
[131] *New York Herald-Tribune*, 7 October 1950, p. 13.

appear before a grand jury investigating racketeering],"[132] "Youth Kills Self Over Love Affair."[133]

In cases where wealthy individuals or those handling a lot of other people's money took their own lives, the public and journalists often suspected embezzlement or some other crime. The presumption of guilt was so strong that occasionally newspapers made a point of mentioning exonerating evidence: "Morris K. Parker Kills Himself: Found Dead With Ice Pick in His Breast; Vice President Equitable Trust Company, New York; Financial Affairs in Perfect Shape."[134]

Another feature journalists were likely to mention (as an offense against public sensibilities) was if the suicide itself was committed in public view: "Throng Sees 4-Storey Death Leap in Loop,"[135] "Hundreds Sees Woman Leap From Hotel Roof,"[136] "Hotel Plaza Diner Suicide At Table: Unidentified Young Man Orders Midnight Supper for Two, Then Shoots Himself [when the waiter turned his back]."[137]

Finally, journalists emphasized any features that were unusual or particularly poignant: a 15-year-old Muskegon, Mich., boy hanged himself rather than appear in a school play;[138] a Tarrytown, N.Y. businessman's family would not receive the $200,000 in life insurance he had just taken out because of a

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[132] *South Carolina News & Courier*, 18 October 1950, p. 3B.
[133] *Chicago Sun-Times*, 24 December 1950, p. 3.
[134] *Boston Globe*, 4 March 1925, p. 1.
[135] *Chicago Tribune*, 2 November 1925, p. 2.
[136] *Boston Herald*, 15 May 1925, p. 18.
[137] *New York Times* 25 July 1925, p. 1.
[138] "Stage Fright Causes Death," *San Francisco Examiner*, 11 January 1925, p. 11N.

suicide clause in the contract;[139] a nine-year-old boy, whose mother was in a mental asylum, tried to wake his father one morning but could not, and a neighbor found in the room an empty bottle of lysol,[140] a Detroit physician chased a suicidal woman around his office for 15 minutes before she finally eluded his grasp and plunged out a 13th floor window.[141]

By 1975 big city journalists were paying less attention to every-day types of suicides. As with other types of death stories, reporters were looking for events with exceptional "news value." As a result, there was less coverage of suicide but the coverage there was tended to be more sensational in a variety of ways.

Some stories involved figures well-known or otherwise significant in the community, such as the former head of Pepsi-Cola.[142] Ordinary people's suicides had to have some other exotic angle to merit coverage. The *San Francisco Examiner* described how a woman, dressed in a pink bathrobe and holding a poodle, jumped from her 13th story apartment; she was found on the sidewalk at 6 a.m.[143] Five days later the *Examiner* noted in a three-sentence item that the 555th jumper had gone off the Golden Gate Bridge.[144]

Other papers focused on suicides that indicated a social problem. Two *Boston Globe* reporters recounted how "A 19-year-old Charlestown man committed suicide at Charles Street Jail yesterday afternoon, six hours after a

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139 "Family Will Lose $200,000 If Leitner Killed Himself," *Boston Globe*, 7 March 1925, p. 12.
140 "Mother in an Asylum, Boy Finds Father Dead," *New York Times*, 21 July 1925, p. 2.
141 "Physician Vainly Tries to Prevent Woman's Suicide," *South Carolina News & Courier*, 19 October 1950, p. 9A.
142 "Ex-Head of Pepsi-Cola Apparent Suicide," *New York Times* 5 January 1975, p. 40.
143 "Woman Leaps With Poodle," *San Francisco Examiner* 5 December 1975, p. 29.
144 "GG Bridge's 555th suicide," *San Francisco Examiner* 10 December 1975, p. 46.

penal officer had warned that he was possibly suicidal." The reporters talked to the mother of the young man, who had a history of car theft and had been arrested for possessing burglary tools: "'He said it [Charles Street Jail] was a horror,' Mrs. Evelyn Cali said in her apartment in the Charlestown housing project. 'That boy went through hell. I know he was wrong, but there's no reason for this.'"[145]

CONCLUSION

David Sloan observed that not until the last half of the twentieth century could "American media be called truly secular."[146] Despite certain anti-fundamentalist and pro-modernist tendencies, in 1925 a Southern newspaper could run as news (and without irony) that long-awaited rain arrived to break a South Carolina drought only hours after a prayer service at Rock Hill's First Baptist Church.[147] By 1950 that story would have seemed quaint and by 1975 it would have seemed out of place. This was not just because the culture was becoming increasingly secular.

It is no coincidence that the professionalization of journalism and the rise of objectivity as an ideal produced a more secular news media in the twentieth century. The type of journalism that objectivity promoted—materialistic, hostile to religious fundamentalism but friendly with liberal Protestantism, focused on social forces, and skeptical of sensationalism—was both a product of and an influence on American culture. That is, the ideals of objectivity arose near the

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[145] "'Suicidal' inmate, 19, found dead in jail cell," *Boston Globe* 3 October 1975, p. 3.
[146] Wm. David Sloan, *Media and Religion in American History*, ix.
[147] "Rock Hill's Rain Comes Few Hours After Hundreds Pray at Services," *South Carolina News 7 Courier* 8 September 1925, p. 1.

turn of the century as a result of religious, intellectual and social forces, and these ideals interacted with these forces and American culture in complex ways to produce the sorts of journalism described above. These ideals, for example, ensured that newspapers provided receptive contexts for discussions of abortion and euthanasia, offered a variety of frameworks of social issues for dealing with murder in different periods, and gradually eroded journalistic interest in topics such as accidents and suicides.

The professionalization of journalism also insulated newspapers from traditional religious influences by eroding the influence individual editors and publishers had on the character and content of their newspapers. That is, in the era of the Penny Press the influence of Henry J. Raymond, for example, meant that the *New York Daily Times* coverage of executions resembled Puritan execution sermons while Horace Greeley's *Tribune* staff downplayed the gory details. Both decisions were based in part on these editors' religious worldviews.

As journalism became more professionalized, individual writers or editors could at times push the content or direction of a paper one way or another but for the most part the boundaries were already set—some by the media institutions themselves, others by professional standards. While there are still major differences between, for example, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Daily News*, when it comes to the portrayal of death both papers operate within the context of professional standards to which journalists employed at these two newspapers will, by and large, agree.

All this set journalism on a path down which it still heads. Death became significant not primarily for the eternal consequences for the individual but for what the death reveals about society. The next chapter will examine some specific ways this tendency plays out in today's newspapers.

Chapter 10: Religion and 9/11 in the News

It has become a commonplace in America that the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, in which Al-Qaeda hijackers crashed two jet-liners into New York's World Trade Center, another into the Pentagon in Washington, and a fourth into a Pennsylvania field, "changed everything."

In one sense, this is indisputable. The attack ravaged many Americans' sense of personal security, shocking them awake to the reality that deadly terrorist attacks on American soil are more than merely theoretically possible; it prompted radical changes in how Americans handle security at all levels—personal, professional, commercial and national—and the formation of a new government department dedicated to "Homeland Security"; it sparked a major shift in U.S. foreign policy that resulted in troops from the United States and other countries invading two Middle Eastern countries, Afghanistan and then Iraq; it contributed to an economic downturn from which, as of this writing, the nation is still emerging.

It is also true, in a sense, that the attacks "changed everything" in journalism. Because the attack radically altered the worldviews of journalists and the public, and news values are derived from worldviews, the attack also produced a radical shift in news values. "Terrorism" became the unifying theme and background context for all sorts of coverage, from business to sports to politics to culture. To illustrate, a Lexis Nexis search for "terrorism" in the headlines or lead paragraphs from the "major papers" category for a single,

randomly chosen day before the attacks (July 1, 2000) found six items in three different U.S. newspapers. The same search of major U.S. newspapers for November 1, 2001, generated 526 items in 27 U.S. newspapers, and the same sort of shift was evident in newspapers throughout the world. Terrorism was still a major contextual factor months later; a search of July 1, 2002 (a year after the date of the original search) produced 61 different items in 20 newspapers. The threat of terrorism and the Bush Administration's "War on Terror," conducted domestically and overseas, is still the substance and context for much news today.

In another sense, however, 9/11 changed journalism very little. Journalists still try to find news that, according to their own worldviews and news values, is timely, relevant, significant, and interesting, they still look to interpret events primarily in the context of social issues; they are still attracted to sensationalism on one hand but bound by professional conventions on the other. Journalism still works the same way.

The journalistic tendencies identified in the previous chapter for the sample years 1925, 1950 and 1975 also appeared in the year 2000 sample. Rather than repeat the findings by category (murder, accidents, obituaries, etc.), this chapter will discuss the relationship between religion, death and journalists as illustrated by selected stories from 1998, 1999, a few stories in the 2000 sample and selected coverage of the aftermath of 9/11.

RELIGION AND NEWSPAPERS IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The United States is the most religious nation in the West and, as Judith M. Buddenbaum puts it, "contrary to the conventional wisdom, there is little

evidence that religiosity is on the decline."[1] Nine of ten Americans say they believe in God, and in a Gallup poll on American religiosity in the summer of 2003, 80 percent of respondents identified themselves as "in the Christian tradition."[2] A 2001 Gallup poll on religious affiliation found that half of respondents identified themselves as Protestant, a quarter as Catholic, two percent Jewish, one percent Mormon and the remainder some other religion or "none."[3]

The relationship between this highly religious society and the news media, especially in the past 30 years when it comes to news involving religion and religious values, has been rocky. Some, often evangelicals who are conservative on questions of doctrine and biblical interpretation, have charged with increasing volume in the last two decades that the "secular, godless, liberal media" is consciously and deliberately anti-religious and specifically anti-Christian:

> It's no secret to any of us how the liberal media manages the news and helps to set the national agenda on public debate. They report the news in such a way as to promote the political goals of the left. The censorship of Christian principles and ideas covers many more issues than abortion and the homosexual lifestyle. The media slants what is reported in the areas of national defense, the budget, school prayer, and the Soviet expansion in Central America, among others. The truth is being hidden.[4]

Observers in sympathy with this perspective often point to a 1981 study of the personal beliefs of 240 journalists at "elite" media institutions (network news

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[1] Judith M. Buddenbaum, *Reporting News About Religion: An Introduction for Journalists* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1998), 3.
[2] "How Are American Christians Living Their Faith? Part III," *Gallup Poll Tuesday Briefing*, The Gallup Organization, 30 September 2003.
[3] "Easter Season Finds a Religious Nation," *Gallup Poll Tuesday Briefing*, The Gallup Organization, 13 April 2001.
[4] Pastor Tim LeHaye in a direct mailing from the National Right to Life Committee, Washington, D.C., 1990. Quoted in James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 227.

broadcasts, major newsmagazines and the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*). Lichter and Rothman found that these journalists were far more secular (86 percent seldom or never attended church) and liberal than the American public on social issues with strong religious implications such as abortion (90 percent approved of abortion on demand) and homosexuality (75 percent had no moral objection to homosexuality).[5]

The survey is now more than 20 years old but there is little reason to suspect much has changed. While many major media institutions (and many smaller ones) have made attempts to "diversify" their staffs, in practice this means hiring racial and ethnic minorities who share the worldviews of their superiors. A few papers have hired columnists known to be "conservative" (in the fall of 2003 the *New York Times* picked up David Brooks, for example) but this enthusiasm for diversity does not extend to intellectual diversity among reporters. "The tendency, for many reasons," observed Kovach and Rosenstiel in 2001, "is to create newsrooms that think like the boss."[6]

Silk, on the other hand, asserted that journalists often run afoul of religious institutions partly because of their insistence on covering scandal. But he maintained that in general journalists are supportive of religion. They do this

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[5] S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman, "Media and Business Elites" *Public Opinion* (Oct/Nov 1981), 42-44. See also Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman and Linda Lichter, *The Media Elites: America's New Powerbrokers* (New York: Hastings House, Book Publishers, 1986), 21, 29.

[6] Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 189. They add, "Ethnic, gender and racial quotas are a means of approaching [intellectual diversity]. But they will accomplish nothing in themselves if the newsroom culture then requires that these people from different backgrounds all adhere to a single mentality."

partly out of conviction, he wrote, partly to avoid antagonizing large segments of their audiences:

> In the preceding chapters I have tried to show that the news media, far from promoting a secularist agenda of their own, approach religion with the values and presuppositions that the American public widely shares . . . newspapers in particular, preoccupied with declining market share, are at great pains to give their readers a product that meets their needs and sensibilities. Hostility to religion is hardly the order of the day.[7]

Contrary to popular belief, newspapers are not becoming more secular, he argued. Although some content analysis studies show a decline in the amount of religious news over the course of the twentieth century, other research indicates a resurgence of interest in religious topics in the last quarter of the century.[8]

Why do so many people believe otherwise? Silk's answer was that people tend not to notice what does not offend them (although that explanation fails to account for the presence of what does offend them), and that public issues involving religion since the 1970s have been particularly contentious. Buddenbaum suggests that news coverage accurately represents a religious and cultural landscape that is increasingly pluralistic. Journalists do not oppose religious belief itself; what some, particularly Christians, perceive as increasing secularism is really a decline in religious authority. Because people tend to believe their own religion is true and other people's religion is false, "it becomes

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[7] Mark Silk, *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 141.

[8] Silk, *Unsecular Media*, 35-36. He points to a content analysis of the *New York Times*, 1865-1975, that indicates a decreasing volume of religious content (Robert B. Pettit, "Religion Through the Times: An Examination of the Secularization Thesis Through Content Analysis of the New York Times, 1865-1975" Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1986. On the other side is Stewart Hoover, Barbara M. Hanley and Martin Radelfinger *The RNS Lilly Study of Religion Reporting and Readership in the Daily Press* (Philadelphia: Temple University School of Communication and Theatre, 1986). That study found a "new prominence of religion in the news."

very easy to see in the existence of different beliefs and lifestyles evidence of a decline in true religiosity and to dismiss those other beliefs and behaviors as secular."[9] Both scholars point out that broad surveys of journalists, particularly research by Weaver and Wilhoit,[10] suggests that most journalists, taking into account those at smaller outlets, share many of the values and religious convictions of their audiences.

Silk accepts that "religion news" has been compartmentalized, like sports and business; the bulk of his book analyzes the frames (he calls them "topoi") in which religion news typically appears. Buddenbaum points out that many religious groups have conflicting complaints about media coverage: while conservative Protestants complain about the influence of secular humanism, mainline Protestants and Catholics do not want reporters to act a apologists, members of minority religions complain about being ignored and atheists charge journalists put too much emphasis on religion.[11]

These are valid considerations when assessing the relationship between the news media and religion. However, neither scholar addresses the fact that the major "elite" media, those whose reporters tend to be most "secular," have both the largest audiences and the most influence; this might well help explain why so many regard "the media" as liberally biased. Although Buddenbaum acknowledges that religion coverage is starting to break out of its ghetto on the church page and appearing more frequently on the front page, neither deals with

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[9] Buddenbaum, *Reporting News About Religion*, 15.
[10] David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist: A Portrait of U.S. News People and Their Work* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
[11] Buddenbaum, *Reporting News About Religion*, 110-1.

how worldviews and religious beliefs of journalists affect the news generally. It is likely that many journalists today, at both large and small outlets, are simply continuing trends began by earlier generations; they tend to be sympathetic to some types of religious belief, or at least tolerant, but are often critical or hostile to others that conflict with their own worldviews.

The stories in the 2000 study sample, like those in the samples from 1925, 1950 and especially the 1975, occasionally mentioned God but rarely interpreted events in a religious context. Science was the ultimate arbiter of truth, even regarding things that have traditionally been the domain of religion and philosophy.

One notable example of this was a *Boston Herald* column by Beverly Beckham about "scientific evidence" for the existence of human souls, or at least an afterlife, headlined, "Science Weighs Next World." The column reviewed a study on "Near-Death Experiences" and suggested that the usual physiological and psychological explanations for the "tunnel of light" experiences are not adequate. It illustrates Silk's assertion that journalists are essentially sympathetic toward religion, and also that, while journalists may support "religion" they regard it as less authoritative than "science":

> A boy is killed while playing outside his house, the victim of a hit-and-run driver. And we want to believe, more than anything, that this boy went back to God. It's what we profess, that flesh is mortal and life is temporary. But our essence - our souls, who we really are - is eternal.
>
> And yet how we rail against death. We fight it every way we can. We don't embrace it. We don't see it as our great liberator, "Here comes death!" our arms open, our hearts light. No one does this. We revile death.

> We run from it. We call it a thief. And it is a thief because it takes people from us.
>
> In our churches, though, death is the underling. Readings, psalms, songs and homilies trumpet the power of God over death and celebrate the immortal soul. Death has no hold. Death, where is thy sting?
>
> But in our homes and hospitals, and in the places where people die every day, death's sting is real. Would it be different if we knew for certain that there was life after death? Would we be different? Would we grieve less? And accept more? Would we lose our fear of death if we knew, not simply believed, that it wasn't an end, but a beginning? Would we then be able to reconcile these two irreconcilable ideas: that life isn't a dress rehearsal and yet again it is?
>
> Dr. Sam Parnia is clinical research fellow and honorary registrar in medicine at Southampton University in England. Dr. Peter Fenwick is a neuropsychiatrist at the Institute of Psychiatry in London. These two scientists, not men of the cloth, say they have reason to believe that human beings may indeed have souls. [12]

Coverage of 9/11 and its aftermath illustrates with startling clarity how journalists are generally supportive of religion that fits their worldviews. The weeks immediately following the attacks were a time of tremendous uncertainty and journalists felt this as much as any other segment of the public. People hoping to make sense of the attacks flocked to churches, at least for a time, and journalists were there providing sympathetic coverage.

> Why did God allow terrorists to hijack four commercial airliners carrying hundreds of innocent passengers? Why did he allow two of those passenger jets to crash into the World Trade Center towers, resulting in the deaths of thousands of innocent people? Why did heaven not unleash protective legions of angels when the other jets crashed, one in Pennsylvania and the other at the Pentagon? Those questions are being

[12] 6 July 2001, p. 25.

> asked in millions of homes and in thousands of churches, synagogues, mosques and temples in the wake of Tuesday's stunning terrorist attacks.[13]

The Houston Chronicle's religion editor then quoted respectfully the responses to these questions from Presbyterian and Episcopal ministers and a rabbi, who said, "We must bury the dead, comfort the bereaved, bring justice to the perpetrators of evil, and ultimately redouble our efforts to promote peace and justice in the world." The *San Antonio Express-News* asked similar questions of a hospital chaplain, a producer for a Catholic television network, and a Baptist pastor.

"If God is good," asked an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* columnist, "why does evil happen? If God is love, why do innocent people suffer? If God is omnipotent, why doesn't he intervene when humans attempt such unspeakable acts? Especially when they commit horrendous acts in the name of God?"[14]

Public expressions of faith in God became common. Some were ordinary statements. For example, President Bush ended his September 12 televised speech to the nation, "Good night, and God bless America." But many were extraordinary. Television cameras, for example, showed Congressional leaders gathered on the steps of the Capitol to make statements: "the lawmakers unexpectedly punctuated their unity by bursting into a rendition of 'God Bless America.' Many lawmakers hugged. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, Democrat

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[13] Richard Vara, "The Tuesday Tragedies and the Question, Why?" *Houston Chronicle*, 15 September 2001, p. 1.
[14] Gayle White, "IN THE FACE OF EVIL" *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 15 September 2001, p. 1B.

of New York, was in tears."[15] This context gave new significance to the reportage of things, such as the President's "God bless America," that otherwise would have been unremarkable.

Once the religious background of the hijackers became public, dozens of newspapers ran backgrounders on Islam that attempted to distinguish between the "radical" or "fundamentalist" Islam of the hijackers and the version of Islam that is broad-minded and tolerant. For example, many newspapers asserted that the proper translation of "jihad" is not really "holy war" but "struggle" and can refer to a personal, internal battle for righteousness. Soon after the attacks President Bush attempted to head off public anger against Muslims in America and to defuse criticisms at home and abroad that America's "war on terrorism" was really a "war on Islam" by insisting that Islam is a "religion of peace." Similarly, journalists quickly reported statements from Muslim spokesmen and ordinary believers who condemned the attacks. One headline in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* summed up the approach well: "Muslims Here Express Grief, Condemn Attacks as 'Absolutely Inexcusable'; They Fear Backlash Against Arab-Americans As Some Endure Whispers, Stares."[16]

Their concern, said some, was based on previous experience after earlier terrorist attacks:

> Even before likely suspects were identified in Tuesday's devastating terrorist attacks, Muslims in the Twin Cities and nationwide held their breath, bracing for the worst.

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[15] Alison Mitchell and Katharine Q. Seeyle, "A Day of Terror: Congress" *New York Times* 12 September 2001, p. 20A.
[16] 12 September 2001, p. B8.

> "We hope we won't feel the heat," said Hamdy El-Sawaf, executive director of the Islamic Center of Minnesota. "We pray as Muslims and pray that God save our nation, the United States of America."
>
> With that, El-Sawaf crossed his fingers for good luck. His wariness is based on the fact that many Muslims have routinely felt besieged when a terrorist attack is waged against Americans. Most notably, in the aftermath of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, Muslims in Minnesota and elsewhere reported being harassed because of the initial assumption that "Arab terrorists" had planted the bomb.[17]

One spokesman quoted in article, Fadia Abul-Hajj, president of the Minnesota chapter of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, said "We're always concerned about this happening, hoping the media won't make us into a scapegoat." The media, ironically, worked extremely hard to avoid just that.

Journalists also attempted to explain "fundamentalist" Islam, often in the context of a "clash of civilizations," a phrase first popularized in the 1990s by Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington.[18] This perspective sees the major conflict in the coming century between The West and Islam with differences in religion, politics, worldview and power as the dividing lines. Journalists sometimes argued for and sometimes against the idea, but it often provided the context for explaining "fundamentalist" Islam, sometimes matched with discussions of "American imperialism."

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[17] "Twin Cities; Minnesota Muslims denounce attacks, brace for the worst;Islamic Center director hopes there won't be harassment," *Star-Tribune* (Minneapolis), 12 September 2001, p. 18S.
[18] See, for example, Bob von Sternberg, "Islam vs. The West" *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* 29 June 2002, p. 5B; Douglas Jahl, "A Nation Challenged: Islam, Moderate Muslims Fear Their Message is Being Ignored" *New York Times* 21 October 2001, p. 1B; Scott Shane, "The Beginning or the End: Terrorists Attacks Cast Two Conflicting Historical Views in a New Light" *Seattle Times* 5 October 2001, A3.

This perspective resembles, in some respects, the colonial perspective that saw world history as a war of evil popery against the good Protestant Christians; both are worldviews for interpreting world conflict that take religion seriously.

There are major differences, however. For many colonial printers, the Catholic vs. Protestant battle was a profoundly moral one because it was, literally, a life and death issue. God was on their side not simply because Protestant doctrine was correct and Catholic false, but because in their view Catholic teachings sent people to hell.

For many modern journalists, Islamic fundamentalism is very much a moral issue. However, the lines are not between religions but between modern and "medieval" worldviews, as *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman put it:

> [T]his is not a clash of civilizations—the Muslim world versus the Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and Jewish worlds. The real clash today is actually not between civilizations, but within them—between those Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Jews with a modern and progressive outlook and those with a medieval one. …
>
> To not retaliate ferociously for this attack on our people is only to invite a worse attack tomorrow and an endless war with terrorists. But to retaliate in a way that doesn't distinguish between those who pray to a God of Hate and those who pray to the same God we do is to invite an endless war between civilizations—a war that will land us all in the smoking section.[19]

In Friedman's view, those with a "medieval," war-mongering and intolerant religion worship a "God of hate" while those holding a "modern and

[19] "Smoking or non-Smoking?" 14 September 2001, p. 27A. This is not to suggest that all or even most journalists hold the same view or could articulate it so clearly. However, the fact that one of the most prestigious columnists on the country's most prestigious newspaper does hold it, however says at least that the view is recognized as legitimate and likely to be highly influential with other journalists.

progressive" religion worship the alternative, presumably the "God of love." Few journalists articulated their view of the conflict quite so clearly as Friedman; nevertheless, the "clash of worldviews" interpretation appeared regularly and was quickly applied to American contexts. This *Houston Chronicle* column, for example, began as an attack on the misogyny of Afghanistan's Taliban government before a U.S.-led coalition overthrew it but the writer clearly understood that both the central issues and the context in which the battles take place are religious:

> It is not so surprising that hatred for the United States runs high throughout parts of the Middle East and the rest of the world. While what might prompt a person to take hatred to the level of engaging in a suicide assassination mission on innocent American civilians is unfathomable to the Western way of thinking, the fact of irrational hatred and anger is not so foreign.
>
> Rather, we see it frequently in this country, from those who burn crosses on the lawns of black residents in otherwise peaceful Houston subdivisions, to those who cruelly hold up "God hates queers" signs along the route of the Gay Pride parade in Montrose, to those who pick on Jewish kids for not believing in Jesus.[20]

It is not surprising that, having labeled the terrorists' version of Islam as "fundamentalist," that journalists interpreted Christian "fundamentalist" perspectives as a similar threat to society. The issue boiled over on September 13 when televangelist Jerry Falwell said, on televangelist Pat Robertson's show, *The 700 Club*, that God had "lifted" his protection from America because sin was rampant in society:

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[20] Andrea Georggson, "Confusing Culture, Taliban Misogyny," *Houston Chronicle* 29 October 2001, p. 24A.

> The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the A.C.L.U., People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'[21]

President Bush promptly distanced himself from Falwell's comments. Falwell at first claimed his comments were "taken out of context," but finally conceded in a statement the following week that his remarks were "insensitive, uncalled for and inappropriate." But the basis for his accusation, that God punishes national sin in a national way, would have been familiar to colonial news readers. *New York Times*' reporter Goodstein also asserted that it is "theology familiar to and accepted by many conservative evangelical Christians." She quoted R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., distinguishing between Falwell's comments and the view that declines to interpret events so specifically:

> There is no doubt that America has accommodated itself to so many sins that we should always fear God's judgment and expect that in due time that judgment will come. But we ought to be very careful about pointing to any circumstance or any specific tragedy and say that this thing has happened because this is God's direct punishment.

Columnists across the country blasted Falwell as "idiotic" and worse. The striking thing about the response was how thoroughly they identified Falwell's "fundamentalism" with the "fundamentalism" of the terrorists. "One religious fanatic is pretty much like another when it comes to using the Bible or the Koran

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[21] Quoted in Laurie Goodstein, "After the Attacks; Finding Fault; Falwell's Finger-Pointing 'Inappropriate,' Bush Says" *New York Times* 15 September 2001, p. 15A.

to justify the most unimaginable barbarisms," wrote Dan K. Thomasson leading off a column for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*.[22] Another columnist, Melissa Stoeltje, is worth quoting at length:

> The groups Falwell singled out for blame - pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays, a civil liberties group - are the very groups that would make it onto any persecution to-do list compiled by the Taliban.
>
> In their effort to blame others and justify death in the name of God, Falwell and his ilk revealed themselves to be the American corollaries of the Islamic fundamentalists, who believe they alone own the one true faith, all else be damned. No, most Christian fundamentalists would never blow up an abortion clinic or murder a homosexual, just as most Islamic fundamentalists would never walk into a pizza parlor wired with a bomb or fly an airplane into a building.
>
> But the danger inherent in religious fundamentalism - based on a strict interpretation of a faith's religious writings - is that spiritual certitude can too easily slide into fanaticism, too easily warp into license to categorize, demonize and - sometimes - kill. …
>
> Moderate Islamic scholars have scrambled to proclaim that their faith doesn't authorize the slaughter of innocents, just as moderate Christians have scrambled to distance themselves from Falwell and his hateful words. But many other commonalties link the extremists within the two camps. In Afghanistan, the Taliban uses religion to justify female subjugation, male dominance, theocracy, the demonizing of the "other." In America, many Christian fundamentalists represent efforts to repeal hard-won women's rights, to institute male dominance, the blending of government and religion, the demonizing of the "other." None of this is really about God, of course. That's just a cover. It's about power. [23]

Olasky has shown that the identification of Christian "fundamentalism" with Islamic fundamentalism makes little sense. The two groups have opposing views on, for example, Israel, the morality of terrorism, and the relationship

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[22] 16 September 2001, p. H3.

[23] Melissa Fletcher Stoeltje, "Religious extremism has many faces, all of them dangerous" *San Antonio Express-News* 18 September 2001, 1D.

between religion and politics.[24] Most Christians would also take exception to Stoeltje's cynical and inaccurate characterization of their values and beliefs.

Perhaps one of the reasons many journalists who are otherwise respectful of religious belief regard as such serious threats "fundamentalist" brands of Christianity and Islam is that they genuinely believe that "spiritual certitude," also known as "intolerance," inevitably leads to "fanaticism" and from there to violence. Moreover, they object to anyone who might not regard death as the worst of all possible evils. Christianity and Islam have very different interpretations of what is the worst evil, of course, but possibly for some journalists any system of values that does not place "death" atop this list is itself a threat. A suicide bomber is indeed "unfathomable" to someone for whom physical death is the worst of all possible evils.

SENSATIONALISM

As described in Chapter 9, the murder stories that attract the most attention generally have well-known characters or those to which audiences can relate, a compelling narrative, personal conflict, drama and mystery, and "amplitude." Reporters also generally look for an angle to the story that gives it a significance beyond the event itself.

A few of the most heavily sensationalized stories in the last several years include the 1994 O.J. Simpson case, in which the former football star was

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[24] Marvin Olasky, "Media Christophobia" *WORLD Magazine* 27 April 2002. He points out, for example, that in Islamic countries "mosque dominates state" in an attempt to unify power in the "hands of those considered virtuous," while "In America, a separation between church and state is not something secularists had to insist upon; it is intrinsic to Judaism and Christianity . . . The U.S. Constitution, with its emphasis on checks and balances, is based on the concept that sin lurks in us all, so power must be divided and all must be watched."

acquitted of murdering his ex-wife and another man; this case was often linked to domestic violence. The 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., in which two boys murdered a dozen classmates and teacher before killing themselves, was connected to bullying and school violence. After a first grade boy from a poor neighborhood in Flint, Mich., shot and killed a classmate, Kayla Rolland, in 2000 the issue was gun control. More recently, pregnant Laci Peterson disappeared on Christmas Eve, 2002, and months later the bodies of her and her unborn child were fished out of the San Francisco Bay near where her husband had claimed to have been fishing when she disappeared. If the case needed a social issue to make it more attractive to reporters, it was abortion; could the prosecution charge Scott Peterson with a double homicide for killing the baby?

Sometimes journalists regard the social issue as central to the story; at other times it seems like an attempt to give a veneer of significance to a story for which the central attraction was celebrity involvement, a mystery or characters with whom audiences identify. The death of Princess Diana of Wales in an auto accident, as the car containing her and her entourage slammed into a tunnel wall while fleeing from the paparazzi, for example, contained strong doses of all three elements, as did the disappearance into the Atlantic of the small airplane piloted by John F. Kennedy, Jr. The pattern of blanket coverage for the handful of such cases in the last decade that generated a "media frenzy," such as O.J., Laci Peterson, Chandra Levy and JonBenet Ramsey, suggests the possibility that the "Spiral of Silence" theory applies, only in reverse. The original theory suggests that some topics and positions are seldom mentioned in society because people

imagine them to be unpopular—and the less they are mentioned, the more unpopular people imagine the position to be, the less likely journalists are to broach these topics. Eventually the idea is simply excluded from public consideration without regard for its merits.[25]

In reverse, it seems likely that the more coverage a particular case or trial receives initially, the more journalists feel they will be "left behind" if they ignore it, so it receives more coverage, prompting more journalists to cover it, and so on. This also could be considered an extreme example of the powerful effects of inter-media agenda setting. In a similar agenda setting effect on audiences, extensive coverage makes a particular case seem especially important, a "national" story and therefore deserving of their attention; this produces an expanding audience, which encourages journalists to increase the coverage, and so on.

Once the ball is rolling, these cases attract attention far out of proportion to their "news value," especially in light of the fact that journalists routinely ignore the vast majority of cases of missing or murdered men, women and children whose circumstances may be just as poignant or mysterious. As one Associated Press reporter observed, in a story about the excessive coverage of Laci Peterson headlined, "Never again' in wake of Chandra rings hollow with Laci coverage":

> After the September 11 terrorist attacks knocked the names of Chandra Levy and Rep. Gary Condit out of the news, some media executives

[25] For a more complete introduction to the Spiral of Silence, see Werner J. Severin and James W. Tankard, *Communication Theories: Origins, Methods, and Uses in the Mass Media* (New York: Longman, 1997), 305-7.

> pronounced that an entire summer would never again be devoted to covering the case of one missing woman.
>
> Things have not only not turned out that way, but after a full winter and spring covering the killing of Peterson and her unborn son, reporters have returned to Modesto - Levy and Condit's hometown - in droves for a story that has talk show hosts, tabloids and the national news media hanging on every development - no matter how small.[26]

Such sensational news cases appear so regularly that it seems the cable news shows are seldom without one; a cynic might suggest that if there were no spectacular trial or investigation happening somewhere in the country, reporters would have to invent one.

Newspaper stories in the year 2000 sample in this study contained very little graphic violence. Journalists would routinely describe the manner of death but would normally include gory details only when the issue justified the sensationalism. Two cases involving "hate crimes" that received massive coverage (and continue to draw references in the media five years later) illustrate how this works.

James Byrd Jr., a black man 49 years old, was hitchhiking home along a dark country road near Jasper, Texas, on the night of June 6, 1998. He accepted a ride from three white men who had, police said, connections with racist organizations. The June 9 Associated Press story began,

> Three white men with suspected ties to the Ku Klux Klan chained a black hitchhiker to the back of a pickup truck and dragged him to his death, authorities said Tuesday.
>
> James Byrd Jr.'s head, neck and right arm were found about a mile from his mangled torso. A wrench with the name of one of the suspects on it

[26] Brian Melley, 21 June 2003.

> was found near the body. Byrd had been dragged about two miles on a narrow, winding asphalt road.
>
> "All evidence shows it will be racially motivated," Sheriff Billy Rowles said.

The story then noted that the victim was "so badly disfigured that investigators had to use fingerprints to identify him." Also, "there were 75 red spray-painted circles along the road to mark where police had found either Byrd's belongings - his keys and dentures - or body parts." An Associated Press update a day later began:

> The trail of James Byrd Jr.'s cruel end was clear, scattered along more than two miles of country road in this East Texas town.
>
> A smear of blood here. His dentures. A piece of ravaged flesh there.
>
> The 49-year-old man was beaten and then dragged by a chain from the back of a pickup truck along that narrow, twisting road - all because, police say, he was black.

Having been identified as a "hate crime," coverage exploded as major newspapers from around the country and the world flooded Jasper with correspondents. This lead from *USA Today* typifies the tone and themes of the coverage, which often framed the event as a modern-day lynching:

> Three days after the mangled body of a black man was discovered on a winding, country road, Texas prosecutors and federal officials are building a case for the death penalty against three white men who allegedly chained him to the back of a pickup truck and dragged him to his death.
>
> As the nation reacted with horror to the murder of James Byrd Jr., the Rev. Jesse Jackson made his way to East Texas to meet and mourn with Byrd's family. President Clinton, who has made racial conciliation a focus of his second term, decried the crime as "shocking and outrageous."

> And the pine-shrouded town of Jasper, Texas, where Byrd lived and died, reeled in the national spotlight, with neighbor warily eyeing neighbor and local leaders pleading that the entire community not be branded racist because of the actions of a violent few.[27]

A *Boston Globe* editorial cited FBI statistics showing that, numerically, Massachusetts was not far behind Texas in hate crimes: "The sheer horror and brutality of the James Byrd murder takes the breath away. But the statistics show that it did not occur in a vacuum. Racial violence is still a component in our ongoing national tragedy."[28] It noted that there had been 12 "hate crime" murders in the U.S. in 1996. Clearly, part of the appeal of the Byrd murder for journalists was that they interpreted it as indisputable evidence for and representative of (perhaps not in the gory details but certainly in its spirit) a pervasive national problem.

Later that year, on October 6, a young gay University of Wyoming student named Matthew Shepard was in a bar in Laramie called the Fireside Lounge. According to the father of one of the men later convicted of murder, Aaron McKinney, Shepard made a sexual advance on McKinney, who was so embarrassed by the exchange (some of his friends were snickering at him) that he determined to lure Shepard out of the bar and rob him. McKinney and Russell Henderson, according to early news reports, told Shepard they were both gay and then drove Shepard a mile out of town where they robbed him, beat him with a pistol and then took his shoes and left him, as the *Washington Post* put it, "tied to

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[27] Charisse Jones, "Race killing in Texas fuels fear and anger" *USA Today* 11 June 1998, p. 1A.
[28] 13 June 1998, p. A14.

a fence like a dead coyote."[29] (The significance of the coyote reference, according to some reports, is that ranchers sometimes post the carcasses of dead coyotes to scare off other coyotes; the killers later claimed they were just hoping to delay his return to town.) Passers-by discovered him the next day, after 18 hours in near freezing temperatures, and he died five days later in hospital from blows to the head. The two murderers were arrested almost immediately and later received life in prison.

The attack received an enormous amount of coverage that started almost immediately after the assault was discovered. President Clinton and various members of Congress took the opportunity to call for sexual orientation to be added to federal hate crimes legislation that specify harsher penalties for crimes motivated by the victim's personal characteristics (current law covers crimes based on race, color, religion and national origin). Gay rights groups realized, as one activist put it, that

> "Now is the time to capitalize on a lot of the energy and awareness in the community," says Cathy Renna, director of community relations for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD). "This was not just a robbery. This was not just a murder. It was a horrific torture and murder that happened because Matthew was gay. And I don't think Americans can tolerate that."[30]

The coverage had several well-defined emphases. Reporters focused on the brutality of the crime contrasted with the inoffensive nature of the victim, like this *Washington Post* lead:

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[29] Tom Kenworthy, "Gay Man Near Death After Beating, Burning" *Washington Post*, 10 October 1998, p. 1A.
[30] Charisse Jones, "Gay student's brutal death stokes hate crime debate," *USA Today* 13 October 1998, p. 1A.

> Matthew Shepard, slight of stature, gentle of demeanor and passionate about human rights and foreign relations, lived a relatively open gay life in this university community that is something of an island of liberal thought in a conservative, traditional-values state. This week, he paid a terrible price.[31]

The second emphases was that society as a whole bears responsibility for the crime because society is intolerant of homosexuality; the implication is that everybody should therefore support social and/or legislative action to suppress such crimes. One story from the *Rocky Mountain News* about a Laramie rally for Shepard illustrated some of the various ways this was communicated. First, the reporter quoted a the chairman of the University of Wyoming's Lesbian, Gay, Transgender Association saying that Shepard's death "is not a Laramie issue. This is not a Wyoming issue. This is not a gay issue. It is a human issue. And it affects everyone."[32] The event also featured calls, many of them based in religion, for social change:

> The Rev. Roger Schmit addressed the crowd and drew an analogy between Shepard's attack and Jesus Christ's crucifixion. They were both beaten and left to die because people hated them for who they were, Schmit told the crowd. "In those 2,000 years between Jesus and Matthew, how much have we really changed?"

The article ended by emphasizing the continuing nature of the anti-gay sentiment, quoting a gay college student who said that although he felt safe, in Laramie "there is a small minority who are intolerant of gays. And there are parts of Laramie you have to be careful in. Some bars around here are known to be filled with locals who are very homophobic."

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[31] Kenworthy, "Gay Man Near Death."

[32] Manny Gonzales, "'This is not a Gay Issue, This Is A Human Issue,' 500 Gather in Laramie to Pray for Shepard" *Rocky Mountain News* 12 October 1998, 5A.

As the debate over the inclusion of homosexuality in hate crimes legislation heated up, the charge that conservatives, who oppose such laws because they extend "special rights" to homosexuals, are complicit in the crime appeared frequently, most often by quoting gay rights advocates extensively:

> "There can be no stronger testament to how toxic the environment is that has been created by the extreme right than what happened to Matthew Shepard," said Kate Kendell of the National Center for Lesbian Rights in San Francisco. "It is crystal clear to lesbians and gay men in this country that hate rhetoric is directly linked to this kind of violence . . . I don't know how much more it's going to take for the right to recognize their vitriolic rhetoric takes on actively violent overtones in the hands of certain individuals in this country," Kendell said.[33]
>
> "This University of Wyoming student was beaten and left to die, tied to a fence like an animal because he was honest and open about being gay," Beatrice Dohrn, legal director of the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, said today. "Matthew Shepard's horrible suffering and death cannot be dismissed simply as the fault of deranged, isolated individuals," Ms. Dohrn said. "His attackers are among millions of Americans who constantly hear the message that gay people are not worthy of the most basic equal treatment."[34]

Certainly this perspective was common among journalists and others long before Matthew Shepard died. CBS's Dan Rather wrote in an April 11, 1994 column in *The Nation* that "Gays and lesbians are beaten to death in the streets with increasing frequency—in part due to irrational fear of AIDS but also because hatemongers, from comedians to the worst of the Christian right, send the message that homosexuals have no value in our society." It continued afterward: in a 1999 piece about how Jerry Falwell is attempting to soften Christian rhetoric

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[33] Elaine Herscher, "Wyoming Death Echoes Rising Anti-Gay Attacks" *Houston Chronicle* 13 October 1998, p. A7.
[34] James Brook, "Gay Man Dies From Attack, Fanning Outrage and Debate" *New York Times* 13 October 1998, p. 1A.

regarding gay rights, *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich blasted the "many religious-right ideologues" who "den[ied] any link between the shrill gay-baiting pronouncements by their 'family' organizations and a national rise in gay-bashing violence at a time when most violent crime is down."[35] The point, for the purposes of this paper, is that journalists consider anti-gay bias a pervasive national problem; this justifies the extensive national coverage and the graphic descriptions of the crime.

Stories without this connection to a "larger social issue" will receive far less coverage and will usually be far less graphic, even if the details are available. About a year after the Shepard murder, near Bentonville, Arkansas a pair of homosexual lovers drugged a 13-year-old boy named Jesse Dirkhising, tied him to a bed, gagged him with his own underwear and duct tape, raped him for hours using a variety of objects and then left him tied to the bed in such a position that he suffocated to death. In marked contrast to the Shepard case, national media ignored the crime. In the month after the Shepard murder, as pro-homosexual commentator Andrew Sullivan pointed out, Lexis Nexis recorded 3,007 stories about it, compared to 46 for Dirkhising; Associated Press took a month to get it out on the national wire, and then only after the *Washington Times* ran an article asking why the national media had ignored the event; the *Boston Globe*, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* ran no stories on it the following year while the *Washington Post* ran one small item and an explanation from its ombudsman explaining why no further coverage was warranted. In the same

[35] Frank Rich, "Has Jerry Falwell Seen the Light?" *New York Times* 6 November 1999, p. 17A.

period, the *New York Times* ran 45 stories involving Shepard and the *Washington Post* ran 28. "This discrepancy isn't just real, it's staggering," conceded Sullivan.[36]

Conservative commentators asserted the discrepancy was proof that the national media are biased in favor of gays, happy to use the Shepard case to press for pro-gay legislation but unwilling to report events that might be used to portray homosexuals in a negative light. Because of political correctness, "Nobody wants to say anything negative about homosexuals. Nobody wants to be seen on the wrong side of that issue," Tim Graham, an analyst with the conservative Media Research Center, told the *Washington Times*.[37]

Editorials in the *Washington Post*,[38] *Denver Post*[39] and the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*[40] all denied that political correctness or pro-gay bias influenced the disparity of coverage. The explanation, according to Cuprisin, is simple: the Dirkhising murder was a not a hate crime. It "is horrible, as horrible as any murder compounded by such brutal sex crimes. But is it a hate crime?" Ombudsman Shipp provided a similar explanation, quoting a *Post* national desk editor who argued that the Dirkhising killing did not raise a "larger social issue" whereas Shepard's death "prompted debate on hate crimes and the degree to which there is still intolerance of gay people in this country."

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[36] Andrew Sullivan, "Us and Them" *The New Republic* 2 April 2001, p. 8.
[37] Joyce Howard Price, "Media Tune Out Torture Death of Arkansas Boy" *Washington Times* 26 October 1999, p. 1A.
[38] R. Shipp, "Reporting Two Killings," 14 November 1999, p. B6.
[39] Sue O'Brien, "Our bias is to our own back yard," 14 November 1999, p. G4.
[40] Tim Cuprisin, "Media doesn't favors liberals, it just favors news," 1 November 1999, p. 8.

Sullivan dismissed that explanation. He argued that gay-bashing murders and murders by homosexuals are both so rare, compared to the roughly 17,000 murders that occur in the U.S. every year, that

> neither says much that can be generalized to the wider world. So why the obsession with Shepard and the indifference with regard to Dirkhising? The answer is politics. The Shepard case was hyped for political reasons: to build support for inclusion of homosexuals in a federal hate crimes law. The Dirkhising case was ignored for political reasons: squeamishness about reporting a story that could feed anti-gay prejudice, and the lack of any pending interest group legislation to hang a story on . . . What we are seeing, I fear, is a logical consequence of the culture that hate-crimes rhetoric promotes. Some deaths—if they affect a politically protected class—are worth more than others. Other deaths, those that do not fit a politically correct profile, are left to oblivion.

It may be true that neither murder says "much that can be generalized to the wider world," but journalists seldom let that prevent them from interpreting such deaths with Puritan intensity. They seek larger meaning in the deaths they cover. American journalists looked for and found meaning in the deaths of Byrd and Shepard, meanings that fit their views of the way the world is and the way the world should be. In Dirkhising's death they saw no lesson, only a horrible crime and, as more than one commentator observed, newspapers cannot cover every horrible crime that occurs. Conservative commentators, for their part, interpreted Dirkhising's death as significant, not for its own, sake, but for what the lack of national coverage implied about the major media outlets.

CONCLUSION

The *Post's* ombudsman might argue that his paper was simply practicing "good" sensationalism in covering the Shepard murder so thoroughly, drawing the

nation's attention to an injustice or social evil that requires action. As a *Washington Post* editorial put it, Shepard's death

> is a special kind of killing. It tells a segment of American society that its physical safety is at risk. It is an attack on pluralism, as well as on the individual's autonomy to live the sort of life he pleases. The nationwide expression of anxiety and rage at this act of brutality affirms the values the killers themselves derided. The public has responded to the Shepard murder as the terrible crime it most certainly is.[41]

The *Post* was clear: it was not just another murder, it was about values and worldviews—which ones journalists consider acceptable in American society and which threaten their views of how society should be. In the Shepard case the values under attack were "pluralism" and the individual's right to practice homosexuality without social censure. Journalists consistently reacted with "good" sensationalism. The same thing occurred when journalists identified American Christian fundamentalists with Islamic terrorists; journalists saw the values of modernity—pluralistic, tolerant, progressive, secular—as under physical attack from Islamic terrorists and cultural attack from Christian "fundamentalists."

Not all news stories containing a murder or death or some sort involve this conflict of values and worldviews, of course. The principle that these stories illustrate is that death often brings these values to the surface. Death raises the

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[41] "A Murder in Wyoming," *Washington Post* 14 October 1998, p. A14. It should be noted that the *Post* was the only paper this study found that opposed hate-crimes legislation. The writer continued: "The best way for society to express this difference lies not in drawing legal distinctions between murders and murders prompted by bigotry but in the marches that have taken place in Wyoming, the national news coverage and the general sense of outrage that has permeated public discussion of the Shepard killing. It lies also in the increased willingness of state and local law enforcement to prosecute gay-bashing and other bias-motivated offenses under the laws that already make these attacks serious crimes, and in the increased insistence on the part of the public that these laws be used effectively."

stakes, so to speak. Insulting a homosexual man violates many of the same values that prompted reporters to cover the Shepard case, but of course individual name-calling incidents receive little media attention. Likewise, Islam fundamentalism and its relationship to Christianity would not have been such a hot topic had the hijackers' plot failed. As with all news, reporters treat death as a good indicator of the severity of the disorder.

Puritan preachers and colonial journalists were doing much the same thing 250 years earlier, only they added an explicit moral or composed a confession to put into the mouths of murderers, if necessary.

Chapter 11: A Matter of Such Importance

This study of death and American newspapers supports Mitchell Stephens' observation that "humans have exchanged a similar mix of news with a consistency throughout history and across cultures that makes interest in this news seem inevitable, if not innate."[1] Of all the thousands of ways to die, from broken hearts to heart attacks, reporters reported those deaths, with very few exceptions, that fit into one of nine different contexts. Three of those—murder, accidents, and obituaries—became most common in the early 1830s[2] and remain so today.

This study found also that the types of disorders on which reporters focused was consistent: stories that identified technological disorder as the cause of death were by far least common in every sample year—this almost certainly is as much a result of the rarity of those sorts of events as of journalistic convention. Stories that described moral disorder were quite a bit more common, while details suggesting natural and social disorder were most common.[3] Moreover, in 1745 just as in 2000, journalists' beliefs about Big Picture issues interacted with religious and intellectual currents in society to produce news stories about death

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[1] Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News: From the Drum to the Satellite* (New York: Viking Press, 1988), 34.

[2] That is, most common in years when the U.S. was not at war.

[3] The average percentage of details coded as reflecting technological disorder in a given sample year was 4 percent, with a range of 2-9 percent; for moral disorder the average was 22 percent with a range of 16-30; the natural disorder average was 34 percent, range 20-49; and the social disorder average was 40 percent, range 27-56. Beyond the ranking just described, there was no discernable pattern over the study period. The percentage of details pointing to any one particular category of disorder would fluctuate from sample year to sample year, but no category showed either consistent growth or decline over the study period.

that were reflections of the times. Journalism has always been about finding meaning in events, and it still is.

Hanna Rosin, writing about coverage of the one-year anniversary of 9/11, grumbled at journalists who insist on finding "a happy ending, a valuable lesson, a useful moral" in the aftermath, what she called their attempts to "weave some comforting narrative out of chaos."

> The worst hopeful stories are the ones ostensibly about "chance"—the missed bus or sick kid or lost key that kept one person from dying—that quietly convey the opposite conviction, that God or some guiding force had a hand in all this. Michael Lomonaco, head chef at Windows on the World, went to get his eyeglasses fixed that morning, and so he was on the shopping concourse in the basement instead of on the 106th floor when the planes hit the north tower. "Why did you decide at that critical moment that you were going to try and get your eyeglasses fixed?" [Connie] Chung asked him, eyebrows raised. "Why do you think you were saved?" The implication is that Lomonaco, and others like him, were somehow protected, chosen—a repulsive idea when one considers what it says about the thousands who died. Chung doesn't consider the simplest explanation: Being the boss that day, Lomonaco had the privilege of arriving at work half an hour late. [4]

Rosin wrote that she prefers "narratives that help us make sense of September 11, but they are not comforting." In fact, "they leave you more terrified than hopeful: Are we in a war or not? Are we safe here or not?" She presented herself in the column as the clear-eyed realist, the materialist who insists that reporters tell it like it is without all this religious humbug. But one essayist in *Harper's* confessed—even before September 11, 2001—that the huge

[4] Hanna Rosin, "All Talk: Too Many Words about 9/11" *The New Republic* 23 September 2002, p. 12,14.

volume of death-related stories in the news media forced even skeptics like himself to ask questions he thought were long settled.

An Amtrak train struck and killed an Ecuadoran immigrant and her four sons, aged 11 to three, walking along the tracks at 2:00 a.m. near Fairfield, Conn. News reports described body parts and bloody toys scattered around the scene, and a shaken Mark Slouka called it one of those "unspeakable things" of which modern man can make no sense. [5] In centuries past, even though people "died like midges in October" from disease and famine, we "succored ourselves with God, with the knowledge that the causes of our grief, however inscrutable, were after all but His instruments." But this modern, prosperous and materialistic age pushed God and even our own deaths offstage and "allowed the myth that gave blood meaning to slip quietly into something like obsolescence."

Slouka was glad to see the myth go, but

> Our connectedness, it seems, is engineering something new for us: a need, a hunger, that cannot be satisfied, an existential dilemma fully worthy of Kafka. Unable to ignore the daily parade of bodies left at our doors courtesy of the networks or the newspaper of record or the many offices of the dot-com world, we are being forced to ask the kind of questions—How could this happen? What does it mean?—that we in the West haven't had to ask on such a regular basis since the seventeenth century.

Cultural historian Joseph Amato wrote that "there is not much of the hereafter left out in the open now," for the "dead have been etherealized, privatized, fragmentized, relativized and left for God alone to care about. The

[5] Mark Slouka, "Blood on the Tracks: Does Senseless Death Reveal God, or His Absence?" *Harper's Magazine*, 300, No. 1801 (June, 2000): 89-97.

dead … have gone the way of ghosts, other spirits, angels, principalities and the afterlife itself." Yet he insisted that we must continue to tell stories about death:

> Death has a particular sting for us in the contemporary world since we lack stories and metaphors to talk about it … We must tell all sorts of stories to keep man-face death at bay. We must tell stories to distract ourselves from death, to explain and mitigate its worst consequences, and to suggest how we will be preserved from it.[6]

Not every story should be about death, of course, and journalists could easily take the "reality of death" to absurd lengths. The satirical newspaper *The Onion* published on December 21, 2003, a front-page story with this lead: "HOLLYWOOD, CA–The inexorable march of time, the prison into which all humankind is born, brought *Leave It To Beaver* star Jerry Mathers–and all of us–one step closer to the grave Monday." The parody continued:

> Mathers, who came face-to-face with his own mortality in April 2001, when a worm he swallowed on *The Tonight Show's* "Celebrity Survivor" gave him a severe stomach infection, once charmed millions as the irrepressible mischief-maker "The Beav." Yet, as sands through the hourglass, Mathers' remaining moments on Earth continue to run out, bringing the star of the short-lived '80s syndicated series *Still The Beaver* closer to the day when worms would eat not just his stomach lining, but the whole of his flesh.

On the other hand, readers are looking for stories that give meaning and value to life, asserted Lule, who argued that the way to provide such meaning is by telling stories that connect readers with "the ultimate issues of the human condition," or "universal and shared stor[ies] of humankind." Not only is this

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[6] Joseph Amato, "Death and the Stories We Don't Have" *The Monist* 76 No. 2 (April 1993), 260, 252.

good journalism, done judiciously it is good business, a way to help staunch the bleeding ratings and readerships of mainstream news media outlets:[7]

> Storytelling will never be in crisis because storytelling is an essential part of what makes us human. We understand out lives and our world through story. Perhaps stories are so much a part of us because human life itself has the structure of a story. Each of us has a central character. Each of us knows, better than we know anything, that life has a beginning, middle, and end. We *need* stories because we *are* stories. Stories will stop, it is clear, only when humanity stops.[8]

What sort of death stories should journalists tell, and how should we go about it? First, journalists should recognize that there is a tension between the "news as information" model and the "news as story" model. For some death stories and contexts, the "news as information" model is the appropriate approach.

But journalists should consider telling fewer "news as information" stories about death and do a better job with the "story" stories. I do not suggest that newspapers should eliminate obituaries or accounts of car crashes and domestic murders, but that journalists should be more selective. Newspapers in 1950 sometimes ran dozens of garden-variety obituaries in a regular daily issue and my eyes soon glazed over in a futile search for something distinctive or significant. Are readers today better served by a near-daily recitation of de-contextualized killings from across the nation? Or the latest update from the investigation into a celebrity disappearance? Would not an occasional piece that delved into the

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[7] For a description of the long-term readership and ratings decline in mainstream news media, see Thomas E. Patterson, *Doing Well and Doing Good: How Soft News and Critical Journalism Are Shrinking News Audience and Weakening Democracy—and What News Outlets Can Do About It* (Cambridge: The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard University, 2001).

[8] Jack Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2001), 4.

meaning and loss of one individual be both more interesting and more useful in explaining how the world works? Journalists locked down by traditional news values such as prominence and timeliness become less able to examine critically their own assumptions, leading to, for example, the media frenzy during the search for the downed airplane containing John F. Kennedy, Jr., and two family members. A writer with *Christianity Today* wrote in response that "our culture exaggerates the importance of celebrity deaths, and in doing so, cheapens the lives of everyone else."[9]

Journalists should not attempt to tell the story of every death they come across. Even Solzhenitsyn, in *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956*, once mentioned how a dozen "zeks" (political prisoners) died marching through the snow. He had already described the deaths of hundreds of such people. But concerning this case, "no one is ever going to write a great novel about it, not even one chapter: if you live in a graveyard, you can't weep for everyone."[10]

But newspapers could tell more stories than they do and so, second, journalism could use some new frames for reporting death and deciding which deaths are significant and why. For news to be of use and interest to an audience, it should expand or refine their "mental maps" or their understanding of the way the world works (see Appendix A: Theory, for my discussion of this concept). The explanation need not be revolutionary but it should improve the audience's

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[9] Doug LeBlanc, "Driven to Tears" *Moody Monthly* (November/December 1999), 37.
[10] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956* Vol. I (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 584.

understanding of the world and their place in it. It is not enough that news be merely new or proximate or relevant.

News that fails to enlighten as well as inform becomes predictable because journalists tell the same old stories with new faces in different places. *The Onion's* editor, Rob Siegel, boasted to *American Journalism Review* in 2002, with the anniversary of 9/11 approaching, "I could write those stories right now." He was probably right. Regarding the media's treatment of death generally, he added: "There's really nothing more simplistic than the way the media deals with death. There doesn't seem to be any room in journalism for people shrieking and crying …Death is rarely dignified." He also charged that the media's tendency to ascribe heroism to everyone who suffers tragedy, to "Christopher Reeve-ize everybody," strips away their humanity. *The Onion's* response: "Loved Ones Recall Local Man's Cowardly Battle With Cancer."[11]

The challenge is to avoid predictability while still seeing life and death in terms that make sense to the audience, that "fit cultural preconceptions of news," as Darnton put it. Journalists could begin by being more skeptical of the political spin that politicians and activists attempt to foist on reporters in the immediate aftermath of a death that seems to confirm their way of looking at the world.

Third, journalists should reconsider their materialistic biases against non-materialist perspectives in news articles. Given the historical weight of the bias and its dominance in many current newsrooms, wide-spread change in this regard anytime soon is unlikely. But materialism is not inherent to good journalism, as

[11] Kathryn S. Wenner, "Peeling the Onion" *American Journalism Review* (September, 2002), 53.

history shows. Journalists with strong religious beliefs from past centuries and today would argue that, if God, heaven and hell are real, they present a more accurate picture of the world because they take those things into account. To ignore these things is to distort reality. It also indirectly affronts the beliefs of the vast majority of any potential news audience beyond the newsletter of American Atheists. David Yount, Scripps Howard News Service religion columnist, points out that religion is the "Eternal Growth Industry":

> Year-end polls reveal that the religious faith of Americans, traditionally intense, has strengthened since the late 1980s. More than eight in 10 Americans today affirm that "prayer is an important part of their daily lives." Even more—87 percent—insist that they never doubt the existence of God. Eighty-two percent of Americans told the Gallup International Millennium Survey that God is "very important" to them.[12]

Journalists who deny spiritual realities should perhaps consider the possible connection between religion as the "eternal growth industry" and their shrinking audiences. This does not mean that journalists should engage in more explicit theological interpretation, speculate on the eternal destiny of the recently-departed congressman, or presume to know which societal sins prompted the latest earthquake or terrorist attack. It does mean that American journalism would benefit if editors and reporters displayed more tolerance for a variety of perspectives on death, what it means, and what themes are appropriate when dealing with it. Death, as this study illustrated, brings deep-seated values to the surface. Perhaps journalists should expand the concept of "news you can use," as Lule suggested, to include the ability to "comprehend the hand of history and fate;

[12] David Yount, "Religion, the Eternal Growth Industry" *Washington Post* 4 January 2004, p. B3.

news they can use to understand hatred and fear … and consider the possibilities and shortfalls in their own lives."[13]

If some journalists are uncomfortable going that far, perhaps they could at least convey a sense of the mystery and wonder of earthly existence. As Pascal wrote, "Man himself is the most miraculous object in Nature. For he cannot conceive what Matter is, still less what is mind, and least of all how a body can be joined to a mind. This is his supreme difficulty, yet it is his very being."[14]

These questions need to be asked because death is central to the human condition. "It useth to be said (and it is a plain, weighty known truth)," said Puritan divine Increase Mather in a 1697 funeral sermon, after two Harvard undergraduates broke through thin ice and drowned, "that nothing is more certain than that every man should die, and nothing more uncertain than the time when."

Journalism that fails to take this into account, fails. The fact that materialism is the default setting at most newspapers does not make for an open and free discussion of the topic, yet we cannot know how we should live until we decide, at least for ourselves, what it means to die. Pascal believed that the fate of the individual after death is the most important question in the world but some "prefer to wait for death to resolve the matter and in the meantime are highly satisfied with their condition." This "resting in ignorance is a monstrous thing," for

> The immortality of the soul is a matter of such importance to us, and touches us so deeply, that we should have lost all feeling is we did not care to know the truth about it. Our every action and thought must take so

[13] *Daily News, Eternal Stories*, 194.
[14] *Pensees*, 56.

> different a course, according as there is or is not eternal bliss to hope for, that it is impossible to make one sensible and judicious step if our eyes are not fixed on that point which should be our final aim.[15]

Whether or not they agree with the Christian teaching that "man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,"[16] journalists in good conscience should not "rest in ignorance" or let audiences do the same.

The writers of seventeenth century English crime pamphlets provided, as Mitchell Stephens put it, the

> hardly uncommon but still disconcerting spectacle of the 'gutter' journalist who reverses his collar, pulls a black coat over his blood-stained shirt, grabs a mud-spattered Bible, clears his hoarse throat, and begins to harangue us with calls to avoid the path of sin.[17]

Now American journalists, better dressed, not quite as bloody and not nearly as biblical, are haranguing us with calls to avoid the paths of racism and homophobia, intolerance and "medieval" views of religion. It is not that American journalism has come full circle, that having started as Puritan preachers journalists evolved into "objective" purveyors of facts and are now reverting to their roots, albeit with a different set of values. Instead, values and worldviews have always shown up in journalism through the selection of stories and the details they include. American journalists never really stopped complaining about an

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[15] Blaise Pascal, *The Pensees* trans. by J.M. Cohen (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961), 117-8.
[16] Hebrews 9:16, *New International Version*, 1984.
[17] Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News* (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997), 106-7.

insufficiently pious public; the difference is that colonial journalists called for more faith in God, and modern ones call for more faith in humanity.

Appendix A: Theory and Methods

The method of an investigation should flow from the theory that guides the investigators, drives their purposes, and provides the basis upon which they formulate their questions. With that in mind, in Part I of this appendix is a brief overview of what I have found to be a useful explanation of the nature of news and how it works. Part II will describe how this perspective related to how I formulated my approach, gathered my data and organized my results. The tables summarizing the results of the content analysis are in Appendix B.

PART I: THEORY

Mental Maps

News is easy to identify but perhaps harder to define. It could be as simple as an exchange of information, but many modern definitions also require, as does this one from Chicago journalist Jack Fuller, the presence of some sort of media organization and some standard of newsworthiness: "a report of what a news organization has recently learned about matters of some significance or interest to the specific community it serves."[1]

But how does one determine what is of "interest or significance" to an audience? And news has a universal quality that is difficult to capture, as Mitchell Stephens pointed out:

[1] Jack Fuller, *News Values: Ideas for an Information Age* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996), 6.

> Indeed, the evidence that is available from this wide sample of preliterate cultures all point to one conclusion: that humans have exchanged a similar mix of news with a consistency throughout history and across cultures that makes interest in this news seems inevitable, if not innate.[2]

Why is this? What makes news a universal phenomenon? I review and expand here a theory that people use news to construct "mental maps" to orient themselves in the world. Although some of my observations are similar to those in a "uses and gratifications" approach, the perspective I offer here is less a listing of "needs" news meets than a psychological model of the human instinct for news, with attention to the central role of narrative in the process.

Perhaps the earliest proponent of the "orientation" function of news was the famed journalist and scholar Walter Lippmann. He suggested in 1922 that people create "pseudo-environments" to help them interpret reality, and that news is one source of material for creating these conceptual maps: "[A person] is learning to see with his mind vast portions of the world that he would never see touch, smell, hear, or remember. Gradually he makes for himself a trustworthy picture inside his head of the world beyond his reach." Of course, he reasoned, the world is too complex, too varied, and people are not equipped to handle unmediated perceptions of reality, so "we have to construct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it." [3] Later researchers came up with a similar concept called "schema theory" that approaches the issue as one of how the human brain perceives and processes information.[4] A "mental map" is distinct but closely

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[2] Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News: From the Drum to the Satellite* (New York: Viking Press, 1988), 34, 16.
[3] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1941), 29.
[4] For a brief overview, see Werner J. Severin and James W. Tankard, *Communication Theories: Origins, Methods and Uses in the Mass Media 4th ed.* (New York: Longman, 1997), 83-4.

related to a "worldview." The latter is a foundational set of beliefs about the nature of God, humanity, reality, and the relationships between them, "a philosophical system that attempts to explain how the facts of reality relate and fit together."[5]

McCombs and Merritt cited research detailing how this orienting function works in a political context. In short, the intensity with which an individual seeks news and magnitude of the effect this information has on him depends on his need for information, as defined by "relevance" (how the information applies to him) and "uncertainty" (whether the individual feels he needs more information).[6]

Exactly how people construct and use these mental maps is uncertain, and methods and uses probably vary widely among individuals. But in general it seems that people use news not merely to construct maps to "orient" themselves in a particular environment, but that these maps serve complex and far-reaching psychological functions as well. McGuire cited sixteen different types of theories of psychological motives and attempted to explain how media use related to them. These sixteen groups can be reduced, by excluding those important to a psychologist but less significant for the purposes of this study, to the following ways people are likely to use media: as a source of material to build or bolster personal intellectual maps and self image; as a source of information useful for solving problems or conquering challenges; as a means of experiencing new and

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[5] Norman Geisler and Norman Bocchino, *Unshakable Foundations* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2001), 55.

[6] Davis Merritt and Maxwell E. McCombs, *The Two W's of Journalism: Why and What of Public Affairs Journalism* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2004), 48-49. See Chapter 5 for an excellent discussion of the relationship between the public and the media's agenda setting role.

varied situations through identification with the characters portrayed in the media; as a means of personal gratification through the release or expression of emotions, again through identifying with media characters; as a source of models to emulate; to gain a sense of participation in the human drama; to gain a feeling of control of the larger world; to gain a sense of community through shared experiences.[7]

In light of this, Lippmann's pseudo-environments should be considered more than just an image of how people live in a foreign country, and the need for orientation regarded as more than a need for data on which to base daily decisions. People use news to help build their understanding of how the world works and their place in it. These "mental maps" have both cognitive and affective components, and are a multi-layered collage of beliefs, attitudes, impressions and images. Some elements may be expressible as propositions, some may not; some elements may be seen as general truths (e.g. humans are intrinsically valuable) and some as specific (e.g. Bill is a fool). These elements, moreover, need not all be logically consistent, although people certainly prefer to see their mental processes as coherent. Stephens's "innate" need for news is a human desire to expand and refine these mental maps, although the need, ability, and inclination to do so varies widely. Building mental maps is analogous to thinking—everybody does it, but some do it better than others.

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[7] William J. McGuire, "Psychological Motives and Communication Gratification" in *The Uses of Mass Communication: Current perspectives in Gratification Research* eds. J.G. Blumler and Elihu Katz (Beverly Hills: Sage Communications, 1974), 167-96.

This perspective presumes that a reality exists that provides a basis for shared experience, and that therefore individuals can share at least parts of their mental maps and worldviews. In this model, the journalistic function of interpretation or ascribing meaning or "putting events into context" occurs when the journalist connects in his own mind an event to some larger pattern, drawn from his own mental maps, that makes the event significant to him. Because he believes his audience shares at least some aspects of his mental map and possibly worldview, he believes his audience will see the significance also.

Journalists, of course, often explain the significance of their stories. But the more the mental map of a journalist corresponds with the mental maps of his audience, the less explicit the explanation needs to be, because the audience will recognize the event's significance.

Another way of thinking about this is the concept of "frames." Each story has a frame, a shared context between journalist and audience or, as Reese defined it, "organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world."[8] A frame is not comprehensive like a mental map, but rather specific to particular situations as defined by the organizing principles. It "supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elabortion."[9]

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[8] Stephen D. Reese, "Prologue—Framing Public Life" in *Framing Public Life* edited by Stephen D. Reese, Oscar H. Gandy, Jr., and August E. Grant (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates , 2001), 11.
[9] Severin and Tankard, *Communication Theories*, 320.

Mental Maps and News Values

If people use news to construct mental maps, this fits well with the traditional, practical definitions of what makes news—news values. Defining news values is a subjective task. Figuring out what makes a story newsworthy "is not something that can be done by slide rule, examined under a microscope, or counted up on an adding machine."[10] Some observers have offered long lists of news values, but those most often cited include timeliness, proximity, prominence, relevance, consequence/impact, conflict, novelty and human interest.

The connection between news values and mental maps is obvious; news that fit the criteria help people construct mental maps that are current, significant, relevant and therefore most likely to meet the psychological needs McGuire discussed, above. Similarly, news audiences would already have a place in their mental maps for prominent people and so would have a "peg" on which to hang new information about their person. Regarding proximity, scholars have found that journalists assess as more newsworthy (and audiences tend to consume more) news about people who are culturally and geographically closer to the audience.[11] The explanation for this tendency, which is especially noticeable in international

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[10] John Hohenburg, *The Professional Journalist* (New York: Holt, Rinhart and Winston, 1969), 48.

[11] See, for example, Thomas J. Ahern, "Determinants of Foreign Coverage in U.S. Newspapers" *Foreign News and the New World Information Order* ed. Robert L. Stevenson and Donald Lewis Shaw (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State Press, 1984); Herbert Kariel and Lynn A. Rosenvall, "Factors Influencing International News Flow" *Journalism Quarterly* 61 No. 3 (1984): 509-16; Eleanor Singer, Phyllis Endreny and Marc B. Glassman, "Media Coverage of Disasters: Effect of Geographic Location" *Journalism Quarterly* 68 No. 1 (1991): 48-58. Scholars have found numerous correlations between international news flow and other factors, such as the economic and political status of the countries and whether the news event is seen as a threat to the home country of the news organization. These factors, it would seem, are connected with journalists' perception of how their audiences will be able to relate to the people in the news.

news, is simple: audiences find it easier to fit into their mental maps news about people with whom they can identify and to whose circumstances they can relate.

Mental maps, worldviews and news values are also related through the concept of "disorder." Sociologist Herbert Gans, in his influential book, *Deciding What's News*, identified two types of news, "disorder" news and routine news. Regarding the former, he argued that reporters have values that tell them what society should be like—events that conflict with these values become "disorder" news. He identified four types of disorders news stories emphasize: natural, technological, social, and moral.[12]

To summarize, journalists (like everybody else) construct mental maps to represent the world the way it is so they can "orient" themselves. They also have worldviews, out of which flow values, that tell them the way the world should be. They base decisions about newsworthiness on a comparison of the way the world is with the way it should be—where these two views conflict is "disorder." Those disorders that they find most useful in building and refining their own mental maps, or those they judge their audience will find most useful, are most likely to be published as "news."

This explanation does not account for everything in a newspaper or news broadcast. It is difficult to explain the inclusion in newspapers of some things, such as fashion news, as "disorder." But this much seems very probable: For news to be of "interest and significance" to an audience, it must refine or expand their mental maps in some significant way. News should be more than merely new or

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[12] Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979).

relevant or proximate; the addition or refinement need not be revolutionary, but it should improve the reader's understanding of how the world works and his place in it.

Most journalists probably understand this intuitively and operate accordingly. But when the journalistic process becomes a formulaic reliance on traditional news values and convention, or when journalists are caught up in the heat of competition, they may not recognize when they are no longer providing useful information. Such lapses lead to huge amounts of coverage, for example, of O.J., the Lewinski scandal, the Gary Condit/Chandra Levy disappearance, and so on, as well as the yawn-inducing coverage of, for example, city council meetings in some local papers.

Darton argued that "newspaper stories must fit cultural preconceptions of news."[13] He meant that news stories must match what the audiences regard as the forms of news—the genres, the styles, the angles, themes, and so on. This is true, but it is not the whole picture. The news must correlate in some way with the audience's mental maps to be comprehensible.

It seems likely that people will eventually reject news media whose stories conflict too strongly or too frequently with their own mental maps. This is not to suggest that journalists should never challenge their audiences' beliefs. They have an ethical responsibility to help audiences build more accurate, truthful and useful mental maps even if that provokes feelings of dissonance in their audiences. Audiences do not expect, in any case, that media messages will correspond

[13] Robert Darnton, "Writing News and Telling Stories" *Daedalus* 104 (1975), 192.

exactly with their own mental maps, like the missing piece of a puzzle, and perhaps ideally they do not. McGuire notes that "categorization theories" propose that people feel gratified when a mass communication message fits their worldview perfectly, but even more gratified when the message does not quite fit but they are able to tweak either their worldview or their interpretation of the message so that it does.

Mental Maps, News Values and Narrative

Walter Lippmann observed that "the problem of securing the reader's attention" is

> A problem of provoking feeling in the reader, of inducing him to feel a sense of personal identification with the stories he is reading … the audience must participate in the news, much as it participates in the drama, by personal identification.[14]

This sense of personal identification is closely related, perhaps even necessary, to many of the uses of news McGuire noted. That is, by identifying with the characters in the news readers experience new situations, gain emotional release, feel that they are participating in the human drama, and so on. One of the major ways journalists draw their readers into this sense of identification is through their narrative techniques.

News writers share with their audiences, besides elements of their mental maps, journalistic conventions that allow readers to make sense of narrative. This is not to say that audiences cannot identify with someone described in a story written in inverted pyramid style, but that "the context of work shapes the content

[14] *Public Opinion*, 355.

of news, and stories also take form under the influence of inherited techniques of storytelling," as Darnton put it.[15]

Some scholars do assert that narrative communicates more effectively and generates a stronger reader identification than the typical hard news style: "The common assumption that readers prefer human interest stories only because the content is more interesting overlooks that these are the same stories that are usually written in traditional story form."[16] Lule took this a step further. He made the case that many news stories are based not just on journalistic conventions, with particular styles for particular situations (e.g. the murder story, the fire story, etc), but upon archetypes and myths, such as "The Victim," "The Scapegoat," "The Hero," "The Flood," and so on. Not every story is mythical, but often

> reporters and editors draw upon a fundamental story of earthly existence, a universal and shared story of humankind, and they use that story to instruct, inform, celebrate, or forewarn. Like myth tellers of every age, journalists can draw from the rich treasure trove of archetypal stories and make sense of the world.[17]

Perhaps readers understand in a narrative framework even stories that are not narrative in form. Bird and Dardenne suggest that the "chronicle" (or "hard") style news stories "provide us with the backdrop of events that tell us the world is still going on and that things we value still matter."[18] As well, it seems likely that people interpret hard news in the context of a larger narrative. The latest report of

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[15] "Writing News and Telling Stories," 192.
[16] S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert Dardenne, "Myth, Chronicle and Story: Exploring the Narrative Qualities of News" in *Media, Myths and Narratives: Television and the Press* ed. James W. Carey (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1988), 77-8.
[17] Jack Lule, *Daily News Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism* (New York: The Guildford Press, 2001), 18.
[18] "Myth, Chronicle and Story," 74.

violence in Israel, for example, is understood and meant to be understood as a part of the continuing conflict in the Middle East, which itself is part of a larger story about the world's perpetual conflict between nations.

Scholars have identified several roles and functions of myths. Lule wrote that myths provide a definition of a group, explain and recount its origins, transmit belief, set social boundaries and illustrate shared beliefs, values and ideals.[19] Bird and Dardenne said myths offer reassurance and familiarity in shared community experiences, provide credible answers to baffling questions, and are both models of and models for culture.[20] In terms that this paper has been using, myths help people construct mental maps of reality by providing common narratives that express and reinforce shared beliefs about how the world works.

Similarly, Olasky called archetypes that provide organizing principles for how journalists look at the world and an individual's place in it "macrostories." There have been three major macrostories in the history of American journalism. Until the eighteenth century, the "official story" dominated journalists' perspectives. This macrostory held that power knows best, and news was what rulers wanted the people to know. The second was the "corruption story." It emphasized the propensity of humans, particularly those in authority, to abuse power.

> Journalists from the 17th through 19th centuries who embraced the corruption story invented much of what we associate with modern

[19] *Daily News, Eternal Stories*, 33.
[20] "Myth, Chronicle and Story," 70-71.

> journalism at its best: A sense of purpose, a willingness to oppose arrogant rulers, and a stress upon accuracy and specific detail.[21]

The third macrostory, which Olasky argued is still dominant, was the "oppression story." It presumes that people are basically good but enslaved by oppressive social structures and institutions. Problems are the result, not of personal sinfulness, but of external influences and the reporter's job is to "put a spotlight on these influences."

PART II: METHOD

How does all this relate to a historical study of death and religion in American newspapers? Death, as Amato was quoted in Chapter 1, "causes people to tell stories." This study looks for meaning in stories about death and compares such stories across hundreds of years in markedly different cultural circumstances. Death, as one of those universal experiences that all cultures must deal with, provides a consistent starting point for investigating journalistic worldviews and values as they changed from 1690 until the present.

I apply some elements of framing theory and a method commonly associated with the social science approach to mass communication research, content analysis, but this is primarily a historical study in the tradition of the humanities.

The topic simply does not lend itself conveniently to a full-blown social science approach. The humanities are "centrally concerned with the meaning of

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[21] Marvin Olasky, *Central Ideas in the Development of American Journalism: A Narrative History* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991), 2. See Appendix C, Methodological Notes, for his description of macrostories.

human existence. Good, evil, right, wrong, beauty, tragedy, imagination, God—these are terms in the traditional vocabulary of the humanities," as David Paul Nord observed. The goal of humanist history "is not to generalize but to illuminate" and thereby provide "insight, perspective, empathy, and perhaps even wisdom."[22] Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote that

> almost all the important questions [in history] are important precisely because they are not susceptible to quantitative answers. The humanist, let me repeat, does not deny the value of the quantitative method. What he denies is that it can handle everything which the humanist must take into account; what he condemns is the assumption that things which quantitative methods can't handle don't matter.[23]

Nord added, however, that applying some social science methods to historical problems can have benefits. In this case, content analysis provides a helpful way to systemically gather materials (newspaper stories involving death) from the huge universe of death-related stories so that the samples are at least somewhat representative of the times and cities I chose for the project. It also provides a quantitative basis for organizing my material and comparing samples through time.

I recognize that, as Nord wrote,

> the evidence the historian must work with is a biased (non-random) sample of the record of the past, and the nature of the bias cannot be determined. For this reason, generalization by statistical inference, or even by common sense, is fraught with uncertainty.[24]

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[22] David Paul Nord, "The Nature of Historical Research" in *Research Methods in Mass Communication* eds. Guido H. Stempel III and Bruce H. Westley (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1981), 295, 296.
[23] "The Humanist Looks at Empirical Social Research" *The American Sociological Review* 27 No. 6 (December 1962): 770.
[24] "The Nature of Historical Research," 297.

As I noted in Chapter 1, stories about death seldom deal explicitly with worldviews or Big Picture questions, nor do journalists often describe their own philosophical and religious assumptions. But it is possible to infer things about what they believed by a close examination of news stories.

For this study, I chose categories organized around the manner and context of the death of the news subject: crime, execution, natural disaster, military/political, disease, old age, accident, suicide and obituary/public figure. These categories proved to be elastic and durable; this study found hundreds of wildly varying causes of death but apparently there are only so many contexts journalists find useful for reporting them. I found no stories that did not fit into at least one of these categories, and only occasionally encountered stories that might fit into more than one. The most common exceptions were murder/suicides, such as a husband who killed his wife and children and then committed suicide. In those cases I classified the story according to what seemed to be the dominant category—in the above example, I always classified such stories as "crime" because the murders occurred first and would have been newsworthy as a crime story even if the husband had not killed himself.

By examining the way frames involving death shift and change over time, and by tracking journalists' tendencies to select greater or lesser numbers of stories in particular categories, I attempt to show how journalists view death itself and how worldviews relate to news value decisions. I did not, however, attempt to subject these results to statistical analysis beyond constructing tables of results for comparison.

Another factor leading me to adopt a humanistic emphasis was that when planning the study I found serious practical problems in quantifying the expression of news values. There are too many indicators of news value aside from frequency of story types, from story length to placement in the newspaper to the presence of a photograph to the size of the headlines, for me to construct a practical scoring system. Moreover, these indicators changed over time,[25] precluding the possibility of developing a system that could compare results over time with reasonable quantitative accuracy.

I can and do assert that frequency changes across time within categories correlate in some way to journalists' news value judgments, and in some cases it is possible to compare news value across categories. The increase in murder stories from 4 in the 1810 sample to 185 in the 1895 sample clearly implies something, as does the fact that in 1925 murder, accidents and obituaries each had at least three times more stories than the next closest category, which was suicide.

But I refrained from putting too heavy an interpretive load on the frequency charts themselves. It would be foolish to suggest, for example, that in 1950 the presence of 112 murder stories against 210 accident stories by itself shows that journalists regarded the accidents as having double the news value of murder stories. After 1895 the totals for public figures/obituaries categories have the potential to be particularly misleading. Most newspapers collected obituaries on one page, and so it is simply not accurate to assume that 1950 journalists

[25] In colonial days, for example, international news was always front-page, not because it was necessarily most important but because, overseas papers arriving by ship during the week, it was usually available first and so typeset first.

regarded the 20 brief death notices on page 23 as having more news value or importance than the two battle accounts from the Korean War on page one and two. I believe the large number of obituaries clearly shows that journalists regarded obituaries as having significant news value, but again, the many other factors such as story length, placement, etc. prevented me from attempting a strict quantitative measurement of newsworthiness.

Frequency tables are helpful for comparison and often suggestive, but my analysis relies mainly on the humanistic historical method, particularly close reading of the stories themselves.

I also classified each story for "disorder," usually related to the primary cause of death. Some types of stories went by definition with some categories of disorder. "Natural disasters" such as hurricanes, for example, were always classified as showing "natural" disorder, and "crime" stories were almost always "moral" disorder. Stories involving "technological" disorder had to suggest that the cause of death was the result of some accidental failure of a man-made machine or technology, such as airplane crashes. Stories were coded as exhibiting "social" disorder if they included details suggesting that the death was part of a larger social problem (such as the many stories in 1925 noting the thousands of auto-related deaths nation-wide) or described or implied disorder in society as a result of the death, grieving relatives or fatherless children, for example. Most stories included details that implied more than one type of disorder; I limited my coding to the two types that were emphasized most. I tabulated my results by proportion per sample year. That is, I charted what percentage of disorder details

reflected natural, technological, social or moral disorder for each year. This allowed me to compare sample years according to how much attention journalists paid to each category.

I recorded my results on a template that included the list of story types in a column along the upper left hand side of the page and the disorder across the bottom. Along the top I recorded the story's source: newspaper, date, headline, a brief summary of the story, and usually page number (in colonial days pages were often not numbered). Under the disorder coding I noted the details that justified my coding decisions. Detailed or particularly interesting stories I photocopied or printed from the microfilm reader, where possible.

The purpose was to provide more information about journalists' mental maps. Coding for story types shows what types of stories journalists regarded as most newsworthy; coding for disorder helps explain how journalists interpreted particular stories, how they selected details to support their interpretations, and what sorts of disorder they regarded as most newsworthy.

I selected for analysis five American cities with long and vigorous newspaper traditions: Boston, as home to America's first newspapers; New York, as the center of American journalism from the mid-1800s on, and Charleston, S.C., Chicago, and San Francisco for regional representation. In each city at roughly 30 year intervals[26] I coded about 14 issues from each of two newspapers (except for Charleston, which for most of its history has had just one major

[26] See Merritt and McCombs, *The Two W's of Journalism*, 32-34, for a discussion of why 30-year intervals, roughly one generation, are a suitable tool for historical analysis.

paper).[27] Newspapers were available for Boston, New York and Charleston from 1745 on because those were among the earliest colonies. I began my analysis of San Francisco and Chicago in 1870; in 1840 both towns were still modest in size and lacked a significant newspaper tradition.

The newspapers were chosen for circulation and longevity, on the assumption that larger, longer lasting newspapers were most likely to be influential, both in their communities and with other newspapers. I also tried for some diversity of style or ideology. I included both Patriot and Loyalist papers in my 1775 sample, for example, and added a broadsheet, the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, to the mainly penny-style newspapers in the 1870 sample, and tabloids (*New York Daily News*, *Chicago Sun-Times*) to the later twentieth century samples.

I chose the years 1745 (Colonial period), 1775 (Revolutionary period), 1810 (Party Press era), 1840 (the rise of the Penny Press), 1870 (Reconstruction, Industrial Age), 1895 (Yellow Press era), then at quarter-century intervals in the twentieth century (1925, 1950, 1975, 2000). I chose these years as representative of significant periods in journalism history, based on the periodization of Wm. David Sloan and James D. Startt, *The Media in America: A History* 4th ed..[28] I also

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[27] Statistically, two reconstructed weeks (two randomly selected Mondays, two Tuesdays, etc.) would accurate represent one year of content from a daily, and one randomly selected issue per month would represent a weekly; Daniel Riffe, Stephen Lacy, Frederick G. Fico, *Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), 98. For this study I used reconstructed weeks until 1895. After 1870 newspapers became so lengthy that for a full year most required a series of 12 or 14 rolls of microfilm. Because I obtained most of my newspaper microfilm through Interlibrary Loan services, it was impractical to order the whole year. I switched to analyzing randomly selected weeks, one from the January to June half of the year, another from July to December.
[28] (Northport, Ala.: Vision Press, 1999).

avoided years in which America was involved in a major war (excepting 1775 and 1950) because coverage war would dominate, and I wanted my study to include a much broader variety of topics.

New York papers
Weekly Journal: 1745
Journal: 1775
Gazette: 1775
Herald: 1810, 1840, 1870
Tribune: 1843[29]
Times: 1895, 1925, 1950, 1975, 2000
World: 1895, 1925
Herald-Tribune: 1950
Daily News: 1975, 2000

Boston papers
Gazette: 1745, 1775, 1810
News-Letter: 1745, 1775
Independent Chronicle: 1810
Daily Advertiser: 1840
Evening Transcript: 1840
Daily Evening Transcript: 1870
Globe: 1895, 1925, 1950, 1975, 2000
Herald: 1895, 1925, 1950, 1975, 2000

Charleston papers
South Carolina Gazette: 1745, 1775
Courier: 1810, 1840, 1870
Mercury: 1840
South Carolina News & Courier: 1895, 1925, 1950, 1975
South Carolina Post & Courier: 2000

Chicago papers
Tribune: 1870, 1895, 1925, 1950, 1975, 2000
Daily News: 1895, 1925
Sun-Times: 1950, 1975, 2000

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[29] Because Horace Greeley's *Tribune* was so influential and well-known as a penny paper, I wanted to include it in the 1840 sample as part of that period—unfortunately, he did not begin publishing until 1843.

San Francisco papers
Chronicle: 1870, 1895, 1925, 1950, 1975, 2000
Examiner: 1870, 1895, 1925, 1950, 1975, 2000

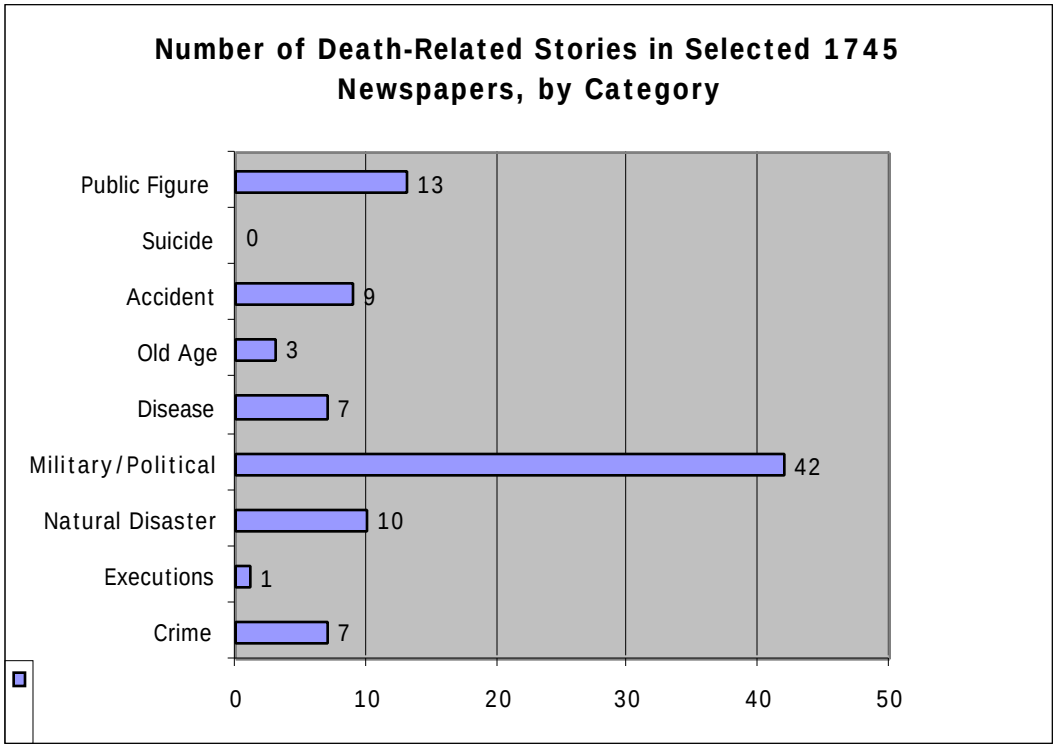
I also read widely from other newspapers or years not included in the sample and used some of those to illustrate various points I was making in my analysis. Until Chapter 10, dealing with the late twentieth century, I did not normally seek coverage of particular events. I wanted my analysis to flow from the stories that I encountered as a regular newspaper reader would have found them—something that they read when they happened to pick up the paper that day.

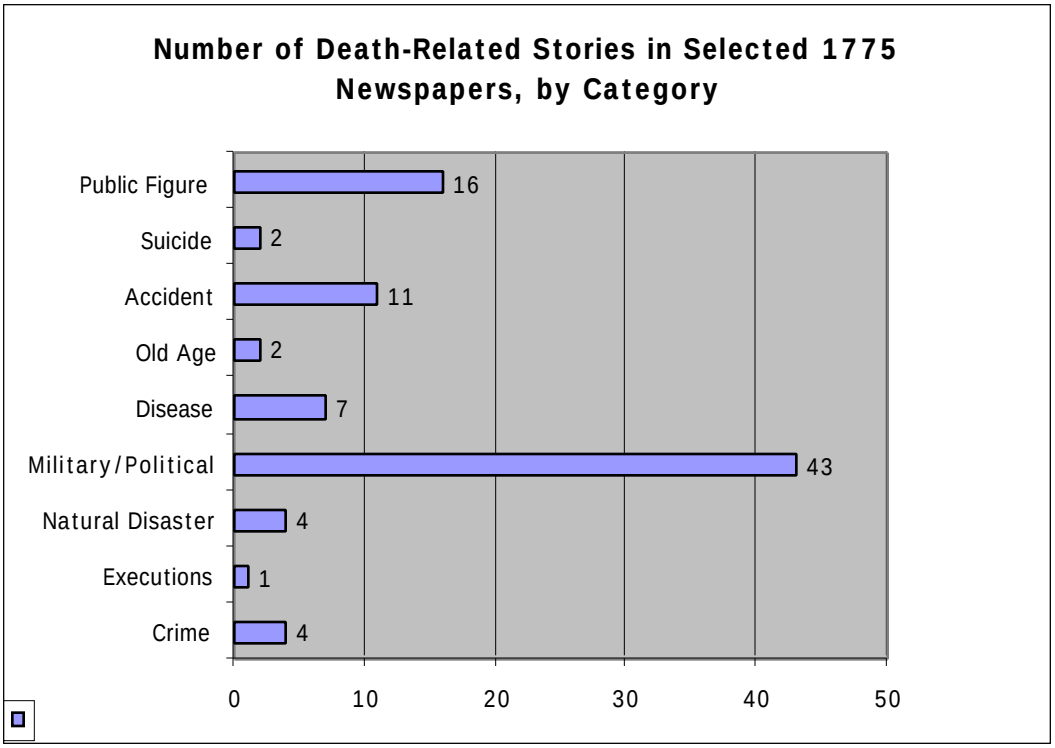
I tabulated my results by year in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and used the program to construct frequency tables for story types. The results are in Appendix B.

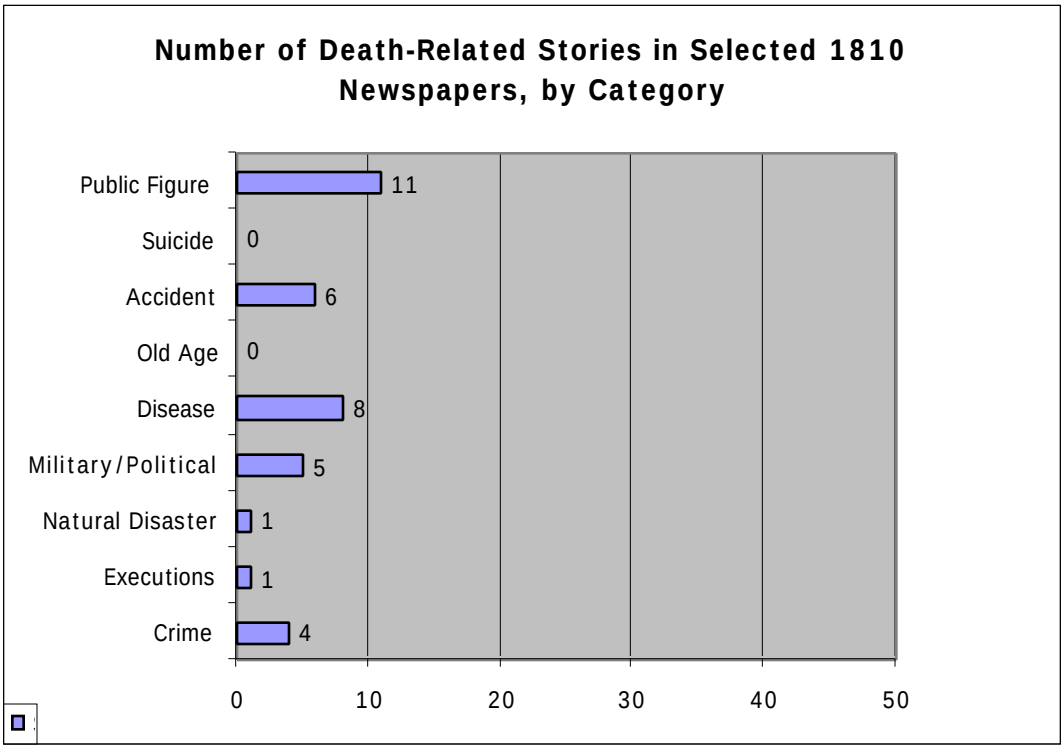
The method of my historical analysis requires only a brief explanation. I read widely from major works of journalism history, books and journals, looking for material relevant to religion and worldview questions. I focused on historians, not all from within journalism circles, who had shown an interest in religion and worldview issues as well as mass communication. Among the most helpful writers and editors are Sidney Ahlstrom, Patricia Bonomi, Edwin Scott Gaustad, Nathan O. Hatch, Mark Noll, David Paul Nord, Marvin Olasky, and Wm. David Sloan. Historians who have written useful works specifically on death in America include David E. Stannard and Gary S. Laderman. In each chapter I tried to identify a broad outline of the main intellectual currents in American religion and

relate those to what I had found in the newspapers, both the results of my content analysis tabulations and in the worldview clues in the stories themselves.

Appendix B: Story Type Frequency Tables




Number of Death-Related Stories in Selected 1775 Newspapers, by Category
Public Figure
Suicide
Accident
Old Age
Disease
Military/Political
Natural Disaster
Executions
Crime
16
2
11
2
7
43
4
1
4
0
10
20
30
40
50


Number of Death-Related Stories in Selected 1810 Newspapers, by Category
Public Figure
Suicide
Accident
Old Age
Disease
Military/Political
Natural Disaster
Executions
Crime
11
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6
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8
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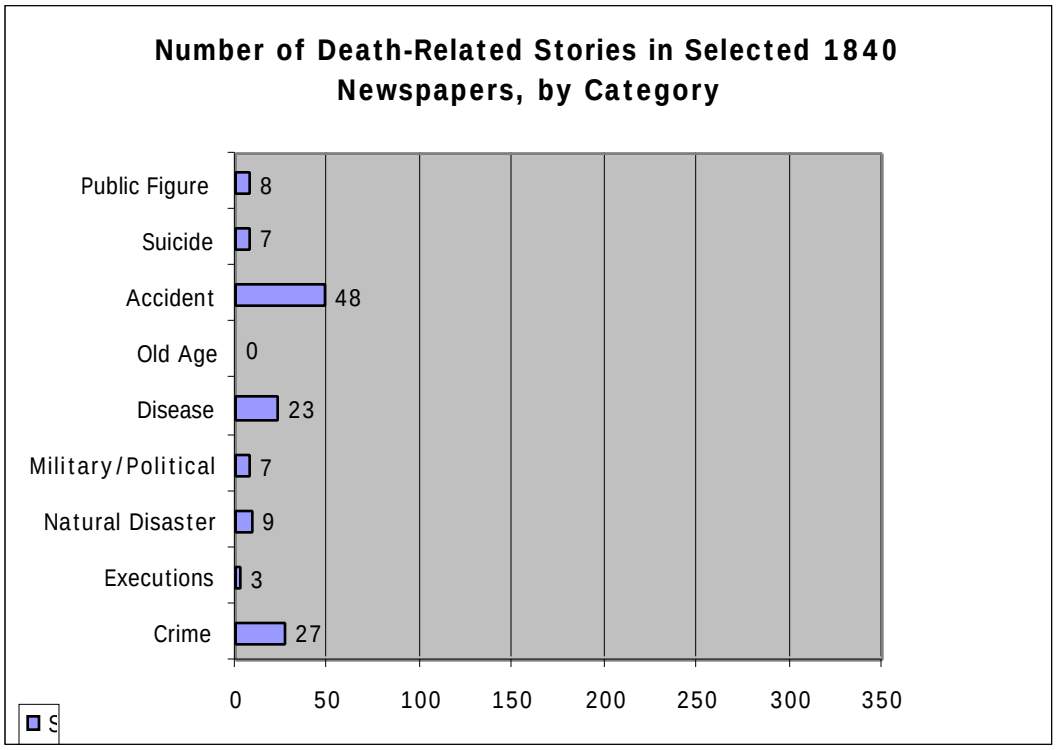
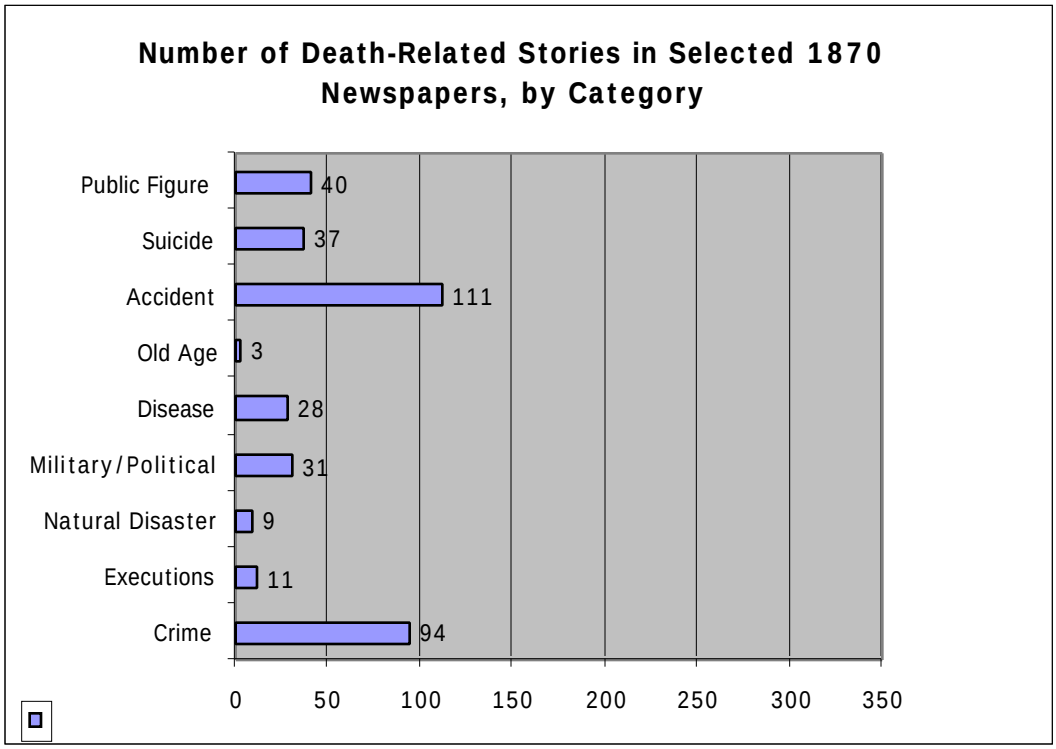
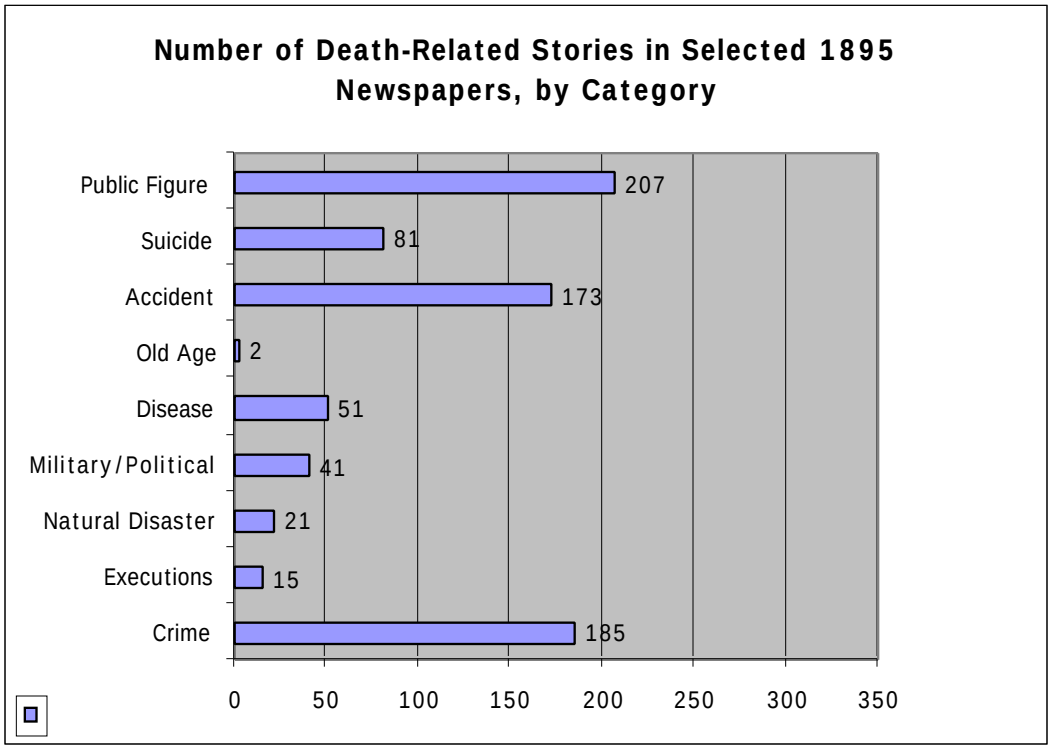
1
4
0
10
20
30
40
50


Number of Death-Related Stories in Selected 1840 Newspapers, by Category
Public Figure
Suicide
Accident
Old Age
Disease
Military/Political
Natural Disaster
Executions
Crime
8
7
48
0
23
7
9
3
27
0
50
100
150
200
250
300
350
S


Number of Death-Related Stories in Selected 1870 Newspapers, by Category
Public Figure
Suicide
Accident
Old Age
Disease
Military/Political
Natural Disaster
Executions
Crime
40
37
111
3
28
31
9
11
94
0
50
100
150
200
250
300
350


Number of Death-Related Stories in Selected 1895 Newspapers, by Category
Public Figure
Suicide
Accident
Old Age
Disease
Military/Political
Natural Disaster
Executions
Crime
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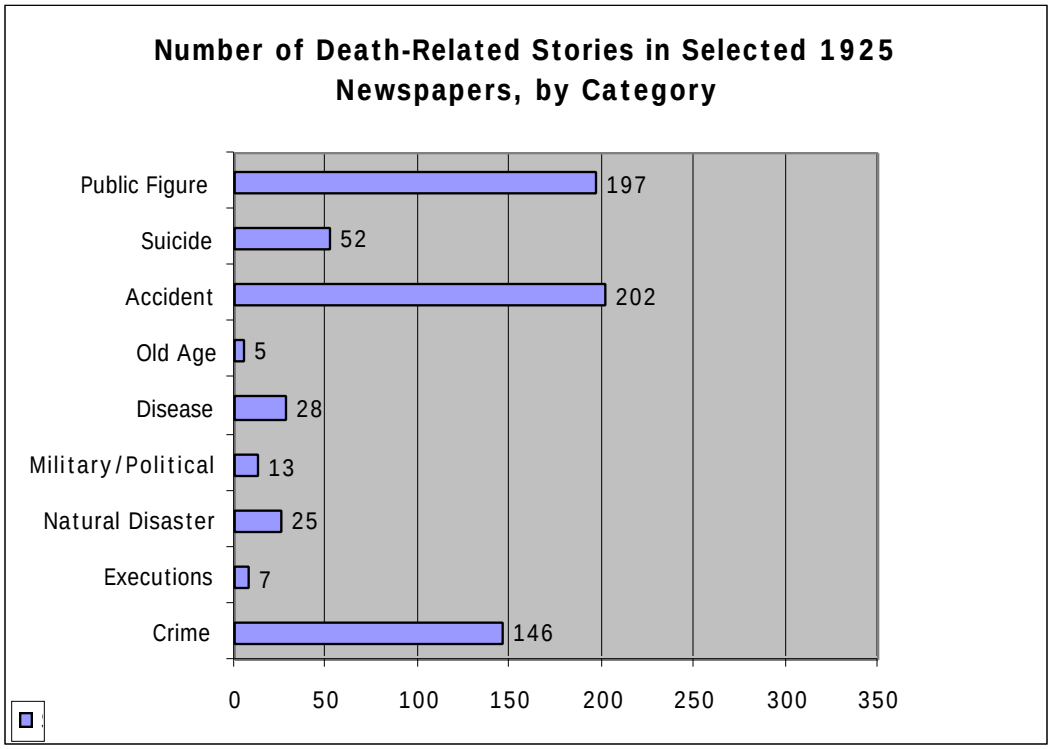
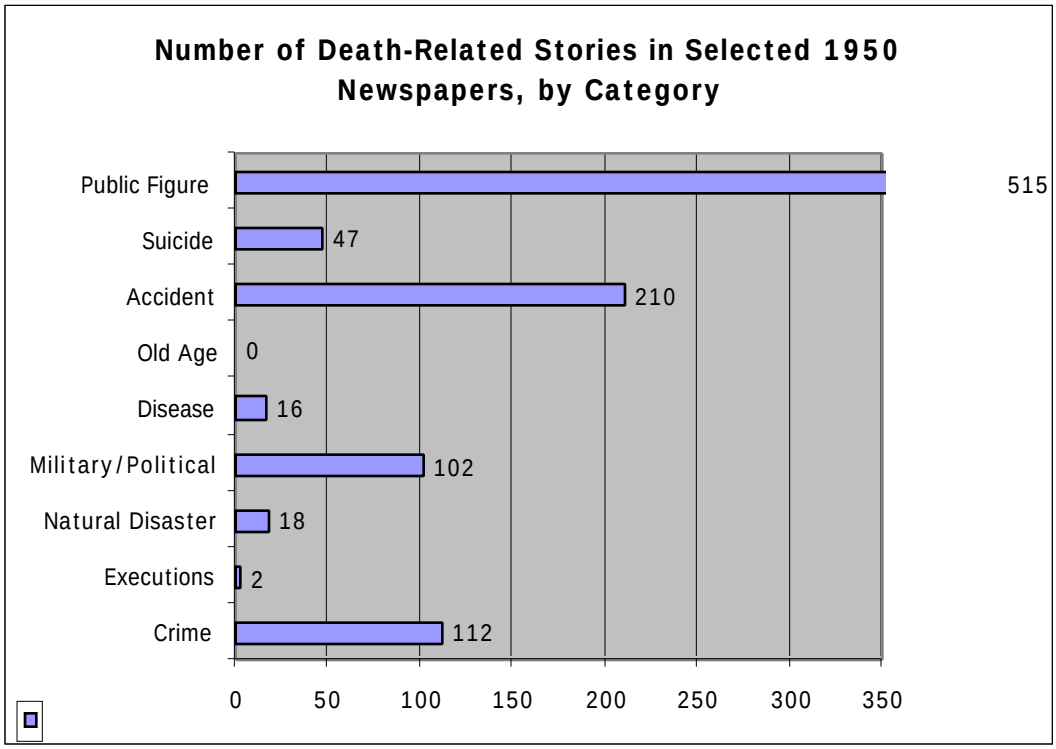
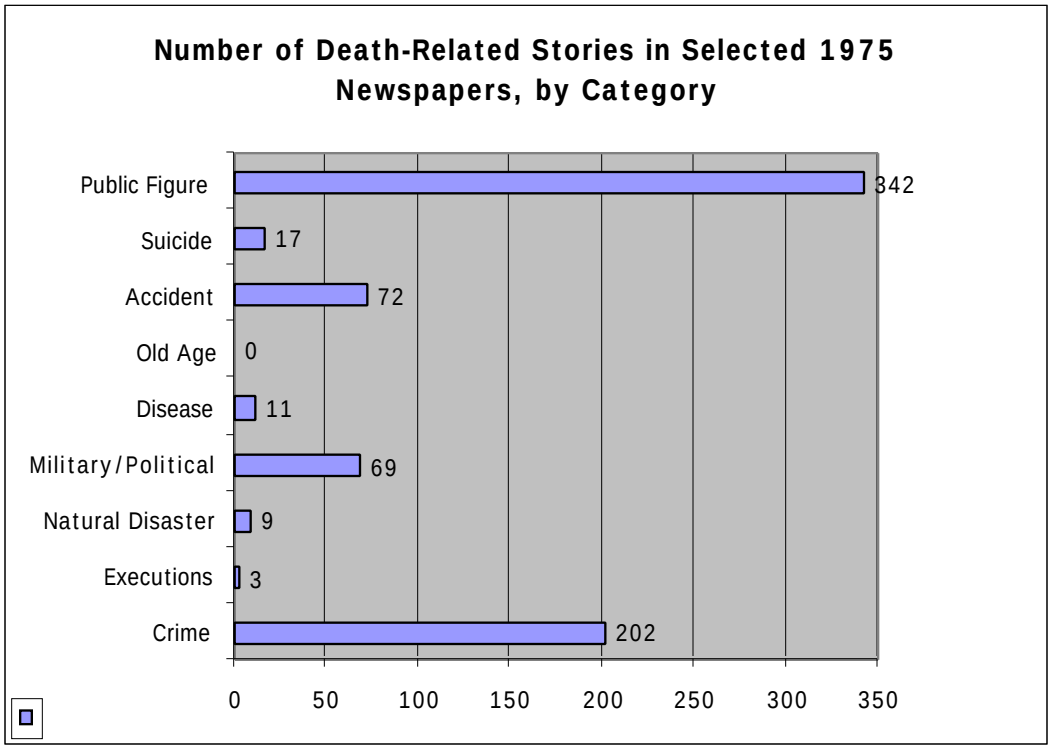
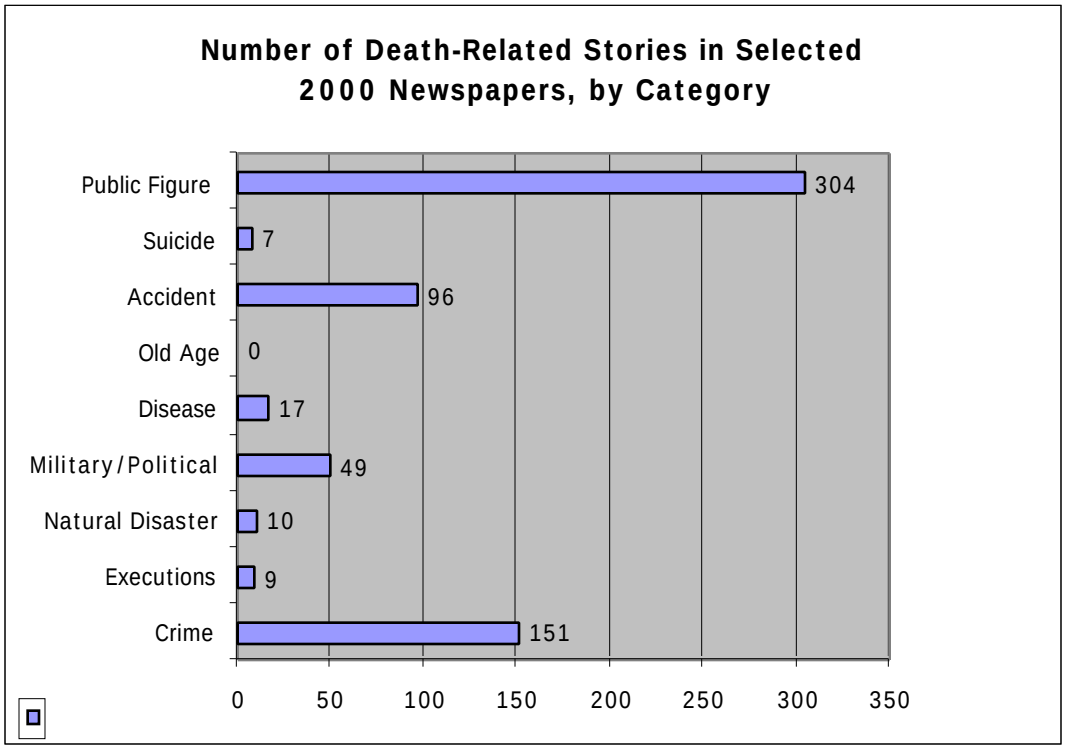
81
173
2
51
41
21
15
185
0
50
100
150
200
250
300
350


Number of Death-Related Stories in Selected 1925 Newspapers, by Category
Public Figure
Suicide
Accident
Old Age
Disease
Military/Political
Natural Disaster
Executions
Crime
197
52
202
5
28
13
25
7
146
0
50
100
150
200
250
300
350


Number of Death-Related Stories in Selected 1950 Newspapers, by Category
Public Figure
Suicide
Accident
Old Age
Disease
Military/Political
Natural Disaster
Executions
Crime
515
47
210
0
16
102
18
2
112
0
50
100
150
200
250
300
350


Number of Death-Related Stories in Selected 1975 Newspapers, by Category
Public Figure
Suicide
Accident
Old Age
Disease
Military/Political
Natural Disaster
Executions
Crime
342
17
72
0
11
69
9
3
202
0
50
100
150
200
250
300
350


Number of Death-Related Stories in Selected 2000 Newspapers, by Category
Public Figure
Suicide
Accident
Old Age
Disease
Military/Political
Natural Disaster
Executions
Crime
304
7
96
0
17
49
10
9
151
0
50
100
150
200
250
300
350

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