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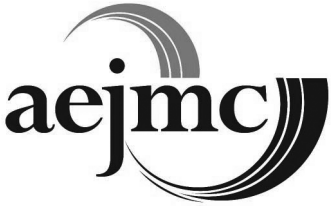

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Reporting Beyond the Problem

From Civic Journalism to Solutions Journalism

Edited by
Karen McIntyre Hopkinson
and Nicole Smith Dahmen

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5. *Explanatory Journalism*

Bringing Greater Interpretation and Depth to Complex Issues

John P. Wihbey

The foundation of explanatory journalism is bringing greater interpretation and depth to complex issues. In seeking to explain issues, reporting in this approach embeds such elements as narrative and current events and trends into the systematic storytelling around the given issue. As with all approaches covered in this book, explanatory journalism adds depth to reporting with the intention of providing context as opposed to editorializing. The evolution of digital news and expanded news outlets has allowed for more reporting in this approach with the introduction and success of such news outlets as Vox and FiveThirtyEight.

The web era has seen tremendous excitement around forms of news that seek to interpret and explain complex issues, embodied prominently in the work of Vox, FiveThirtyEight, the *New York Times*' "The Upshot," and a host of other efforts to bring greater depth and context to the news.

Building on an older tradition of interpretive news, explanatory journalism aims to better serve audiences by embedding events, trends, and anecdotal phenomena in systematic information and knowledge. A wide variety of contemporary news outlets in the Anglo-American and North American world are exponents of the tradition of explanatory journalism—from magazines such as *The Economist* and *The Atlantic* to radio shows and podcasts such as "Science Friday," "Planet Money," "Revisionist History" and "The Ezra Klein Show." The explanatory mode, often with distinctive national and regional variations, can also be found in European publications such as *Die Zeit* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, in Germany; *Der Falter*, in Austria; *La Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera*, in Italy; as well in more domain-specific

magazines such as *Brand Eins*, which focuses on socioeconomic issues in Germany.

Within the tradition, some forms have leaned more toward a journalism of ideas with a point of view, while others have stuck more to a dispassionate presentation style, infusing discussion of current events with relevant context and deeper knowledge. Increasingly, the explanatory trope is being democratized. Across the news media landscape, one finds the instinct toward explanatory journalism embodied in popular forms such as backgrounders and accompanying listicles (e.g., "Seven Things You Should Know about Syria") at myriad outlets, both those aimed at elite and mass audiences alike.

Much as the New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s drew its innovative power by borrowing from models of literature and literary technique (Weingarten, 2006), the newer waves of the explanatory movement in its digitally native form often appear to draw inspiration and substance from the models of science, social science, and data science. Although not without its critics, explanatory journalism has also held out the promise of providing an antidote to myriad societal ills attributed in part to deficient traditional news media practice, including a failure to orient citizens on policy issues and a tendency to inflame political polarization (Hudak, 2016; Mann, 2016).

The promise of the latest generation of efforts rests on innovations relating to both media form and content. Journalists at many outlets are using the affordances of digital media—hyperlinking, data visualization, social media engagement, multimedia scrolls that can feature audio and video, cutting-edge forms of podcast production—to add richer material to traditional news stories. Central to the highest aspirations of explanatory journalism is the ability to do original work with data and to approximate social science practices that build on decades of innovation in computer-assisted reporting and data journalism (Doig, 2008; McGregor, 2013; Meyer, 2002).

Further, the democratization of knowledge in digital space has made deeper reporting functionally easier and more doable on deadline. Search engines such as Google Scholar, open scientific databases such as PubMed, and millions of open datasets and new, free tools for data analysis and visualization have all contributed to an atmosphere characterized by new possibilities and enthusiasm (Wihbey, 2016). Practitioners of explanatory journalism articulate the need for deep subject matter expertise and continual learning in order to execute the practice in an effective way (Roberts, 2018).

A third aspect of media innovation, interrelated with media economics, has also inarguably facilitated new space for explanatory journalism: Because of massive web platforms such as Apple, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and

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Amazon, with their associated niche communities, targeting algorithms, and recommendation engines, in-depth, longer-form content that leans heavily on technical material can find robust narrow-casted audiences. In past media eras, content in niche verticals had little chance of reaching a substantial number of the possible audience members interested in such content, whereas the social web era creates a new economic paradigm and possibilities for monetizing journalistic depth and so-called "long tail" products.

Finally, explanatory journalism's rise is also rooted in the need for marketplace differentiation in an increasingly crowded world of online media content. Picard (2014) noted that the Internet has increasingly been deskilling journalists by taking away their comparative advantage in terms of being able to access information, persons, and events that formerly were out of reach for average people (p. 5). Moving up the value chain of information, and going beyond fact-gathering, may be crucial for journalists. Zachary (2014) noted that in an "era of pervasive digital networks that instantly deliver news with scant human help, the successful journalist will be, above all, a knowledge maker." Being able to create value-added news products that differentiate themselves from what machine learning algorithms can serve up will be increasingly important in the decades ahead, as automated forms of journalism displace jobs and create labor substitution problems for media workers. For all of these reasons and more, scholars have been calling for journalism to conceive itself increasingly as a knowledge-based profession or even as a craft that aspires, at its highest level, toward producing wisdom for the public (Donsbach, 2013; Stephens, 2014).

Implicit in the efforts of explanatory journalism are two forms of critique of existing media patterns. These critiques operate at different levels. One embedded critique relates to norms and characteristics long associated with broadcast and tabloid news—speed, brevity, compression and an attendant superficiality and episodic quality to news events. The other relates to the traditional, and much-debated, journalistic doctrine of objectivity. This doctrine, as will be discussed, has seen attack from multiple angles by scholars and practitioners, and contemporary explanatory journalism sits somewhat uneasily in the framework of these debates.

This chapter will explore the promises of explanatory journalism as currently manifested, unpacking its embedded critical premises and situating the arguments for explanatory journalism in the context of media history. It will also analyze some case studies, highlighting areas of challenge both in terms of the range of topics that typically receive explanatory treatment and the fine line between providing subtle context and editorializing—the tension between a "value-added" news product and an aggressively "values-added" one.

It is worth noting that the explanatory mode continues to morph and evolve in combination with technology, and original charts and interactive graphics increasingly accompany explanatory journalism. This trend creates a blurry line, at times, between data journalism proper—which might be distinguished typically by intensive data gathering, often with an investigative bent and a focus on novel empirical insights—and explanatory journalism, which often leverages existing datasets, such as polling data, or administrative data and focuses on contextualization of known topics. Further, both analytical and interpretive journalism stand as traditions that are intertwined, both historically and functionally, with explanatory journalism, as will be explained.

The focus here is largely the news media ecosystem of the United States, although trends toward interpretive, analytical, and explanatory journalism have, as mentioned, also been documented in other areas of the world such as Europe (Brüggermann & Engesser, 2017; Soontjens, 2018). National media cultures can influence norms—and the general tone—around the interpretive mode of journalism, with some cultures emphasizing more subtle contextual reporting and others leveraging interpretation to confront powerful institutions (Henkel, Thurman, & Deffner, 2019). Media practitioners in the United States and France, in particular, have been found to use the interpretive mode more frequently when covering political issues (Salgado, Strömbäck, Aalberg, & Esser, 2017).

Importantly, nearly all contemporary innovative approaches in journalism—whether solutions or advocacy, or any theory that emphasizes social responsibility—may derive in some way from the nearly century-old interpretive, analytical turn in news practice, whose most direct descendent is explanatory journalism. Insofar as this is true, charting the roots and pathways of explanatory journalism helps conceptualize and situate much of the current state of innovative media theory and practice.

An Accumulating History

The seeming newness of explanatory journalism has, as mentioned, generated an atmosphere of excitement over new possibilities for doing news work more effectively from a democratic perspective (McDermott, 2014; Mann, 2016). However, looking out over the variegated landscape of journalism over the past century, one hears echoes in various movements and reform efforts within news history. A genealogy of the idea reveals the coming together of several disparate strands, co-evolving over time.

The original idea of a distinct institution called the "press," as enshrined in the First Amendment, did not capture what we might think of as the core of journalism today: An aspiration toward fair representation and impartiality, as embodied in, for instance, the contemporary Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics (2014). All newspapers were partisan- and political party-oriented in nature at America's founding (Schudson, 2003), which was an era that also predated many journalistic conventions and features that society now takes for granted—from the very notion of an information-gathering reporter to the idea of interviewing people to be quoted in stories.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were exceptions, of course, and there is a way in which, for example, the Federalist Papers, which ran in newspapers, stand in a kind of proto-tradition of putting policy debates and unfolding news in deep historical and intellectual context, albeit a tradition steeped in advocacy. The Federalist Papers, authored by early American political founders James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay to frame debates relating to the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, have indeed been described as an act of "journalism" (Schudson, 1997). In Europe, the early blossoming of the newspaper tradition witnessed especially in the 1600s was eventually supplemented by the rise of the "journal," a distinctive feature of Enlightenment-period publishing. As the historian Andrew Pettegree (2014) has noted, "These publications, in contrast to the newspapers, would draw on traditional founts of authority, expert writers and discursive analysis"; in addition, the longer articles featured in the journals "encouraged the development of a journalistic tradition" in newspapers wherein writers "took time to explain and develop an argument" (pp. 269–270).

The "muckrakers" of the Progressive Era in the early 20th century—campaigning journalists such as Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell—also might lay claim to a piece of the early explanatory tradition, insofar as they explicitly eschewed objectivity in service of immersive depth and a higher civic mission. The explicitly partisan nature of outlets began to change during the half-century between the Civil War and the end of WWI. The percentage of political newspapers that claimed to be independent rose from an estimated 11% in 1870 to 62% in 1920 (Gentzkow, Glaeser & Goldin, 2006). The rise of the objective movement in reporting practice during the 1910s and 1920s paralleled a move toward professionalization in journalism, resulting ultimately in objectivity as a central norm in journalism (Mindich, 2000). These trends toward professionalism and objectivity accompanied the changes toward independence in editorial identity and ownership orientation. Still, within the objective movement, only editorial and opinion

columnists might be permitted to interpret the facts of news events and go beyond the basics.

The beginnings of a more interpretive orientation in journalism began after World War I, when global events surprised both the public and journalists alike, leading to a sense that more context needed to be brought to bear on news events (Weaver & McCombs, 1980; Stoker, 2018). Walter Lippmann's landmark books *Liberty and the News* (1920) and *Public Opinion* (1922) called for a more social-scientific approach in news work to combat propaganda and to grapple with an increasingly complex world, even as Lippmann doubted journalism's capacity to achieve such goals alone. In 1948, James "Scotty" Reston of the *New York Times* told the Associated Press managing editors: "Explanatory writing is the field in which we can excel. You cannot merely report the literal truth. You have to explain it" (Pressman, 2018, p. 25).

It was not until the 1950s, however, that the *New York Times* first began to label certain feature stories as "News Analysis," a convention that the paper used only infrequently for some years after and never on the front page (Pressman, 2018). The McCarthy hearings of the 1950s, which featured a prominent U.S. Senator publicizing unfounded accusations about communist infiltration of the government and reporters dutifully repeating them, led journalists such as Edward R. Murrow to believe that the press must go beyond mere stenography. Increasingly, too, the dominance of television news, with its ability to break news quickly, forced newspapers to begin thinking about a different sort of product that could be differentiated from that of the direct and timely broadcast segment.

A more general journalistic conversation about the need for interpretive journalism then began in the late 1950s, but it took the social and cultural turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s to raise wider consciousness in newsrooms and substantially accelerate the practice of more explicit explanation or interpretation of events and fact patterns. Dramatic ruptures in political life, particularly in the 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, spurred reporters and editors across newsrooms in the United States, especially younger ones, to conclude that objectivity as a model favored the status quo and interpretation must replace a mentality of mere transmission (Pressman, 2018). However, it was not just those sympathetic with causes of the political left who advocated interpretation, but conservative press commentators too and a wide variety of journalists across the ideological spectrum (Pressman 2018). The rise of weekly news magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, which provided synthetic perspectives on events, also pushed newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* in this direction.

Despite the interpretive turn, however, a robust debate about getting "past" objectivity as a norm and standard continues in the 21st century. Meyer (2014) notes that journalism needs to move past the old standards to a new kind of "objectivity" that harnesses data and social science technique and is based on method, not result.

Accelerating Interpretations

This competition between objectivity as a norm and more assertive, interpretive practice remained far from resolved over this period or wholly satisfying to media critics (Patterson, 1997). It is also unclear that research in this area has necessarily settled on consistent definitions or been able to operationalize conceptions of interpretive journalism in a way that allows for cumulative research (Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012).

Nevertheless, the empirical evidence suggests a growing acceptance of the need for great analytical work in stories in subsequent decades. Barnhurst (2014) has traced a sweeping, half-century-old trend in journalism away from event-centered, or "realist," journalism toward "meaning-centered news" and "sensemaking." Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) assert that the tendency toward meaning-centered news can be explained in part by attendant technological and sociological trends reshaping journalistic practice: A rise in quantitative data collection; enhanced computing capacity; an assimilation of social science approaches by journalists; rising education levels among journalists; and increasing professionalization. Likewise, Fink and Schudson (2014) note an "enormous" industry change toward "contextual" or analytical/explanatory journalism, a pattern that they call the "quantitatively most significant change in newspaper journalism between the 1950s and the early 2000s" (p. 4).

These paradigm shifts in news work are reflected in the attitudes of journalists themselves and their own self-conceptions. In their ongoing, longitudinal survey work with journalists, Willnat and Weaver (2014) found that 69% of respondents said that "analyzing complex problems" in society is "extremely important," the highest historical level recorded since the survey was first conducted in 1971. This response level to questions about the importance of analysis has increased among journalists an "astonishing" 18 points since 2002; analyzing complex problems and investigating government claims are what journalists now believe are their two most important functions.

Of course, whether or not properly fulfilling these functions is merely aspirational—how well journalists are actually doing these jobs—can be debated, and observers have noted a continuing lack of knowledge as reflected

in journalistic education and practice that would prepare professionals more systematically for such analytical work (Patterson, 2013; Wihbey, 2019).

A 2015 survey of mostly U.S. journalists (N=875) conducted by Harvard's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy revealed discrepancies between journalists' belief about the importance of knowledge-related skills and their own abilities. Only about one in ten journalists in the survey said they were "very well equipped" to perform statistical analysis on their own, and 46% said they were "somewhat" well equipped on that skill measure. However, nearly 40% acknowledged that it was "very" important for journalists to be able to do statistical analysis. Further, only one-quarter of journalists said they were very well equipped to interpret statistics generated by other sources, with 58% saying they were somewhat equipped. In terms of their self-assessed ability to interpret research studies, about one-third said they rated their ability very highly. Yet nearly 80% of journalists acknowledge that it was very important both to be able to interpret statistics from sources and interpret research studies, suggesting again a wide gap between actual skills and journalists' beliefs of the importance of these competencies (Wihbey, 2019).

At any rate, the broad tendencies in journalism toward increasingly contextualization and meaning-centered practice have reshaped the roles of journalists, which have traditionally included multifarious roles such as that of watchdog, authenticator, sense maker, and reporter bearing witness. New possibilities enabled by the online world have opened up possibilities for other journalistic functions: curator, or intelligent aggregator; forum leader; empowerer; role model; and community builder (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011, 2014). Within the explanatory tradition, journalistic roles might be usefully organized in terms of the central material with which a journalist is working, or the central problem to be solved, whether it is complex legislation, scientific studies, or political controversies over the causes and proper interpretation of events, such as an economic crisis or a foreign conflict. With this in mind, Nisbet and Fahy (2015) delineate several crucial roles for journalists doing explanatory work in areas of complexity: "knowledge broker," "dialogue broker," and "policy broker" (p. 223).

Distribution of Topics

Perhaps the signal event in the history of explanatory journalism, at least in the United States, may be its formal inclusion as a distinct category in the annual Pulitzer Prizes. Beginning in 1985, the Pulitzer committees awarded prizes in explanatory journalism; in 1998, the formal category was changed

to "Explanatory Reporting." The first to win the prize in 1985 was the legendary feature writer Jon Franklin for a seven-part series about the science of molecular psychiatry. Over the ensuing three decades, finalists and winners were alternately single reporters (or pairs) performing stunningly original work or, increasingly, large teams of reporters whose stories are characterized by panoramic interviewing and data collection and analysis. Many of these reports employ creative storytelling techniques in order to make accessible the complex material being covered (Forde, 2007).

An original analysis, performed by the author for this chapter, of the 106 winners and finalists over the past 33 years (1985–2018) suggests a heavy emphasis on scientific topics such as medicine, health care, and the environment (see Figure 5.1). Financial industry stories and foreign affairs topics, both difficult categories for mass audiences because of their arcane nature, also received attention from the Pulitzer board in the category.

As mentioned, Vox has emerged as a leading exponent of explanatory journalism, and its various approaches to covering complex subjects have received a fair amount of media industry attention since its founding in 2011 by, among others, Ezra Klein, who had pioneered a similar vertical at *The Washington Post*. Stories produced by Vox span many beats and topics, but overall, there is a strong emphasis on politics and elections. An analysis (performed by the

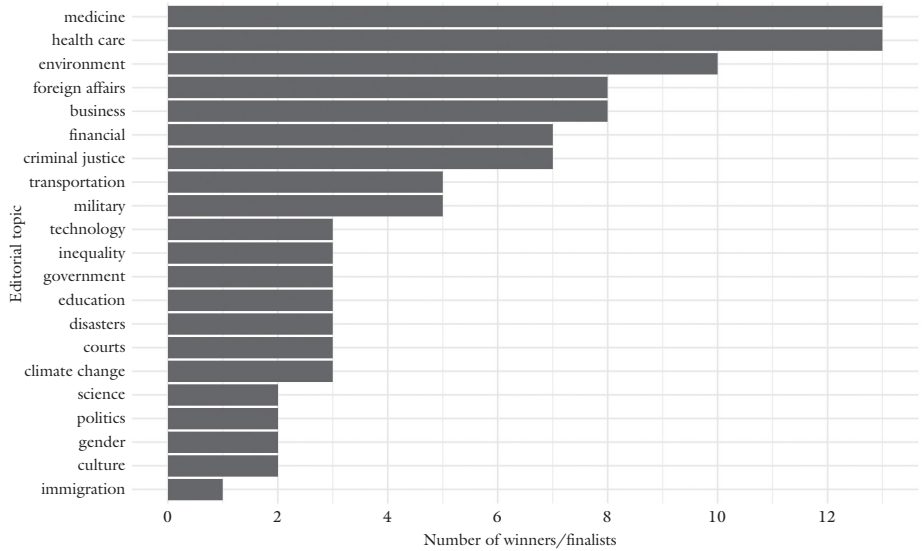

Figure 5.1: Pulitzer Prize Winners and Finalists in Explanatory Reporting/Journalism by Topic, 1985–Present. *Source:* Stories coded by author based on article data at The Pulitzer Prizes website: https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-category/207 N=106

author) of 1,861 Vox articles published between January 2 and December 31, 2018, shows this relative indexing toward all things political. The data informing Figure 5.2 and Figure 5.3 were downloaded from Media Cloud (a joint database project of scholars at Harvard and MIT). Media Cloud allows searches of more than 250 million stories from 50,000 media sources over the past decades, facilitating a wide variety of research relating to media trends (Roberts et al., 2017). Articles were tagged with themes like "politics and government," "women," and "medicine and health" generated by Media Cloud using a series of trained models including Google News word2vec and the *New York Times* annotated corpus. The most popular topics were then shortened and condensed into 11 "themes" including, from most frequent to least frequent: politics, other, elections, women, health, finances, media, education, labor, immigration, and law. (The "other" category, while significant in size, is mostly comprised of stories that have strong hybrid themes among the other defined categories, and therefore did not lend themselves easily to clear categorization.)

Of course, 2018 was a midterm election year in the United States, and so an emphasis on politics might be expected. Still, a breakdown of the yearly

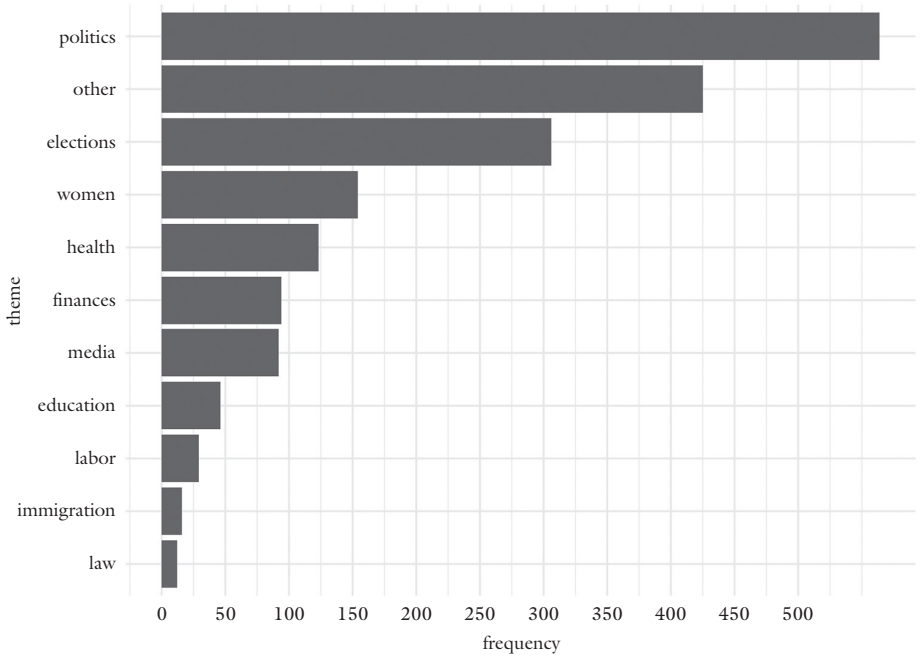

Figure 5.2: Vox News Coverage by Theme in 2018. *Source:* Analysis performed by author using Media Cloud, https://mediacloud.org/ N=1,861

flow of coverage of topics by Vox shows a consistent emphasis in these areas, with relatively little coverage devoted to issues such as labor, immigration, or education.

Vox is certainly not the only explanatory journalism operation to focus heavily on Washington, D.C.-centric and electoral-related topics. The leading data journalism outlet FiveThirtyEight, founded by Nate Silver, also emphasizes electoral- and polling-related topics. The *New York Times*' "The Upshot" covers a wide variety of topics, but also devotes heavy attention to political races. Taken together, these patterns suggest that newer forms of explanatory journalism could stand to diversify in order to fulfill a broader civic mission, even as they usefully help the public understand political races and elections in more contextual and granular ways.

In this regard, as explanatory journalism continues to grow, evolve, and find new creative forms, its practitioners would benefit from keeping in mind the skeptical tradition in media criticism, first articulated by Lippmann (1922), that journalism can often do little more than "signalize" events and issues, and informing the public is a tall order that may be largely unrealistic. In this skeptical vein, Patterson and Seib (2005) articulate a long-running concern that, ultimately, the agenda-setting function of news is of primary concern, more so than variables of depth and quality: "We should . . . worry less about the press's ability to inject factual information and the public's

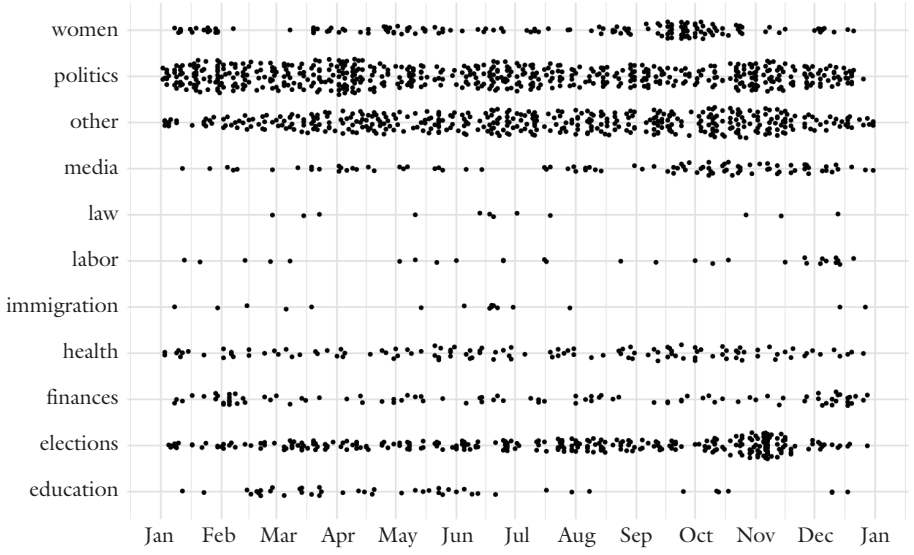

Figure 5.3: Vox News Coverage by Theme in 2018. *Source:* Analysis performed by author using Media Cloud, https://mediacloud.org/ N=1,861

ability to store it, and worry more about what the press thrusts into the public view and whether this material provokes thought and discussion relevant to public matters." There remain concerns about the degree to which certain explanatory outlets may target elite audiences, which are often more politically engaged, rather than attempting to inform a broader public (Johnson, 2016).

Examples of Practice

The range of practice within explanatory journalism is wide, and particular media form or structure does not define the approach. The practice might be found in an in-depth podcast, a Twitter thread by a journalist on a topic, a multimedia longform web story, or a video documentary. Some producers of local news have found explanatory journalism to be an effective way of engaging communities, yielding measurable results (Delgado, 2017). The family resemblance or shared intellectual space of this journalistic mode is, to put it simplistically, a commitment to going beyond the basic who, what, when, and where, and more into the why and how.

Yet making assertions about causal relationships, subjectively selecting broader ranges of trends with which to contextualize facts and events, and making qualitative judgments about people and their motives all slide into tricky territory, where the news-consuming public may not entirely understand the difference between analysis and opinion. Much can depend on tone and language.

Take, for example, a January 2019 "News Analysis" piece in the *New York Times* headlined "Trump's Wall, Trump's Shutdown and Trump's Side of the Story" (Baker & Haberman, 2019). The story, which unpacks the political strategy of President Donald J. Trump as he sought to pressure Congressional Democrats to offer funding for a southern border wall in the United States amid a government shutdown, is authored by two widely respected political reporters, Peter Baker, and Maggie Haberman.

The story includes, early on, this sentence: "Rather than a failure of negotiation, the shutdown has become a test of political virility, one in which he insists he is receiving surreptitious support from unlikely quarters." The use of the word "virility," while arguably appropriate, is laden with meaning that relates to the psychology and character of the president. It is language far from that of social science, even if it helps orient readers about the strategy involved. Further, the news analysis article states that: "The details do not matter to Mr. Trump as much as dominating the debate." Again, the journalists overstate, or dramatize, the point with language such as "details do not matter to Mr. Trump." This may be in some sense true, but it is

not an empirical claim; it is a stylized generalization, and even some of the president's critics would concede that he does care about details in select cases. The explanatory journalism here, in other words, employs some of the sweeping—and often highly engaging—rhetorical tropes that one might find on an Op-Ed page. How well it may serve audiences is unclear, and it may depend very much on the antecedent beliefs of the reader.

Of course, this "news analysis" is an incremental political strategy story, one produced within the constraints of a tight deadline; but it shows one common species within the practice and some of the complications therein. By contrast, a slightly more technical-analytical approach to explanatory work on political topics might be seen in many stories included in Vox's genre of "Explainers," such as "Bernie Sanders's Path to the 2020 Democratic Nomination, Explained" (Nilsen, 2020). That article is a long, process-oriented analysis, unpacking myriad uncertain scenarios and providing dozens of hyperlinks that readers can use to see underlying documentation and discover more information.

As another counterexample, consider the 2016 story "Hell and High Water," a joint reporting project about the city of Houston, Texas, and its vulnerability to hurricanes and storm surge (Satija et al., 2016). *The Texas Tribune*, *ProPublica*, *Reveal*, the University of Texas at Austin, Rice University, Texas A&M Galveston, and Jackson State University teamed up to produce a stunningly prescient, interactive story that presented the likely scenarios for a direct hit on the city by a major hurricane.

Calling Houston a "sitting duck," the story—by journalists Neena Satija for the *Texas Tribune* and *Reveal*, Kiah Collier for the *Texas Tribune*, and Al Shaw and Jeff Larson of *ProPublica*—showed how citizens and policymakers had not sufficiently prepared for the kind of storm that would likely come, eventually, to the city. Using accessible visualizations based on sophisticated modeling by their academic researcher partners, the journalists constructed a compelling warning to the city of Houston. Academics spent many hours helping the journalists bring together the data files and render them accurately (Shaw & Larson, 2016). Over the following year, the explanatory multimedia report spurred policy makers to accelerate the construction of a coastal barrier and floodgate that could protect relevant areas of the city. The story illustrated how explanatory journalism might facilitate positive social change.

Still, the protective infrastructure project that the story sped up was, tragically, not robust enough in time. The year after the story was published, in August 2017, Hurricane Harvey blasted Houston, creating flooding and mayhem. Many dozens of lives were lost, and more than $100 billion of

property and infrastructure damage was wrought. Nevertheless, the story stands as an important case study in how journalism can team up with research institutions to produce powerful public-interest reporting that does important explanatory work.

Drawing on the definitions of Nisbet and Fahy (2015) in this domain, we might see these journalists serving as both "knowledge broker" and "policy broker," mediating vital technical information for the public. The policy reporting and complex data-visualization tasks created an altogether new body of knowledge, one accessible to average people. This reporting has continued to contribute to a public conversation in Houston about coastal development, zoning, planning, and climate adaptation. In a century when risk and resilience are becoming part of our vocabulary—from the global climate to financial markets to networked technologies, danger seems to know no boundaries—such explanatory reporting based on scenario-based forecasting will likely become essential in terms of preparing the public to make smarter adaptive choices that can lead to resilience (Wihbey, 2019).

Conclusion

The rise of contemporary explanatory journalism has roots in both the liberal historical traditions that sought to extricate the press from party and private interests—and the attendant pivot toward objectivity as a norm—and the tradition, beginning with the Hutchins Commission into the Freedom of the Press in the 1940s, toward social responsibility and an emphasis on serving the public (Peterson, 1956; Ward, 2008). The traditions of activism or advocacy journalism and interpretive practice are, as Ward (2008) notes, intertwined, insofar as they want to go beyond the facts and create higher levels of meaning. Whenever journalists seek to do more than provide mere stenography, they join a long-running discourse about how using their interpretive powers can best serve the public.

Of course, the norm of objectivity has seen sustained criticism from social scientists, who have long noted that all stories are characterized by some degree of framing; subjective selection is inherent to all acts of journalism, no matter how much journalists may claim to present/provide a dispassionate rendering of facts (Gans, 1992). To the extent this is true, objectivity in a pure sense has always been something of a shaky premise and aspiration, and a more explicit practice of explanation and interpretation may be more intellectually honest, at the very least. In this way, explanatory journalism may stand as something of the logical conclusion of a century-old debate over the proper stance of journalists toward news gathering and storytelling.

(Of course, subjectivity is inherent to all forms of analysis, and such debates over objectivity will continue, notwithstanding greater methodological transparency.)

Still, if it is to avoid partisan traps in an era of political polarization, explanatory journalism must ultimately be able to justify both its premises and its practice. The ideas of traditional news objectivity are of little help in this regard. Instead, the discipline of explanatory journalism might rely on ideas such as pragmatic news objectivity (Ward, 1999), whereby its standards are defined according to its degree of empirical factuality, its coherence, and its openness to rational debate. Embracing complexity may be a key journalistic strategy in an age of polarization, when many people are highly suspicious of news media and simplistic media formulations are bound to alienate audience segments (Ripley, 2018). In an age of rampant misinformation, false news, and political spin, giving up entirely on objectivity of any kind carries with it grave risks. As Ward (1999) notes, "To devalue objectivity is to leave the public sphere even more vulnerable to manipulation than it is today. In a culture that lacks confidence in objectivity, demagogues prosper and the quality of public debate suffers" (p. 9).

Ultimately, explanatory journalism allows for the possibility of the reinvention of older traditions of both impartiality/objectivity and social responsibility in a form or mode that is both powerful and agile enough to respond to the needs of 21st century citizens, whose media lives are defined by hybrid patterns of access and consumption. In any case, a dizzyingly complex world requires better orienting pictures for overwhelmed citizens. Much hangs in the balance as explanatory journalism attempts to bring about new norms and expectations—among media practitioners and the public alike—for news accompanied by deeper, more meaningful perspective.

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