

**Gatekeeping in Action: Editorial Conferences and Assessments of  
Newsworthiness**



Steven E. Clayman; Ann Reisner

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## GATEKEEPING IN ACTION: EDITORIAL CONFERENCES AND ASSESSMENTS OF NEWSWORTHINESS\*

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**Steven E. Clayman**

*University of California, Los Angeles*

**Ann Reisner**

*University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana*

*We study how newspaper editors, in conference meetings, jointly determine which stories will appear on the front page. Previous research on editorial gatekeeping has identified various standards of newsworthiness that serve as selection criteria. We focus on the actual practices through which gatekeeping decisions are rendered. We provide an overview of the primary phases of activity in conference meetings, identify various practices for promoting stories as page-one material, and analyze in detail one particular practice—verbal assessments of newsworthiness. We find that editors display a systematic preference for mildly favorable assessments over both stronger and weaker ones, apparently because restrained support enables them to maintain solidary relations with reporters and editorial colleagues. Moreover, assessment favorability is significantly associated with gatekeeping outcomes.*

The front page of the newspaper has a special significance. Stories featured there exert an impact denied to stories appearing elsewhere in the newspaper. Front-page stories achieve greater exposure and are more likely to come to the attention of newsreaders. In newspaper dispensing machines, above-the-fold stories are accessible to all passersby, including those who never actually purchase a newspaper. Because they are more prominent, front-page stories also may be perceived as more important than other stories.<sup>1</sup> Correspondingly, for journal-

ists within news organizations, front-page placement is coveted as a badge of professional status and success (Breed 1955; Sigal 1973; Tuchman 1978).

How are stories actually selected for the front page? For the most part, this basic gatekeeping task is carried out by editors in the context of a daily staff meeting known as the *editorial conference*. Little is known about the procedures organizing such conferences. In studies of journalistic practice, the story-selecting work of editors has been overshadowed by a focus on the prior news-gathering work of reporters (Schudson 1996). Numerous studies have shown how news-gathering routines, established news sources, and various commercial and technological factors determine the pool of available stories.<sup>2</sup> Less is known about how stories are

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\* Direct correspondence to Steven E. Clayman, Department of Sociology, University of California, 405 Hilgard Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90095 (clayman@soc.ucla.edu). We thank John Heritage, Manny Schegloff, and the anonymous *ASR* reviewers for commenting on earlier versions of this paper; Terry Anderson, Elizabeth Boyd, and Anna Lindstrom for refining the transcripts; and Ruth Klap and Nelson Lim for providing statistical assistance. We have benefited from presenting this paper to, and receiving feedback from, audiences at the International Sociological Association conference in Bielefeld, Germany, July 1994; the American Sociological Association conference in Washington, D.C., August 1995; and the UCLA Center for Language, Interaction, and Culture, Los Angeles, in January 1996.

<sup>1</sup> Correspondingly, lead stories on broadcast

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news programs have a greater impact on public opinion than do stories placed later in the program (Iyengar and Kinder 1987:42–45).

<sup>2</sup> Such studies include those by Altheide (1974), Epstein (1973), Fishman (1980), Gans (1979), Herman and Chomsky (1988), Kaniss (1991), Lester (1980), Molotch and Lester (1974, 1975), Sigal (1973), and Tuchman (1978). Useful reviews of this extensive literature may be found in Schudson (1996), Shoemaker (1991), and Shoemaker and Reese (1996).

chosen from the available pool, prioritized in terms of newsworthiness, and arranged within a newspaper or newscast. Moreover, studies addressing this subject have adopted a limited analytic perspective that overlooks much of the social process of gatekeeping.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Gatekeeping, as a social scientific concept, can be traced to Lewin's (1947) writings on social planning. He observed that the most efficient way to bring about widespread social change is to concentrate on persons in key positions of influence, who function as "gatekeepers" in the flow of goods and ideas through the society. Lewin viewed the societal impact of gatekeepers as a matter of "group dynamics," and hence he saw gatekeeping as a basic problem for sociology. At the same time, however, he conceived of the gatekeeping process itself in individualistic and psychological terms:

This [research] is an example of a sociological investigation to determine who the gatekeeper is and therefore to determine whose psychology has to be studied, who has to be educated if a change is to be accomplished. (Lewin 1947:146)

The assumption here is that in any organizational environment a singular decision-maker functions as *the* gatekeeper, and the primary phenomenon of interest is that gatekeeper's "psychology"—presumably, the attitudes and values favoring certain choices over others.

The gatekeeping metaphor has inspired much research that transcends the individualistic bent of Lewin's initial formulation by focusing on a range of social groups and organizational entities involved in the production and distribution of cultural objects,<sup>3</sup> including organizations in the business of

newsmaking (see note 2). However, when editors and story selection come under scrutiny, an individualistic/psychological element frequently reasserts itself.

Some researchers have approached the story selection process indirectly by analyzing patterns of news output (Berkowitz and Beach 1993; Bridges 1989; Corrigan 1990; McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996; Molotch and Lester 1975). Others have entered the newsroom to observe the process directly in editorial conferences and other situations (Berkowitz 1990; Gans 1979; Gieber 1956; Reisner 1990, 1992; Sigal 1973:25–31; Soloski 1989; Tuchman 1978: 31–38; White 1950). Although methods may differ, many of these studies converge on a common analytic objective: to identify the standards of newsworthiness that function as selection criteria, guiding editors as they decide which stories will pass through the news gates. Frequently proposed criteria include "news values" such as timeliness, impact, geographical proximity, conflict, and so on.

The payoff of a criteria approach is that it illuminates the range of considerations that inform editors' choices. At the same time, however, there are limits to how much this approach can reveal about the story-selection process. Criteria alone tend to have weak predictive value, and they do not fully explain actual selection decisions. For example, in a study of local television news, Berkowitz (1990) found that five "news value" criteria accounted for only 19.4 percent of the variance in outcome (also see Reisner 1990, 1992). Thus, Gans (1979:82–83) argues that news values function only as loose and flexible *considerations*, not as strict selection *criteria*.

A second and perhaps more fundamental limitation of the criteria approach is that it overlooks the actual social practices central to the gatekeeping process itself. News stories are usually chosen in the context of the give-and-take of editorial conferences, but little is known about what is actually said and done in such meetings—how editors formulate and assemble the attributes of each story, invoke criteria for judging those stories, express their views of a given story's newsworthiness, and nominate and justify particular stories for page one. These situated practices are significant, not only because

<sup>3</sup> Prominent studies include those by Becker (1982), Crane (1987, 1992), Gitlin (1983), Griswold (1981), Hirsch (1972), Lopes (1992), Peterson (1976), and Peterson and Berger (1975). For studies of journalistic institutions in particular, see note 2. Although most of these studies involve cultural institutions in the public domain, private domains of household residences, families, and personal relationships also have been analyzed from a gatekeeping perspective (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Maynard and Schaeffer 1997; Schegloff 1986).

they can influence actual selection decisions,<sup>4</sup> but also because they are the elementary components that comprise gatekeeping as a social process.

The situated social practices involved in journalistic gatekeeping are overlooked by studies that adopt criteria as their central focus. Indeed, an exclusive emphasis on abstract criteria of newsworthiness treats all such practices as epiphenomenal, as if journalistic gatekeeping were a purely intellectual endeavor in which given story characteristics are measured against given journalistic standards. In reality, however, this reasoning process does not take place exclusively within editors' minds; it is worked out publicly, through concrete speaking practices embedded in courses of interaction within conference meetings. To describe, evaluate, and select stories is to engage in basic forms of social action that remain largely unexamined in the newsroom context. This perspective takes seriously the ethnomethodological insight that the significance of any criterion or decision rule cannot be understood apart from the matrix of situated practices through which it is implemented (Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984, chap. 5; Zimmerman 1970).

We examine journalistic gatekeeping in action. First, we provide an overview of the major phases of activity that organize editorial conference meetings. Second, we identify various practices used to promote stories as page-one material. We then focus on one particular practice central to the gatekeeping process: rendering verbal assessments of newsworthiness.

## DATA

Our data consist of audio recordings of editorial conferences conducted in 1989 at eight daily newspapers. These include both prestigious newspapers serving large metropolitan areas, and lesser-known newspapers from smaller cities and towns. A one-week block

<sup>4</sup> For example, Reisner (1990, 1992) has demonstrated that when editors are called upon to summarize the available stories, the degree of elaboration of a given summary is associated with front-page placement—highly elaborated stories are more likely to be chosen for page one. Also see Boyd (1998) and Maynard (1984, chap. 7).

(five to seven days) of conferences at each newspaper were recorded, and all were roughly transcribed. A smaller subset of 10 conferences was selected for more detailed transcription in accordance with the conventions of conversation analysis (see Appendix A). This subset includes a five-day block of conferences from one metropolitan newspaper, and five additional conferences drawn from various other newspapers. The analysis we present here is based primarily on this 10-conference subset.

These data are less than ideal. Audio recordings do not capture the participants' non-vocal conduct, or the photos, graphics, written story lists, and other materials commonly introduced in such meetings. Identifying speakers also can be difficult, especially when participation becomes more dense and lively. Accordingly, we concentrate on those phases of the conference that are amenable to reliable transcription.

## EDITORIAL CONFERENCES

Editorial conferences are part of the daily routine of most contemporary newspapers. Shortly before the paper is scheduled to go to press, editorial staff members convene for up to an hour to deal with various organizational tasks, the most important of which is determining the lineup of stories for the front page. The staff also may consider how to prioritize and arrange stories on the page to distinguish between the most newsworthy ("lead") story, which usually appears at the top of the page, stories to be placed elsewhere "above the fold" of page one, stories to appear "below the fold," and stories to be placed elsewhere in the newspaper and merely referred to on the front page.

Three main categories of meeting participants collaborate to discharge these tasks. (1) The managing editor usually chairs the conference meeting. (2) Various department or section editors responsible for the major news divisions also take part—these vary from paper to paper, but may include a national editor, city or regional editor, wire editor, feature editor, and various topical specialists such as business, arts, and sports editors. (3) The final group includes editors responsible for aspects of newspaper design and layout, such as the photography and graphics editors.

**Extract 1**

1 ED:->Allright. Take it away Joh::n?  
 2 (1.3)  
 3 BE: Okay top of the new:s uh:m Exxo:n: (0.4) took a  
 4 big hit. (0.4) uh for its second quarter earnings....

(B: July 24, 1989; 2)

**Extract 2**

1 BE:->Uh the soy sto:ry it's pretty much stands from  
 2 this morning, uh: the Italians blasted the:  
 3 Chicago Board of Tra:de on limiting (0.4) uh (0.2)  
 4 soybean contracts they say the move cost them  
 5 about fifteen million dollars,  
 6 (0.8)  
 7 ->Uh:: So:lo the company that makes paint for Sears  
 8 is restructuring saying it's gonna cost about two  
 9 hundred jobs,  
 10 (0.4)  
 11 ->Honeywell which is based in Minneapolis is  
 12 restructuring the reason we care (with) they have  
 13 a lot of operations throughout our state they employ  
 14 about fourteen hundred here (.hh) uh they are not  
 15 sayi:ng (0.4) how many in the state will be affected,  
 16 (1.0)  
 17 ->Uh Washington National a big insurance company based  
 18 here is gonna sell some of its smaller: uh subsidiaries,  
 19 (0.4)  
 20 ->And we're also gonna have an (uh) earnings roundup  
 21 topped by (A:moco). (B: July 24, 1989; 4)

This conference meeting does not necessarily yield the last word on the front page; the finer details are worked out later on in smaller and less formal discussions (also see Sigal 1973:27-28). Nevertheless, it is within the main editorial conference that much of page one takes shape.

**PHASES OF THE EDITORIAL CONFERENCE**

Conference meetings follow a rather predictable sequence of activities that can be segmented into four basic phases.

***Phase 1: Preliminaries***

Phase 1 begins when the participants start to arrive in the conference room. Before official business gets underway, the participants may exchange greetings, small talk, and gossip about extraneous matters. They may also

engage in activities preliminary to the business at hand, such as seeing that all relevant personnel are present, accounting for those who may be absent, introducing guests, and so on. Since this phase is largely tangential to the task of story selection, we will not examine it further.

***Phase 2: Story Review***

The conference formally begins when the participants proceed to summarize and review the most important stories (and accompanying visuals) being developed in each division of the news organization. Generally, this story-review phase is initiated by the managing editor, as in Extract 1.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In the transcript excerpts, speakers are identified as follows: "ED" is reserved for the managing editor, and various departmental editors are designated by initials for their areas of special-

## Extract 3

1 BE: I like the Miata story by: John Mason. (w-) This:: car:  
 2 the Miata- Mazda Miata MX Fi:ve (0.6) uh:m (0.4) has  
 3 been the hottest car in America.=It is: received ra:ve  
 4 reviews, (0.3) uh::m (.) a:nd it s- has about the right  
 5 (0.3) price tag for uh- lotsa folks. It's a sporting  
 6 little car: it's about thirteen thousand do:llars, (0.8)  
 7 (Only problem) is nobody can get it. (0.6) They made about  
 8 they imported about twenty thousand, (0.4) a:nd- for  
 9 the whole country. (.) to be shared around eight hundred  
 10 dealers or so. (0.4) And so: the premiums for these  
 11 things right- at this point in ti:me (.) a:re tremendous.=  
 12 uh twenty five thousand dollars in one case: (0.4) on  
 13 the west coast. (.) Uh:: there's a report unconfirmed  
 14 report in the story that someone offered a premium of:  
 15 forty eight thousand dollars for a Mazda. (.) Miata.  
 16 =So: uh (0.5) while I don't normally offer pro:duct  
 17 stories (0.4) uh:m (0.4) for page one, this is interesting  
 18 because nobody's got (0.2) the car. (0.4) Uh::m (.)  
 19 a::nd (.) an' a lotta folks is kind of a yuppie  
 20 sporty kinda ca:r.=an' lotsa folks want it right now  
 21 so it's an interesting little story.  
 22 (0.5)  
 23 BE: Thee: uh (0.5) Times story is... (A: July 24, 1989; 4)

The managing editor typically begins by saying "okay" or "all right," thus closing down whatever topic or activity was previously in play (Beach 1993). Having prepared for a turn to new business, he or she then invites a particular department editor ("John" in Extract 1) to take the floor.

The chosen editor then proceeds to summarize the main stories being developed in his or her news division. Some stories are summarized in a sentence or two. In Extract 2, the business editor produces a series of brief, short-form summaries in succession (the beginning of each is arrowed). The majority of stories, however, receive more elaborate attention, as in Extract 3. In such long-form summaries, editors often move beyond the raw facts of the story to offer technical and evaluative commentary.

ization—BE for business editor, CE for city editor, WE for wire editor, and so on. Target utterances are indicated by arrows (->) in the left margin. The item in parentheses at the end of each extract identifies its location within the database. Other transcribing conventions are explained in Appendix A.

Reactions to story summaries tend to come primarily from the managing editor, who initiates the vast majority of responses, although the frequency of response varies greatly from newspaper to newspaper. At the larger and more prestigious papers responses are infrequent, so that many stories (e.g., Extracts 2 and 3) receive no vocal response at all. In contrast, at the smaller newspapers the managing editor typically plays a more active role in the review phase. There, managing editors usually do not comment on the newsworthiness of particular stories, but they may offer forms of acknowledgment, probe for further details, make suggestions regarding angles to be pursued, facts to be verified, and so on.

When a department editor has presented all the major items on his or her agenda, the managing editor then selects another editor to take the floor and to launch into a review (see Extract 4, arrowed).

This review process repeats until all department editors have been heard from, including the graphics and photography editors, who generally are the last to review their offerings.

**Extract 4**


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1 SE: And next Friday Saturday and Sunday is- is uh the tra:ck  
 2 and field ( ) so (it'll be a little heavier then.)  
 3 (2.0)  
 4 ED:->Rob,  
 5 (1.2)  
 6 GE: Uh: we've go:t uh: the only graphics we have tonight  
 7 are with fina:ncial there's a: two column graphic on  
 8 Exxon's: uh (0.6) earnings and revenues:... (A: July 24, 1989; 7)

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**Phase 3: Story Selection**

The conference then proceeds to Phase 3, in which the participants begin to discuss how the stories should be arranged in the newspaper, and in particular which stories should appear on page one. Just as the managing editor initiates official business in Phase 2, he or she also advances the meeting to Phase 3, typically by inviting one of the department editors to nominate a lineup of front-page stories from among those just reviewed. For example, in Extract 5, after the photo editor completes a review of available pictures and favorably evaluates the last one, the managing editor (line 8) solicits the business editor's choices for page one. Managing editors may thus seek advice from their subordinates, but they may also take charge of this

task themselves and simply pronounce what should appear on page one (see Extract 6). In either case, the primary initiative for page-one proposals flows from the managing editor, who either makes the proposals or invites suggestions from others.

The managing editor also has primary responsibility for determining when the discussion of story selection, and hence the main business of the conference, is over. He or she may signal the end with "okay" or "all right," or by thanking the others for their participation (see Extract 7, line 5). Before ending the story-selection phase, however, the managing editor may check to see if there is "anything else" (Extract 7, lines 1-3), thus ensuring that all relevant business has been dealt with (cf. Schegloff and Sacks 1973).

**Extract 5**


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1 PE: ...I really like Miranda coming outta jail.= (That eh-)  
 2 (0.3) about ten million dollars cash bond, but this  
 3 (0.3) you know (2.1) I like Jackie too da:ncing.  
 4 ? : .hhhh  
 5 PE: Very [good pictu[re.  
 6 ED: [( ) [Very good picture there,  
 7 (2.7)  
 8 ED:->What do ya got Ben,  
 9 (0.5)  
 10 BE: .hhhh Well: I see a hhhh problem with the le:ad, but  
 11 uh:: (0.3) I like the a:theist story very much as the  
 12 reader. (0.3) I like the:: school: swap with uh::  
 13 garbage 'n I like the gospel swap (0.2) possibly  
 14 with civic if it comes across in time.... (A: July 27, 1989; 11)

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**Extract 6**


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1 ED: O::kay. Let's see, (0.3) let's see what we got here.  
 2 (.) I think we'll take our: cra:sh survi:vors: cra:sh  
 3 victim sto:ry.... (D2: n.d.; 19)

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**Extract 7**

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- 
- 1 ED: Anything else?  
 2 (.)  
 3 ED: Any other thoughts?  
 4 (1.6) ((sound of paper shuffling))  
 5 ED: Thank you. (C2: n.d.; 29)
- 

**Phase 4: Aftermath**

Although official business has ended, there may be some additional talk as the interaction breaks into smaller conversational groups before the participants go their separate ways.

**REVIEWED STORIES AS PAGE-ONE OFFERINGS**

In the remainder of this paper, we focus on Phase 2, the story-review phase. Thus far, we have seen that stories are summarized and reviewed in Phase 2 prior to the story-selection process in Phase 3. We now consider how story summaries are produced and understood as *accomplice* to the later task of story selection.

Most department editors are expected to concentrate on stories that deserve consideration for front-page placement. The participants display an allegiance to this norm when it is breached—that is, when a problem arises concerning the relevance of an item being offered for review. The managing editor, for example, may sanction an editor who devotes excessive attention to material that does *not* seem suitable for page one. Thus, in Extract 8, when the city editor indicates midway through his review that he intends to continue through his “entire list” of stories (lines 1–3), the managing editor calls him to account for his action (line 4). At this point the city editor offers to stop (line 5). The managing editor does allow him to continue (line 6), but only

after mildly chastising him for proceeding through such “thin” material. Extract 8 illustrates how an editor can be sanctioned for presenting material of questionable relevance to page one.

This orientation to page one also is manifest when an arguably significant story is found to be *absent* from an editor’s review. For example, in Extract 9, when the managing editor asks the city editor about a particular story (line 1) not mentioned in his review, the city editor explains its absence (lines 5 and 8) by reference to the expectation that only page-one candidates warrant inclusion in the review. This ostensibly defensive move has a mildly offensive aspect, given that the city editor is downgrading the importance of a story that the managing editor had strongly affiliated with (“my downtown story”), and it is notable that CE laughs as he does this a second time (line 8). The managing editor continues to push for the story’s inclusion on the grounds that it is in fact a page-one candidate (lines 9–10), at which point the city editor tentatively agrees (line 12) and proceeds to review the story. In Extract 9, then, the parties initially disagree as to the relevance of a particular story, but both justify their views by appealing to the norm that only “page-one candidates” should be reviewed.

While conference participants generally are oriented to page one, this orientation may be less prominent for special-section editors (e.g., entertainment and sports editors), whose stories rarely appear on the front page. Even for “hard news” editors, the relevance

**Extract 8**

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- 
- 1 CE: I kinda like this.=I actually have to go through my  
 2 entire list. I’ve got you. I’ve got you for a who:le  
 3 five ten minutes. .hhh  
 4 ED: Why,  
 5 CE: The uh- well I can stop now.  
 6 ED: Get a little thin but that’s okay, . . . (B: July 24, 1989; 15)
-



## Extract 9

1 ED: And my downtown stor:y.  
 2 (2.0)  
 3 CE: Oh yeah. (.) I forgot about that.  
 4 (1.9)  
 5 CE: Uh::m >I- (thought you) just wanted< page one candidates.  
 6 (.)  
 7 ED: Huh:?  
 8 CE: Thought you just wanted page one c(h)andid(h)a[tes].  
 9 ED: [Isn't that  
 10 a page one candidate?  
 11 (0.5)  
 12 CE: I think I- I guess: (.) it i:s. (0.6) The: uh (.) the  
 13 fourth or fifth l(h)ast .hh (0.2) r(h)etail business  
 14 Jameson Stationers will clo:se, (1.0) early August....  
 (D: July 21, 1989; 13)

of page one may be momentarily suspended during a conference. For instance, in Extract 10, when the business editor proceeds to summarize an item that would never appear on the front page (a marketing column that normally runs inside the business section), but which might be of interest to his colleagues (the story concerns newspaper advertising revenues), he both prefaces and concludes his summary (lines 1 and 9, arrowed) by commenting that it is “just to let you know.” In this way, he momentarily suspends the relevance of page one and establishes an alternative rationale for this particular story: Rather than proposing an item for the front page, he casts himself as conveying information of professional interest to his colleagues.

Thus, the task of front-page story selection is an overarching goal that contingently informs the participants' conduct through much of the journalistic conference. Even though story selection isn't taken up explic-

itly until Phase 3, that objective lurks behind the summaries produced in Phase 2, motivating those summaries and guiding how they are understood and dealt with. The activity of summarizing stories is not pursued as an end in its own right; summarized stories are being *offered*, and are *understood as being offered*, as candidates for the front page.

## PROMOTING STORIES

How, then, do editors promote or “pitch” a given story as front page material? At this juncture in the meeting, the participants do not have access to actual story copy (although brief one- or two-sentence story blurbs may be distributed at the beginning of the meeting). Thus, how a story is presented by its sponsoring editor can be crucially important to the gatekeeping process.

One promotional practice involves *positioning a given story within a series of re-*

## Extract 10

1 BE:->And just to let you kno::w Mary William's column (0.2)  
 2 she's gonna be writing about a speech that was given  
 3 (0.5) uh:m (0.4) by an exec in the newspaper advertising  
 4 bureau (0.7) An:d they've lowered its forecast for 1989  
 5 spending (0.3) on newspaper advertising (0.2) to a five  
 6 percent increase (0.2) instead of a six percent increase  
 7 overall.=In other words (0.4) newspaper advertising  
 8 will be dow:n (0.3)  
 9 ->Just wanted to make you aware that- that is what she  
 10 wul- (.) she will be writing about in tomorrow morning.

(B: July 24, 1989; 4)

**Extract 11**


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1 ED: O:kay. (0.2) Kerry?

2 (0.7)

3 BE:->Our best story is

the Amoco story that Jim: mentioned ear:lier:....

(A: July 28, 1989; 4)

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**Extract 12**


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1 BE:->...Everything else is a (little bit) more mundane

2 you have Sears releasing its earnings.... (B: July 25, 1989; 4)

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*viewed stories.* Editors may order their reviews so as to begin with those stories they regard as most important, while presenting subsequent stories in order of declining importance. This priority arrangement is implicit in the mild “fanfare” that sometimes accompanies an editor’s first story (see Extract 11). Correspondingly, an editor may indicate the point at which the major stories are giving way to lesser material (see Extract 12). Given that reviews can be ordered roughly in this way, the position of a story within a series of stories may embody the editor’s implicit claim as to its relative newsworthiness.

A second set of practices involves the *design of the story summary itself*. Particular facts may be selected, formulated, and arranged to highlight the novelty, impact, and/

or significance of the events depicted in the story (Reisner 1990, 1992). For example, in Extract 13 the business editor offers a story about an orange juice company indicted for adulterating its product. He includes in his summary the fact that the juice is distributed locally and in 35 other states (lines 6–7), thus demonstrating the widespread impact of this story as well as its relevance to local newspaper readers. Although he does include one fact that downgrades the importance of the story (“Although there’s no health threat . . .” in lines 7–8), he relegates this detail to a sentence-initial subordinate clause, and proceeds to counterbalance it with more newsworthy details (lines 9–12). The latter material occupies the main clause of the sentence and is sequentially implicative for what comes next.

**Extract 13**


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1 BE: Uh: (0.2) John Bellman is offering us a good

2 story (0.6) outta the courts. Uh (.) in which

3 uh (.) Govan’s which makes uh orange juice (0.4)

4 was indicted on charges that they put a:ll this:

5 (.) adulterated stuff in the orange juice.=It’s

6 concentrated and distributed (0.4) in our state and

7 thirty five o:ther states. Although there’s no health

8 (.) health threat (0.6) uh:: inv:ol:ving this uh::

9 (0.2) you can see the list of stuff that they stuck in

10 orange juice an’ sold it as orange juice. ’n (0.6)

11 Uh:: corn sugar beet sugar monosodium glutamate

12 ascorbic acid an’ so on an’ so o:n. .hh It sounds

13 like something you might (get here at the galley).

14 (0.2)

15 ALL: [(Laughter, groans)]

16 BE: [Uh:: bu::t uh::

17 (0.2)

18 BE: Tha:t’s- that’s also a pretty good (lead) story.

(A: July 25, 1989; 5)

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**Extract 14**


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1 BE:->A:nd there's a: >fairly interesting economic story  
 2 today: it- (.) o::n the eve of the=uh (0.3) GNP report  
 3 for the second quarter, there were (0.2) si:gns in the  
 4 market today: that the Federal Reserve: is: (0.4) allowing  
 5 interest rates to ea::se.... (A: July 26, 1989; 4)

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**Extract 15**


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1 CE:->Number seven's an interesting story it uh-  
 2 ?: nhhh  
 3 CE: The city's gonna try this experiment (1.2) uh  
 4 in the- (.) in parts of town where they just can't  
 5 keep the meters fixed. for one reason or another....  
 (B: July 24, 1989; 10)

---

Thus, details suggesting that the story is not newsworthy are downplayed, while its newsworthy features are highlighted and form the basis for subsequent talk. This is one place where something like traditional news values are clearly oriented to by the participants. But the basic point is that, in a variety of ways, the facts of a story can be formulated and assembled in a manner that portrays the story as newsworthy.

Stories also can be promoted by means of *explicitly evaluative comments*. Editors may move beyond the specific facts of the story and comment overtly on the story's suitability for the front page (e.g., Extract 13, line 18). We will focus on the most common type of evaluative comment: assessments of newsworthiness.

**STORY ASSESSMENTS***Assessments of Newsworthiness*

In the course of reviewing their stories, editors may offer evaluative comments that bear more or less explicitly on the question of newsworthiness. Such comments ordi-

narily appear in either of two sequential positions. An editor may assess the newsworthiness of a story just *before* summarizing its factual details (as in Extracts 14 and 15), or just *after* the summary is completed (as in Extract 16; also see Extract 13, line 18). Correspondingly, a story may be assessed in both positions, as in Extract 17 (lines 3 and 19). There, the business editor evaluates a bank merger story as "fairly important" both before and after presenting a summary of the story.

Assessments are occasionally introduced in the midst of a story summary; however, these internal assessments are different in both form and function from the more commonplace pre- and post-summary assessments. Extract 18, a story about a local measles epidemic, exemplifies this contrast. The regional editor renders a pre-summary assessment (line 1), and then goes on to offer mid-summary assessments (lines 11 and 14). These internal assessments, unlike the preliminary one, do not occupy a clause or sentence of their own—the assessment terms ("interesting," "even more interesting") are embedded in sentences devoted to summariz-

**Extract 16**


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1 RE: ...when the American flag is concerned nobody should  
 2 be uh (0.6) not even the- the governor of the city  
 3 should be outlawing it under any circumstances.  
 4 (0.4)  
 5 ->So that uh has potential too.  
 6 (0.4)  
 7 RE: The state U story I'm not so sure of.... (A: July 24, 1989; 5)

---

## Extract 17

1 ED: Alri:ght, (1.4) Ben  
 2 (1.0)  
 3 BE:->We've got a fairly important bank deal today on LaBe:lle  
 4 Street uh:m (0.5) LaBelle National Ba:nk which is owned  
 5 by a Dut- (0.2) a Dutch fir:m i:s acquiring: (0.6) the  
 6 First National Bank of Metrocity, (0.6) Uh:: which  
 7 will make (0.3) the:: uh (.) the ( ) (.) combined  
 8 bank will be the fifth largest ban:k in the sta:te (0.5)  
 9 and will me:an now: that two of ou:r top five banks are  
 10 foreign ow:ned, (0.7) Uh: both banks are: (0.3) quite  
 11 well know:n and well esta:blished institutions on  
 12 LaBe:lle Street and this is a very much of a surprise  
 13 deal that was announced (0.4) early this morning itch-  
 14 it's all part of a (0.4) globalization of banking and  
 15 the fact that the (0.2) pretty soon the state is gonna  
 16 open up to full interstate banking and I think a lot of  
 17 (0.3) the local banks are gonna be (0.2) getting  
 18 together to get ready for that event.  
 19 ->So (0.3) fairly important business story on LaBe:lle  
 20 Street.  
 21 (0.5)  
 22 BE: We ha:ve with that a profile.... (A: July 26, 1989; 3)

## Extract 18

1 RE:->The measles story is uh: (0.7) another very interesting  
 2 story althou::gh uh (0.3) its principal impa:ct agai:n  
 3 is in the: uh: (.) Metro City area. (0.7) Uh::: there's-  
 4 (0.2) the measles epidemic is now up to abou:t uh:::  
 5 (.) fi:ve hundred and eighty three cases. (1.0) Uh:::  
 6 (1.0) Everybody's concer:ned enough so tha:t the: uh  
 7 Health Department is urging (0.7) tha:t infants be  
 8 inoculated again:st uh: measles it used to be: you were  
 9 a year ol:d before they recommend you get a shot now  
 10 they're recommending it at six months. (0.5)  
 11 ->But the interesting thing is tha:t the: uh: (.) epidemic  
 12 seems to be concentrated in ni::ne w:est and no:rthwest  
 13 side (0.4) the low income communities. (0.6)  
 14 ->Even more interesting perhaps is that the: uh (.) first  
 15 patient (0.9) the first know:n victim of measles, (0.6)  
 16 was a twenty ni:ne year o:ld (.) yuppi:e in the  
 17 Cliffside area.... (A: July 26, 1989; 5)

ing particular facts about the story (the epidemic's geographic concentration and first victim). Consequently, the referent of each assessment is not the story as a whole, but rather the particular fact with which the assessment is associated.

Global, story-focused assessments normally appear in either the pre- or post-summary positions, and they tend to share similar

design features. Such assessments are normally brief—most occupy only a single sentence. Moreover, the assessment terms used are typically quite general, the most common being variants of “interesting,” “good,” or “good read.” For the most part, editors do not comment at length or in detail as to why the story should appear on page one, although there are exceptions as we shall see.

## Extract 19

1 RE: Uh: the lightning story will provide a reader if you're  
 2 interested,=If you recall a coupla weeks ago there  
 3 was this ama::zing situation in Western county in which  
 4 (0.8) in which uh:: (.) uh these three people got hit  
 5 by lightening.=A- a fa:ther a mother and their child....  
 6 .  
 7 . ((several lines omitted))  
 8 .  
 9 ...uh:: (1.0) she seemed to have kind of a sense  
 10 of humor about one ha:p- wha- when- went o::n what  
 11 happened that day what she remembers of it, (0.2)  
 12 ->But the fact it is: really kind of an amazing story.  
 13 (0.4)  
 14 RE: (That) you know these: people walking down the  
 15 street an' get jolted by lightening are livin' to  
 16 ta:lk about it.  
 17 (2.0) ((tape may do a brief skip here))  
 18 RE: A::nd uh: the phone sto- (wanted e-) just to scrap  
 19 that.... (A: July 25, 1989; 7-8)

*Assessment Polarity*

Assessments of newsworthiness are patterned in terms of their polarity. They tend to be favorable in character, but only *mildly* favorable. Many assessments are markedly qualified—stories are assessed as “*fairly* interesting” (Extract 14), “*pretty* good” (Extract 13), “*fairly* important” (Extract 17), and so on. Even when qualifying adjectives are not used, generally the assessment terms are restrained (e.g., “interesting” [Extract 15], “has potential” [Extract 16], or “good read”). In contrast, strongly favorable assessments (e.g., “very important,” “major story”) and unfavorable assessments (e.g., “boring”) are far less common. The general pattern is for editors to be upbeat but restrained in their evaluations.

This is more than just a statistical regularity. Mildly favorable assessments appear to have a *normative character* in the context of editorial conferences, and are preferred<sup>6</sup> over

both strongly favorable and unfavorable assessments. This is perhaps most apparent in the differential accountabilities associated with these assessments. *Mildly* favorable assessments are asserted straightforwardly and with no special explanation or justification—other than what is embedded within the story summary itself. Thus, when editors render mildly favorable assessments following a story summary (see Extract 17, line 19), they usually move on to the next story (line 21) without any further discussion of the just-completed story. A similar pattern may be observed in Extract 7 (lines 19–22) and Extract 16 (lines 5–7).

In contrast, *strongly* favorable post-summary assessments are often followed by additional talk that justifies the assessment. For example, after summarizing a story about a family struck by lightning (Extract 19, lines 1–11), the regional editor comments that it is “really kind of an amazing story” (line 12). This assessment is qualified but still stronger than is typical in this setting—and the assessment is not left to stand on its own. After a brief pause (line 13), the editor adds another increment of talk (lines 14–16) that builds syntactically on the assessment (as a

<sup>6</sup> “Preference” is used here in a behavioral rather than psychological sense. It refers not to the subjective feelings of the participants, but to observable patterns of conduct that privilege mildly favorable assessments over assessments of other kinds. This usage is commonplace within conversation analysis (Heritage 1984:265–80) to

characterize asymmetries between alternative courses of action.

## Extract 20

1 ED: Alright Jeff?  
 2 (0.5)  
 3 RE: The: uh best story we had was the cra:sh story:, (0.7)  
 4 The: uh flight attendants: the surviving flight  
 5 attendants uh- (.) from the:: uh: (0.8) UA flight (.)  
 6 two thirty two: (.) held a press conference at the  
 7 airport Hilton today:. (0.3) Uh it was a pretty emotional  
 8 sce::ne they talked about (0.4) uh::m (0.2) their  
 9 experience during the cra:sh and their feelings si:nce  
 10 the:n. .hh Uh:: mixture as th- (.) doping says of uh:  
 11 (0.5) grief and euphoria, (0.6) Uh::m (0.3) it's a  
 12 ->good (.) good story well written by: (0.5) Larry Wilson  
 13 uh (0.2) some o'the people: talk about how:: uh (0.6) how  
 14 guilty (.) they feel sometimes about still being ali:ve  
 15 when all those other people di:ed. (0.5) Uh:: (0.9)  
 16 it's good reading.  
 17 (0.2)  
 18 RE: The schools piece is kind of mo::re uh: (.)  
 19 pedestrian:.... (A: July 28, 1989; 5)

subordinate clause prefaced by “that”) and is thus presented as an elaboration of that assessment. In this elaboration he *re*-presents the story, but this time in a reduced form, omitting many details and boiling it down to just three key facts highlighting what makes the story so “amazing.” This provides clear grounds to support the antecedent assessment (line 12). Only after this justification has been added does the editor move on to the next story (line 18).

Similarly, in Extract 20, when the regional editor presents a story about the survivors of a plane crash, he initially characterizes it as his “best” story (line 3), and after completing the summary he characterizes it as a “good good story” (line 12). This reiterated assessment term provides greater emphasis and thus upgrades the endorsement it embodies. At that point, rather than moving on to the next story, the editor defends and justifies his assessment (lines 12–16), although he does so differently than in the previous example. Instead of reducing the story to its essentials, the editor introduces additional details that were glossed over initially—details about the story’s poignant aspects and the quality of its writing. This additional talk provides evidence for the strong endorsement rendered just previously, and only when that evidence is pre-

sented does the editor move on to the next story (line 18).

Unfavorable assessments are similarly accountable. Thus, in Extract 21, when the city editor finishes reviewing a story about a presidential press conference, he comments that he is “not hugely enthusiastic” about the story (line 17). He then goes on to explain why (lines 18–21), commenting on the lack of substance and novelty in what the President said. Once again, the editor’s next story, about Exxon (line 23), is withheld until this justification is completed.

Unfavorable assessments, in addition to their accountability, have another design feature that suggests a dispreferred status: Such assessments are usually marked as *subjective* in character. In the preceding example, the regional editor asserts, “I’m not hugely enthusiastic about this.” Similarly in Extract 22, when the regional editor introduces a story about state university programs to help disadvantaged students, he initially opines (lines 1–2) that “The state U story I’m not so sure of.” In both Extracts 21 and 22, the unfavorable assessment is framed as characterizing the speaker’s own perspective or attitude toward the story. This contrasts sharply with the design of favorable assessments, which directly characterize the story itself (e.g., “it’s a good story”).

## Extract 21

1 FE: ((clears throat)) (0.5) On the na:tional schedule (0.8)  
 2 uh: the President uh:: (.) popped out of:- uh: his uh  
 3 nook today::, and had a- (.) a (0.3) unannounced press  
 4 conference, .hhh Uh::m (0.5) he:: said a lot of fairly  
 5 predictable things abou:t (0.4) what the house did to  
 6 his: uh (0.5) defense (.) budget (0.3) propo:sals, (.)  
 7 yesterday, .hhh Says that he still feels that he will be  
 8 able to prevai:l, .hh that it's okay to take the  
 9 occasional sh:ot at the con:gress even though there are  
 10 more Democrats than Republicans there, .hhhh Bu:t uh (0.2)  
 11 he figures tha:t uh: (.) tha:t uh:: (0.7) the Senate  
 12 will help him (.) and he:'ll uh: (.) he'll get (.) what  
 13 he wa:nts from the (.) in the defense budget. .hhhh  
 14 (.) Uh: he:: uh:: (.) ran: over a who:le (.) l:oad of  
 15 thin:gs, uh praised Bill: Lucas: (.) and uh .hh said  
 16 he's still trying to work on something on capital gai:ns,  
 17 ->(0.7) Uh:: (0.2) I'm not (.) hugely enthusiastic about  
 18 this he: it is the President and it is a press conference  
 19 but it- there's not (1.0) there's not a:: (0.3)  
 20 an awful lot of detail and there's (nothing)  
 21 (.) wi::ldly uh: (0.2) unexpected in what he said.  
 22 (0.8)  
 23 FE: I like the Exxon story much better:... (A: July 28, 1989; 3)

## Extract 22

1 RE:->The State U story I'm not so sure of. Uh there're people  
 2 ->who're excited about it I'm not sure why: (0.2) Uh::m  
 3 State U: (0.3) apparently about a year ago: (.) came in  
 4 for some criticism because it fired a black counselor....  
 (A: July 24, 1989; 6)

Another common feature of unfavorable assessments is the use of a rhetorical construction known as litotes—an unfavorable assessment is expressed by negating a favorable one (e.g., “I’m *not* hugely enthusiastic,” “I’m *not* so sure of”). This type of construction is indirect (Bergmann 1992) in that it enables the speaker to avoid producing a hostile antonymous assessment term (e.g., “I’m *opposed to*”). This further contrasts with favorable assessments, which involve the use of directly favorable assessment terms. Notice also that the negated favorable assessment terms in Extracts 21 and 22 are particularly strong or upgraded, so that the negation results in an assessment that is only mildly unfavorable.

These various asymmetries in story assessments suggest that there is a normative level

of restrained support that editors orient to when evaluating stories. Both stronger and weaker endorsements are offered much more cautiously, with justificatory accounts, markers of subjectivity, and distinct forms of mitigation. Some of these features may be efforts to make the assessment less vulnerable to criticism or attack—justificatory accounts in particular seem designed to head off anticipated resistance. Editors thus are more cautious or defensive when rendering assessments that are either stronger or weaker than the mildly favorable norm.

This pattern recurs across the data sample; but there are exceptions. Some mildly favorable assessments are offered using the design features normally associated with more extreme assessments. For instance, concerning the story about a short-

## Extract 23

---

1 ED: Jan: whatcha got.  
 2 (0.3)  
 3 BE: I have v:irtually nothing. (0.7)  
 4 St- (.) the market was [dow:n.  
 5 ED: [Don't sell your page so hard.=  
 6 BE: =Well: I- really (.) feel ba- ba:d about nothing hap-  
 7 I mean not only don't (0.8) I have anything locally  
 8 but w:ire wise it sucks too::.. (C: n.d.; 22)

---

age of Mazda Miatas (see Extract 3, p. 182), the business editor evaluates the story as one that he “likes” (line 1), is “interesting” (line 17), and is “an interesting little story” (line 21). All of these endorsements are rather restrained. And yet, the first is subjectively framed, and the second is followed by an account (lines 18–21). Here, then, an editor is being “cautious/defensive” when rendering assessments that are, in terms of their polarity, utterly routine. In this case there appears to be another rationale for cautiousness: the particular type of story involved. BE characterizes it as a “product story” (lines 16–17), and he professes a general reluctance to offer such stories for page one. But he then goes on to cast this particular product story as an exception, one that deserves consideration for a variety of reasons (lines 16–21). The cautiousness thus appears to be responsive to the specific type of story at issue, which normally would be considered as unsuitable.

Thus, a cautious/defensive stance may emerge whenever an editor feels him- or herself to be “going out on a limb.” Such feelings occasionally arise when the story in question is regarded as a long shot, but they arise more commonly when the editor’s evaluation is substantially stronger or weaker than is usual in the conference setting.

### ASSESSMENTS AND PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

What explains the patterning of newsworthiness assessments during story review? One factor may be the perceived character of the stories themselves. Presumably, editors tend to review stories that are seen as worthy of the front-page placement, but on any given day relatively few stories will be momentous

or earth-shaking. Given the likely distribution of reviewed stories, it is not surprising that most assessments are mildly favorable. Yet mildly favorable assessments are not only more commonplace; they are offered more straightforwardly and less defensively than stronger and weaker ones. What accounts for this asymmetry?

For a more comprehensive explanation, we must move beyond the stories themselves and consider aspects of the social environment in which they are evaluated. Editors are enmeshed in a matrix of professional relationships and personal allegiances, and are accountable to these relational ties in ways that bear on the assessment process.

### *Relations with Reporters*

Each editor has ties to the reporters in his or her division of the news organization, and these reporters expect their editor to act as an *advocate* for their stories. This role and the expectations associated with it has been documented in the ethnographic literature (Sigal 1973:19–31), and it also surfaces in the present data.

The relevance of the advocacy role is perhaps most conspicuous when it is momentarily transgressed or suspended. Thus, in Extract 23, when the business editor offers a particularly gloomy appraisal of the stories available that day (line 3), the managing editor comments ironically on her failure to “sell” her own business stories (line 5). Lest she be perceived as hostile to the work of her own reporters, she responds by suggesting that her negative comment is not aimed specifically at local business stories but is meant to apply also to stories offered by the wire services (lines 6–8). Thus, although this department editor initially declines to act as an



## Extract 24

1 ED: You're next ( )

2 WE:->(Very:) uh very thin today....

(B: July 24, 1989; 16)

advocate, both she and the managing editor display an orientation to the normativity of that role.

Editors' advocacy role becomes manifest more routinely when editors refer to their own reporters during the review phase. Editors always have the option of mentioning the reporter who is responsible for a given story, but this option is exercised selectively. Reporter citations are quite commonplace when stories are evaluated favorably (e.g., "I like the Miata story by John Mason" in Extract 3, line 1; "Joe Bellman is offering us a good story outta the courts" in Extract 13, lines 1–2). Furthermore, when justifying a particularly strong assessment, an editor may go beyond a simple citation to comment explicitly on the quality of the writing and reportage. For example, in Extract 20 the editor supports his strong assessment by pointing out that the story is "well written by Larry Wilson" (line 12), and he concludes by characterizing it as "good reading" (line 16).

In contrast, when stories are evaluated negatively, reporters are never directly mentioned (see Extracts 21 and 22). Correspondingly, the justifications offered for negative evaluations rarely involve matters for which reporters are responsible. Instead, such justifications routinely focus on the lack of news value in the events with which the story is concerned. In Extract 21 (lines 17–21), the negative assessment of a story covering a presidential press conference is warranted mainly by the press conference's lack of substance and novelty (although the comment about the lack of "detail" could be a veiled reference to the reportage). Unfavorable assessments thus are justified primarily by reference to qualities of the *event*, and not the *story* assembled to report on it.

In short, attributions of responsibility are asymmetrical—reporters are credited for strong stories, but they are not blamed for weaker ones. This asymmetry is one way in which editors act as advocates on behalf of their reporters.

### *Relations with Editorial Colleagues*

Editors also have ties to their editorial colleagues, who have somewhat different expectations. For their colleagues, editors are expected to exercise a modicum of *detachment* and judge stories according to universalistic standards. This is in part a matter of journalistic professionalism, but it also promotes solidary relations among the various editors who must meet on a daily basis and whose divergent story preferences must repeatedly be balanced. In this recurrent zero-sum game, an appropriately detached stance during the story-review phase tends to minimize the occurrence of friction later on, when tough choices must be made.

Editors often strive to display such detachment when they first take the floor. At that juncture, they can comment prospectively on their entire collection of stories. In sharp contrast to assessments of individual stories, these global assessments tend to be negative in character, as in Extract 24 (also see Extract 23, line 3). Editors thus exhibit hard-nosed skepticism about their own reporters' stories *in general*, even as they work to promote this or that story *in particular*.

In contrast, editors who push too hard for too many stories fail to remain appropriately detached, and they may be negatively sanctioned. In Extract 25, when the foreign editor strongly and elaborately endorses the third story listed in his review (lines 1 and 6), which happens to be about an unusual heat wave in England, he gets into trouble with the managing editor. The managing editor first asks if he prefers this story over "Poland" (line 8), which was the second story he had reviewed (just previously). The foreign editor is plainly reluctant to discriminate between these stories—he pauses (line 9), restates the question (line 10) as if thinking out loud, and then hesitates rather extendedly (lines 11–12). This prompts the managing editor, sounding slightly agitated, to ask, "How many stories do you want?" The clear

## Extract 25

- 1 FE: ...It's just a very funny read about what it's like in  
 2 a place that knows nothing about he:at and is getting  
 3 an awful lot of it. (0.4) Uh they say (.) uh: yeh- yeah  
 4 it says here it's the uh (.) hottest summer in uh (1.0)  
 5 since the mid seventies. (1.0)  
 6 A very- it's a very good read.  
 7 (2.0)  
 8 ED: Y'like it better than Poland?  
 9 (0.4)  
 10 FE: Is it better than Poland.  
 11 (1.4)  
 12 FE: Uh:::m=  
 13 ED: =The series out there, can't you ( how many-) (0.2)  
 14 Well what do you (think there-) (How many) stories  
 15 do you want.  
 16 (2.0)  
 17 FE: Well it's a lot more fun than Poland,=  
 18 ED: =Okay. (A: July 25, 1989; 2)

implication is that the foreign editor is angling for too many, and he subsequently backs down and renders a comparative judgement (line 17).

This tension between advocacy and detachment, rooted in editors' competing allegiances to their own reporters and to their editorial colleagues, may partly account for the privileged status accorded to mildly favorable story assessments. Such assessments strike a balance between these divergent demands. Editors present themselves as pushing their reporters' stories, but in a restrained or measured way, as if each story were being judiciously weighed rather than rubber stamped. Furthermore, mildly favorable assessments allow greater flexibility in subsequent negotiations: They provide the managing editor with substantial "wiggle room," while enabling department editors to avoid undue embarrassment and loss of face should the story be rejected for page one. More extreme assessments, which could threaten either advocacy or detachment and that involve risky levels of confrontation and commitment, are offered less frequently and with much greater caution.

Taken together, these observations suggest that when editors verbally evaluate their stories, they are attentive to more than just the stories themselves. Because judging newsworthiness is in part a public form of

activity, and not a wholly private intellectual exercise, it is sensitive to the matrix of social relations in which it is embedded. Assessments of newsworthiness are one important means by which editors' relational ties are acknowledged, nurtured, and reproduced.

## ASSESSMENTS AND OUTCOMES

Newsworthiness assessments represent just one part of a complex and multifaceted gatekeeping process. This process encompasses other promotional practices mobilized during the story-review phase of the conference, subsequent negotiations in the story-selection phase, and the managing editor's own judgement of how well a given story measures up against various news values. Despite this complexity, the verbal assessment a story receives is strongly associated with its placement in the newspaper.

Table 1 depicts the relationship between assessment polarity and placement outcome. Of those stories that received strong favorable assessments during the review phase, 78 percent subsequently appeared on the front page. In only two cases did a strongly endorsed story fail to make it to the front page, and in one of these cases the editor subsequently modulated his endorsement when he was criticized for overzealous ad-

**Table 1. Assessment Polarity and Placement Outcome**

Assessment Polarity	Placement Outcome					
	Front Page		Elsewhere		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Strongly favorable	7	78	2	22	9	100
Mildly favorable	8	40	12	60	20	100
Unfavorable	0	0	5	100	5	100
No assessment	8	42	11	58	19	100

*Note:* Statistics are based on the block of five editorial conferences at a large metropolitan newspaper; this data comprises half of the primary data sample. The remaining five conferences were excluded from the analysis because newsworthiness assessments were much less frequent at the smaller and less prestigious newspapers, and the published front pages often were not available.

vocacy (see Extract 25). With mildly favorable assessments, the success rate drops to 40 percent, which is roughly equivalent to the success rate for stories that receive no verbal assessment at all. Finally, negatively assessed stories were never chosen for the front page. This overall pattern is consistent with the argument that mildly favorable assessments are the norm, while stronger and weaker forms embody marked claims regarding newsworthiness. The association between assessment polarity and placement outcome is statistically significant (Fisher's exact test,  $p = .04$ ).

Verbal assessments represent only the most explicit way of presenting a story as newsworthy. A more subtle promotional practice amenable to quantification is story positioning. Because editors tend to present their best stories first, a story's sequential placement in the review embodies an implicit claim as to that story's newsworthiness. Table 2 demonstrates that story position is indeed strongly

associated with front-page placement (Fisher's exact test,  $p = .002$ ). First-positioned stories were more than twice as likely to be chosen for the front page as second-positioned stories, and were more than four times as likely to be chosen as stories placed third or later.

Given that both assessment polarity and story position are associated with placement outcomes, are these two factors mutually independent? Table 3 shows the relationship between assessment polarity and outcome with story position controlled. Positioning continues to matter, particularly in the absence of a more explicit assessment. Among stories that received no assessment, those reviewed first had a much higher front-page success rate (88 percent) compared with those reviewed second (25 percent), and so on. The 88-percent figure is slightly exaggerated because it includes three stories that were part of a running series—the newspaper had a major investment in this series and

**Table 2. Position of Story in Review List and Placement Outcome**

Position of Story in Review	Placement Outcome					
	Front Page		Elsewhere		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
First	14	74	5	26	19	100
Second	6	35	11	65	17	100
Third or later	3	18	14	82	17	100

*Note:* See note to Table 1.

**Table 3. Assessment Polarity and Placement Outcome by Story Position**

Story Position/ Polarity	Placement Outcome				Total	
	Front Page		Elsewhere			
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
<i>First Stories</i>						
Strongly favorable	5	100	0	0	5	100
Mildly favorable	2	40	3	60	5	100
Unfavorable	0	0	1	100	1	100
No assessment	7	88	1	12	8	100
<i>Second Stories</i>						
Strongly favorable	1	50	1	50	2	100
Mildly favorable	4	40	6	60	10	100
Unfavorable	0	0	1	100	1	100
No assessment	1	25	3	75	4	100
<i>Third or Later Stories</i>						
Strongly favorable	1	50	1	50	2	100
Mildly favorable	2	40	3	60	5	100
Unfavorable	0	0	3	100	3	100
No assessment	0	0	7	100	7	100

*Note:* See note to Table 1.

it was probably a foregone conclusion that each installment would appear on page one, so each story was reviewed first but without an explicit assessment. When these rather special cases are removed from the analysis, the success rate for unassessed first-positioned stories drops to 80 percent, but this is still much higher than the rate for unassessed second-positioned stories.

When an assessment is rendered, the relationship between assessment polarity and placement outcome remains constant across all story positions. Thus, regardless of whether a given story appears first, or second, or third in an editor's review, that story is more likely to be chosen for the front page if it receives a strong favorable assessment. Mildly favorable assessments have a lower success rate at every position, but they do better than unfavorable assessments.

Thus, both assessment polarity and story position are independently associated with gatekeeping outcomes. Moreover, when an editor mobilizes both practices in combination—offering a story first and strongly endorsing it—the success rate is a perfect 100

percent. At least in the present data sample, a double-barreled strategy hits the target every time.

## DISCUSSION

The broader significance of this study may be appreciated by situating it in relation to other perspectives on newsmaking. Sociological analyses of the news stand in opposition to the view of news espoused by journalists. Journalists occasionally argue that news reflects reality, pure and simple, but most offer the somewhat more sophisticated view that news is a judicious selection of the most newsworthy events of the day (Epstein 1973:13–37; Gans 1979:78–80). This view is founded on the assumption that journalists are autonomous professionals who are insulated from extraneous pressures and are trained to gather news objectively in accordance with established standards of newsworthiness. Sociologists, in contrast, have demonstrated that journalists work within a complex institutional and cultural environment that leaves its imprint on the daily

news (see note 2). This context systematically narrows the pool of available stories, and it affects how editors select stories from the pool and arrange them in the newspaper or newscast. Thus, researchers have illuminated a range of considerations (e.g., preferences for drama and conflict, for discrete events over long-term processes, etc.) that have less to do with idealized standards of newsworthiness than with the practicalities and imperatives of the news organization.

The present study also suggests that news is a social construct, but in a way that has not been appreciated previously in the context of editorial gatekeeping. Not only do extra-journalistic, organizationally driven considerations enter into the gatekeeping process (although that is undoubtedly so); gatekeeping itself is fundamentally a social and collaborative process. That process is negotiated by the editorial staff, each of whom promotes particular stories for page one through a variety of discursive practices, to a managing editor who does not have independent access to the stories themselves. In the absence of actual story copy, department editors play a crucial role in proposing which story characteristics should form the basis for evaluation, and how each story should be ranked vis-à-vis other available stories. When editors render explicit verbal assessments, these are intertwined with, and conditioned by, the framework of social relationships at the newspaper. Thus, passing judgement on a story's newsworthiness is not a purely intellectual task discharged by atomistic professionals; it is an observable social action, situated within interaction, and performed with an eye toward its immediate relational implications.

Moreover, various promotional practices are strongly associated with gatekeeping outcomes. All this suggests that what matters in the gatekeeping process is not just the news values that editors have internalized, but also what they say and do publicly in the relationally consequential forum of the editorial conference. Further research is necessary to specify the relative importance of critical news values and context-sensitive promotional practices. Nevertheless, it is plausible that these practices may explain some of the variance in story selection that is not accounted for by newsworthiness cri-

teria alone (cf. Reisner 1990, 1992). In any case, story selection cannot be understood fully until this infrastructure of practices is more thoroughly explicated.

This analysis, and the perspective it embodies, has implications that extend beyond the domain of journalism per se. It is relevant to diverse gatekeeping institutions involved in cultural production, people processing, and the like. Gatekeeping is often a group effort, negotiated via specific discursive and interactional practices by participants who are accountable to collegial or social relationships.<sup>7</sup> Outcomes may be influenced in untold ways by these situated practices and the social relations to which they contribute. To the extent that researchers attempt to model gatekeeping decisions in terms of formal decision criteria, they may benefit from a closer look at processes of gatekeeping in action.

*Steven E. Clayman is Associate Professor of Sociology at UCLA and is affiliated with the Communication Studies Program there. His research applies conversation analytic methods to the study of mass communication. To this end, he has examined news interviews, political speeches, editorial conferences, and sound-bite selection. He is currently examining how presidential press conferences have evolved in the postwar era.*

*Ann Reisner is Associate Professor in the Department of Human and Community Development and the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. She studies mass media coverage of environmental issues, particularly those at the intersection of environment and agriculture. She has published in Agricultural and Human Values, Rural Sociology, Journalism Quarterly, and Studies in Symbolic Interaction.*

<sup>7</sup> Such processes have been examined, with varying degrees of elaboration, in studies of decision-making in medicine (Boyd 1998; Kleinman, Boyd, and Heritage 1997), law (Manzo 1993; Maynard 1984; Maynard and Manzo 1993), education (Erickson and Shultz 1982), and emergency service (Whalen and Zimmerman 1990; Zimmerman 1992). However, systematic efforts to relate interactional processes to gatekeeping outcomes remain rare.

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**Appendix A. Transcript Notational Conventions**


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The extracts presented in this paper use the notational conventions from conversation analysis, which aim to capture the details of talk and interaction as they naturally occur. Below is a guide to the transcription symbols used here; for a more detailed exposition see Atkinson and Heritage (1984:ix-xvi).

ED: <u>That's</u> our <u>policy</u> .	<i>Underlined items</i> were markedly stressed.
ED: That's our po:::policy.	<i>Colon(s)</i> indicate the prior sound was prolonged.
ED: THAT'S our policy.	<i>Capital letters</i> indicate increased volume.
ED: That's our- our policy.	A <i>hyphen</i> denotes a glottal stop or "cut-off" of sound.
ED: .hhh That's our policy.	<i>Strings of "h"</i> mark audible breathing. The longer the string, the longer the breath. A period preceding denotes inbreath; no period denotes out breath.
BE: I hhhh would agree.	
ED: That's (.) our policy. (1.3)	<i>Numbers in parentheses</i> denote elapsed silence in tenths of seconds; a period (.) denotes a micropause of less than 0.2 seconds.
BE: I would agree.	
ED: That's our policy.=	<i>Equal signs</i> indicate that one event followed the other with no intervening silence.
BE: =I would agree.	
ED: That's [our policy]	<i>Brackets</i> mark the onset and termination of simultaneous activities.
BE: [I would ag]ree.	
ED: That's our policy.	<i>Punctuation marks</i> denote intonation rather than grammar at turn constructional unit boundaries. Periods indicate falling intonation, question marks indicate rising intonation, and commas indicate "continuing" or slightly rising intonation.
BE: But should it be.	
ED: I think so?	
ED: That's our ( )	<i>Open parentheses</i> indicate transcriber's uncertainty as to what was said. <i>Words in parentheses</i> represent a best guess as to what was said.
BE: But (should it) be.	
ED: -> That's our policy	<i>Arrows</i> indicate phenomena of interest.

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