



IDEAS AND REVIEWS

We're All Postmodern Now

Even Journalists have realized that facts
don't always add up to the truth

By Mitchell Stephens

“It’s all spin at this point, isn’t it?” CNN anchor Aaron Brown asked the network’s senior White House correspondent, John King, at one point in the last days of the 2004 election campaign. They were trying to puzzle out the implications for the campaign of that day’s major story (a new tape from Osama bin Laden).

King agreed. And then he proceeded to deepen the haze by labeling the implications of that development “yet another element of uncertainty.”

In the final third of the twentieth century, journalism had seemed the last bastion of certainty, of hardheaded realism. While the arts, the humanities, elements of the social sciences, and even aspects

of the sciences, were grappling with notions of interpretation and uncertainty, most reporters held onto the very nineteenth-century notion that facts were independent of interpretation; that they were discrete and merely required “collecting.” Most journalists, in other words, believed, as one of their great sages, Walter Lippmann, put it, that “the world outside” could and should be seen as independent of “the pictures in our heads.” Reality was out there; journalists merely “reflected” it — objectively.

Armed with this noble and uncomplicated view of their calling and the world, journalists were content to ignore postmodernism — a loose collection of philosophical ideas and aesthetic notions that have in common a revolt against the belief that any one perspective, any one view of reality, has ultimate priority. Deconstruction, perhaps postmodernism’s most dynamic incarnation, earned its first mention in American journalism with a *New Republic* article in 1983 — seventeen years after it first invaded America and began establishing itself in scholarly literature. When they were obliged to pay attention, journalists fell back on derision: after deconstruction’s founder, the Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida, was hired by the University of California, Irvine, in 1986, a columnist for *The Orange County Register*, dubbed his work, with an openness and fairness characteristic of journalists at the time, “pure mumbo jumbo.”

But with the arrival of the twenty-first century, the notion that “it’s all spin” — that, as deconstruction and other postmodern theories have long argued, interpretation is inextricably bound with reality — has not only gained a foothold in journalism; it threatens to take over

journalism. Deconstruction lost its status as flavor of the month many dozens of months ago on the campuses, but a postmodern view — even if it is rarely acknowledged as such — currently seems inescapable in journalism. We're all postmodern now.

Listen, for example, to this disquisition on the primacy of interpretation from Peter Callaghan, a columnist for The News Tribune in Tacoma, Washington: “Modern campaigns are about spin: spin the voters, spin the press, spin the other side’s spin.” In the last days of the last presidential campaign, The New York Times demonstrated its awareness that political coverage itself was a performance, subject to review — a “text,” if you will — by assigning a major Week in Review piece to its chief film critic, A.O. Scott. “Phenomena with no inherent political meaning are continually blown up into symbols and subjected to endless interpretation and spin,” Scott concluded.

It was, consequently, not entirely surprising that the death of Jacques Derrida — only one of whose books had ever been reviewed by The New York Times — made the front page of The New York Times. Derrida’s acolytes had long noted that he was something of a “spin scholar,” diligently tracing some of the multitude of interpretations that wind through our understandings. In journalism, Derrida’s time has — belatedly but overwhelmingly — come.

The age of naïve realism was an exception in the history of American journalism. Before the twentieth century, most journalists had no compunctions about viewing the news from their own perspectives. When you purchased a newspaper you also purchased a

point of view. In the middle of the nineteenth century, readers knew where Horace Greeley stood on abolition, so they knew where his paper, the New York Tribune, stood — from first page to last. If they disagreed, they probably paid their penny instead for James Gordon Bennett's New York Herald.

The notion that facts and interpretation could be divorced arrived somewhat slowly. It arrived with a growing appreciation of the power of the hypothesis-experiment two-step that was the scientific method (one of the few dances in human history intended to be performed without spin). It arrived with the development of photography. It arrived as fiction became dedicated to unvarnished, unblinking “naturalism” or “realism.” It arrived as “positivism” — an emphasis on exact observation and logical analysis — gained a grip on Viennese, British, and then American philosophy.

The separation of fact from interpretation was encouraged by changes in journalism itself: as reporting staffs grew and then deployed themselves here and there, they needed something concise enough to cable back from there. “Telegrams are for facts,” a correspondent for the Times of London was advised in 1894; “appreciation and political comment can come by post.” Appreciation and political comment slunk off to the back pages. And with so many people involved in producing a newspaper it became more difficult to toe a single political line.

The ideology of no ideology took hold in American journalism and maintained its grip long after the limits of realism became clear in art, literature, philosophy, and even, to an extent, physics. The “inverted pyramid” — a perfect vessel for contextless, virginal facts —

was seen as holy. In the second half of the twentieth century, objectivity became the American journalist's creed.

Those fact-worshipping journalists — with their enterprise and investigative zeal — were, to be sure, onto something. It is true that the burglars who broke into the Watergate offices of the Democratic Party were connected to the Nixon White House. That is indeed a fact. It proved a powerful fact. And once someone is convinced that the news world is a mosaic composed of such facts, it becomes hard to view interpretation — spin — as anything more than an imperfection, to be decried or ignored.

It wasn't necessary to have taken a course in comparative literature, however, to see through the pretense that news merely consists of collections of unbiased information, which had somehow passed, without contamination, directly from reality to notebook to typewriter. For facts often — on a grassy knoll in Dallas, for example — prove impossible to pin down. They often prove — as in Vietnam — malleable. And they often attach themselves — in Nicaragua, on the West Bank — to someone's perspective on an event. "To hear people talk about the facts," noted one heretic, the British journalist Claud Cockburn in 1967, "you would think they lay about like pieces of gold ore in the Yukon days waiting to be picked up." Fact-collecting was necessary. But fact-collecting proved not enough.

Stories clearly were being missed. Politicians — from Joseph McCarthy to John Kennedy to Ronald Reagan — were certainly spinning. But journalists often seemed too busy trying to get the quotes

right to notice. Muttering about news manipulation was for late-nights over a beer, for Theodore White books, or for oddballs writing in Rolling Stone. Reporters presented information — independently verifiable, arrayed in order of importance, discrete, certain. This was how most American journalists understood their mission. But this ideology, as even its partisans have begun to notice, is fading.

For one thing, it no longer makes economic sense. In an age when information travels fast and arrives from numerous directions, collections of shiny little fact nuggets have become harder to sell. Journalists have found themselves pushed to add value.

The easiest and cheapest alternative is to fall back on rumination and speculation, though without reporting to back it up, this can result in a net loss of value. More serious journalists are still going out and working to get the story right, but now the facts they collect have to be rehydrated, reconnected, placed back in context. Call it perspective; call it analysis. But what has happened, in essence, is that modern reporters have had to relearn to scratch their heads, rub their chins, and weigh in. The old twentieth-century line between fact and interpretation has become more difficult to draw (or pretend to draw).

That line is perhaps most effectively blurred in the latest of journalism's incarnations: the blog. It's kind of hard to profess to be impartial and impersonal when you are clearly and irrefutably an individual, encumbered by a name, a background, and a take on the world. And it is indeed that very partiality — the attractiveness and perspicuity of a blogger's take on the world — that often becomes a ticket to relevance.

Bloggers also live in a world of highly distilled interpretation. Indeed, the speed and alertness of some of the more interesting bloggers frequently has them commenting upon comments upon comments in a single, as we used to say, news cycle. Many of those comments devolve, alas, into cheap rumination and speculation, but sometimes blogs achieve a kind of meta-reporting — reporting on the process by which news and opinion are formulated — which can be, even if it never necessitates leaving one's bedroom, enterprising and enlightening. Anyone who peruses a few blogs with some regularity looks out not upon a flat field scattered with pieces of information but upon a landscape rippled with hillocks of interpretation.

News sources, too, have been helping pile interpretation upon interpretation. Developing alongside the great journalistic fact-gathering machines in the twentieth century was the great science of public relations. Newsmakers — from American political handlers to the tape-making Osama bin Laden — now spin with enough dexterity and industriousness to make us all dizzy.

Everyone senses this. Is there any better evidence both of the ubiquity of spin and of the recognition of the ubiquity of spin than the name that is now universally applied to the space outside our quadrennial national debates — spin alley? To allow yourself to be spun while knowing you are being spun is a quintessential postmodern experience.

One reaction to all this is for reporters to throw up their hands and surrender to the spin. Jonathan Culler, a literature professor at

Cornell and an early interpreter of deconstruction, worries that this is happening. “There is a kind of meta-move that has occurred that is not altogether to the good,” he suggests. “Stories about spin take the place of certain kinds of investigative journalism. Maybe it’s better, in this sense, for journalists to remain naïve realists.”

Culler’s fear is that journalists will convince themselves that, since everything comes down to interpretation anyway, there’s no point in digging deeper: let the Republicans spin it their way. Let the Democrats spin it theirs. Bard College’s Thomas Keenan, who studied under Derrida at Yale, refers to this he-spins, she-spins journalism as “bad postmodernism.”

A number of journalists — unaware that literary theorists now share their concern — have become alert to this problem. They worry that some cynical political reporters have been mesmerized by spin to the point of paralysis. They have begun appealing, consequently, to their peers to move beyond spin to what is, to use a possibly out-of-date word, really happening. Charges (“exploiting tragedy for political gain”) need to be checked against the record. Numbers (“voted over 350 times for higher taxes”) need to be recalculated. Quotes (“supports offshore drilling in Florida”) need to be placed back in context. (These examples are from an article on spin and the presidential campaign by Bryan Keefer that ran in *cjr* a year ago, in the July/August 2004 issue.)

Consider the well-spun debate over the filibuster, for another example: Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist proclaims, “We must restore the 214-year-old principle that every judicial nominee with majority support deserves an up-or-down vote.” Senator Charles Schumer, a

Democrat, accuses conservatives of “trying to undermine the age-old checks and balances that the founding fathers placed at the center of the Constitution and the Republic.” Some facts — historical facts, in this case — are clearly called for.

Not that facts are always successful in unwinding the spin. The filibuster is indeed a venerable Senate tradition, and perhaps its spirit is in the Constitution, but it is not actually in the document. Judicial nominees have indeed failed in the Senate at other times in American history, but very rarely through a filibuster. The New York Times, from which the Frist and Schumer quotes were selected, did make one impressive effort to look beyond the spin to some facts by running an opinion-page (why not news-page?) chart showing judicial-confirmation rates dating back to President Truman. Yet, even its primary point — that “the current president’s batting average is roughly on par with Mr. Clinton’s” — raises questions. President Clinton’s party, unlike that of the current president, did not control the Senate for much of his term; he might have been expected to have had a worse record.

Facts, sadly, are often messy, difficult to isolate, dependent on context, and subject to interpretation. Fine. Journalists should acknowledge, as postmodernists are always eager to do, the complications. But they should still provide their audiences with as much of the information needed to make a judgment as possible. They should take their audiences as close as possible to truth.

Some mutter that postmodernists place no stock in “truth.” Here’s Derrida’s angry response to that charge against his own work: It

“is false (that’s right: false, not true) . . . The value of truth (and all those values associated with it) is never contested or destroyed in my writings.”

Recognizing the importance of spin should not, in other words, be an excuse for settling for spin. In a nightmare world of “bad postmodernism” a couple of people on an all-news channel would endlessly throw the words “spin” and “uncertainty” back and forth to each other, having never left the studio, having never picked up a phone, having ignored the consequences for people’s lives of the issues that are being spun, having no interest in determining the truth.

When asked for an example of “good postmodernism” in journalism, Keenan, now director of the Human Rights Project at Bard, reached back to the summer of 1994 and the work of New York Times reporter Raymond Bonner, just after he had just arrived in Rwanda. At the time it was still unclear who was killing whom. Bonner did what all good reporters do: he tried to figure out and report on what was going on. “Countless thousands, most of them Tutsi, have been killed since April,” he wrote.

But Bonner also apparently realized that the competing interpretations of what was going on — particularly the interpretations being made by the French, who had a peace force in the country — were themselves important, maybe crucial, if the mass killing was to be stopped. “Since the French arrived, they have been constantly criticized by international relief organizations for being too partial toward the Hutu Government,” Bonner explained.

Then, in that same article, he reported a change in the spin a French officer was giving: “Earlier this week, Colonel Gillier refused to answer any questions about who was doing the killing in the mountains and whether there were Tutsi in need of help. ‘I do not wish to get involved in a political matter,’ he said. But today, he urged a British television cameraman to walk through the mountains and film the corpses. ‘You must go,’ he said. ‘People must see this.’” In the midst of what would soon be revealed to be genocide, this change in the way a French colonel responded to Western reporters could have been seen as minor. Yet Bonner apparently understood that such variations in spin can be significant, that they can turn events. “Postmodern” is still an unwanted appellation for many journalists, who cling, in word if not deed, to their ancestors’ creed. Nevertheless, Bonner was demonstrating here a postmodern understanding.

The spin, the point is, can be part of the story and must then not merely be noticed and remarked upon but reported on — reported on with as much thoroughness and enterprise as any other part of the story. This is something valuable that journalists can take from their belated, only partially acknowledged awakening to postmodernism: work hard to report, where possible, through the spin, and also report, really report, on the spin itself.

Part of the job of the successful twenty-first century political reporter will be, in other words, “to evaluate,” as Keenan puts it, “the contest between spinners.” How do the mechanics work? What are they trying to accomplish? To what extent are they succeeding?

The postmodern journalist must also grapple with one additional question: to what extent are events — elections, even wars — becoming almost “all spin”? Reporting on that requires that they maintain, nourish, and communicate what Keenan calls “a radical suspicion.” Reporters will need to be suspicious of newsmakers and their interpretations of events; suspicious of the work of other journalists and of accepted interpretations of events; suspicious, if they are fair, of themselves, too, and of their own necessarily limited perspectives on events. Reporters will need, in other words, to maintain a suspicion — and this surely is a postmodern mental state — of any particular attempt to settle upon a single meaning for an event. They will need, put another way, to be aware of the multiplicity of interpretations. The rationale for this last affront to naive realism was perhaps best given by Culler himself. “Meaning is context bound,” he wrote in his 1983 book *On Deconstruction*, “and context is boundless.”

For a particularly impressive example of what all these suspicions, effectively marshaled, might accomplish, let’s look at a piece by Mark Danner on the election last winter in Iraq. Granted, this 6,700-word article, the first of two parts, was not written on deadline for a daily but published in April, two months after the fact, in *The New York Review of Books*. But it does provide a model. Danner was in Baghdad during the election and came back in possession of a hefty collection of quotes, observations, and anecdotes. But he uses all that information to challenge the “narrative,” to use another postmodern term, that has been created about that election.

To accomplish that, he must make us suspicious of the ability

of reporters to cover today's Iraq. Danner shows how intense security concerns, particularly the fear of kidnapping, have "driven reporters off the streets," and he argues that this has reduced them to "hotel journalism." He doesn't hide the fact that he himself walked the streets only once on this visit — on election day itself — and then was only able to visit two polling places.

Danner also includes a disquisition on the limitations of images. "You can't show the fear here with a television picture," he quotes a "disgusted" but unnamed television correspondent as complaining. "You can't show the atmosphere of paranoia. The story escapes the images — the tools — that we have to tell it." Danner wants us to be suspicious, too, of "the management of images," particularly by the United States, with its sophisticated "IO" — information operation. "Here IO is everything," he quotes an American officer as saying.

Armed with these suspicions, Danner asks us to reconsider those images of proud, motivated, purple-fingered Iraqis standing in line on election day. Careful preparation had had its effect: the number of possible insurgent attacks was reduced by an American plan to forbid vehicular traffic and, thereby, eliminate any possibility of car bombs. And the considerable number of smaller insurgent attacks that still did occur ("the highest number of any single day of the occupation," Danner states) were not shown on TV because cameras were allowed only at "five predetermined and highly protected polling places."

Meanwhile, various unreliable and ultimately untrue figures on the percentage of Iraqis who voted — including: "probably more than

80 percent” — were given out and “run continuously as a crawl on CNN and other networks”; Danner suggests that “likely fewer than half of those eligible” actually voted. And, he writes, “television cameras, which could only show what was before them in the polling places, could not show the day’s critical actors, the Sunnis, who did not appear.”

Danner quotes that American officer as explaining, “The simple fact is that how things are perceived here is almost as important as how things actually are The fact is, whoever wins the IO battle here, wins.”

This is a rather frightening lesson on the vertiginous power of modern-day spin — inescapable even among the terrible realities of war. However, the “radical suspicion” Mark Danner communicates does not discourage him from also struggling to put the lie to the information operations — by reporting on them and reporting beyond them. That lesson and that reporting seem to be what, in a nutshell, we want from postmodern journalism.

Jacques Derrida’s obituary in *The New York Times* did manage, as if by force of habit, to take a few last slaps at the father of deconstruction. Indeed, the front-page headline gave as the French philosopher’s claim to fame: “abstruse theorist.”

Few reporters have had an opportunity to hear Derrida or his buddies lecture, yet they have still managed to breathe in large amounts of their allegedly “abstruse” theories; for these theories have, in various ways, been in the air. If this second-hand engagement with

postmodernism has made journalists more alert to the struggle to control interpretations, if it has made them more apt to challenge widely held interpretations, then that is indeed “good postmodernism.” Such alertness and willingness to challenge may also become, in this new century, a definition of good journalism.

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