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“Is Narrative Enough? Immigration News and the Genres of Journalism”
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Abe Rosenthal, the legendary editor of the NY Times, was once asked what he thought of Le Monde, the legendary newspaper of France.

“Le Monde? Well, Le Monde is the greatest something in the world – but whatever it is, it’s not a real newspaper.”

Good thing that kind of American hubris is a thing of the past, right?

Actually, the silver lining in the financial crisis of the American press is a greater openness to alternative ways of doing journalism.

Maybe we can, like modern day de Tocquevilles traveling in the opposite direction, learn something valuable from a French-American comparison.

In my book, *Shaping Immigration News: A French-American Comparison*, I show how the immigration debate has changed – or not changed - over the past 40 years in the two countries.

In so doing, I not only document the public discourse on this important and defining issue of our era, I also offer a detailed portrait of two national journalistic fields in action.

Today, I want to draw on my French-American comparison to offer a fresh critical perspective on what has become one of the sacred totems of American journalism: long-form personalized narrative.

Everyone seems to agree this is a good thing. When everyone agrees, my instinct as a sociologist is to be suspicious. What's really going on here?

Long-form narrative is held up as the best way to balance journalism's contradictory pressures. On the one hand, constructing dramatic tales infused with emotion provides a way to attract and keep the easily bored audience.

On the other hand, narratives go beyond the politicians' sound bites to humanize issues, to show the concrete impact that policies have "on the ground."

As *New York Times* immigration reporter Nina Bernstein once publicly remarked, "individual stories are a powerful way to convey larger forces."

Against this U.S. journalistic conventional wisdom, I argue today that personalized narrative and structural context are not so easily reconciled – as Bernstein also acknowledged: "there can be a falsity" in this approach – "you're looking for some neat story that illustrates something that is much more complicated."

In its search for melodrama, personalized narrative can give short shrift to structural complexities, power dynamics, and diverse perspectives.

Even when narrative connects the individual to larger trends (as with the classic "she is not alone" transition paragraph), its register tends to be descriptive rather than explanatory.

But if these critiques are accurate, what are the alternatives to narrative? This is where international comparative research can be helpful. It can help make us aware of other ways of doing things.

Building on the comparative French-American research I conducted for my book *Shaping Immigration News*, I want to call attention to some differences in French and U.S. journalistic practices especially as they relate to newspapers – both offline and online.

While it also has its shortcomings, the “debate ensemble” format common in France suggests one way of overcoming the limitations of narrative.

Bringing together news, background features, commentaries, and interviews with experts, the debate ensemble is well-equipped to address structural complexity, ideological diversity, and historical context. It provides a way of going beyond the “human dimension” of individual immigrants to address the hows and whys of immigration as a social process. It incorporates narrative, but is not limited to it. The format is most strongly developed in French newspapers, but is also evident in public media in other countries (such as the PBS NewsHour in the U.S.).

Before saying any more about the debate ensemble, however, I’d like to first examine more closely the strengths and weaknesses of personalized narrative.

Narrative is endorsed by American journalism’s leading lights, from Harvard’s Nieman Foundation to the top editors of the *New York Times* to the Pulitzer Prize committee, which increasingly honors feature articles that emphasize “emotional story-telling.”

Narrative reporting is not new. Dan Hallin and Paolo Mancini commented on this characteristic of U.S. TV news in an early 1980s comparison with Italian TV news. Jean Padioleau also picked up on the U.S. story-telling emphasis in his 1985 book comparing *Le Monde* and the *Washington Post*.

But the dominance of narrative has only increased. In her book *Everyman News*, Northwestern Medill School professor Michele Weldon found that personalized narrative – marked by the anecdotal lead – has become increasingly common on American front pages over the past decade.

Is this a bad thing? Isn’t a solid narrative feature better than a sensationalistic crime story -- or a press conference report that only reproduces official sound bites?

Compared to much of what we see online today – “snarky opinion pieces” and “top ten lists” being some of the favored genres – long-form narrative journalism can reasonably present itself as the quality alternative.

The question I want to raise, however, is what can or should journalism’s “best practices” offer to democratic public debate? It is important to candidly evaluate both the strengths and weaknesses of even the most prestigious genres.

Clearly, narrative provides a powerful technique to “humanize” the immigrant experience and to make the public aware of otherwise hidden social worlds. I could give many examples, but perhaps the best-known example of a dramatic narrative approach to immigration is “Enrique’s Journey,” Sonia Nazario’s Pulitzer-Prize winning six-part series for the *Los Angeles Times*.

It is a story of a mother – one of many across Central America -- who leaves her starving children behind in order to find work that will allow her to send money home to make their lives better.

It is also a story of the child who sets out many years later in search of the mother, his harrowing journey, and the inevitable disappointments and difficulties of their reunion.

In order to recreate this experience for readers, Nazario literally retraced Enrique’s travels from Honduras to North Carolina, even risking her life riding on the tops of the same trains. She conducted dozens of interviews with Enrique and his relatives, other migrants, and immigration officials and aid workers.

The story’s ending is tragic. After having suffered so much because of his mother’s departure, Enrique feels compelled to do the same to his new baby child. As Nazario concludes her series:

One day [after arriving in the U.S.], Enrique phones Honduras. [His girlfriend] Maria Isabel is pregnant, as he suspected before he left. On Nov. 2, 2000, she gives birth to their daughter.

She and Enrique name the baby Katherine Jasmin.

The baby looks like him. She has his mouth, his nose, his eyes.

An aunt urges Maria Isabel to go to the United States, alone. The aunt promises to take care of the baby.

“If I have the opportunity, I’ll go,” Maria Isabel says. “I’ll leave my baby behind.”

Enrique agrees. “We’ll have to leave the baby behind.”

I do not mean to dispute the validity or importance of the emotional elements of Enrique’s experience, powerfully conveyed by Nazario’s writing. The question I want to raise is simply the extent to which this narrative – and narrative journalism in general – does what Nina Bernstein of the New York Times said it could do, that is, serve as a “powerful way to convey larger forces.”

In one of the many glowing reviews of the book version of *Enrique’s Journey*, *Entertainment Weekly* wrote that “Nazario’s impressive piece of reporting ... turn[s] the current immigration controversy from a political story into a personal one.”

Yet something is lost in the translation.

We experience in vivid detail what it would be like to live through Enrique’s ordeal. We learn that he is one of many suffering the same fate. But we learn very little about why this is happening and what might be done to help him.

Despite her insistence that the human dimension and social context can be interwoven, Nina Bernstein’s reporting has also at times failed to make this connection.

This is certainly the case in her profile of a Long Island immigration restrictionist activist, “On Lucille Avenue, the Immigration Debate,” published in June 2006. In this article, the structural is doubly disadvantaged, both by the demands of narrative and the failure of empathetic understanding: from its opening paragraph, there is no doubt about the social distance between the reporter (and her likely

elite urban audience) and the union member/ restrictionist activist at the center of the story.

ELMONT, N.Y. - The streets where Patrick Nicolosi sees America unraveling still have the look of the 1950's. Single-family homes sit side by side, their lawns weed-whacked into submission to the same suburban dream that Mr. Nicolosi's Italian-American parents embraced 40 years ago when they moved to this working-class community on Long Island.

Commenting on the article a few years later, Bernstein told me, "Certainly, the working class perspective, the white working class perspective can be quite different. Actually what he said made a lot of sense I like the fact that I have the freedom as a reporter to lay out those contradictions and give voice to someone like this who in fact was coming from a, at least in some ways, a progressive perspective."

In the article, Bernstein writes:

It is the economics of class, not the politics of culture or race, that fires Mr. Nicolosi's resentment ...

Like many working-class Americans who live close to illegal immigrants, he worries that they are yet another force undermining the way of life and the social contract that generations of workers strived so hard to achieve.

.... "They're telling us Americans don't want to do these jobs," Mr. Nicolosi said. "That's a lie. The business owners don't want to pay. I know what my grandparents fought for: fair wages and days off. Now we're doing it in reverse."

"It's either a country of law and order and what my parents fought for, or we just turn it over to big business," he went on, working himself into a speech that connected many dots.

Bernstein gives Nicolosi his say, but always couched in relation to personal, even irrational emotions ("resentment," "worries", "working

himself into a speech”), not to the kind of hard data that could either confirm or refute his arguments.

Instead of opening up a discussion about the validity of the “progressive” critiques of third-generation union member Nicolosi, the article’s underlying thrust is intensely personal.

Nicolosi’s campaign to stop homeowners from leasing unregulated basement apartments to illegal immigrants ultimately results in the eviction of a Mexican family, with two children, one disabled, living across the street.

Nicolosi is shunned, even by his neighbors who share his views on immigration.

The reason, Bernstein writes (echoing her reporting creed): “People forget the human dimension.” Bernstein closes with a lament from Nicolosi’s next-door neighbor: “For every problem, there’s a solution. For every solution, there’s another problem.” Narrative thus serves not to supplement structural analysis but effectively to silence it.

Not all narrative articles are the same. Narrative techniques have a strong affinity with investigative reporting, at which Bernstein has excelled – such as her multiple exposes of abuses in the immigrant detention system.

Narrative can also be more or less attuned to structural complexity and contradictions.

With considerable effort, narrative journalism can weave together human agency and social context, as do some novels, non-fiction books, documentaries, or multi-layered television series such as “The Wire.”

Still, there seems to be an underlying rhetorical tension between personalized narrative and the “deliberative exchange of ideas.” In the midst of telling a story, trying to inject “abstract political ideas” will almost inevitably come across as an inelegant, even tangential disruption.

Democracy's needs are multiple. Journalism, as its crucial handmaiden, also needs to be multiple. A central challenge for journalism is how to join narrative story telling with other approaches. It is a problem of the coordination of genres.

I now turn to this question.

When she transformed her newspaper series into a book, Sonia Nazario made one important change: she added an analytical "Afterword" in an attempt to answer the questions that her narrative did not.

Drawing on a careful reading of the available scholarship, Nazario accurately summarizes: "Any calculus of the benefits and burdens of immigration depends on who you are. People who own businesses and commercial interests that use cheap immigrant labor benefit the most from immigrants like Enrique and [his mother] Lourdes."

On the other hand, Nazario adds, "those hardest hit by the influx of immigrants are disadvantaged native-born minorities who don't have a high school degree – namely, African Americans and previous waves of Latino immigrants. They must compete for the same low-end jobs immigrants take."

For their part, "Most immigrants would rather stay in their home countries with their extended families ... What would ensure that more women can stay home – with their children, where they want to be? As [one] mother, says, simply... 'There would have to be jobs. Jobs that pay okay. That's all.' "

The problem, in short, is economic and global. Nazario points to suggestions for ways to "bolster the economies of immigrant-sending countries," such as forgiving foreign debt of poor central American countries, implementing more favorable terms of trade for immigrant-sending countries, and increasing U.S. foreign aid donations. Whether Nazario's proposals are adequate is not the issue here.

The issue is what it takes to fully represent a complex issue like

immigration. As Nazario's analytical afterward illustrates, it takes more than personalized narrative.

As Patrick McDonnell, another LA Times reporter conceded to me, maybe "newspapers aren't as good with topics that are very, very high concept. To some extent, I think we try to tell stories."

But I don't agree that this is an inherent limitation of newspapers, offline or online. I don't agree that this is what makes for a "real" newspaper-- if there is such a thing.

There are different "forms of news," to use the phrase coined by Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone. And each of these forms of news makes for more less democracy – or as I'd rather put it, different forms of democracy.

European journalists use narrative techniques as well. The difference, at least in France, is that features, profiles, or other types of personalized narratives rarely stand alone: in coverage of major events and trends, multiple genres are closely counter-posed.

In his comparative study of *Le Monde* and the *Washington Post* during the 1970s, French sociologist Jean Padioleau singled out *Le Monde* for its distinctive multi-genre format: a "pluralist" assemblage of multiple discursive genres and perspectives, anchored by its commitments to both "document" (via publication of diverse original source materials) and "comment" upon the issues of the day.

The French newspaper *Libération* took this French multi-genre approach to a new level beginning in 1981, with the launch of its "événement" format – loosely translated, "today's big news."

In the words of its former long-time director, Serge July:

"'Événement' is about putting the emphasis on what we judge to be the day's most important news ... All the newspaper's desks contribute, and the topic is approached and problematized from as many angles as possible: whether through investigation or analysis, news reports or

interviews, the point is to show, decode, explain, confront, give sense to the news ... giving rise to the newspaper's own editorial position."

I know the work of a French scholar, whom some of you may know, Sandrine Boudana, who studied French news coverage of the Palestinian Intifada.

And she did something that we as researchers ought to do more often.

After she finished her detailed content analysis she shared it with the journalists who wrote the stories. And one of their main responses concerned the proper unit of analysis.

Le Monde's foreign editor told her: "You musn't isolate the article, but rather try to consider the page as a whole."

And a French journalist from another newspaper said almost the same thing: "You shouldn't analyze each article separately, but as a set of papers."

So, in this format, it's clear – the individual article is less important than the larger ensemble.

It's kind of like Paris versus New York – what makes Paris great is not this or that building, like in New York, but the entire ensemble of the city. So maybe this pattern extends well beyond journalism.

Here are some examples of the debate ensemble format:

- Liberation

- Le Monde dossier – note the full page interview with an immigration scholar, Emmanuelle Saada, who also happens to teach here at Columbia!

- Le Monde page one – opening up to multiple articles

- L'Humanite – with detailed mobilizing information

- La Croix, with the editorial on p. 1 alongside the news

You can see here that French page one news packages mix multiple genres of news – whereas U.S. news packages are almost entirely event news and feature news.

One final unique feature of the French approach is the interview transcript. Instead of including a 15-word soundbite quote from a university expert in a news story as is common practice in the U.S. -- the French approach is to include both a new article AND a separate interview transcript of 600 words.

As this graph shows, interviews provide a forum for a wide range of voices – politicians, academics, civil society representatives, and unaffiliated individuals.

In-depth, multi-perspectival coverage is facilitated by professional practices that break down barriers between news and opinion as well as between different types of news.

At the *New York Times*, news and opinion editors work on different floors and conduct their own separate meetings to choose the day's top news stories and editorials. At *Le Monde*, the topic and position of the day's editorial are decided at the same meeting where page one decisions are made.

At U.S. newspapers, immigration reporters are generally part of the general information “metropolitan” or “national” news desks. In France, most immigration reporters are part of the “social problems” (*société*) desks.

At the social problems desk, there is a more “magazine-like” conception of information. Events are understood as “illustrations of broader problems.”

Consistent with this thematic understanding of the beat, it should not be surprising that when leading French immigration journalists write books they are often not narrative epics (as in *Enrique's Journey*) but rather short and snappy compendiums of the scholarly literature.

At a macro-level, the multi-genre debate ensemble format seems to be closely linked to public or other non-commercial funding and

ownership, whereas the narrative approach is more dominant among commercial media. In part because the French journalistic field is less commercialized than the U.S. field, French newspapers are more likely to use the multi-genre approach.

However, even in the United States, non-commercial media such as the PBS Newshour also tend to organize news as a debate ensemble. Thus, while shaped by distinctive national histories, journalistic practices can and do cross national boundaries (with or without overt attempts to export them). What works “elsewhere” may in fact work “here” as well, with all due adaptations to local circumstances.

Fair enough, some American journalists might say. But does the public really want this kind of journalism? Isn't it boring? Multi-genre journalism does not have to be. French newspapers rely mostly on newsstand sales, so they use dramatic headlines and images to entice buyers. The debate ensemble is a kind of “daily magazine” that tries to both “reflect upon” and “convey the emotion” of the news. The French format is not without its own types of sensationalism. It is simply another way of accommodating journalism's competing needs to attract audiences and serve civic functions.

What difference does the form of news make?

It can play a big role in how “multiperspectival” the news is, to build on Herbert Gan's classic term.

When I was doing my research in Paris, American journalists would tell me – if you have time to read 10 newspapers, you'll get a wider range of views with French than with American newspapers. But if you only have time to read one, you're better off with an American newspaper.

That's another way of saying each American newspaper has higher “internal pluralism” than each French newspaper – while on the other hand, the French national media system as a whole has higher “external pluralism” than the American system.

But that's not what I found.

This table shows the average number of distinct immigration frames and types of speakers per news package in various French and American newspapers.

The difference isn't dramatic, but it's clear that French newspapers are at least as or more internally pluralist than their American counterparts.

I also measured the balancing of opposing threat, victim, and hero frames in French and American newspapers – and the balancing of opposing viewpoints was also higher in French newspapers.

This is just one measure of the quality of news. What we do know, however, is that multiperspectival news contributes to a more educated and motivated citizenry. As one review of the literature concluded:

“When people are exposed to several competing interpretations [or frames] they are able to think about the political situation in more complex and original ways” and this translates into citizens who are better able to “perform their civic duties.”

Journalists should not underestimate their audiences. Even if they are enticed by melodramatic story telling, many readers clearly want more than that.

While I admired and liked the many journalists who contributed to Giovanna's conference and book, I was struck by how many of them saw their work in almost purely descriptive terms. They were not interested in explanations.

In my interviews, some American journalists have told me they are hesitant to enter into the debate about causes, consequences, and solutions because the research itself is so conflicted. In fact, as Nazario showed in her book's afterword, immigration scholars agree on most of the crucial issues. The links between immigration and neo-liberal economic policymaking are especially strong: these are “inconvenient truths” that need to be heard by the public and policymakers.

Journalists who are not afraid to cover the dangerous stories on the border need not be afraid to wade into the academic research thicket

and work with scholars to make these findings accessible and interesting to the public.

Instead of succumbing to a cynical relativism, journalists should pay closer attention to the social conditions underlying the production of expertise: there is a crucial difference between the packaged sound bites (often with hidden agendas) mass-produced by many think tanks – AND the critical knowledge produced by careful academic scholarship subject to rigorous peer review.

Actually, a lot of people – not just crazy anti-immigration activists on Long Island – want to connect the dots.

Journalists ought to help them. There are signs that journalists in the United States as well as in France are beginning to realize this. Interview transcripts are increasingly appearing in the *Los Angeles Times*, in both the opinion and news pages. The *New York Times*' longstanding Week in Review has been transformed into a "Sunday Review" that makes ample room for the voices of writers, artists, and scholars alongside journalists.

In the online versions of the *New York Times* and other leading newspapers, opinion is no longer relegated to the back pages but is featured at the top of the homepage.

The Internet has become a laboratory for experimentation and mixing of genres and formats. In-depth articles about immigration are easily retrievable years after their first publication and can also be linked to databases, maps, interactive graphics, expert debates, and other genres and types of information, analysis, and commentary.

NYTimes.com also now has a regular feature called "Room for Debate" in which various experts and activists discuss topics of the day and readers submit comments.

On the web, at least some of the format differences between French and U.S. newspapers are decreasing rather than increasing, as news, opinion, and other genres mix more freely online.

Over the course of several weeks or months, any good newspaper is likely to cover immigration from a variety of angles.

The multi-genre format's extra contribution is clear: In a single day's edition, it helps its readers break out of the endless news cycles of seemingly unrelated events, factoids, and dramas in order to see how the many moving parts might just fit together.

If one civic purpose of journalism is to help the public understand issues such as immigration in all their multiplicity, then journalism must also become more multifaceted. In the long-run, this will require resources.

It will also require improving journalistic working conditions in ways that allow for the production of intellectually autonomous knowledge.

But the first step is to see that there are in fact alternatives to the dominant narrative-based practices. The challenge for journalists – as well as scholars, policy-makers, and activists – is to find new ways to work together to enrich and expand the public debate.

Thank you and I look forward to the rest of the discussion.