INTRODUCTION

IN HIS POEM “Questions From a Worker Who Reads,” Bertold Brecht notes that in books we find the names of kings, vic­ tors, and other men who win great battles, build majestic palaces, and create impressive societies. Brecht asks, are these men alone, do they personally carry the rock boulders, cook the feasts, or weep for the dead? Of course Brecht wants us to remember that it is the workers who built Thebes, beat the Gauls, and wept when the Spanish armada sunk. Yet he also reminds us that constructions of history, and our collective memory, are infused with power struggles and that those in control have a voice and a place in “history” while those without power, the workers, are usually silenced.

In recent years, oral history projects have attempted to redis­ tribute a little of that power and give voice to previously silenced groups and individuals. Oral historian Paul Thompson suggests that through an emphasis on “the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated” it is possible to create a “more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past” (1990, 6). Thompson, whose book The Voice of the Past remains a seminal text for the study of oral history, maintains that by addressing the personal experi­ ences of ordinary people, involved in the historical process, that we not only create a “richer, more vivid and heartrending” (99) construction of the past, but that we may also develop a deeper and more credible history.

This oral history project is based upon an understanding of history as a continuous and connected process; it takes into con­ sideration the emotions, motivations, and expectations of indi­ viduals involved in historical events but also considers the framework imposed by political, social, and economic factors which influence society. Following Raymond Williams, I view history not only as domination and oppression; or catastrophe, crisis, and rupture; but also as opposition, challenge, and regen-
eration (Williams 1989; Williams 1977/1988). This project incorporates a notion of class consciousness that is based on E. P. Thompson’s definition of class as a historical phenomenon that occurs in human relationships over periods of time, and through which patterns develop in ideas, relationships, and institutions. Drawing on Thompson, I understand that the concept of class does not represent a structure, category, or thing but represents real people involved in real cultural contexts (Thompson 1966, 9–11).

The term newsworkers is used throughout this oral history project in an effort to recognize the contributions of individuals involved in the editorial process, at the same time remaining mindful of the degree to which press ownership largely defines and enforces the professional practices that constitute this labor (Hardt & Brennen 1995). Newsworkers are part of a working class history; they share the experience of work under the institutional constraints of the media industry and under the specific conditions of their social and economic existence.

The experiences of journalists, primarily in their own words, who worked in Rochester, New York, on the Gannett-owned Democrat & Chronicle and the Times Union are the focus of this study. While there are occasional glimpses back to the beginning of the twentieth century and conversations regarding current newsroom policies by those who are still involved in the business, most of the material in this study focuses on Gannett during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s—a period that may be seen as pivotal to the development of the company. In 1940, Gannett was a limited group of nineteen newspapers owned and run by Frank Gannett; by 1969, under the leadership of Allen Neuharth, the Gannett Company owned thirty-four newspapers and was well on its way to its current position as the nation’s largest newspaper chain in terms of circulation.

Gannett currently owns ninety-nine daily newspapers in the United States, with a combined daily paid circulation in excess of 7.8 million. Gannett’s USA Today is the country’s largest-selling daily newspaper, with a circulation of approximately 2.3 million. In 1999, Gannett acquired one of the largest regional newspaper publishers in England, Newsquest, which publishes fifteen daily newspapers, along with a variety of non-daily publi-
cations. In addition, Gannett owns and operates twenty-two television stations and more than 100 web sites in the U.S. and the U.K., including USATODAY.com which is currently the most frequently visited newspaper web site (Brandt 1993; Gannett Company Profile 2000).

This book project emphasizes the rank and file rather than the elite members of the press. Although there is an enormous wealth of material available on the lives of editors, publishers, and owners of newspapers, the history of newsworkers remains quite limited. The majority of contemporary explorations into media history remain preoccupied with the collection and presentation of facts relating to owners and publishers and their corresponding urban daily newspapers; these facts often exclude historical contextualization or understanding about rank-and-file newsworkers (Brennen 1995). My primary intention for this project was quite straightforward—to give voice to these newsworkers. I was interested in learning what it was like to work as a journalist for Gannett in Rochester, New York. I wanted to know about their work environment, routines, and expectations. I encouraged the journalists to share their favorite stories, best interviews, greatest challenges, and most frustrating experiences. I wondered how they got started in the business, if and why they left, and what they felt was the role of the press in contemporary society.

The backgrounds and experiences of interviewees varied widely. Some of these newsworkers covered politics and most at one time were assigned to the police beat. Others were science reporters, sports reporters, business reporters, feature writers, editorial writers, and local columnists. Stories from the first woman covering sports for the Rochester area are included, as well as commentary from women who worked city-side during and after World War II. A few of the journalists worked their way up the ranks of newspaper management while others remained reporters throughout their careers. Many of the newsworkers eventually moved on to other professions, choosing careers in public relations, public health, city administration, and advertising. One journalist left Gannett and became a lawyer, another chose a career as a Kodak model, and still another became ordained as a Presbyterian minister.

In giving voice to those previously marginalized, this oral his-
tory project may help us to reach a deeper understanding of the challenges and realities newsworkers still face in the United States. Often, media critics and press defenders alike construct and reinforce romantic assumptions about journalism’s past in critiquing the realities of contemporary reportage. Of course, that idealistic vision usually suggests that things were better, that somehow the “noble” profession of journalism has, for a variety of reasons, degenerated in recent years. Rather than extolling a golden age of journalism, rank-and-file reporters who labored for editors and publishers on daily newspapers during the first half of the twentieth century often tell us a different, far less romantic story. And not surprisingly, the experiences of these Gannett newsworkers resonate with challenges journalists continue to face in the new millennium.

As Ronald Grele explains in his book *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, written and spoken histories alike contain “truths” not only about the era being investigated but also about the time from which the inquiry takes place. Grele maintains that it is the dialectic tension between the past and present that provides oral history with its relevance and strength (1991).

Studs Terkel suggests that oral history does not concern itself with uncovering the plain unvarnished facts, but instead searches for deeper meanings and feelings about those facts (1997). While feelings are constructed by members of a particular culture at a specific historical moment, we should understand that oral history is not only about individuals’ recollections of past events, but that it is also an exploration into the collective memory of a society.

Much of Louis Althusser’s work is valuable to media scholars and his emphasis on ideology is of particular relevance to oral historians. Although many historians now appreciate that all recorded history is constructed and selected on the basis of cultural concerns and interests, from Althusser we can learn that there are overriding Ideological State Apparatuses such as our schools and churches, the state, the media, advertising, and popular culture that guide our thoughts, beliefs, and interests (1971). Cultural institutions and artifacts help us to keep some memories alive and prominent in our minds, while distorting and forgetting others. Ultimately, these ideological apparatuses encourage us to see
a “correct” vision of our history. One way that oral historians may challenge the prevailing ideological constructions of our collective memory, as well as our official institutional history, is to ask questions of people whose voices have previously had no audience.

In general there are three main approaches to the use of oral history. One perspective focuses on single life histories of individuals in which transcriptions of conversations are often presented unmediated by critical introspection or analysis. In some cases, the most outstanding of these single life stories are used to represent the history of an entire class or community. A second type of oral history incorporates a collection of either whole life stories or shorter narratives that are grouped around related themes and issues. Often these stories are combined in such a way as to offer a broader historical explanation or community portrait. There is also a third approach that utilizes information gathered from oral histories much like any other source of historical evidence. Brief interview quotations are combined with other types of evidence and then analyzed and woven into a narrative that represents the author’s perspective. One particular concern with this approach is the possibility of lifting a particularly intriguing quotation out of context—that is, the possible misappropriation interviewees’ words.

In this project I attempt to draw on the strengths of each of these approaches to oral history. My intent is that the reader hear the voices of these newsworkers, not my voice alone. While none of the individual stories can fully represent the experiences of each of the newsworkers interviewed, each person has some unique and important things to say. For this project, stories are edited in response to Barbara Tuchman’s concerns over the “appalling proportions” of meaningless trivia being collected these days just because new technologies allow us to do so with ease. Tuchman maintains that encouraging people to “ramble effortlessly and endlessly into a tape recorder” preserves only “a few veins of gold and a vast mass of trash,” ultimately “drowning ourselves in unneeded information” (1996, 96).

The reader should find no meaningless trivia in this collection. I have evaluated each of these interviews just as I would consider any other sources of historical evidence. All of the oral histories
have been subjected to strenuous tests of both internal and external verifiability. I have corroborated and verified all of the information given to me as "facts" and I do not include any material that could not be authenticated. The newworkers themselves made this process considerably easier since many of them were "collectors." It seems that journalistic conventions that relate to the collection and assessment of information have encouraged them to save a variety of historical artifacts over the years including countless clippings of newspaper stories, newsroom memos, and photographs. During the course of these interviews, the journalists shared various newsroom memorabilia that offered additional evidence to corroborate their stories.

I have done my best to make sure that the reader understands the distinction between material that is presented as accurate information and that which represents newworkers' personal opinions. On particularly controversial or contested topics I have included commentary from a variety of individuals and have attempted not to draw any quick conclusions regarding the disputes, opting instead for discussion from each perspective.

It is important to remind the reader that I am not a neutral observer and I have been an active participant throughout this process. In one sense I may be seen as the "producer" of this oral history project; in addition to framing the original study, I made decisions as to what should and should not be included. I catalogued the interviews by topics that were of interest to me, arranged the conversations by my concerns, and I attempted to keep the conversation moving so that neither the reader nor I got sidetracked. However, while I certainly have been a part of the process, I made no attempt to alter the words of these newworkers. I strove to provide proper support for their stories, to avoid taking things out of context, and to treat each person fairly even when things they said were difficult for me to hear.

I began this project with a brief list of former reporters whom Thomas Flynn, public service director for the Gannett Rochester papers thought might be interested in participating in an oral history project. This list grew with names given to me by the newworkers themselves during the course of their interviews. I wrote a letter of introduction to each and followed it up with a series of phone calls. Thus began the process of getting to know these
individuals and attempting to establish trust. While trust is crucial to the oral history process, it is not always easy to garner. Several of the men and women that I contacted were reluctant to participate, and some ultimately felt they had nothing to contribute to the project. Luckily, several who initially had doubts about the project eventually became intrigued and agreed to be interviewed. Discussion among the newsworkers themselves also helped to lend credence to the project and sway those journalists who felt unsure about their participation. Ultimately, I interviewed every journalist I had learned about who was willing to participate in this oral history project, was still living in the Rochester area, and had worked for Gannett during the 1940s, 1950s, or 1960s on either the *Times Union* or the *Democrat & Chronicle*.

The interviews took place in the journalists’ homes, in academic and business offices, and in one case at the public library. They ranged from one and one-half hours to four hours in length. Henry Clune, who was 104 at the time, was interviewed during two separate sessions held one month apart; all other sessions were completed in one sitting. To prepare for the interviews, I immersed myself in a variety of theoretical materials as well as practical applications of oral history including just about everything Studs Terkel had written on the topic. Of particular relevance to me was Terkel’s discussion of the interview process in *Division Street: America* in which he writes: “I realized quite early in this adventure that interviews, conventionally conducted, were meaningless. Conditioned clichés were certain to come. The question-and-answer technique may be of value in determining favored detergents, toothpaste, and deodorants, but not in the discovery of men and women. It was simply a case of making conversation. And listening” (1967, xxi).

Following Terkel, this oral history project focused on conversations rather than interrogations. All questions that I asked were open-ended, allowing each individual to share his or her story—no questions were framed in an attempt to elicit a specific answer. All of the newsworkers were encouraged to discuss how they got started in the newspaper business and to describe work routines as well as their personal understanding of objectivity. All were asked to share their favorite stories, greatest challenges,
and their most frustrating experiences. I personally conducted each of the interviews and I also edited all of the transcripts according to *Editing and Indexing: Guidelines for Oral History* by Shirley Stephenson (1983). During the editing process false starts and duplications were removed, as well as references to the interview itself.

Although a total of eighteen newsworkers were interviewed for this project, the words of only seventeen journalists appear on the following pages. Upon reflection, Delbert Ray, one of the gentlemen I worked with, became uncomfortable with what he had told me. After he read the transcript of his interview, he wrote me that he was not "a good interviewee." Ray found that his statements "rambled" and felt that some of the information he gave me was "incoherent." He deleted parts of the interview and wrote, "I do not want to embarrass former colleagues and friends, or to denigrate the business I loved and which was so good to me several decades ago." He ended his letter by asking me if it would be possible to "forget the whole thing." Although I was surprised by his request, I quickly decided that out of respect for Delbert Ray, I would not include any of his interview in this project.

The absence of the commentary by one newsworker illustrates one of the primary differences between oral history and journalistic reporting. Unlike traditional journalism, oral history is a collaborative process. After each interview was transcribed, a copy of the edited transcript was sent to each journalist, who was asked to read his or her interview and inform the author of any corrections or additions that he or she would like made. Each person was asked to verify names and places, and correct any other errors that might have been made in the transcripts. While several of the reporters responded to these requests, others just noted on the transcripts that they looked fine. Some individuals provided additional stories, commentary, and clarifications in addition to making corrections, and a few wrote that they were particularly excited about the project and were looking forward to having the "truth" finally told.

The earliest memories come from Henry Clune who began working in 1910 on the Rochester *Democrat & Chronicle* as a "sub reporter"—a worker whose status was below that of a cub
reporter. Clune and other newsworkers relate how they got started in the newspaper business in Chapter One. This first chapter also includes background material on Gannett and local New York history as a context for the experiences of these journalists.

The daily work routines of these newsworkers are described in Chapter Two. While several journalists were assigned the police beat, others covered general assignments, features, and sports, and a few wrote editorials and columns. This chapter addresses attention to detail and other jobs the newsworkers undertook to help make ends meet. Questions regarding minority issues and the role of women in the newsroom, while now of central concern, were not conscious issues for most of these newsworkers during their employment at Gannett. Their discussions of these queries, which are also included in Chapter Two, may be seen as an effort to uncover aspects of the social and political unconscious during this era. They may also reflect an awareness of current issues in contemporary United States society and illustrate how people may be challenged to reinterpret or reconsider their past experiences in order to give more meaning to their lives.

Chapter Three illustrates the dialectical tension of history, particularly the ways journalists confronted Gannett policies, their responses to these policies, as well as their sense of camaraderie, and their cooperation with other newsworkers. The chapter also describes the fierce competition throughout this era between the two Gannett newspapers, the Times Union and the Democrat & Chronicle. A frequently mentioned change these newsworkers discussed was the decision to combine the editorial staffs of both newspapers. Although the Times Union and the Democrat & Chronicle were both Gannett papers, for many years the newsrooms operated completely separately from each other, maintained different staffs, and often engaged in heated competition. Several of these journalists mentioned their fears that combining the editorial staffs would ultimately destroy the viability of the newspapers. Unfortunately their concerns came to fruition in June of 1997 when Gannett finally closed the Times Union. Clashes between The Newspaper Guild and Allen Neuharth are also described in this chapter. While Gannett was always consid-
ered a right-wing, anti-labor company, when Neuharth was hired at Gannett he began a more systematic campaign against the unions that resulted in additional pressures and problems for newworkers active in The Guild.

Divergent conceptions of objectivity emerged from our conversations in Chapter Four. For some newworkers, objectivity is a group of consensually agreed upon strategies used in journalistic reporting and writing; for others, objectivity is defined as the process of getting all sides of an issue in order to forestall competition. This chapter also focuses on the role of newworkers in contemporary society and ways that new technologies may have changed the nature of journalism.

Storytellers take raw material from their own experiences and those shared by others, and they weave a narrative from personal and reported information. When at their best, they enable their audiences to experience these tales, as well. Walter Benjamin suggests that unlike a news report, the goal of storytelling is not merely to impart value-free information, but to get at a deeper interpretation and understanding of life. The storyteller is considered central to this “artisan form of communication” and ultimately, for Benjamin, “traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (1968, 92). The storytelling process is most apparent in Chapter Five of this collection where newworkers discuss the most memorable stories and individuals they encountered along the way. In a sense, these memorable stories may be seen as the culmination of this process of discovery.

While these oral histories explore the nature of daily journalism at Gannett, they also provide documentation that may be useful in the development of a theory of resistance related to issues of labor and newwork. In Chapter Six I conclude this study with a consideration of resistance that incorporates the subjective experiences of workers with the material realities of the Gannett organizational structure, and I offer some initial suggestions on how the stories of these newworkers illustrate issues of resistance, consent, and compliance within industry.

The topics addressed in this study may be seen as an effort to uncover aspects of the social and political unconscious during this era. This project may also be seen to reflect an awareness
of current agenda items in contemporary U.S. society and may illustrate ways individuals reinterpret or reconsider their past experiences in order to give greater meaning to their lives. Ultimately, these journalists provide evidence of a specific structure of feeling that was pervasive at Gannett in Rochester, New York from the 1940s through the 1960s. Structure of feeling is a concept used by Raymond Williams to describe those actively lived and felt meanings, values, and experiences within a culture (1977/1988). A structure of feeling can suggest the dominant and also the emergent ideologies of an era and can provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the overall structures of society. While structure of feeling is often found in the documentary culture of a society, in novels, films, music, newspaper accounts and such, it is certainly evident in the oral histories of these newsworkers. Ultimately, this structure of feeling can help us to uncover the feelings about facts that Terkel and other historians are searching for, as well as help us to enliven and extend our understanding of twentieth century media history.

While all writing is a collaborative process, oral history cannot be done without the help and cooperation of others. I would like to thank the men and women who provided me with their time, enthusiasm, stories, and insights into news work practiced at Gannett. George Beahon, Margaret Beck, Robert Beck, William Beeney, Henry Clune, Thomas Connolly, Art Deutsch, Thomas Flynn, Don Fradenburgh, Jean Giambrone, F. Lawrence Howe, Mitch Kaidy, Floyd King, Charles Luckett, Desmond Stone, John Van Buren, and Sarah Watts have all provided me with a wealth of information regarding the practice of journalism in Rochester, New York.

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For the Record