

QUOTING PRACTICES, PATH DEPENDENCY AND THE BIRTH OF MODERN JOURNALISM

David M. Ryfe and Markus Kimmelmeier

Using Hallin's (1994) analysis of soundbites in network television news coverage as a model, we track the quoting practices of five American newspapers during the transition to modern news (1876–1916). We find that despite variation in the size, geographic location, and partisan orientation of these newspapers, trends in their quoting practices moved in relative lockstep. Drawing on the institutionalist concept of path dependency, we argue that these patterns are not consistent with an economic explanation of the transition to modern news. Rather, we suggest that political change—specifically, the breakdown of the third party system in 1896, served as a “critical juncture” in the transition to modern news. Overall, we argue that detailed analysis of newsgathering practices coupled with an institutional approach may allow historians to trace the timing, sequence and explanation of historical change in journalism in finer detail.

KEYWORDS institutionalism; journalism history; path dependency

Introduction

Daniel Hallin's (1994) work on television soundbites is rightfully well known. Tracking the length of soundbites in network television news coverage of presidential elections over 20 years (1968–1988), Hallin found that the average soundbite shrank from just over 43 seconds in 1968 to just under nine seconds by 1988 (see also Adatto, 1990; for a recent update of Hallin's study, see Bucy and Grabe, 2007). As Hallin (1994, pp. 137–8) argues, this factoid represents a nice index of the broader change in television journalism toward a more prominent role as mediator of the political process. In 1968 reporters did little more than “set the scene” for other political actors. In contrast, 20 years later they used the words of politicians as “raw material” for story lines which reporters themselves “imposed.”

The practice of quoting is such a nice index of broader trends in journalism that it seems worth placing Hallin's argument in a wider historical frame. In the present study, we present data on quoting practices in American newspapers at the birth of modern journalism—the years from 1876 to 1916. We argue that the trends in our data index the transition toward a more autonomous, professional, modern form of journalism. As such, they offer an opportunity to reconsider issues of timing, sequence and explanation of this transition. For a very long time, historians have argued that a relatively gradual change in the economic and technological environment of news was mainly responsible for the birth of modern journalism (cf. Baldasty, 1992; Baldasty and Rutenbeck, 1988; Lee, 1917; Mott, 1962; Rutenbeck, 1995; Smythe, 2003). More recently, a few historians have argued that the transition had more to do with politics, specifically, the breakdown of the third party system, than economics, and was more punctuated than gradual

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(Kaplan, 2002; McGerr, 1986; Ryfe, 2006b). There is a good deal of historical evidence for each of these explanations. However, the relationship between them remains unclear. We do not know, for instance, whether the economic explanation is in competition with or complementary to the political explanation, and what it would mean in either instance. In other words, despite the great deal of scholarship on this period in journalism's history, historians have yet to work out the precise timing and sequence of this transition.

Borrowing from a literature on historical institutionalism, we push this conversation forward in productive ways. Specifically, our data indicate that nineteenth-century newsgathering practices were "path dependent" (on this concept, see Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000a, 2000b, 2004). As explained by Pierson (2000b, p. 252), path dependence means that as social actors take steps down a particular path "the relative benefits" of continuing down the path "compared with other possible options increase over time." When in the 1830s American journalism became associated with the political party system, it took steps down a partisan path. Over time, journalists enjoyed great benefits from this system, which led all newspaper publishers—even those who proclaimed their independence—to remain tied to the party system. As this path became well worn, newspaper publishers found it costly to extricate their newspapers from this system—even when other paths, like a more politically independent journalism, became more attractive.

Our data show that while economic and technological change in the 1870s and 1880s loaded more pressure on to partisan journalism, quoting practices remained relatively stable. It was only in the mid-1890s—when the third party system broke down—that quoting practices dramatically and decisively changed across the sample. As the concept of path dependency would suggest, the timing and pacing of changes in quoting practices were punctuated. Moreover, as scholars like McGerr (1986) and Kaplan (2002) have argued, these changes were closely associated with political change. This is not to say that economic and technological change were unimportant. Rather, it is to say that these forces loaded a pressure on the news system that was only relieved with a change in the political environment facing news publishers.

Our model of the transition to modern journalism requires more detail and data. But anchored to the concept of path dependency, this essay begins the process of putting historiography on the transition to modern news into a more rigorous conceptual framework. We begin with a brief description of our data and methods.

Method

Data

Our data set comprises 4702 news stories published during the week prior to the US presidential elections of 1876, 1884, 1892, 1900, 1908 and 1916. We took these stories from the front pages of five US newspapers: *The New York Tribune*, the *Washington Evening-Star*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *The Atlanta Constitution*, and *The Chicago Tribune*. These newspapers were chosen according to variables of geography, partisanship, and newspaper size. Essentially, we sampled newspapers in different parts of the country, with different partisan leanings (Democratic—*Atlanta Journal* and *Cleveland Plain Dealer*; Republican—*Chicago Tribune*; independent—*Washington Evening Star* and *New York Tribune*), that were of different sizes: large metropolitan (New York, Chicago); medium metropolitan (Cleveland, Washington, DC); and small metropolitan (Atlanta).

We measured each story's length in column inches, and coded its story type using Baldasty's (1992, pp. 149–51) content analysis scheme of subject categories. Further, we identified and counted the number of direct quotes included in each news story (range 0–7). For each quote then, we (1) measured its length in column inches, (2) identified its source (e.g., government official, former government official, party official, former party official, other journalist, eyewitness, man-on-the-street, noted figure, and text), and (3) labeled it by type (e.g., speech, interview, letter, telegram, report, or other kind of text).

Analyses

Our goal was to examine the extent to which story and quote characteristics changed during the time period covered by our data set (1876–1916). Our analysis of the data was complicated by the fact that different newspapers contributed different numbers of stories in different years. For instance, during the week prior to the 1876 general election the *New York Tribune* only published six front-page stories including any kind of quote, whereas the corresponding number for the *Washington Evening Star* was 33. And in every year sampled the *Atlanta Constitution* published more front-page stories including any kind of quote than the *Washington Evening Star*. This means that in any given year the patterns in some newspapers have more influence on the overall trends than other newspapers. For example, the results reported in Figure 2 for 1876 reflect trends in the *Washington Evening Star* rather than in *New York Tribune* because the former contributed more stories to the sample during that year. However, by 1882 this difference was reversed, with the *New York Tribune* publishing 38 stories containing quotes, and the *Washington Evening Star* publishing only 24. Thus, the numbers in 1882 are now more reflective of the *New York Tribune* than the *Washington Evening Star*.

To avoid statistical distortions caused by these differences between newspapers, we focused our longitudinal analysis on trends as they occurred within each newspaper over time. The statistical trends found within a newspaper were then averaged as a reflection of the overall trend. Linear mixed modeling, also called multilevel modeling (Bickel, 2007) or hierarchical linear modeling (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002), is the statistical technique most suited for this task. This advanced modeling technique is particularly well suited for the “nested” data structure present in our data. Moreover, because linear mixed modeling is based on an iterative maximum likelihood procedure, the fact that the number of stories contributed by each newspaper changed across years does not adversely affect our examination of linear and nonlinear trends.

In our linear mixed model, we treated newspapers as a random factor and election year as a fixed-effect predictor. Specifically, we tested for a linear as well as a nonlinear (quadratic) change over time. We also included the newspaper as a fixed factor to examine whether there were systematic differences between newspapers. Unless noted otherwise, all findings reported below are based on this model.

We also explored a range of more complex models. These models yielded essentially the same results, but without improving the model fit. Particular attention was paid to the possibility that the trajectory of change might vary between the five newspapers included in the present data set. To examine this issue, we used interaction terms to address whether there were any systematic differences between newspapers in the linear and quadratic gradients of change. However, without exceptions such interaction terms were not significant. In other words, all newspapers changed roughly to the same degree at

roughly the same time. This implies that any observable differences between newspapers can be treated as random variation.

Description

We begin with an empirical description of changes in quoting practices. As a start, we observe that, from the 1870s forward, the number of stories appearing on the front page of newspapers at first increased and then dramatically decreased, and, as this happened, the length of stories grew. As Figure 1 shows, much of the increase in stories came in the 1880s. Overall, the number of total stories appearing in these five newspapers increased from fewer than 150 in 1876 to over 220 in 1884. The increased number of stories in individual papers was sometimes quite dramatic. For instance, the front page of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* in 1884 contained nearly three times as many stories about the election as it did in 1876. This increase signals the explosion in the size of news pages during these years. It also corresponds with the fact that news during this period was increasingly a commodity, and that newspapers were hiring more reporters to produce it (on this point, see Baldasty, 1992, p. 85; Smythe, 2003, p. 58). However, even as newspapers continued to add staff in the 1890s, the number of stories appearing on the front page began to decline. Between 1884 and 1900, the numbers of stories declined almost to their 1876 level. Again, changes in individual papers dramatize this story. From a high of 38 front-page stories per day in the week prior to the 1884 election, for instance, the number of stories on the front page of the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* in 1916 shrunk to just 18 per day. Not surprisingly, beginning in

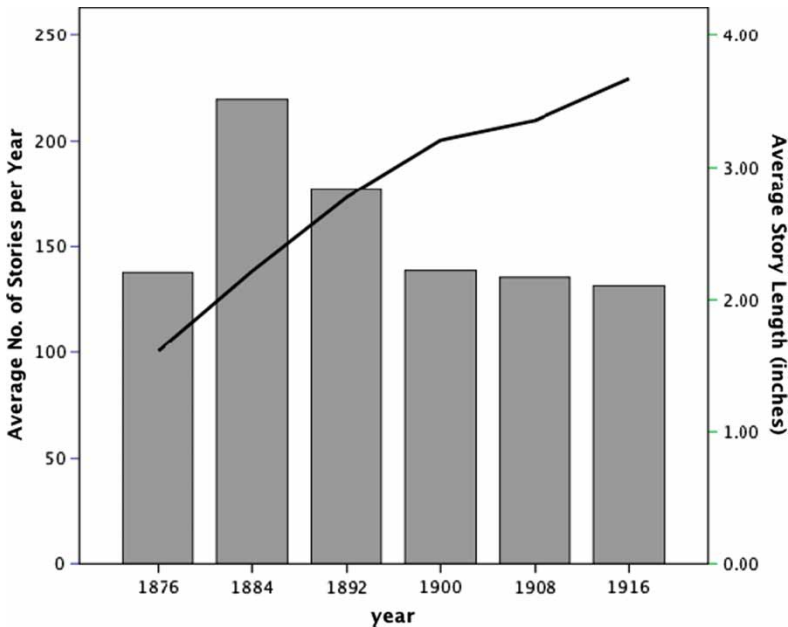


FIGURE 1 Development of front-page stories over time. Bars reflect the per-newspaper average number of front-page stories published during the week before the general election. The line graph reflects the average length of the same stories (measured in inches) pertaining to the same period. The figure summarizes data from 4702 front-page news stories from five newspapers

the early 1890s, the length of stories grew as their number on the front page decreased. Figure 1 shows that between 1876 and 1916, the length of stories on the front page grew from an average of 1.43 to 3.66 column inches. Together, these figures illustrate the fact that from the 1890s forward an increasingly professional group of reporters were writing fewer, but longer and, for that reason, presumably more complex, stories.

Over time, more of these stories contained quotes and the average number of quotes in a story increased as well. In 1876, it was relatively rare for a story to quote a source. As Table 1 (first column) shows, in 1876 only 28 percent of stories contained any quote at all. In the case of *The New York Tribune*, 90 percent of stories in that year did not contain a quote. By 1916, the number of stories containing a quote grew to roughly 50 percent of stories. A logistic regression analysis confirms that, with time, front-page stories were increasingly likely to contain a quote, $\chi^2(1) = 58.15, p < 0.001, b = 0.02, se = 0.003, \exp(b) = 1.02$.

This trend is especially apparent for stories on the presidential election. In 1876, just under 30 percent of stories on the election contained a quote, a percentage that jumped to nearly 60 percent by 1916, reflecting a highly significant trend, $\chi^2(1) = 38.81, p < 0.001, b = 0.023, se = 0.004, \exp(b) = 1.023$. In contrast, quotes remained relatively rare for all other story types, most of which were of the “human interest” variety. In 1876, only 10 percent of human interest stories contained a quote. This number varied a bit in the ensuing decades, but never amounted to more than 20 percent of those stories. Consequently, a logistic regression analysis did not detect a significant increase in the proportion of studies containing quotes, $\chi^2(1) = 2.31, p = 0.13, b = 0.012, se = 0.008, \exp(b) = 1.012$.

The practice of including direct quotes in stories signifies three trends. First, it shows news organizations increasingly relying on reporters to get the news rather than waiting for the news to come to them via the mail or the telegraph. Second, it demonstrates that much of reporters’ newsgathering took the form of eliciting information from other people, and reporting this information in their stories. Finally, it registers the growing practice of attribution, a signal routine of modern news. Increasingly, reporters were writing less that something was true and more that someone said something was true.

TABLE 1
Stories containing quotes: quote length and frequency of stories

Year	Quotes per story							
	Stories with quotes		All stories (N=1085)		Election stories (N=734)		Human interest stories (N=102)	
	N	%*	Mean	%†	Mean	%†	Mean	%†
1876	125	28.0	1.22	12.8	1.25	12.9	1.20	13.3
1884	195	35.2	1.42	23.6	1.46	25.6	1.21	15.8
1892	187	42.0	1.45	28.3	1.44	26.8	1.33	26.7
1900	197	46.3	1.49	29.9	1.43	27.5	2.08	38.5
1908	173	51.7	1.69	39.9	1.84	47.9	1.43	26.1
1916	208	49.6	1.56	31.3	1.69	38.5	1.12	11.8
Total	1085	23.1	1.48	28.4	1.51	30.0	1.37	21.6

There were a total of 4702 front-page news stories. The table summarizes a total of 1611 quotes that appeared in 1085 news stories.

*Proportion of stories with quotes in the overall number of stories.

†Proportion of stories with two or more quotes in the overall number of stories with quotes.

This practice allowed journalists to appear outside the scene of action—lending them at least the appearance of independence—just as it tied them more closely to their sources of information.

As the number of stories containing quotes grew, the average number of quotes in stories grew as well. Recall that we coded only the front page of the newspapers in our sample, so these numbers do not count the absolute number of quotes in every story (some of which may have jumped to inside pages of the newspaper). Nonetheless, the numbers are suggestive. As summarized in the second column of Table 1, in 1876 stories with any kind of quote employed an average of 1.22 quotes. These numbers jumped to 1.69, reflecting a statistically significant upward trend, $b = 0.008$, $se = 0.002$, $p < 0.001$. Put differently, in 1876 only 13 percent of stories with quotes contained more than one quote, but by 1908 this number had swelled to nearly 40 percent. Again, much of that growth came in political stories. Between 1876 and 1908, the average number of quotes increased, $b = 0.011$, $se = 0.003$, $p < 0.001$, and the percentage of political stories containing more than one quote jumped 35 percent (see Table 1, third column). In contrast, the average number of quotes in human interest stories did not change predictably over time, $b = 0.003$, $se = 0.006$, $p = 0.62$, and the percentage of human interest stories containing more than one quote was actually lower in 1913 than in 1876 (13 percent in 1876 to 12 percent in 1916; Table 1, fourth column).

Who were reporters quoting in their stories? Table 2 presents data on the distribution of quoting sources for stories about the election. It shows that reporters most often turned to government and party officials. Indeed, the lowest proportion of these sources was 56 percent in 1876; yet, the balance between these sources changed dramatically over the years, $\chi^2(10) = 107.91$, $p < 0.00001$. The high-water mark for use of party officials came in the election of 1900, when just over 45 percent of quotes used in stories came from this group. But reporters' sourcing practices took a decisive turn in the election of 1908, when reporters dramatically reduced their reliance on party officials and increased their attention to government officials. This trend held in the election of 1916, when less than 19 percent of quote sources came from party officials. These data show reporters pivoting their attention from parties to federal officials just as the third party system disintegrated in the aftermath of the 1896 election.

So far, we have painted a picture in which a growing professional group of reporters was writing fewer but longer stories, stitching these stories together with more

TABLE 2
Election-related stories containing quotes: quote sources

Year	Quote sources					
	Government official		Party official		Other source	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1876	34	36.6	18	19.4	41	44.1
1884	101	50.8	39	19.6	59	29.6
1892	81	45.8	67	37.9	29	16.4
1900	55	34.6	73	45.9	31	19.5
1908	116	64.8	43	24.0	20	11.2
1916	81	68.6	22	18.6	15	12.7
Total	468	50.6	262	28.3	195	21.1

The data are based on 925 quotes contained in 734 election-related front-page stories.

quotes, and, in their election coverage, turning more to government officials as primary sources for those quotes. We now turn to the kinds of quotes reporters used in their stories. Did they quote from letters or telegrams, interviews or speeches? And what were the trends in the use of these different kinds of quotes? The short story is that over time reporters relied more and more on quotes from speeches. Table 3 shows that in 1876 speeches accounted for just under 30 percent of quotes used in stories about the election. By the early 1900s, that number had soared to over 85 percent of quotes, logistic regression $\chi^2(1) = 85.45$, $p < 0.00001$, $b = 0.053$, $se = 0.006$, $\exp(b) = 1.055$. Again, the decisive break came in the 1908 presidential election, when the percentage of quotes from speeches jumped over 30 percent from the prior election. These numbers register two trends. First, the modern style of campaigning—which relied less on torchlight parades and more on stump speeches by the candidates—took hold (on this transition, see Jamieson, 1988; McGerr, 1986; Reynolds, 2006). At this time, campaigns began to center on political candidates engaging with voters on the stump. And second, reporters paid more attention to this activity. This is to say, the practice of reporting increasingly revolved around following the candidates as they made campaign swings around the country.

Finally, the length of quotes in stories demonstrates the same curvilinear trends. Before the early 1890s, the length of quotes continuously increased, but beginning in the early 1890s their length significantly shrunk. Figure 2 displays this marked curvilinear change over time, $F(1, 1605.99) = 17.82$, $p < 0.0001$. From the 1876 to the 1892 election, the size of the average quote grew from 1.09 to 1.71 column inches. Like Hallin's description of early TV news coverage, in these early years, stories often began with reporters "setting the scene" and then giving their stories over to the words of others. Between the 1892 and the 1900 presidential elections, this practice changed. At this time, quotes became smaller and smaller, ending at an average quote size of about 1.08 column inches in the 1916 presidential election. Like modern TV reporters, print reporters of the time increasingly used the words of candidates and others as "raw material" out of which they stitched together stories.

The change in the size of quotes is not nearly as striking as the shrinking soundbite in TV news. But when combined with other measures, it indexes the transition to modern journalism in much the way that soundbites registered the modernization of TV news in the 1980s. Two brief examples demonstrate the point.

TABLE 3
Election-related stories containing quotes: nature of the quote

Year	Nature of the quote			
	Speech		Other	
	N	%	N	%
1876	27	29.0	66	71.0
1884	123	61.8	76	38.2
1892	109	61.6	68	38.4
1900	76	47.8	83	52.2
1908	152	84.9	27	15.1
1916	105	89.0	13	11.0
Total	592	64.0	333	36.0

The data are based on 925 quotes contained in 734 election-related front-page stories.

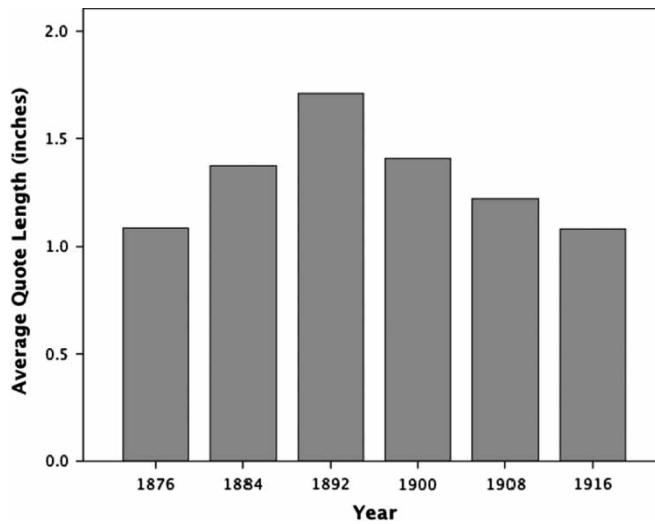


FIGURE 2

Average quote length over time. The figure is based on 1611 quotes from 1084 front-page stories that did contain at least one quote. All stories were published during the week prior to the general election

On November 5, 1876, *The Chicago Daily Tribune* published a report of a speech given by Secretary of the Treasury Lot M. Morrill. After a brief paragraph setting the scene, the reporter writes,

Mr. Morrill said: This looks to me very like business. I feel that I ought to congratulate the country that at length the business instincts of the people have become conscious of the impending danger, and I hail it as a harbinger of that success which in the providence of God and in the right we shall witness next week.

This paragraph is followed by a 12 column inch transcript of Mr. Morrill's speech, which the reporter interrupts only occasionally to introduce the next set of remarks: "Mr. Morrill then said . . ." The reporter concludes his report with a summation of the audience's reaction: "His [Morrill's] remarks were greeted at every point with laughter and applause, and the whole occasion formed a special feature of the campaign here."

The simple fact of including a quote makes this story atypical for the time. But all of its other characteristics demonstrate the conventions of newsgathering in place at the time: the reporter quoted one government official; the quote is very long; and, the reporter himself does little more than set the scene.

Forty years later, on November 3, 1916, the same paper ran a story on a speech given the night before by Charles E. Hughes, the Democratic candidate for President. The lead paragraph states:

Charles E. Hughes, speaking here tonight, declared his belief that he would win the electoral votes of Ohio, Indiana, and New York, and asserting that he was "looking forward to the responsibilities of the administration," outlined what he regarded as "the essential conditions of national leadership."

In the next paragraph, the reporter notes:

The nominee in previous speeches today had declared he had no apologies to make for his attacks on the administration for its foreign policy, characterized it as “very cruel and unwarrantable” the suggestion that a vote for him meant a vote for war, and had declared his opposition to a “muddle of meddle” in America’s foreign relations.

The rest of the story reviews the various themes hit upon by Hughes in the four speeches he gave that day. Each theme is set apart as a subsection of the story. In each of these subsections, the reporter provides a short snippet from a speech and then analyzes its meaning.

Again, this story is typical for the time. But it is strikingly different from the conventional practice of 1876. The reporter provides many quotes. Rather than merely setting the scene, the reporter defines the meaning of these quotes, namely that it is an occasion on which Hughes defended himself against certain charges from the other side. Further, the reporter takes Hughes’ words out of the context of the speech and makes them serve as an illustration of the reporter’s frame. Finally, unlike the reporter in the 1876 story, the events described in this story are lifted out of chronological time. Snippets from several speeches are woven together in a narrative flow that stands outside of the temporal sequence in which they were uttered. In short, much as in TV news of the 1980s, Hughes’ words are made to serve the interests of a news story. Thus, by 1916 the outlines of modern quoting practices were in place—especially in political journalism—across our sample of newspapers.

Discussion

How might we explain these changes in quoting practices? One possibility is that editors and reporters were responding to economic and technological change. This explanation would be in line with the major current in journalism historiography about the transition to modern news. Lee (1917, chap. 18), for instance, describes the period from 1880 to 1900 as one of “financial readjustment” in the news industry. Mott (1967, chap. 26) links the “rise of the independent press” to the commercial innovations of Joseph Pulitzer and other Western publishers. Baldasty (1992, p. 140) argues that in the transition to modern news “what figures most prominently . . . is the growth of news as a commodity, as a commercial product.” And Smythe (2003, p. 66) summarizes this perspective when he writes “it was the growth of advertising and the demands of advertising agents for circulation that . . . freed most of the daily newspapers from political bondage.” The argument for this view is straightforward. Beginning in the 1880s, national advertisers increasingly wanted access to mass audiences; these audiences were located in cities; with the introduction of the linotype machine in 1886, newspapers in large cities were well positioned to serve as a bridge between advertisers and consumers. Moreover, as the capital costs of founding and sustaining newspapers grew, their owners had an additional incentive to seek greater profits. Together, these dynamics pushed newspaper owners toward the adoption of less partisan news practices.

Though compelling, it turns out that economic change is not especially correlated with trends in quoting practices. Figures 3 and 4, as well as Table 4, break out trends across newspapers in quotes per story, length of quotes, and sources of quotes, respectively, for stories about the election. They show some variability between

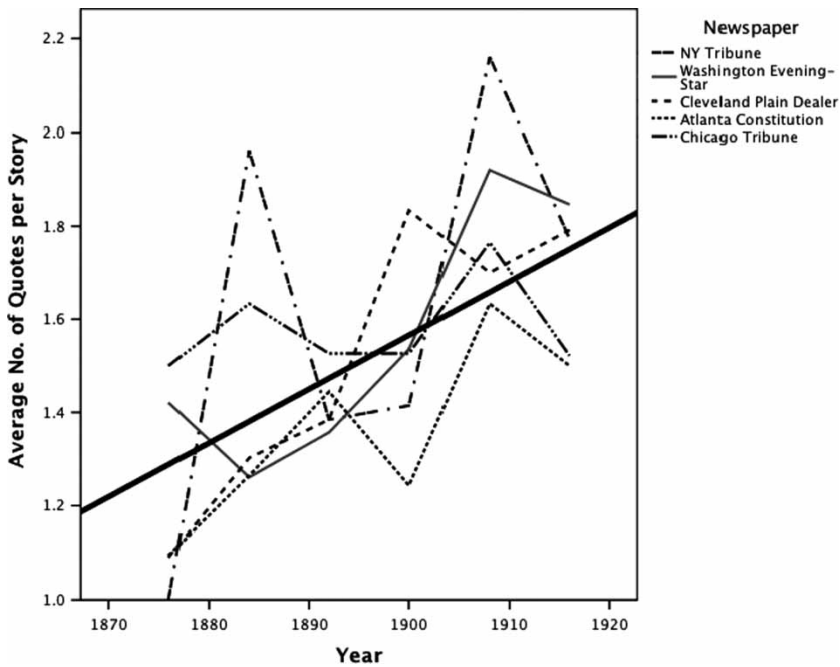


FIGURE 3

Average number of quotes per front-page story: individual newspapers and general trend. The graph is based on 734 front-page stories published in the week prior to the general election. The dashed curves reflect trends for individual newspapers (see legend). The bold line reflects the overall linear trend across time

newspapers. The average number of quotes in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* reached peaks in 1880 and 1908 that the *Chicago Tribune* never reached. The *Atlanta Journal* published more front-page stories containing quotes in every year than the *Washington Evening Star*. Similarly, the length of quotes in the *Washington Evening Star* never reached the heights of the other newspapers. However, in our linear mixed model we find that these differences between newspapers are never statistically significant. In other words, the trends between newspapers reflect random variation rather than reliable and meaningful differences. In contrast, as reported above, the overall trends are statistically significant. In other words, the data show that trends in quoting practices moved roughly the same degree at roughly the same time for all of the newspapers.

The overall trends and the absence of any meaningful variation between newspapers are not consistent with an economic explanation for the transition to modern news. Under an economic explanation, one would expect that newspapers facing a more robust commercial environment, i.e., large, city newspapers, would adopt the new quoting practices first, and that newspapers in smaller towns and cities would lag behind. Consider, for instance, the situation of the two big city newspapers in our sample. In 1880 the *New York Tribune* and *Chicago Daily Tribune* employed up to 50 reporters each, had circulations reaching 100,000, and competed against at least a dozen or more other daily newspapers (North, 1881, pp. 72, 83). Now compare this situation to that of the *Atlanta Constitution*, a newspaper that employed about a dozen people, competed against one other daily newspaper, and served a community whose population was just under 40,000

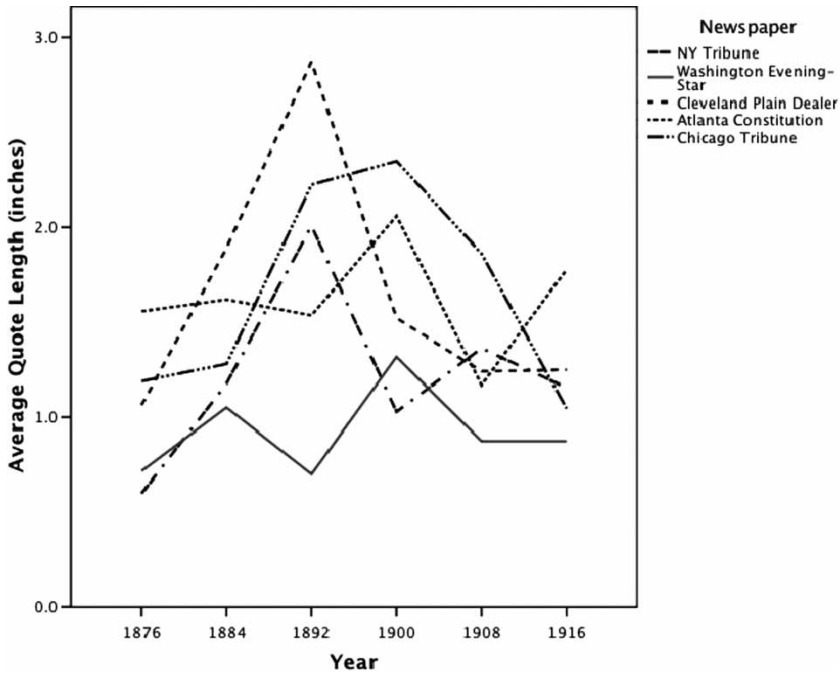


FIGURE 4
Average quote length in election-related stories: individual newspapers. The graph is based on 925 quotes that appear in 592 election-related front-page stories published in the week prior to the general election. The dashed curves reflect trends for individual newspapers (see legend)

people. If publishers were responding to the new economic environment, and that environment changed first in the urban areas, then big city newspapers like the *New York Tribune* and *Chicago Tribune* ought to have adopted more modern forms of newsgathering

TABLE 4
Election-related stories containing quotes: proportion of quote sources (%) by newspaper

Year	New York Tribune		Washington Evening Star		Cleveland Plain Dealer		Atlanta Constitution		Chicago Tribune	
	Gov't	Party	Gov't	Party	Gov't	Party	Gov't	Party	Gov't	Party
1876	20.0	60.0	43.5	8.7	21.7	21.7	58.8	17.6	32.0	20.0
1884	68.9	4.4	37.5	33.3	35.3	27.5	61.3	29.0	50.0	12.5
1892	43.3	43.3	33.3	33.3	70.0	23.3	42.6	46.3	39.6	35.4
1900	17.6	64.7	37.5	40.0	63.6	27.3	43.2	43.2	40.0	25.0
1908	80.0	6.0	70.6	29.4	51.6	25.8	65.9	27.3	35.0	50.0
1916	87.5	0.0	35.7	64.3	69.4	25.0	88.9	0.0	55.6	14.8

Entries reflect the proportion of quotes (%) in front-page stories published in a particular newspaper that were obtained from government (Gov't) officials or party officials. Combined percentages pertaining to the same newspaper and the same year cannot exceed 100%. The data are based on 925 quotes contained in 734 election-related front-page stories. A total of 213 quotes were from the *New York Tribune*, 150 from the *Washington Evening Star*, 182 from the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 192 from the *Atlanta Constitution* and 188 from the *Chicago Tribune*.

before smaller, more partisan newspapers. In this scenario, the story of the transition to modern news ought to be one in which bigger, urban newspapers innovated new practices, and these new practices slowly migrated outward to medium-sized and smaller newspapers. Instead, we find that all of the newspapers adopted the same practices at about the same time.

It is worth pausing here to ask why economic forces did not exercise a more powerful force on newsgathering. The answer, we think, has to do with the path-dependent nature of news production. As Cook (1998) and Sparrow (1999) argue, to guarantee their survival, news organizations must resolve a few basic uncertainties (more generally, see Ryfe, 2006a). For instance, they must find ways to reliably and efficiently fill their news hole. They must also discover revenue models that return a steady rate of profit. And, they must establish their authority to mediate conversations taking place in the public sphere. Beginning in the 1830s, newspapers found responses to these uncertainties in political partisanship (for various descriptions of this relationship, see Baldasty and Rutenbeck, 1988, p. 68; Kaplan, 2002, p. 61; McGerr, 1986, pp. 15–16; Smith, 1977). In the political parties, for instance, newspapers found a ready supply of news. To the extent that they received direct and indirect subsidies from the parties, they also found a steady profit. Finally, as the dominant institution of American public life, the political parties lent an authority to the news that could not be gained elsewhere.

This is not to say that political affiliation was the “best” or “most efficient” way to resolve these uncertainties. At the time of its inception, partisan news was only one among a number of alternative paths that might have been taken. The penny press, for instance, offered a model for commercial news at about the same time that newspapers adopted partisan practices. Partisanship became widely accepted across news organizations for reasons that were peculiar to the context (for more on this context, see Humphrey, 1996; Schudson, 1978). But as it was accepted, this form of journalism became institutionalized. To say that it was institutionalized is to say that partisan news formed a “regime.” A news regime is a relatively stable set of rules and resources for producing the news that extends across the organizational environment of the field (for more, see Ryfe, 2006a; also see Keohane, 1989; Krasner, 1989; Skowronek, 1997). The stickiness of these rules lent established newspapers increasing returns. In other words, as the rules became embedded in the system, the more newspapers abided by the rules, the more benefits they accrued. There were several varieties of these returns.

- *Knowledge*: the longer reporters practiced partisan news, the more knowledge they gained about how to do so.
- *Coordination effects*: the longer news workers interacted with partisan leaders, the more productive these interactions became.
- *Identity*: the longer journalists participated in partisan politics, the more investment they had in a partisan self-conception.
- *Profit*: the costs of producing partisan news lowered as the experience of producing it increased.

Further, rather than inventing new, and potentially risky, answers to the old uncertainties, new newspapers had an incentive to simply adopt the tried and true method of partisan news. Through most of the nineteenth century, these increasing returns served as something of a positive feedback system for newspapers. The more they participated in the partisan news regime, the more benefits newspapers gained.

Granted that this is so, what are we to make of the persistent presence of commercial news organizations through the nineteenth century? Already in the 1830s, James Gordon Bennett and other proprietors of penny papers proclaimed their commercial, as opposed to partisan, motives (Schudson, 1978). Moreover, McGerr (1986) and Rutenbeck (1990) are quite right to note that in the 1870s a few publishers were already chafing at the restrictions of the party press regime (see also Dicken-Garcia, 1989). Indeed, the economic pressures on news organizations—especially in large urban areas—were increasing dramatically in the 1870s and 1880s. It appears, this is to say, that commercial news emerged at about the same time as partisan news, and never left the scene even as partisan news secured its dominance.

How is this possible in a context of partisan institutional dominance of the news? The concept of “layering” offers a way to address this question. As institutionalists have argued in other contexts (Schickler, 2001, p. 15; Thelen, 2004), it is possible for institutional patterns (like the commercial press) to emerge parallel to dominant arrangements. In a study of pension reform, for instance, Teles (1998) shows that rather than challenge the well-entrenched system of public provision, reformers created an alternative track of privately-funded arrangements. We might think of the penny press in the 1830s, the liberal reform movement in 1870s newspapers (McGerr, 1986), and the emergence of newspaper chains in the 1880s (Baldasty, 1992), in this light. Throughout the nineteenth century, commercial news arose and grew alongside the dominant partisan system, never challenging the latter’s supremacy, but slowly building an alternative path. This commercial path was not immune from partisan influence. As Schudson (1998, p. 120) notes, commercial entrepreneurs could not avoid the partisan process. They may have “preached independence,” he writes, but even these newspaper editors “practice[ed] partisanship.” Over time, however, commercially oriented newspapers placed pressure on the prevailing system by offering newspaper owners new options, and calling into question the received wisdom of the partisan path.

Over this time, most newspapers—even if commercially oriented—remained formally and informally enmeshed in the partisan process. They did so because the cost of doing otherwise was simply too high. Newspaper publishers wishing to detach themselves completely from the party process faced the cost of finding new sources of information, coordinating their daily practices with these sources, and writing to new audiences in new ways. They also faced the symbolic costs of dissociating themselves from the dominant political rituals of the time. Few were willing to take such risks. Therefore, it is best to understand commercial news as an institutional layer that slowly mounted pressure on the partisan news system. This pressure explains why publishers and editors increasingly called for a new, more independent journalism. But it was a pressure that by itself was unable to convert the institutional system to a new set of rules. Despite the new economic pressure, into the 1890s newspapers continued down the path of partisan journalism.

Often, change in a self-reinforcing process like the partisan news regime requires a shock to the system, an event that jolts actors out of their typical habits (Collier and Collier, 1991; Krasner, 1989). For the partisan news regime, that jolt came from the breakdown of the third party system. The story of this breakdown is well documented (cf. Burnham, 1965; Key, 1955; Schattsneider, 1956; Sundquist, 1983; Wiebe, 1995). The 1890s saw the growth and subsequent absorption of the populist insurgency by the Democratic Party, the rise of new political issues, like monetary policy, new demographic cleavages around

the two parties, and the emergence of candidate-centered campaigns like those of William Jennings Bryan. These forces combined to destabilize the party system, and weaken its stranglehold on the political process. Political scientists have identified the 1896 presidential election as a watershed moment in this process (e.g., Burnham, 1970; Sundquist, 1983; for alternative views, see Mayhew, 2002; Shafer, 1991). After this election, much of the apparatus of the nineteenth-century party system was dismantled in short order: the Australian ballot was introduced; direct primaries were adopted; new voting registration requirements were imposed, especially in Southern states; civil service reform was enacted; and advertising-based presidential campaigns became the norm. As Silbey (1991, p. 14) writes, with these changes, "the party period passed, never again to be revived as it had been."

Trends in quoting practices track with this broader change in American politics. As we have suggested, these trends move in relative lockstep across our sample of newspapers. More importantly, all of the indicators shift with the breakdown of the party system. Until 1884, all of the newspapers experienced an increase in the number of stories appearing on their front pages, and after 1892, all of them saw a rapid decrease in these numbers (Table 1). Before 1892, all of the newspapers saw the number and length of quotes rise in their stories. After 1892, the number of quotes went up and their length went down stories at roughly the same rate across the newspapers (Figure 2). In the eight years between 1900 and 1908, the percentage of quotes in stories about the election from government officials nearly doubled, from 38 to 62 percent (Table 2). In the same period, the percentage of quotes from speeches went up 30 percent (Table 3). All of this movement occurred just as, or immediately after, the third party system lost its hold of the political process. In institutionalist terms, we can say that the breakdown of the third party system served as a "critical juncture" for newspapers. When party influence over public life ebbed, newspapers lost many of the returns that came with linking themselves to the partisan process.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown that, from the 1870s to the early 1900s, quoting practices in news stories changed in the following ways: as stories on the front pages of newspapers grew fewer in number, the number of these stories containing quotes grew, as did the average number of quotes per story. At the same time, the median size of quotes shrunk. Further, reporters quoted government officials more often, and, over time, were more likely to focus on the spoken word rather than documents. We take these trends to signify the growing role of reporters as mediators of public conversation. Much like the shrinking soundbite in TV news, in other words, changes in quoting practices over this period represent a good index of the broader transition to modern news.

Of course, our data are not conclusive. Unlike the three network evening news programs in Hallin's study, no small sample of newspapers can represent the full diversity of nineteenth-century news. Moreover, there may be aspects of the trend lines missed by our focus on coverage of presidential elections. Finally, though quoting practices are a nice index of the transition to modern journalism, they are not the only indicator that might be used. One might look at the emergence of other journalistic routines and narrative devices and come to slightly different conclusions. These and similar questions ought to be explored in subsequent research.

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David M. Ryfe (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), Reynolds School of Journalism, University of Nevada Reno, Mail Stop 310, Reno, NV 89557, USA. E-mail: dryfe@unr.edu

Markus Kimmelmeier, Department of Sociology, University of Nevada Reno, Mail Stop 310, Reno, NV 89557, USA.

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