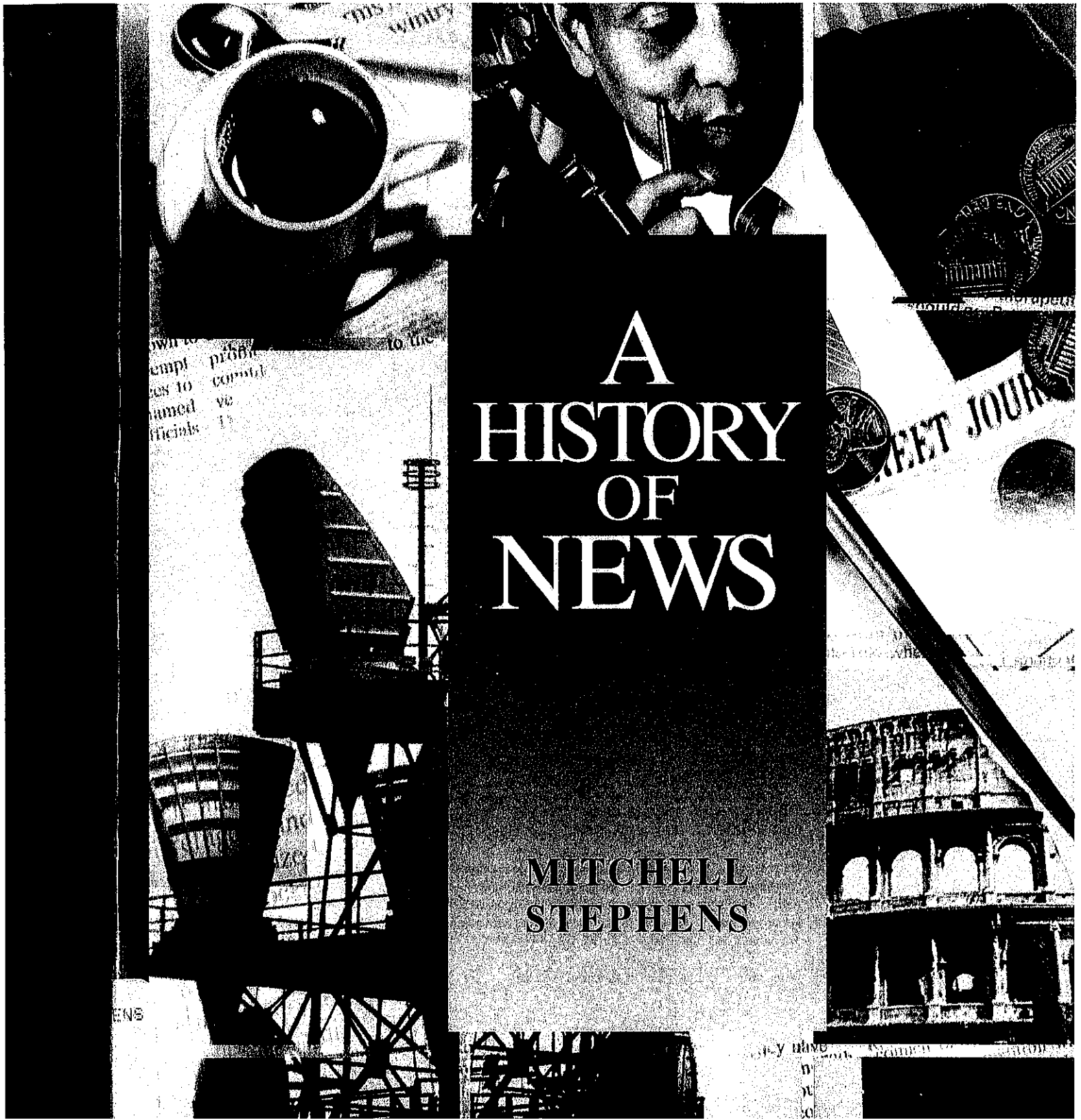

A HISTORY OF NEWS

MITCHELL STEPHENS

Publisher ..... Christopher P. Klein
Senior Acquisitions Editor Carol Wada
Developmental Editor..... Cathlynn Richard
Project Editor..... Tamara Neff Vardy
Production Manager ..... Debra A. Jenkin
Art Director ..... Garry Harman

This book was printed on recycled paper made from 10% post-consumer waste and 40% pre-consumer waste.

The total recycled fiber content is 50% by fiber weight.

Address editorial correspondence to: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 301 Commerce Street, Suite 3700, Fort Worth, TX 76102.

Address orders to: Harcourt Brace & Company, Permissions Department, 6277 Sea Harbor Drive, Orlando, FL 32887-6777. 1-800-782-4479 or 1-800-433-0001 (in Florida)

Harcourt Brace College Publishers may provide complimentary instructional aids and supplements or supplement packages to those adopters qualified under our adoption policy. Please contact your sales representative for more information. If as an adopter or potential user you receive supplements you do not need, please return them to your sales representative or send them to: Attn: Returns Department, Troy Warehouse, 465 South Lincoln Drive, Troy, MO 63379

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 0-15-501857-4

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 96-076420

6 7 8 9 0 1 2 3 4 5 016 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER 2

News in Preliterate Societies—In the Ordinary Way

Newspapers have not yet taken a firm hold, even in the large towns; but news travels very fast in the ordinary way. . . .

—Max and Bertha Ferrars, writing about Burma, ca. 1890[1]

A European living among the Zulus in Africa in the nineteenth century once made the mistake of using his servants' cooking pot to boil the fat off a piece of a crocodile. That was a serious defilement of the pot according to the natives, for whom even touching a crocodile was taboo. His servants quit in consternation. In search of a replacement, the European hurried to neighboring villages, but the news had preceded him: the crocodile was mentioned wherever he went. No one would take the job.

In some desperation, the European ventured farther out, hoping to "outstrip" the news, and in a distant village he did indeed find a man who promised to send a servant. But the man added one request: please do not feed that servant crocodile![2]

The Zulus, who live in the northeastern section of South Africa, take their name from the clan of the king Shaka, who unified them by force early in the nineteenth century.[3] They had not developed a form of written communication on their own when they began encountering European settlers in Shaka's time;[4] yet the Zulus possessed and maintained the ability to spread news rapidly and over great distances without writing—an ability that often amazed those Europeans who had an opportunity to observe it. L. H. Samuelson, a missionary's daughter who lived among the Zulus, remembered learning in 1872 of the death of the Zulu king three hundred miles away by word of mouth, days before the settlers' newspapers had the story. Such journalistic feats, she wrote in 1928, were not atypical of the Zulus:

> Whatever takes place is known for miles round, in an incredibly short time,—what happens in the morning is known everywhere, long before sunset. During the recent wars we often heard from natives of attacks which had taken place, even before the special editions of the papers had been distributed.[5]

This rapid circulation of news is evidence of more than just the desire of individuals to know and tell; it is evidence of a societal commitment. News could not have traveled this far, this fast, among a people without access to printing press or

electricity unless its dissemination was encouraged by edict, custom, and ritual. And the Zulus were not unique in their ability to circulate news or in the effort, conscious or not, their society put into encouraging its circulation.

Oral news systems must have arrived early in the development of language, some tens or even hundreds of thousands of years ago. At its most basic, the exchange of news requires only the simplest of indicative or declarative statements. And the dissemination of news accomplishes some of the basic purposes of language: informing others, entertaining others, protecting the tribe. For example, Hopi Indian children who spotted a Caucasian entering their village, in the days when that was still a portentous occurrence, were trained to yell out just one word: "Bahana!" ("white person"). That warning cry would then be "echoed throughout the pueblo," until all were aware of the alien presence.[6]

Yet most of our information about spoken news systems, despite their age, comes from relatively recent anthropological literature, such as that on the Zulus, the Hopi, or the Tikopia. Attempts to look back further are hindered by the fact that speech does not "fossilize."[7] Instead, to understand the news systems used by the innumerable exclusively oral societies that have appeared and disappeared since humans first began to talk, we must turn to literate observers of such systems. Some scattered historical references to communication in the gymnasiums of Athens or on the street corners of Paris have survived, but for the most part a study of spoken news is beholden to the reports of the missionaries, colonial administrators, and anthropologists who have examined life in preliterate societies.

Most of the examples of oral news systems discussed here were selected from observations made in the nineteenth or twentieth century—in that brief interregnum between attempts by the "civilized" to enslave or annihilate the "uncivilized" and the spread of that most seductive of "civilizing" forces, television. (Because many of these news systems have already begun to succumb to the invasion of twentieth-century media, they are referred to here in the past tense.) Most of these examples, therefore, were recorded by observers who had grown accustomed to relying on newspapers, radio, or television for much (but not all) of their own news.[8] Perhaps that explains why so many of these observers, like the missionary's daughter who watched information spread among the Zulus, were surprised, even shocked, to witness how word that a taboo had been broken or a king had died sped across the plains or through the forests without the benefit of a printing press, electricity, or even writing.

We would expect preliterate peoples to be mystified by modern journalism, but Europeans or Americans who have lived with these people seem just as mystified by their news systems. They return from the field using words like "extraordinary," "unbelievable," "incredible," or "almost incomprehensible."[9]

The oral news systems employed by the Zulus and by most of humankind throughout most of human history are neither incredible nor incomprehensible; they feature a series of logical and effective methods for gathering and disseminating information, methods that testify to the importance these societies placed on the circulation of news. The roots of our own journalism lie in such methods.

"Human Wireless Telegraphy"

The neighbors did not have to be notified when a member of the Zulu tribe died. The sound of lamenting emanating from the household of the deceased brought them the news.[10] Such vocal displays of grief obviously had other purposes. In most societies they fulfilled a religious duty: sending off, perhaps, the newly liberated spirit or announcing its impending arrival to the gods.[11] Psychologically attuned observers might suggest that the production of these mournful sounds also accomplished a more down-to-earth purpose: releasing the emotions occasioned by the death of a loved one and, thereby, beginning the process of purging those emotions.

L. H. Samuelson labels the Zulus' news system, of which she was in some awe, "human wireless telegraphy." If their ability to circulate news seems mysterious, almost telepathic, it may be because the behaviors the Zulus and similar peoples relied on to circulate news did perform other, often more visible functions. The religious and the psychological explanations for the Zulus' loud laments can seem sufficiently compelling to mask their role in spreading news or to make that role appear incidental. It was not.

Most of the various rituals with which preliterate societies respond to death have one quality in common: loudness. The Ibo of Nigeria, for example, would bang on a large wooden drum after a death; the Toradja on the Celebes Islands would fire a gun.[12] These may be somewhat less cathartic behaviors than screaming and moaning, but they are audible at even greater distances. The Siwans, who live by an oasis in north Africa, greeted death with a clamorous show of grief like that of the Zulus: the female relatives would commence a loud wail—"Yaiiii-yai-yai-yai-yai-yai-yaiiiiiiiii!—with other women hastening to join the chorus until, according to one observer, "the house of the deceased is packed to the doors with women raising this dismal cry." But at some point, tradition called for mourning Siwan women to climb to the roof of the loftiest house to continue their wail.[13] The need to purge emotions does not explain this ascension to the roof; the need to spread the news as far as possible does.

Many of the institutions and customs of preliterate societies conceal a similar journalistic purpose. In the 1920s at Siwa Town, the Siwan "graybeards" assembled in the evening under the *dululas*—sun shelters made of rushes and mud. These shelters provided some relief from the heat and an opportunity to socialize, but the shelters also were a significant component in the Siwans' news system. Visitors to the town stopped at the shelters to gossip; the men of the camel corps came by "to hear the latest news." "It is incredible how soon the most secret facts are known there," an observer remarked.[14]

Any place where people met or gathered in these societies would fill with "the latest news." When Zulus met along a path, they exchanged greetings, shared a pinch of snuff, and then one would say, "Tell me the news of the country."[15] Elsewhere it was a campfire or the village well or the town square.[16] In such open-air news marts—and there must have been one in every village in the world—the breezes of conviviality carried information from person to person, transforming news-hearers into news-bearers until an entire society was informed.

Moving People Moves News

The first great improvement in the speed of news was not the telegraph or the radio but the domestication of the horse, which was first accomplished in China in about 3500 B.C. Humans bearing news could be carried by horses much faster than by their own legs. The wheel, which goes back to the fifth millennium B.C., helped too. Wheels together with horses produced chariots.

Before electricity was "domesticated"—used to carry human messages—similar improvements in the speed with which news moved were produced by all improvements in transportation: better roads, better chariots, relays of horses, better boats, and then, in the nineteenth century, steam ships and steam-powered railroads.

Few locales drew such large, relatively diverse crowds as a marketplace. News may not have been the most important commodity exchanged there, but the market's importance in the local news system was well understood by the people who frequented it. When the Ibo of Nigeria wanted to spread some news, they said, "I will speak of it in the market."[17] Indeed, a crucial relationship is established at the marketplace: the symbiotic relationship between news and trade. News—word that a hunt has been successful, for example—helps the merchants at the market plan their strategies, and the goods that are being traded there attract people and therefore attract news.[18]

There seems almost a physical law operating here: When people gather in a pleasant spot, news sparks between them, stirring them, causing them to swirl and buzz, to argue and laugh. A society's political meetings, sporting events, and festivals aid the flow of news by convening such critical masses of people. They too are among the hidden mechanisms behind this "human wireless telegraphy." A Zulu chief, for example, would avail himself of the troupe of warriors gathered for the "Dance of the First Fruits" to announce laws, regulations, and orders. The warriors were then expected to pass on the announcements—along with word that the season's fruits could now be eaten—to the rest of the tribe.[19]

Something—shoppers strolling to a market, warriors returning from a ceremonial dance, mail, delivery trucks, electrons in a wire—must move if news is to flow. Preliterate peoples might dispatch their news on puffs of smoke; they might transmit it on sound waves—the Toradja made sure their villages were never too far apart to be able to hear one another's drums.[20] However, in an oral society news moved for the most part as people moved. Traveling was as important as congregating for the circulation of news. Does this not help explain the warm reception guests—travelers—so often received?

Among the Nootka of Vancouver Island in Canada, chiefs invariably invited visitors to their villages, or tribe members who had just returned from a trip, to a feast where they were "expected to recount to their host all the latest novelties." The other

guests at such feasts were given the leftover food so that when they returned to their homes they could hold their own feasts for friends and relatives and, significantly, pass on "the latest novelties."[21]

Trade was perhaps the primary motivator of travel—further evidence of its importance to the spread of news.[22] On the island of Jamaica in the 1950s, part of the responsibility of the "higglers," who purchased food from farmers to sell at the market in Kingston, was to keep those farmers informed of occurrences in the city.[23]

Preliterate peoples, like most peoples, were enthusiastic gossipers. It was an activity at which some among them inevitably excelled. At the turn of the century such an individual—one of the Havasupai Indians, who live near the Grand Canyon in Arizona—"breezed through the door and eased her plump body into a chair" in the room where an outsider was settling a dispute.

> She was Vesnor's wife, a giggling woman . . . whose ears were attuned to gossip. She had come to gather news, first hand, so that she might gleefully dispense it later to an eager audience.[24]

Some of what such busybodies "gleefully dispensed" was mere chitchat—of little interest to a public of any size; some presumably represented mere carping or cattiness—opinion, not information. However, the gossip indulged in by men and by women like Vesnor's wife might also have included information on such substantive matters as deaths, births, marriages, hunts, scandals, and disputes. There is, in other words, a significant area of overlap between gossip and news.* Through their wanderings, their curiosity, and their chattiness, busybodies helped news items large and small leap the divides between the different courtyards, the different kinship groups, that constitute a community.[25] The fact that so many busybodies have been female may help explain why they have often been disparaged. It is difficult to imagine news finding its way through these communities without them.

To Western eyes, the members of such oral societies may not often have seemed to have been engaged in the process of news gathering and dissemination. Instead they were gossiping, trading, traveling, feasting, attending ceremonies, meeting on paths, collecting at gathering places, lamenting deaths; yet unobtrusively, almost invisibly, word of the pot defiled by a crocodile spread.

The Amplification of News—Messengers, Criers, and Minstrels

There is a randomness to the news that drifts through a marketplace or falls from the tongue of a traveler. The spread of a particular item is often dependent on whim and

*The word *gossip* is used to describe both a form of communication and a subject about which people communicate—personal, even intimate, information. The role of gossip in the news, in this latter sense, is discussed in chapter 7.

The Zulu king with his advisors and bodyguards in 1930.

circumstance; word of an event may lurch forward or stall with variations in mood, weather or season.

Leaders of larger societies require more precision and reliability from a news system. When the Zulu king was heavy with news—a threat against the nation, perhaps, or some important new laws—he could not wait for the "Dance of the First Fruits" to deliver it; he could not trust the normal flow of travelers in and out of the capital to spread the word to his many, widely scattered subjects.

The problem was solved with the use of trained news specialists. The Zulus employed runners to transmit the king's news. These messengers would be dispatched to the various chiefs spread about the kingdom. The chiefs, in turn, made sure word was passed to the heads of families and homesteads, who informed the rest of the populace.[26] Through the work of such runners, leaders such as the Zulu king achieved what all authorities at some point desire: a degree of control over the flow of news to their subjects.

Journalism's progress along the road from busybody to newscaster has depended on an increasing ability to amplify the news—to endow it with the power to travel farther, faster, and to arrive with less distortion. The use of messengers was among the first of these amplifications.

The news exchanged in marketplaces or by travelers had been a democracy of anecdote and information—all subject to the same obstacles, all with approximately the same likelihood of being heard. The use of messengers, however, granted significant advantages to an elite selection of news items. This news gained speed as dawdling and detours along the route from source to receiver were reduced; it gained power as discipline and devotion were applied to its circulation. These news items were now more likely to remain coherent over distances, more likely to reach specified destinations. And in amplifying news, messengers—like the more powerful methods for transmitting news that would follow—ensured that additional attention

The First Marathon

Probably the best known instance of news being carried by a messenger is said to have taken place in Greece in 490 B.C. At the time, Greek soldiers, mostly from Athens, were fighting a much larger army of Persian soldiers on the plain of Marathon.

According to one version of the legend, an Athenian messenger, Pheidippides, ran all the way from Marathon to Athens, a distance of more than twenty-five miles, with word of a huge Greek victory. After reporting this glorious news, the story goes, Pheidippides died of exhaustion. The marathon running races of today commemorate his feat.

would be paid to its content. Before being placed in the hands of a messenger an item of news might be mulled over, even edited.

Whoever controlled the messengers could select which anecdotes and information would be favored by this treatment. Therefore, whoever controlled the messengers gained not only a conduit to the members of a society—the ability to inform them of new regulations—but gained a measure of power over the selection of news the members of a society received—the power, for example, to ensure that they received news of triumphs but not necessarily of debacles. Messengers were controlled, for the most part, by kings, chiefs, headmen. They were rarely channels of dissent.

Such messengers (the Greek god Hermes may be the archetype) delivered more than news. Much of their time would be spent carrying instructions or personal communications between officials or distributing wedding invitations. But messengers often deposited information of public interest at locations where it might be distributed to the public.

Among the Fox Indians in the Midwest, "ceremonial runners" circulated word of deaths, tribal councils, treaties, and other occurrences. These messengers made the rounds of the huts each spring and fall to collect news. A clue to their significance can be found in a comment by an elder of the Fox Indians early in this century—about sixty years after the death of the last of the tribe's messengers: "It is hard not to have a ceremonial runner," he told an anthropologist. "That is why [this generation] has a hard time in hearing when anything has happened." (The lack of new ceremonial runners cannot be blamed exclusively on the onslaught of modern communication technology, however; this was a position with great religious significance, and the job description had apparently included celibacy as well as speed.)[27]

A European in Vietnam in 1821 had an opportunity to observe how news was amplified by a member of a different class of news specialist:

> He threw himself backwards, projecting his abdomen, and putting his hand to his sides, and in this absurd attitude uttered several loud and long yells.

The crier for the liberal faction of the Hopi tribe at the turn of the century.

Thus began the performance of a news crier. Our narrow-minded observer's review: "truly barbarous."[28] Nonetheless, such exuberant news crying was perhaps the most regular and trustworthy form in which news was presented to preliterate societies. Criers usually followed prescribed routes, often appeared at prescribed times of day, and frequently brought news obtained directly from its source—the local potentate.[29] They further strengthened the communication between leader and led.

Indeed, news criers, like messengers, resided for the most part in the leader's pocket. The crier for the Winnebago Indians in the Midwest, for instance, was required to meet with the chief each morning for instructions.[30] Authorities used them to perform a necessary governmental function—the publication of gatherings, orders, and ordinances. (Among the Siwans of North Africa, after an announcement had been proclaimed by a crier on three consecutive days, ignorance of the announcement was no longer accepted as an excuse.[31]) Leaders also used criers in their efforts to control the news received by their followers. This ability to influence perceptions was so well respected by a group of Hopi Indians at the turn of the century that when they found themselves divided politically two criers were selected: one beholden to the liberal faction, the other to the conservatives.[32]

How did the news accommodate itself to this form of delivery? As do most methods for amplifying news, criers added a degree of formality. If the Khasi, who live in a highland area of northeastern India, had to gather to settle a dispute, their criers, waiting until evening when all the inhabitants of a village had returned, would call out the information. One such cry has been translated. It begins with an attention-grabbing yell:

> *Kaw!* thou, a fellow-villager; thou a fellow-creature; thou an old man; thou, who are grown up; thou who are young; thou a boy; thou a child; thou an infant . . . *Hei!* because there is a contest. *Hei!* for . . . cause to sit together. *Hei!* for . . . cause to deliberate . . .[33]

Such cries were ornate because those who were listening expected a bit of entertainment along with their news; they were strictly structured so they could be easily remembered; and they addressed their audience in direct, personal terms because people in such societies knew no other way of addressing each other. In other words, these cries were typical of formal public speech in preliterate societies.

The communication of news does not require such showy wordings, but they can be useful. Rhythm, rhyme, and melody are also optional, but because they are entertaining and because they are aids to memory, these techniques too can be put to the task of disseminating newsworthy information. The problem is that songs or poems take time to compose. They are well suited for recording history or legend—the *Iliad* is an example—but less adept at keeping up with the news. News of the Greeks' hard-won success at Troy must have spread long before a poet, blind or otherwise, fashioned it into verse.

Nevertheless, with a repertoire of stock tunes and a gift for rhyme, some minstrels did succeed in transforming events into song with sufficient dispatch for their compositions to qualify as news. A man who served as a minister in the Serbian government in 1873 recalled walking into coffeehouses and inns and hearing an account of a speech he had made that very day recited by such minstrels—*goosslari*—to the tune of a national song.[34]

So along with messengers and criers, there is a third, much smaller group of news specialists: those who sing or recite news in verse. This branch of the profession includes the *barrāh,* Gypsy musicians who would wander through the marketplaces among the Rif in Morocco "announcing to the listening throng . . . the noteworthy news items of the day";[35] the bards of India, who would "carry news of local and dynastic interest from one village to another" and whose specialty was "to versify the events in which they participate";[36] and the *griots* of west Africa, who would sing songs of praise or ridicule and who were "the channel by which all gossip and rumor passes."[37]

Some of these early news specialists, like the Fox's celibate ceremonial runners, were revered; others, however, were disparaged, even ridiculed. In certain areas of west Africa the *griots* were considered so lowly a caste that they were denied the right to burial—it was believed that their corpses might pollute any land under which they were interred.[38] And the heralds who filled this role for the Bella Coola Indians of British Columbia often were the butt of jokes: it was not uncommon for the host of a ceremony to throw the herald his bag of food at such an angle that it would splatter over him.[39] (Are there not reminders here of the enmity that has been directed at some newspaper and broadcast journalists?)

Nonetheless, societies placed enough importance on these individuals, whatever their status, to honor them with a secure place in custom and ritual. Where tested ways cannot be preserved for future generations by writing them down, religion must function as a sort of societal DNA—passing along the cultural code by fostering the replication of certain crucial behaviors. In many societies religious tradition emphasized the importance of selecting messengers or criers. The Bella Coola's heralds, for example, were said to have been established by the wish of a god "as expressed to the first people in the beginning of time."[40]

News in Song

News spreads so fast by other means today that it rarely tarries long enough to find its way into song—particularly songs that take many months to record and distribute. However, in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s folk singers often discussed and commented on topical issues such as civil rights or the Vietnam War—as Gypsy musicians, Indian bards, and west African *griots* might have. And this tradition has occasionally been revived in more contemporary forms of popular music.

When four students were shot by National Guard troops at Kent State University in 1970, the group Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young had some success with an angry rock and roll song about the incident. And more recently the Rolling Stones recorded a song, "High Wire," criticizing the Persian Gulf War of 1991.

Rap music, with its sometimes extemporaneous rhymes, has had some success in recent years in fitting in mention of current events, particularly in live performances.

Newsworthiness

A group of Zulus was in hostile territory for a wedding in 1918 when suddenly they were attacked. An immediate priority for the members of that seriously outnumbered wedding party was to spread news of their plight, to get help. The women in the group handled that task by dashing up to the hills and shouting. Soon the alarm spread, and their tribesmen swarmed in to defend them.[41]

Perhaps the most valuable news we can receive is warning of a clear and present danger—the British are coming, Pearl Harbor has been bombed, a hurricane is on the way, a wedding party has been attacked. Sometimes, as it was with those Zulu women, news is simultaneously a call for help.[42] But news of danger does not always arrive with a request for action; an alarm may be sounded simply as a warning. In a Zapotec village in Mexico, the church bells would ring to warn the village of threats ranging from bandits to an earthquake or a rainstorm.[43] Any news system must make some provision for spreading alarms.[44] (Thomas Jefferson once called newspapers "the only tocsin of a nation."[45])

Death ranks as another inescapable news story—whether proclaimed by wailing or obituary. All societies must also find means for disseminating news of war, which unlooses both death and danger. After members of the Abipon tribe in Paraguay in the eighteenth century fought a battle some distance from town, a horseman was sent back to spread the news. The scene that followed was observed by a missionary:

> As soon as this messenger is espied from a distance, a crowd comes out to meet him; striking their lips with their right hands, and accompanies him to his house. Having preserved the profoundest silence he leaps down from his horse on to a bed; whence, as from a rostrum, he announces the event of the battle, with a grave voice, to the surrounding multitude. If a few of the enemy are killed and wounded, he begins his story with

> *Nalamichiriñi;* they are all slaughtered, which . . . receives the applause of the bystanders. . . . The number of captives, wagons, and horses, that have been taken, are then detailed with infinite exaggeration, for of each he asserts that they are innumerable. . . .

Eventually, however, all war reporters have to impart some bad news. The Abipon horseman put that task off until the end of his story, for good reason:

> The mention of the death of one of their countrymen entirely destroys all the pleasure which the news of the victory had excited; so that the announcer immediately finds himself deserted by his late attentive listeners. . . . All the women unloose their hair, snatch up gourds and drums and lament.[46]

Danger, death, and war all have great impact, but news does not have to be so dramatic, so directly concerned with the physical safety or freedom of the community to have practical value. For the Tikopia the movement of ships was always newsworthy, because ships brought food to the island; for the Rwala Bedouins it was important to know that a new grazing ground was fertile, so a scout would carry back an armful of grass and let the grass tell the story.[47]

Nor does the thirst for news abate when practical concerns end. As noted in the previous chapter, we also turn to the news for pleasure, for entertainment. If news of a pasture upon which their animals might graze was important to the Bedouins, even news of an inaccessible pasture would have been of interest. And word of the ambush of that Zulu wedding party continued to spread even after the practical matter of coming to their aid had been addressed.

We examine our surroundings initially for threats or for the information we need to survive, but inevitably our focus widens. From the spectator's perspective, sporting events—such as the races announced by a crier to Tewa Indians in New Mexico[48]—are classic examples of subjects that are newsworthy without being directly connected to the well-being of the news audience. Human interests demand that news carry us beyond thoughts of safety and succor to the diverting, even the trivial. And those who lived in oral societies demonstrated as much of a fascination with such stories as we do.

The Nootka of Vancouver Island exchanged the usual complement of practical news: on "the abundance of salmon in this or that river," on a chief's plans to hold a ceremony, on the killing of a sea otter, on talk that the chiefs were planning war. However, the Nootka also pricked up their ears at word that someone was having an affair with someone else's wife. And the tale of a suitor who tumbled into a barrel of rainwater while sneaking out the window of his lover's house "spread like wildfire up and down the coast."[49]

The qualities that modern journalists look for in news, as outlined in journalism textbooks, include: impact, emotional appeal, conflict, timeliness, proximity, prominence and the unusual. Were standards for measuring news value in oral culture much different?

A rainstorm or the presence of bandits in a Mexican village was news primarily because of its potential *impact* on people's lives. Death too had impact, perhaps

How Practical is News Today?

Some years ago a *New York Post* editor argued that crime news serves a practical purpose: "You make people more aware. You make them more careful. You make them more responsive." But it is not that easy to make the case for the practical value of crime reporting, which too often seems instead to make readers or viewers more paranoid. (see chapter 8) Once you have purchased an extra door lock and mastered some basic street smarts, how useful is it to learn of another particularly gruesome or particularly odd homicide? (Stephens, "Crime Doesn't Pay. . . .")

A terrible crime is news primarily because it is unusual, because it features conflict and has a kind of emotional appeal, because, in other words, it is interesting, not because it has that much impact on our lives. (see chapter 7)

The service pieces that newspapers and newscasts run—how to test for breast cancer, where to find the best child care—certainly are practical. And some breaking news—a tax cut, discovery of a new cancer treatment—certainly can have impact upon many lives. But most breaking news is too unusual to be representative, too far removed from our daily experience to be useful.

As citizens, we want to be informed of outbreaks of fighting overseas and political scandals back home; a chain of events they touch off might someday affect our lives. However, it is a stretch to contend that we follow these events primarily for practical reasons.

magnified by the widespread belief that it provided a clue to the mood of the gods. The suitor's tumble into the barrel had *emotional appeal*—it was at once sexually titillating, embarrassing, and funny. *Conflict* was one of the qualities that made news of war, a footrace, or a man's affair with someone else's wife. Had those Bedouin scouts brought back clumps of brown grass to show that a pasture had been fertile a month ago, it would not have been nearly as newsworthy—*timeliness* was all important. The *proximity* of the grazing ground, the footrace, or the lovers—their accessibility or familiarity—also helped determine the degree of interest they elicited. And evidence of the extent to which the *prominence* of individuals determined their newsworthiness can be found in the ritual with which the Toradja on the Celebes Islands responded to death: ordinarily they would fire a gun, but if it was a chief who had breathed his last, ten cannon shots would be fired.[50]

At the heart of modern journalism is the search for the last item on this list—*the unusual*. Our news is very much about those events that manage to distinguish themselves from the clip-clop of ordinary experience. Oral societies had no less a taste for the unusual. In the hamlet of Kakapalayam in southern India, whenever someone broke a law and was arrested, whenever someone's life was shattered by an accident, a crowd would gather to find out what happened. "On all such occasions, when anything out of the way takes place," two observers report, "the tea shops . . . have some brisk business. The people neglect their looms with a view to find out the local news."[51]

If the basic standards of news judgment in oral societies appear similar to those used in our society, so do the basic types of stories. We have in common reports of accidents, earthquakes, military expeditions, sports, weather, death, and violations of the law. We too spread alarms—though the dangers, if life expectancies are any guide, may be growing more distant. Our economic news at present may not include facts on the fertility of individual pastures, and ship movements may have been relegated to the agate type; but the reports we receive on the money supply or the commodities markets perform essentially the same function as the armful of grass brought back by a Bedouin scout.

The splash an occurrence must make to be considered news varies, of course, with the size of the audience reached by a news medium. If some of the news that circulated through preliterate societies still seems unfamiliar, perhaps it is because their measures of news value were calibrated for even smaller audiences than those attracted by our small-town newspapers or radio stations. As a result, the newsmakers in these societies did not have to be quite so prominent; the out-of-the-ordinary occurrences did not have to be quite so bizarre.

The presence of a larger audience—the result of a higher degree of amplification—also tends to add formality, even a hint of propriety to the news. We share with the Nootka a weakness for stories like that of the suitor who fell in the barrel, but his flop would have to be more dramatic, or the suitor more prominent, not only to whet the interest of news organizations today but to overcome their reluctance to publicize so personal a matter. (Were the suitor a candidate for president or were he murdered, that reluctance would quickly be overcome.)

Admittedly, the composite picture of news in oral societies presented here has its limitations. To make the more precise comparison between news in a *particular* oral society and our news we would need a more complete accounting of news in one such society than is now available in the anthropological literature. (It would also be useful if that literature included more comments from the members of those societies about their news.)

It is, of course, possible to exaggerate the extent of the congruity between the news disseminated by busybody, messenger, or crier and that disseminated in the late twentieth century by newspaper or newscast. Attitudes toward the news undoubtedly have shifted somewhat as ceremonial runners have given way to secular news announcers. News, though now more trustworthy, is less prized, its revelations rarely perceived as divine. And variations certainly have appeared, and continue to appear, in the range, complexity, comprehensiveness, accuracy, emotionalism, credulity, and objectivity of news accounts—variations considered in detail in this book. Nevertheless, the basic topics with which those news accounts have been concerned, and the basic standards by which they evaluate newsworthiness, seem to have varied very little.[52] Indeed, the evidence that is available from this wide sample of preliterate cultures all points to one conclusion: that humans have exchanged a similar mix of news with a consistency throughout history and across cultures that makes interest in this news seem inevitable, if not innate.

Is it surprising that the concerns of the news appear to have changed so little? To what other topics could the news devote itself? Can we imagine a news system that disdained the unusual in favor of the typical, that ignored the prominent, that devoted as much attention to the dated as the current, to the legal as the illegal, to peace as to war, to well-being as to calamity and death? The particular amalgam of anecdote and information that humans call news undoubtedly reflects some of the most basic categories and standards by which the human mind evaluates phenomena in the social world.

There is an additional explanation for the success of this mix of news: it seems to satisfy not only individual cravings for information, for entertainment, for awareness, but societal needs for safety and solidarity. The importance to the group of warnings of danger and reports on fertile fields is clear, and news of the leader's laws and regulations help that leader to coordinate behavior—presumably for the good of the group. But the exchange of news also has more subtle contributions to make to the strength of the group. Societies depend on news of violations of the law to reinforce understanding of their laws and fear of their punishments; they depend on accounts of the out of the ordinary to strengthen the consensus on what qualifies as ordinary. Indeed, the members of a society can be said to be renewing their membership each time they exchange news on the situation and fortunes of that society—its battles, its ceremonies, its sporting events. From this perspective, each report or item of gossip recognizing the prominence of a leader is a reacknowledgment of the centrality of that leader; each shared perception—of danger, of humor—each shared reaction—fear, grief, outrage—reawakens a sense of shared destiny and shared purpose.

Oral news systems had significant inadequacies in fulfilling individual and societal needs for news. Future news media would be able to extend human awareness, and societal bonds, over much larger areas. But the set of common interests out of which they would create that awareness, and form those bonds, would remain basically unchanged.

The Edge of the World

One observer of the news system employed by the Zulus was impressed by the "certainty and celerity" with which news traveled.[53] Celerity, yes. News of the pot defiled with crocodile did spread with impressive speed; and with the use of runners the Zulus could accelerate their news still further. But certainty? Elementary school teachers have a game that demonstrates how unreliable oral communication can sometimes be. They have students whisper a message from person to person around the room. The message soon becomes unintelligible.

Oral societies were not quite as vulnerable to misunderstandings as that classroom game might suggest. Because they knew the world through word of mouth, members of these societies had to train themselves to achieve a certain precision in their whispering. The use of news specialists further improved the accuracy of their communication. Employing a messenger to carry the news over a distance, or a crier to distribute it to an entire village, at the very least reduced the number of individuals—each capable of adding distortion—through which a news item had to pass. The use

of objects to supplement oral reports also could increase their reliability. A Bedouin scout's report on the fertility of a pasture could hardly be doubted if he was carrying an armful of grass.

Nevertheless, any news system that is based primarily on multiple exchanges among individuals is going to be subject to distortion and inaccuracies. Tongues—no matter how well trained—will occasionally slip; there will be lapses in comprehension. And how many stories can be backed up by an armful of grass? Messages may not have consistently grown unintelligible in these societies, but they could not be consistently relied upon either.

Consider the experience of Ukokko's brother, a member of the Yahgan tribe at the southern tip of South America. After receiving word that Ukokko and his family had been shipwrecked and murdered on an island, this devoted brother quickly gathered some friends and set out in search of revenge. However, the gang of angry avengers soon found themselves "in a very awkward situation": After presumably charging with weapons raised onto the island where Ukokko had landed, they learned that the news—as was often the case—had been incorrect. Ukokko was safe; he had not been mistreated. The anthropologist who passes along this story notes that among the Yahgan "most news . . . is communicated from mouth to mouth." "The facts," he says, "are inevitably altered in various ways."[54]

Oral societies were particularly vulnerable to the storyteller's natural temptation to exaggerate. The feared bush cows inevitably created a sensation for the Tiv in Nigeria when a few of them wandered down from the hills every five or six years. One week in 1950 a Tiv town received a visit from three bush cows. They may have injured one man. The news quickly spread, but just as quickly the number of casualties grew. Soon it was being reported that three men had been injured, another killed. Then in the hands of a "song maker" it became ten wounded, two dead, and six bush cows.[55] Each person who played a role in spreading the story had an opportunity to improve upon it, and, of course, there was nothing on paper to give the lie to these embellishments.

Freedom from paper, with its ability to harden facts, made it easier for the news to bend in the direction not only of drama but of hope. Raymond Firth recorded a score of inaccurate rumors of ships said to be about to dock at Tikopia, rumors that were generated, he surmised, by simple wish-fulfillment.[56]* Spoken news is also flexible enough to accommodate most stereotypes: Bush cows are vicious; therefore they must have wounded more than one man.

Journalists working in any medium will surrender at some point to the comfort and convenience of stereotypes. But stereotypes settle particularly easily into spoken news, and they have special value for those who attempt to spread news in a preliterate society. Formulas, clichés, and stereotypes—from the stock phrases of Homeric epics ("clever Odysseus") to the vicious bush cows of the Tiv—are easy to store and then recall from our memories—always an important consideration in an

*The difference between rumor and news, in these societies at least, was mostly a matter of degree. Few news stories were seen as entirely trustworthy; few rumors were presented or received as entirely discreditable. Rumor was news that was less likely to prove true.

exclusively oral society where the forgettable will be quickly forgotten.[57] The more minds and memories an item of news is filtered through, the more the imprint of the stereotypes lurking in those minds and memories will be felt on that news item. In other words, the heroes grow braver, the bush cows more murderous, as the news is relayed from person to person through a society.

The limitations inherent in spoken news go beyond such inaccuracies and distortions. Despite their remarkable speed, oral news systems have limited breadth. As distances grow, the number of people required to move the news grows—with the attendant risk of additional distortions. Runners and travelers may have enabled news of a king's death to travel three hundred miles, but that must have tested the limits of the system. The great expanses of jungles or deserts were opaque to news of less radiant personages, less charged events, or more complex circumstances.

News cannot do its work for a society unless it can penetrate that society. Oral culture, the historian Brian Stock writes, "suits small, isolated communities."[58] Empires, even nation states, could not be kept informed by the mechanisms available to such a culture. In 1954 the residents of a remote village in India, without access to any modern news media, were queried on their knowledge of current events. News that India had gained its independence had reached them all, but no one in the village had heard of the cold war, no one knew of the partition of India and Pakistan, and only one person in the village, the headman, had heard of the country's prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.[59] The village's news system simply did not reach all the way to New Delhi, let alone Moscow or Washington.

From the perspective of a society dependent for its news upon individuals meeting, chatting, running, or proclaiming, the political world, and even the known world, ends at some point. Its edge may be a three-day run away or a three-week caravan trip away, but most of the other cultures in the world are lost in the void beyond.

Such limitations in spoken news are more than mere anthropological curiosities. Gathering places, travel, busybodies, messengers, criers, and minstrels were the sources humankind relied on for news for tens of thousands of years. The limitations of spoken news enforced limitations on the cultural perspectives and political possibilities available to most of the world's population.

Questions

1. What other uses of language are as important as the exchange of news?
2. What places contribute to the exchange of news in modern societies?
3. Discuss some of the ways in which the role played by messengers and criers in oral societies differs from that played by professional journalists today.
4. Find contemporary examples to illustrate each of the seven qualities mentioned here as making occurrences newsworthy.
5. Does our world today have an "edge?" In other words, are there places or cultures today into which our contemporary news system fails to penetrate?