ABSTRACTING IN THE
Gregg Hoffmann* # NEWS-MAKING PROCESS

DURING 20 YEARS AS A JOURNALIST, and seven years of teaching reporting courses, I have become increasingly aware of the abstracting process in the development of a news story.

Journalists are the professional map-makers of our society. They are charged with trying to make their maps as accurate and as close to the territory as possible. It is not an easy task.

In recent years, I have used general semantics principles to help my journalism students at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee become more aware of abstracting. I have also tried to use those principles in the field to make me a better map-maker.

We usually start each semester talking about the influences inherent in the news business that affect abstracting. For example, most newspapers try to maintain a 70-30 split between advertising and news; some are at 75-25. The larger figure in both cases reflects the percentage of column inches devoted to advertising. The smaller figure represents the so-called news hole.

This very factor leads to abstracting, or gatekeeping. Some stories simply do not run because there is not room. There are those in the field and out who suggest that the *New York Times* slogan "All the News That's Fit to Print" might be changed to "All the News That Fits."

Time limitations also influence abstracting. For example, I cover the Milwaukee Brewers for a Wisconsin daily newspaper. The average game lasts around three hours, which means a night game is over around 10:45 p.m. My newspaper has an 11:30 deadline. That leaves me little time to do interviews, race back to the press box and write a story, which then must fit into a news hole (often about 15 column inches).

Needless to say, I cannot take time to include everything that happened, or to interview everybody involved in the key plays, etc. In fact, quite often, the players who make my story are the ones who take the quickest showers and are ready to talk.

The abstracting process in news making also is influenced by the very bureaucracy of the average news organization. Each story might be read by two or three editors, who add their own abstractions, or delete those of the reporter.

Several learned values, considered very important to developing "a nose for news," also become involved in the abstracting process. Some of these values include timeliness (news is new); the use of credible sources; sticking to the "facts" such as who, what, when, where, why, and how; and objectivity.(1)

The concept of objectivity has been at the center of debate in the journal-

* Gregg Hoffmann is a lecturer at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and a Wisconsin journalist. He was the recipient of a 1989 Sanford I. Berman Research Grant.

ism profession for several years.(2) Does it mean presenting a balanced view, including as many perspectives as possible? Does it mean neutrally collecting data without challenging sources, etc.? Does it mean journalists simply mirror reality?

I have spent many a night debating the mirror analogy with fellow journalists. It is my own feeling that the mirror analogy does not accurately reflect (no pun intended) the newsmaking process. We simply cannot reflect all of reality (the territory). We inevitably abstract and create a map of the territory.

In my reporting courses, I use a mirror (taken from my home's bedroom wall) as a property to illustrate what I feel is the fallacy of the mirror analogy. I will walk around the room holding the mirror, which is roughly 18 by 20 inches. I ask students to describe what they see in the mirror.

We then discuss the things that are not included in the mirror image. What about parts of the room that fall outside the parameter of the mirror? What about the classmate in the next chair, whose ear is the only part of his anatomy that is reflected in the mirror?

Could an analogy be drawn with the details, events, issues, etc., which fall outside the parameter of the reporter's perspective? Or the events which simply are not covered because of the lack of manpower, space limitations or a lack of interest?

I then start to slant the mirror, first left and then right. We discuss how the movement of the mirror affects the reflections.

Can we draw an analogy with slants in news coverage, when the reporter becomes involved in the process? I usually introduce the role of the "map-maker on the map" at this point in the discussion.

Another technique that seems to work with my students is to take a single story and trace it through the news making process. (See diagram with this article.) I give the students the following information:

A 1987 Chevrolet, driven by Jerry Smith, 30, Milwaukee, collides with a 1988 Olds, driven by Mabel Jones, 61 West Allis, on southbound I-94 in Milwaukee. Smith was uninjured. Jones received fractured ribs. A passenger in Jones' car, Annabel Brown, 77, also of West Allis, received cuts and bruises to her forehead.

The students then write a news story from this information. A typical story might read:

> Two West Allis women were injured in a two-car accident on southbound I-94 about 9:30 p.m. yesterday, according to police.
>
> Mabel Jones, 61, the driver of a 1988 Oldsmobile, received fractured ribs. Annabel Brown, 77, a passenger in Jones' car, received cuts and bruises to her forehead. Both are listed in serious condition at Memorial Hospital.
>
> Police said Jones' car was headed south when it collided with a 1987 Chevrolet, driven by Jerry Smith, 30, Milwaukee. Smith was uninjured in the accident. Authorities are still investigating for further details.

We then discuss how such a story might be covered. Often, it will not be

directly covered by a reporter. Instead, he or she will learn of the accident when making his or her daily rounds on the police beat. The main source of information will be a police report, prepared by officers who likely obtained their information by talking to the victims or witnesses.

For the purpose of this exercise, I tell the students that they have been sent to cover this accident. When the reporter arrives at the scene, the victims already have been taken to the hospital and cleanup is underway. The reporter hurries into action, questioning some witnesses. The class then discusses how that reporter is relying on the abstractions of those witnesses.

The reporter likely will also go to "credible sources." He or she will talk to police, who might have talked to the same witnesses.

After he or she has completed the work at the scene, the reporter must return to the office and write. He or she is told there is a 5-inch news hole for the story and a half hour until deadline. The reporter contacts the hospital to get the condition of the victims and does any followup information collecting.

He or she then writes the story, making decisions on what and what not to use, how to organize the information, how to write the story in a way that will interest readers, etc. The reporter also must be very careful in word choice. For example, to write "Smith's car hit Jones" could imply guilt that has not yet been determined.

About this time, a student or two will chime in, noting how many "levels of abstractions" the story already is removed from the original event itself. I usually tell them that's just the start of abstracting.

After the reporter writes his or her story, it will go to a copy editor, who will form some abstractions and write a headline. At larger papers, more than one editor might work on the story. Abstractions are being added. Maps are being made of maps.

Of course, when the readers see the story the next morning, they also will abstract. It is very difficult for the journalist to predict what details those readers will find most interesting and important.

At this point in the exercise, I usually add some information. I tell my students that in the hours from the time the newspaper was "put to bed" and the time the readers sit down to read the story, things have changed. Brown has had convulsions and has slipped into critical condition. The police have found pot in Smith's car. These details are not in the story. Therefore, they can't be part of your readers' perception of the accident.

At this time, the students usually start talking among themselves about the layers of abstracting. I then add one final item. Because the reporter was sent to cover the accident, he or she could not cover a housing meeting that was held on the same night. That meeting will not be part of the readers' world view at all. It fell outside the parameter of the mirror.

I have found these techniques to be quite effective in sensitizing students to the abstracting process involved in reporting. I also have discussed these with colleagues in the journalism profession. Many have said they always were aware

of the problems in getting at the truth of an event or issue. They felt the abstracting exercises brought a systematic approach towards explaining the map-making of a journalist.

In fact, it was on the urging of these journalists that I sought a Sanford I. Berman research grant from the International Society of General Semantics in 1989. I hope to use the grant to work with journalists and general semanticists in developing programs on news reporting and news judgment as the profession enters the 21st century.

Some of the questions I hope to explore include:

1. Could a better understanding of the abstracting process and Korzybski's scientific model make journalists better map-makers?(3)

2. Could general semantics principles make journalists even more aware of limitations on our language?

3. Could we use the general semantics principle of process to encourage more coverage of developing issues, rather than a reliance on event coverage?(4)

4. Can general semantics principles suggest ways for journalists to stay in touch with their readers?

5. Would an understanding of abstracting help readers better understand the newsmaking process?

I believe these and other questions are very important for journalism students, journalists and the audience to address. As we approach the 21st century, the news media will become even more important in providing information and images which all of us use to form our world views. I believe we all can benefit from finding ways to use general semantics to better understand the abstracting process in news making.

Accident Diagram

ACCIDENT → REPORTER/WITNESSES' INTERVIEWS → REPORTER/POLICE INTERVIEWS → REPORTER SEEKS ADDITIONAL INFO → REPORTER WRITES STORY → EDITORS EDIT FOR SPACE, ETC. → EDITOR ADDS HEADLINE → READER ABSTRACTS WHILE READING STORY.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality.* Gaye Tuchman. Free Press. New York, N.Y., 1978.
2. *Media, Myths and Narratives: Television and the Press.* James Carey (ed.), Sage Publications. Newbury Park, Calif. 1989.
3. *Science and Sanity.* Alfred Korzybski. Institute of General Semantics. Englewood, N.J., 1933.
4. *Bridging Worlds Through General Semantics.* Mary Morain (ed.), International Society for General Semantics. San Francisco, Calif. 1984.