

The News Paradigm and the Ideology of Objectivity: A Socialist at The Wall Street Journal

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□—*This study examines the news paradigm as an occupational ideology whose major feature is the principle of objectivity, and the larger hegemonic function of that paradigm. An anomalous case is analyzed to illustrate paradigmatic repair: A. Kent MacDougall caused a controversy in the journalistic community and threatened the paradigmatic norm of objectivity when he revealed that he had been a radical socialist during his ten years as a reporter for The Wall Street Journal. Three types of repair are examined: (a) disengaging and distancing the threatening values from the reporter's work, (b) reasserting the ability of journalistic routines to prevent threatening values from "distorting" the news, and (c) marginalizing the man and his message, making both appear ineffective.*

ON the evening of March 4, 1983, Cecil Andrews set himself on fire in a deserted Alabama town square, in what he called an act of protest against unemployment. The event was recorded by a local TV news camera crew, alerted by Andrews, who conveniently waited for them to arrive and set up. The national controversy following the event centered not on the jobless protestor but on the behavior of the news media. Would the man have ignited himself had the camera not been present? Probably not. Should the camera crew have tried to stop the man rather than filming his efforts for 37 seconds? Yes. The troubling story violated the journalistic norm that reporters record reality, not create it.

In their analysis of the Andrews episode and the commentary it provoked, Bennett, Gressett, and Haltom (1985) observe that the story was an "anomaly," a troubling story that did not fit comfortably into journalistic routines yet presented enough routine features to fall within what Tuchman (1978) calls the "news net." The camera crew arrived to record what they thought would be authorities subduing the man. When police were delayed, however, the "script" was so strong that the news crew proceeded anyway, thus, in effect, triggering the event rather than responding to it. Bennett et al. contend that such anomalies bring the internal logic of news

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gathering into sharp focus and provide an excellent opportunity to study the limits of the journalistic paradigm.

In describing scientific inquiry, Kuhn (1962, p. 23) defined a paradigm as “an accepted model or pattern” that guides those engaged in complex information-producing tasks; it focuses attention on some problems and necessarily excludes others that cannot be as easily stated using the tools supplied by the paradigm. To make sense of the world, journalists, like scientists, rely on a paradigm, which remains of value so long as it provides a useful practical guide for them and they share its underlying assumptions.

Bennett et al. (1985, p. 55) note that, like all paradigms, the news model faces the problem of “anomalous or troublesome cases that fall partly within the defining logic of the paradigm, yet fail to conform to other defining characteristics of the paradigm.” These cases threaten the paradigm by calling into question its limitations and biases, and, therefore, must be “repaired.” They argue that the journalistic community repaired the Andrews case by retrospectively defining the core event as unnewsworthy, by introducing official sources as the story developed, and by blaming the event on methodological error rather than any blind spots in the professional guidelines. Bennett et al. note that “no single anomalous case can reveal the logic of an entire paradigm” (p. 56) but that a series of distinct cases can help develop a more complete understanding.

This study examines another such anomaly to probe the principle of objectivity and locates it within a larger ideological framework. Here I address what Becker (1984, p. 73) calls one of the key questions in critical media studies: How is the dominant ideology linked up to the norms and practices, or “occupational ideology,” of media workers? Similarly, Murdock and Golding (1979) fault traditional studies of the sociology of media occupational practice for emphasizing pure description and failing to locate these occupations in the larger social order. They argue for “linking the general set of values and frame within which culture is set to the particular norms of occupational practice; in a phrase, linking the ruling ideology to occupational ideologies” (p. 35).

In this article I examine these links by exploring the journalistic “occupational ideology” through the notion of paradigm, relating it to occupational practices and considering its larger ideological function. The following discussion analyzes a troublesome case for the news paradigm involving not a specific story but an individual reporter.

After a long career reporting for *The Wall Street Journal* and the *Los Angeles Times*, A. Kent MacDougall revealed that he had been a socialist throughout that time and had written for radical publications while employed at the *Journal*. The controversy within the journalistic community over his revelations helps shed light on unwritten paradigmatic assumptions, particularly regarding objectivity. I will review the commentary that was generated by his actions, particularly from within the profession and show how paradigmatic assumptions and routines were reaffirmed and strengthened. If MacDougall violated a central tenet, we should find evidence of paradigm maintenance—attempts to “repair” his apparent violation of those rules

and normalize the case. The steps taken to address the anomaly help explain the nature and limits of the paradigm.

MacDougall's actions as a reporter direct attention toward that major part of mainstream press content that purports to be straight, objective news. Many journalists, of course, are expected to voice their opinions—albeit within a fairly narrow range—through newspaper columns and editorials or in broadcast commentary. Confining such opinions to clearly designated locations, such as the editorial pages, however, creates the illusion that other news content is delivered “straight,” free of journalists' values. Indeed, by not appearing openly ideological, mainstream press reporting becomes all the more ideologically effective.

The fact that MacDougall reported for *The Wall Street Journal* makes his case especially intriguing for a study of values and objectivity. The *Journal*, more than any other paper, is associated with the inner core of U.S. capitalism. It is heavily relied on by the financial elite and is part of a larger corporate enterprise, Dow Jones. All of this, one might expect, would make it particularly sensitive to the values expressed by MacDougall. At the same time, the *Journal's* reporting has had a long-standing reputation for credibility and factual accuracy (e.g., Kwitny, 1984), while sharing a faith in objectivity with the rest of the mainstream press.

As this case will show, the process of paradigm repair ultimately must be understood within the larger ideological context. Journalistic practice has its own autonomy yet stands in a structured relationship with powerful institutions. This is not to say that media practices are dictated automatically by ruling-class interests or the modes of production; but the paradigm must be negotiated and renegotiated in view of these forces. The meaning of objectivity itself is not fixed but continually contested in an ideological struggle.

PARADIGMS, REPAIR, AND HEGEMONY

PARADIGMS

The notion of paradigm directs our attention, as Scholle (1988, p. 36) advocates, away from the ideological content of texts to an “analysis of the forms of knowledge, norms, and models that make particular forms of experience historically possible.” Knowledge is produced as a consequence of the practices that constitute the news paradigm (Hall, 1985), or what Foucault (1980, p. 132) calls the “ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated.”

A paradigm exerts powerful influence by restricting the range of questions deemed appropriate for study. According to Kuhn (1962), paradigms provide examples rather than explicit rules. Thus, one learns the paradigm by engaging in the discipline, and the paradigm's effectiveness is not inhibited because it may be unwritten or even inarticulable by its practitioners.

The journalistic paradigm defines what becomes part of our second-hand reality received through the news media, and thus it is every bit as important as scientific paradigms. Both science and journalism are empirical information-gathering activities that have developed learnable routines for their practitioners. Both scientists and journalists are presumed to be dispassionate observers of the world, guided primarily

by their observations (although scientists are perhaps given a broader mission to explain, in addition to describing, the physical world). Both science and journalism are guided by a positivist faith in empiricism, the belief that the external world can be successfully perceived and understood.

Unlike physical scientists, however, journalists observe phenomena that can fight back, dispute the way they are described, and set the rules for their observation. Scientists have theories to guide them, while journalists are supposed to be guided by the reality of events. In the absence of well-defined theoretical guideposts, journalists rely more heavily than scientists on routines as a basis and justification for descriptions of reality. Tuchman (1972), for example, notes that these routine practices represent a "strategic ritual" that helps protect against the risks of the trade, including such pressures as deadlines, libel suits, and reprimands from superiors. A violation of routines, then, threatens the news paradigm itself; conversely, routines can be invoked, particularly by those within the profession, as a defense against an alleged paradigm violation. Indeed, we should expect routines to be invoked as the defense of last resort (see Forrest, 1989).

Gans (1979, p. 183) argues that both scientific and journalistic methods are validated by consensus. The consensual nature of newsgathering supports the notion of a guiding news paradigm, the mainstream press being particularly single-minded in its shared values and assumptions (see, e.g., Reese & Danielian, 1989). Lacking an objective standard for evaluating what are often highly ambiguous situations, journalists find it useful to agree among themselves. As Sigal (1973, pp. 180-181) found:

Newsmaking is a consensual process. The forming of consensus takes place within a context of shared values—conventions about news as well as conceptions of the newsman's role. . . . So long as newsmen follow the same routines, espousing the same professional values and using each other as their standards of comparison, newsmaking will tend to be insular and self-reinforcing. But that insularity is precisely what newsmen need. It provides them with a modicum of certitude that enables them to act in an otherwise uncertain environment.

As the professionalization of news work has increased, the paradigm perhaps has grown more entrenched but less obvious.¹

Thus, the news paradigm may be seen as a model of information gathering, imbedded in journalistic practices, and centered on ways of determining the newsworthiness of events and the way they are to be transmitted to an audience. The ideal of objectivity is central to this model.

OBJECTIVITY

Objectivity has been called "the emblem" of American journalism (Schudson, 1978, p. 9). In recent years, journalists have found it increasingly hard to maintain that they are wholly "objective" and have fallen back on more defensible standards, like "accuracy," "balance," and "fairness." The underlying principles of objectivity nonetheless remain firmly entrenched. The ideal of objectivity holds that facts can be separated from values or opinions and that journalists act as neutral transmitters who pass along events to an audience (Hackett, 1984). Therefore, the intrusion of value

into a recitation of facts threatens objectivity, and a reporter with strongly held values threatens the smooth operation of the system.

As Hackett (1984, p. 251) observes, traditional studies of objectivity and bias in news accounts assume that "news can and ought to be objective, balanced and a reflection of social reality" and that "the political attitudes of journalists or editorial decision-makers are a major determinant of news bias." He argues that the practical objectivity criteria of *balance* and *nondistortion* are epistemologically incompatible. Both criteria, however, require that journalists' values be kept out of reporting.

For example, Hackett (1984) observes that news stories often balance competing truth claims that rest on incompatible world-views by implying that the truth lies somewhere in between, but this relativist assumption requires that the news organization itself not take a position, letting the truth emerge from a plurality of perspectives. He also argues that the goal of nondistortion in objectivity rests on an assumption that "the facts" are ultimately knowable; the journalist is a detached observer, separate from the reality being reported, and capable of transmitting a truthful account of "what's out there." Thus, in this case too, the journalist must be value-free so as to not keep "the real facts" from getting through.

In this study I treat objectivity as part of the news paradigm. Doing so focuses analysis on the kind of knowledge made possible by this "ensemble of rules" and rejects the notion of an external reality, open to distortion through biased, non-objective reporting.

PARADIGMS AND HEGEMONY

The news media play an essential role in maintaining the authority of the political system. Thus, the news paradigm can be seen as operating within this larger ideological sphere, particularly in relation to hegemonic processes. Hegemony may be defined as the "systematic (but not necessarily or even usually deliberate) engineering of mass consent to the established order" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 253). By not appearing openly coercive, this control is all the more effective. The concept of hegemony, as developed by Gramsci, entails moral, political, and intellectual leadership within a social system; the ruling group does not simply impose a class ideology on others but rather provides the articulating principle by which diverse ideological elements are unified into a world-view. As Mouffe (1981) puts it, complex ideological ensembles existing at a given moment are the result of a constant process of transformation.

The media function in this process to "certify the limits within which all competing definitions of reality will contend" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 254). Media reproduce a consistent ideology without being instructed directly by the state. This leads Hall (1985, p. 101) to ask, "How is it that they are driven again and again, to such a limited repertoire within the ideological field?" The answer, in large part, is that they accept the frames imposed on events by officials and marginalize and delegitimize voices that fall outside the dominant elite circles. By perpetuating as commonsensical notions of who ought to be treated as authoritative, these routines help the system maintain control without sacrificing legitimacy. Despite journalism's stated goal of depicting reality, the news media—tightly interlocked at the top levels with other powerful institutions—have an interest in preserving the larger liberal,

capitalist system by helping maintain the boundaries of acceptable political discourse. The media establish what is normal and deviant by the way they portray people and ideas. Journalists may frequently conflict with representatives of government and business, but this is a reformist antagonism that does not threaten underlying hegemonic principles (e.g., Dreier, 1982; Parenti, 1978).

The journalistic paradigm, therefore, has been developed, sustained, interpreted, and modified within this larger hegemonic context. Elements of the paradigm may contest the dominant ideology, but this tension is part of the hegemonic process and must be negotiated on an ideological field articulated by ruling interests. As self-perceived professional truth tellers who objectively cover events, journalists naturally resist being overtly manipulated by sources or their own managers. The paradigm provides them with enough latitude to satisfy their professional objectives without treading on core societal values (e.g., the desirability of private property, democracy).

Indeed, the self-policing character of the news paradigm is essential for its hegemonic effectiveness. Values that pose a threat cannot be suppressed directly by ruling interests; doing so would contradict the commonsensical notion that the media are free to report from within their own autonomous position. Instead, the media enforce their own boundaries by insisting that reporters with nonmainstream values keep them out of news accounts and through the natural workings of their own routines. For example, by relying heavily on official statements made through routine channels (Sigal, 1973), journalists give these sources the power, by default, to frame much of their reality. This helps solve the key problem of defining news: News is what authorities and other institutional elites say it is. Official and corporate sources make themselves even more attractive to journalists by "subsidizing" the media's cost of gathering information about them (Gandy, 1982). By making it easier to be covered, through predictable and prearranged packaged pronouncements, these sources can crowd out less strategically advantaged voices. The media benefit by being assured of efficient channels through which to get an acceptable raw information product.

The logic of the news paradigm must take into account and help justify this state of affairs. The notion of objectivity rests on assumptions that are eminently compatible with hegemonic requirements. Hackett (1984, p. 242) observes that the rules of impartiality not only *disguise* ideological messages in the media but are an essential *part of* their ideological functioning. Prevailing definitions of situations are reinforced, while viewpoints outside the consensus are rendered irrational and illegitimate. Thus, while journalists are being "objective" when they let prominent sources dictate the news, if they use their own expertise to draw conclusions they are considered biased. Giving serious attention to non-official sources is discouraged as "unnewsworthy." The press, for example, largely treated Ronald Reagan uncritically during his first term, because no opposing elites were able or willing to mount an effective challenge and thus make themselves available as oppositional media voices (Hertsgaard, 1988).

By accepting valueless reporting as the norm, the media accept and reinforce the boundaries, values, and ideological "rules of the game" established and interpreted by elite sources. Journalists threaten the paradigm when they express values openly,

particularly values outside the societal mainstream. (Normally, radical writers can be dismissed as falling clearly outside the mainstream paradigm, but MacDougall could not, having worked in the mainstream press for almost 25 years.)

The editing process is particularly compatible with hegemonic requirements. Editors rise to their positions only after fully internalizing the norms of the journalistic paradigm (e.g., Breed, 1955). Although reporters are presumably in closer contact with the reality of their stories, editors are considered less apt to succumb to bias than reporters, who may get "wrapped up" in a story and be blinded to the "big picture." High-ranking editors, particularly at major papers, are also more directly in touch with the values of official and other elite sources and are reluctant to exceed these boundaries. In the early 1960s, for example, David Halberstam was a highly knowledgeable reporter in Vietnam, yet he often had difficulty getting his stateside editors to accept his pessimistic version of the war. The editors had received a more optimistic version from Pentagon and administration officials and were reluctant to contradict it (Sheehan, 1988).

If the individual political views of the communicator are the chief barrier to fully objective reporting of "the facts," it follows that mainstream journalists should not find strongly held values to be occupationally useful. Indeed, Gans (1979) found few journalists in the national media who would admit to consciously held values. He did locate those at *Time* and *Newsweek* who were identified as house radicals and house conservatives. These were the rarities, however, and served primarily to identify boundary markers and help the other journalists feel free of ideology. (Important from a hegemonic perspective is his finding that the house radicals eventually tired of political differences and quit, while the conservatives remained.) In MacDougall's experience, most Left journalists have found mainstream journalism uncomfortable; he cited Chomsky's observation that he knows of no socialists in the strikingly uniform media (MacDougall, 1988a, p. 15). MacDougall also noted the reaction of *Los Angeles Times* publisher Otis Chandler when asked in 1977 about *Times* staffer Robert Scheer, former editor of the leftist publication *Ramparts*: "A radical? If that were true he wouldn't be here" (MacDougall, 1988b, p. 12).

Of course, journalists hold many values that aren't obvious because they are safely within the range of core societal values. Sources notice journalists' values only when those values differ markedly from their own. MacDougall (1988a), for example, said that sources he spoke with while at *The Wall Street Journal* were more candid because they assumed he was as soft on business as the writers for the editorial pages. Referring to the Columbia University School of Journalism, for example, MacDougall noted (p. 16) that this "trade school" gives reporters the mind set needed to thrive in the mainstream press," during the 1950s this mind set included vigorous anti-communism (in addition to valueless reporting).

ANOMALIES AND EVIDENCE OF REPAIR

The MacDougall case can be treated as an anomaly in need of repair, although with some important differences from a conventional "story." Unlike the "man on fire" anomaly, here repair work cannot be traced over time as different facts and frames are introduced into a running story. The MacDougall case does not present a specific story but rather an individual, his statements about what he did, and the

resulting commentary. I examine this material for evidence of paradigm violation and repair. The body of work produced by MacDougall is examined only indirectly through references to it by him and others. Thus, I do not focus on the "texts" of MacDougall's articles but rather on the larger discourses surrounding the case and the practices that it called into question. The alleged bias in his stories is less at issue than the assessments by the journalistic community of paradigm violations.² A strategy of normalization is examined through references to existing standards of journalistic practice.

First, I look for indications that the MacDougall case represents an anomaly by seeking evidence of its ambiguity. If the case is problematic for the paradigm, journalists should have difficulty coming to grips with it. If it is problematic, particularly regarding objectivity, we should be able to observe repair work centering on the role of reporters' values as the paradigm is defended and reaffirmed. Because routines are central to the news paradigm, I expect repair work within the media to resort to them as a major way of normalizing the anomaly.

THE CASE OF A. KENT MACDOUGALL

A. Kent MacDougall, who is now on the faculty at the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California at Berkeley, began his award-winning mainstream press career³ in 1956 at *The Herald-News*, Passaic, New Jersey. Between 1961 and 1972 he worked at *The Wall Street Journal*; beginning in 1977 he spent ten years at the *Los Angeles Times*. His two-part memoirs, "Boring from Within the Bourgeois Press," published in November and December 1988 in the socialist *Monthly Review* (1988a, 1988b), set off a storm of controversy in journalistic circles (see also MacDougall, 1989a). In the article, he said he had written under an alias for radical publications while at *The Wall Street Journal*⁴ and had selected story topics based on his radical beliefs. For example, at *The Wall Street Journal* he profiled I. F. Stone and wrote other articles surveying radical economists and historians; at the *Los Angeles Times* he profiled other radical economists and the left-leaning magazine *Mother Jones*.

The case generated a strong response, including articles and columns in the mainstream press as well as in industry publications. I conducted a thorough search, including the use of DIALOG, Nexis, and VuText⁵ data-base services, for all relevant published mentions of the MacDougall case. The resulting materials referenced in this study represent as thorough and comprehensive a list as possible.

THE CASE AS PROBLEMATIC FOR THE PARADIGM

The ostensible violation of the journalistic paradigm appeared to center on the uneasy relationship between reporter values and objectivity. The first serious attention from inside the media came from former *Journal* reporter Dean Rotbart, who wrote a lengthy review of the case in early January 1989 in a business journalism newsletter, *TJFR: The Journalist & Financial Reporting*. He called MacDougall's career "exemplary" but questioned his professionalism, particularly the practice of seeking out sources supportive of a thesis and of having preconceived

sympathies or antagonisms toward subjects (Rotbart, 1989a; rewritten as 1989b). Dow Jones & Company, Inc., parent company of *The Wall Street Journal*, issued the most vociferous reaction a few days later through its corporate relations department, although it declined to mention MacDougall by name or publish a story or editorial in the paper itself. This statement was issued for attribution to a spokesperson for the *Journal*:

We are offended and outraged that a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter now claims he tried to pursue a hidden ideological agenda within the pages of the *Journal*.

However, this reporter left the *Journal* more than 15 years ago and his importance at the *Journal* or in journalism seems somewhat greater in his own mind these days than it was in fact.

We have reviewed articles he wrote while at the *Journal* and we believe our editing process succeeded in making sure that what appeared in print under his byline met *Journal* standards of accuracy, newsworthiness and fairness.

Finally, we find it bizarre and troubling that any man who brags of having sought to push a personal political agenda on unsuspecting editors and readers should be teaching journalism at a respected university (Austin, 1989).

I also obtained a form letter from Dow Jones (March 29, 1989) sent to those complaining about the matter, which does name MacDougall and makes the same points, referring in the opening paragraph to a "hidden ideological agenda." *TJFR* framed the issue in much the same way, as striking at perhaps the most sensitive nerve—journalistic credibility: How vulnerable is a paper to reporters manipulating the news in pursuing their personal agenda? ("Recent Revelations," 1989). MacDougall's more recent media employer, the *Los Angeles Times*, refused to make a statement officially, but it did so in a backhanded manner. A spokesperson said *Times* policy prohibited comments about ex-employees, adding, "it can give them more credibility" ("Recent Revelations," 1989, p. 8)—implying, "more credibility than is warranted."

The violation also may be seen in the amount of publicity surrounding the case and the way it was characterized. For example, a nationally distributed *Los Angeles Times* story said that MacDougall's memoirs had "sparked a contretemps in the mainstream journalistic community" (Shaw, 1989a, p. 1; reprinted as Shaw, 1989b). In a follow-up reaction piece to its first article, *TJFR* noted that the incident has sparked "heated debates" in journalistic circles ("Recent Revelations," 1989, p. 1). An article in the newspaper trade publication *Editor & Publisher* said that MacDougall had "created a media furor with his revelations" (Stein, 1989, p. 10). Considering how long it had been since MacDougall worked for the *Journal*, the case received more publicity than might have been expected. Indeed, the case continued to draw interest at least six months after MacDougall's initial revelations in November (Walljasper, 1989). The problematic nature of the story gave it staying power.

Unlike the Andrews case, this story was not carried by the supreme arbiter of newsworthiness, *The New York Times*—although it almost was. *Times* correspondent Albert Scardino was assigned the story the first week in January, but he could not find an angle acceptable to his editors. He says his first story was rejected for failing to define an ethical issue or to present a compelling case that MacDougall had done anything wrong. A revised story asked whether reporters have points of view

and whether, if they do, it is helpful or harmful. Scardino says he declined to simplify an issue that he saw as complex but that his editors saw as black and white—that is, reporters should be apolitical (personal communication, August 2, 1989).⁶ Exactly why the *Times* declined to run the story is unclear, but the reporter's difficulty in finding an acceptable angle itself suggests that the story was problematic.⁷

The case also presented ample overt evidence of being problematic. The *TJFR* follow-up article said that the case provided a rare glimpse of the fuzzy lines between right and wrong in journalism, where there is often no rule book or final arbiter (“Recent Revelations,” 1989, p. 1). The same article noted that journalists like to present a united front to the outside world even though they vary in their beliefs and behavior (p. 1). MacDougall himself acknowledged the ambiguousness of the paradigm and used the uneasy relationship between routines and values to his advantage. He learned that “editors would support a reporter against charges by a news source, special-interest group, or reader that the reporter’s story was biased or had some other major defect as long as the reporter had gotten all the minor facts right” (MacDougall, 1988a, p. 19).

Knowing that reporters must speak through sources, he said, “I made sure to seek out experts whose opinions I knew in advance would support my thesis. . . . Conversely, I sought out mainstream authorities to confer recognition and respectability on radical views I sought to popularize” (MacDougall, 1988a, p. 23). He paid his dues by cranking out routine business stories, playing within the established rules of *The Wall Street Journal*. Thus, he was given latitude to pick feature topics and report in depth. His writing included enough attributes of the paradigm to be acceptable—although not without provoking the occasional angry audience response: “Are you a communist?” said one reader in reaction to his *Mother Jones* piece (MacDougall, 1988b, p. 14). A forestry industry group, critical of his series for the *Los Angeles Times* on “The Vanishing Forests,” suggested he was fostering an “anti-private-enterprise view” (Benneth, 1989).

MacDougall said that his stories contained enough “significance, controversy, color and surprise to satisfy commercial journalistic standards for relevance and readability” and that his “calm, matter-of-fact, non-polemical tone fit the formula” (MacDougall, 1988a, p. 24). He said that the *Los Angeles Times* permitted its reporters wide latitude, valuing diversity as an attention getter as long as the reporter “adheres to the readily assimilated professional code of objectivity and impartiality and doesn’t violate canons against being shrill and propagandistic or stating a personal opinion” (MacDougall, 1988b, p. 13). One columnist felt that MacDougall had “got away with” slanting by being factually accurate and avoiding leftist cliché’s (Morris, 1989).

The ambiguity of the case is also revealed through editors’ reactions to MacDougall’s work at the time. At the *Los Angeles Times*, one editor liked a series on economic inequality enough to write a glowing Pulitzer Prize nomination statement, which noted that MacDougall had backed up his research with “interviews with scores of economists, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists”; the page one feature editor downplayed the series, choosing not to run it on consecutive days (as was the custom) and to not run one of the four stories on page one (MacDougall, 1988b, p. 19).

The notion that MacDougall fell outside the hegemonic boundaries maintained by

the news paradigm is supported by the language used to describe him. Throughout the case, the rhetoric includes terms that set limits. MacDougall himself said: "What I was—and wasn't—able to report in two of the nation's most enlightened dailies indicates the limits within which socially conscious journalists can practice their craft in mainstream media" (MacDougall, 1988a, p. 14). His success, he said, suggests that the "limits of the permissible are wider than many radicals would suppose" (p. 15) (but perhaps not as wide as they might like). He admitted that he had been "pushing against the limits set by the *Wall Street Journal's* standardized news formula" (p. 24).

The predictable attack from the conservatives zeroed in on this idea of violated boundaries (e.g., Irvine, 1989). Kincaid (1989, p. 7) noted that Accuracy in Media had started a letter-writing campaign to media heads, asking, for example, if NBC "has adequate safeguards against similar abuses by other media moles." Kincaid (1988, p. 4) said that the case raised concern "about the ability of Marxist agents to penetrate the mainstream media" and would make it harder for *The Wall Street Journal* to defend itself against charges of liberal bias. Columnists referred to MacDougall's "subterranean antics" (Cheshire, 1989) as a "clandestine Marxist" (Morris, 1989). MacDougall himself entitled his *Monthly Review* piece "Boring from Within" (1988a, 1988b).

THE NORMALIZATION PROCESS

I have argued that the news paradigm helps justify the maintenance of ideological boundaries. If the radical socialist values represented by MacDougall and expressed in his memoirs fall outside these boundaries (and this should be apparent from the rhetorical descriptions and the known range of hegemonic acceptability), then repair work would be in order. The stories MacDougall wrote were beyond "repair," but several post hoc repair strategies were possible: (a) disengaging and distancing these threatening values from the reporter's work, (b) reasserting the ability of journalistic routines to prevent threatening values from "distorting" the news, and (c) marginalizing the man and his message, making both appear ineffective. The press takes an active role in the normalization process and, indeed, carried out the repair work in this case without any help from other institutions. And to a large extent MacDougall, too, engaged in this normalization process.

Disengage threatening values.

In response to the attack on him, MacDougall mounted a vigorous defense, reaffirming the distinction between values and his professional work, contending that he was "a journalist first and a radical second throughout my career. . . . I stuck to accepted standards of newsworthiness, accuracy and fairness" (Shaw, 1989a, p. 15) and adding that his remarks were misconstrued. He makes it a point to assert that he keeps ideology out of the classroom at Berkeley, choosing to train aspiring journalists in the routines. He says that he never criticizes business in class (because it is all a student can do to get the facts right) ("Recent Revelations," 1989, p. 9). MacDougall does not banish values completely, however. He maintains that his "emergence from

the ideological closet” is serving a useful purpose in encouraging debate over whether journalists’ having unpopular views interferes with their job performance. In his case, he claims, it made him a better reporter (e.g., MacDougall, 1989b).

Others also reaffirmed the distinction between values and reporting (albeit uneasily), claiming that reporters should not seek to promote their own agenda. Tom Goldstein, Dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Berkeley and a former *Journal* reporter, praised MacDougall’s teaching, saying, “We have no ideological litmus test at this school,” and adding that MacDougall’s personal beliefs were his own, “not ours, and he scrupulously keeps ideology out of the classroom” (Shaw, 1989a, p. 16). An unsigned editorial in the *Columbia Journalism Review* sums up this disengagement repair, asking if there is a place for socialist reporters in the capitalist media. It contends that a reporter should “be judged not on the basis of his political beliefs but by the integrity of his work,” and maintains that MacDougall’s work did have integrity (“Comment,” 1989, p. 16). The article goes on to argue that mainstream journalists ought not to have only one set of mainstream values, supporting MacDougall’s contention that a variety of perspectives can benefit journalism (p. 17).

The repair work using the disengagement approach was not completely successful, nor could it have been. The counterparadigmatic yet appealing notion of free expression of diverse opinion kept intruding. One columnist criticized MacDougall for “promoting radical causes” yet praised MacDougall’s radical father, a long-time Northwestern University journalism professor, for being outspoken. He concluded that it is wrong when a man admits his “professional life was a masquerade and is allowed to teach others the craft” (Cheshire, 1989). He does not explain why MacDougall is accused of masquerading even though values are ideally to be kept out of reporting. (Ironically, this apparently conservative columnist made the same argument as leftist Alexander Cockburn—that MacDougall should have promoted his views forthrightly.) *Wall Street Journal* and *Los Angeles Times* editors also said they valued diversity. Frederick Taylor, *Journal* managing editor during MacDougall’s last two years there, accepted that MacDougall would choose some stories over others because of his views, as would others with more conservative values (Taylor, 1989). A *Seattle Times* ombudsman’s column similarly argued that reporters with differing views “can help broaden and enrich” political discussion, while of course being held to the same “rigorous standards of fairness” MacDougall followed (Wetzel, 1989).

Reassert journalistic routines.

The primary defense within the journalistic community was to reaffirm the ability of the editing routine to handle the anomaly, to wring out any potential bias. As the *Columbia Journalism Review* senior editor told a reporter: “The safeguards worked, the editing system is in place” (Vick, 1989).⁸ The Dow Jones letter made the same point: “We believe our editing process succeeded” (Austin, 1989). If that was true, why was Dow Jones so upset? Indeed, journalistic consensus was not perfect.

The common reaction among editors responding to the story, however, was that bias would have been dealt with in the editing process. *Los Angeles Times* editor at the time, John Lawrence, explicitly stated that he edited out any hints of MacDougall’s

bias (Shaw, 1989a, p. 16). In another article Lawrence expressed ambivalence about MacDougall's reporting: "Being a Marxist doesn't necessarily have to detract from his journalistic integrity. Every reporter comes to a story with some level of bias. The question is: Are they capable of rising above that bias to write a fair story?" Lawrence concluded that MacDougall was capable, and went on to support his contention that radicals might be more objective than conservatives and therefore might be better journalists ("Recent Revelations," 1989, p. 8). Yet he said he would not have allowed MacDougall to write about a Marxist economist if he had known he was "as strong a proponent . . . as he now claims to have been" (Shaw, 1989a, p. 16). This uneasiness suggests that Lawrence thought reporters are able to rise above their bias but that it is better not to tempt them.

MacDougall received general support from his former editors⁹ of course, they were the ones who had approved his stories. Michael Gartner, now head of NBC News and MacDougall's editor at *The Wall Street Journal*, said that he had assumed MacDougall was liberal but that it didn't affect his reporting: "I judge journalists by one thing—whether they are fair, thorough and accurate" (Shaw, 1989a, p. 15). Gartner agreed that the strict *Wall Street Journal* editing process would have filtered out any bias before it got into print ("Recent Revelations," 1989, p. 8). William F. Thomas, editor of the *Los Angeles Times* until January 1, 1989, affirmed the ability of a reporter to keep values separate from professional duties. He said that he knew MacDougall was left of center but that he "met every journalistic standard. He was a professional" (Shaw, 1989a, p. 15).

Columnist Donald Morris (1989) also reaffirmed the effectiveness of the editing process, saying that editors would simply "spike" or edit out bias, or not hire reporters prone to such slanting in the first place. (Note the emphasis on recruitment in maintaining the paradigm.) In addition, Morris claimed that slanting a story is hard to do, given the simple factual nature of most stories (but this avoids the issue of selectivity). *Time* magazine's article concluded with an uneasy paradigmatic tension between bias and diversity. The editing process would have prevented MacDougall from "pursuing any hidden agenda," said the article, yet it noted editor Gartner's belief that having a socialist on the staff added a diversity that benefited readers (Zuckerman, 1989).

Minimize the man and his message.

The third repair technique used to neutralize the paradigmatic threat was to minimize MacDougall and his message. This included, as in the Dow Jones letter quoted above, questioning his participation in carrying on the paradigm through his teaching function. In the first apparent media mention of the case and official response, on December 15 the *New York Post* carried a blurb quoting *Journal* corporate relations spokesperson Charles Stabler, who adopted the minimization strategy: "He said in the story that he spent his weekends writing about CIA dirty tricks and restrictive immigration laws. If he had been doing that for us, he'd have had a more successful career." He added that "no one cared" that MacDougall was using the *Journal* to spread his ideology because "he wasn't taken that seriously" ("Radical Doings," 1988). Others continued this theme. Morris (1989) quoted an anonymous *Los Angeles Times* editor saying, "If he slipped any messages through,

they were so oblique that nobody got it” and concluding that there are easier ways to get messages across than being a closet Marxist.

Others attempted to marginalize MacDougall, and de-emphasize his contribution, by referring to him in derogatory terms.¹⁰ *Times* editor William Thomas said that the name “Walter Mitty” came to mind (Gomes, 1989). Paul Steiger, deputy managing editor of the *Journal*, said that MacDougall was “more a secret agent in his own mind” (Shaw, 1989a, p. 15). *Los Angeles Times* editor Tim Rutten explained, “You know, there’s something concocted about this. I catch the odor of rationalization for personal dissatisfaction with his life. . . . I don’t find any politics in this man’s pieces” (quoted in Cockburn, 1989). Frederick Taylor, *Journal* editor, also took this tack (having also supported the diversity value), saying that he was “madder than hell. I think it is gutless of him to confess now. He’s like a lot of liberals. They want their cake and to eat it too. Why didn’t he say so up front if he believes it so strongly?” (“Recent Revelations,” 1989, p. 8). Taylor said he would not have fired MacDougall for being a socialist but would have had he known of his extracurricular writing.” He said he was especially upset about defending MacDougall against conservative attack and then finding he was a leftist after all (p. 9).

Three columns labeled MacDougall a “Marxist” (Cheshire, 1989; McCarthy, 1989; Morris, 1989), a term he did not use to describe himself and one with more negative connotations than “socialist.” One of these writers found it disturbing that MacDougall “abused that position of trust,” adding that he not only “insinuated his flaky politics into news stories” but unethically contributed to radical publications under a nom de plume. The same writer disparaged MacDougall’s father, describing his arrival at an editorial writers conference, “shambling and snarling along, attended by a handful of admirers” (Cheshire, 1989). One article used a loaded term in saying, inaccurately, that MacDougall claimed to have worked to popularize “Marxist dogma” (Vick, 1989). The *Time* article termed MacDougall’s career “shadowy”¹² and featured a picture of Karl Marx with the caption, “his favorite newsman.” (In his two-piece *Monthly Review* contribution, MacDougall had called Marx his favorite journalist—the only mention in the 27 pages.)

DISCUSSION

I have used this case to illustrate an important theoretical intersection of hegemony, a Kuhnian paradigm, and journalistic practice. Tracing the epistemological roots of objectivity as it relates to the news paradigm directs attention toward the type of knowledge made possible by this model of information gathering and its ideological implications—and away from the traditional news research question of whether that knowledge represents some distortion of an actual external reality. I have discussed this news paradigm in an ideological context in order to link it to the larger hegemonic process. We can learn much about the limits of the paradigm by observing such nonroutine cases and by examining the discourse surrounding the anomaly as repair work is engaged. The journalistic community must undertake this repair if the model is to remain effective, and the ongoing repair project must function within a hegemonic framework, articulated by the dominant ideology.

Although the limited commentary on the MacDougall incident restricted the materials available for analysis, that lack itself suggests the mainstream press’s

difficulty in dealing with the issue. However, repair work can be discerned in the case. This repair necessarily focused on MacDougall himself and the issues he raised rather than on his stories, which had been written long ago and could not be spiked or re-edited.

It could be argued that the lack of coverage indicates that the case was not problematic, or was less so than other cases. Janet Cooke's fabricated story for *The Washington Post*, for example, generated much more commentary. Perhaps her Pulitzer Prize gave her a higher profile. More likely, fabricating stories outright represents a more direct threat to the paradigm than using values to guide reporting.

As in the "man on fire" case, here repair work relied largely on the assertion that readily available and reliable professional routines constitute a reliable news paradigm; the editing process was asserted to have worked to perfection. Three strategies of repair were employed: (a) disengaging the reporter's values from the news, (b) reaffirming journalistic routines, especially the editing process, and (c) marginalizing and minimizing the man and the effectiveness of his message.

Different people within the media engage in different kinds of repair work. Certainly, MacDougall's immediate editors had less problem with his work than did the *Journal's* top editor, Taylor, and its corporate office, which issued the denunciatory letter. These higher levels in the media system are more concerned with protecting the paradigm at the institutional level. And editors at the lower echelon could not easily attack MacDougall's stories, given that they had personally approved them. Future studies may want to probe the different forms of paradigm repair performed at different levels of media systems.

The repair process helps us understand how the paradigm reinforces and justifies hegemonic boundaries. By crossing the lines of hegemonic acceptability, the case required that the paradigm be reaffirmed. Of particular note is that MacDougall prompted greater attack from the Right than from the Left, perhaps not surprising given his value system. The discovery of a conservative at *The Wall Street Journal* surely would have caused no rush to defend journalistic routines. This differential attention to violations of the leftward border shows the importance of interpreting the news paradigm within its hegemonic context.

The most strongly worded media industry complaint was from Dow Jones.¹³ Perhaps, as MacDougall suggested, the company wanted to avoid offending its conservative subscriber base ("Recent Revelations," 1989, p. 9). He notes that the Dow Jones reaction escalated from Charles Stabler's negative but mild comment ("He wasn't taken that seriously") in December to the "offended and outraged" letter in January, with the intervening event being the right-wing December 24 attack in *Human Events* (personal communication, June 5, 1989).¹⁴ That article charged that the *Journal* sheltered other "left-wing" reporters, including Jonathan Kwitny (Kincaid, 1988).

Herman and Chomsky (1988) would characterize this as successful "flak"—negative responses to the media that include complaints, threats, petitions, letters, and articles. In their view, flak originates mostly from the Right—including foundations, think tanks, and media monitors like Accuracy in Media—and is designed to harass, intimidate, discipline, and generally keep the media from straying too far from acceptable elite viewpoints. Certainly, mainstream journalism gives

more attention to attacks from the Right than from the Left. One could argue that Dow Jones was obliged to respond to right-wing flak. Alternatively, flak may be considered a paradigm maintenance device. Clearly, judging from the frequency of attacks from conservatives, the paradigm is showing signs of wear on its right flank and may have to be shored up there in particular.

The Left stance finds value in being apart from “the system,” while the Right finds journalists outside the “system” to be necessarily inimicable to it. In both cases, the usually invisible “system” comes into view; the objectivity framework becomes shakier as one moves toward either end of the political spectrum. An Accuracy in Media Report (quoted in “Comment,” 1989, p. 16) noted that the MacDougall case “explodes the myth that our media have effective safeguards to screen out propaganda hostile to our country and our system.” On the other hand, MacDougall found support in a *Washington Post* column: Coleman McCarthy (1989) criticized writers and reporters for often being glorified dictationists, thereby supporting MacDougall’s assertion that journalists improve their vantage point by stepping outside the system—and further indicating the inherent tension imbedded in the news paradigm.

Conservative press critics recognize more than media insiders that story selection is a form of bias. The growing right-wing industry of press criticism (Accuracy in Media, MediaWatch, etc.) has at least called into question the prevailing news paradigm, pointing out the power of selectivity as a way of bypassing the filters of “objectifying” routines. Kincaid (1989, p. 7), for example, quotes Joe Farah, editor of *Between the Lines*, who notes that many Left journalists “got into the media . . . because they saw it as a way of changing the world. And you can do that by choosing to write certain stories.” Conservative critics must elevate the power of the individual journalist over the objectifying structural routines or else render moot their frequent “liberal journalist” charge.

The case also points out the paradigmatic dilemma faced by journalists on the Left. On the one hand, they can speak out forthrightly (as Alexander Cockburn recommends) and be relegated to small circulation publications like *The Nation*, where their impact is minimal. On the other hand, they can choose mainstream journalism and reach a wider audience. There, though, they will be frustrated and constrained by the mainstream news paradigm and perhaps criticized for “selling out” or, as MacDougall was, for “masquerading.” For example, MacDougall’s editor made him introduce a conservative spokesperson to balance a story about inequality: “Even though I knew he was wrong, I quoted Gilder as saying that the growing gap between rich and poor was almost entirely demographic” (MacDougall, 1988b, p. 18). Another example of paradigmatic limits is seen in MacDougall’s editor’s allowing him to mention Marx but only if introduced in a humorous way. MacDougall agreed in order to get the story in print (MacDougall, 1988b, p. 17).

When MacDougall came under attack, he fell back on a strongly paradigmatic defense: that he had followed the guidelines of “accuracy, fairness and newsworthiness.”¹⁵ He made another important point in his defense, however: that radical journalists may be even more objective than “bourgeois” journalists, who are often not conscious of the presuppositions that they bring to their reporting on capitalist institutions (MacDougall, 1988b, p. 22; 1989b). By taking the “system” itself as problematic, radical journalists may be better equipped to address the structural causes for social ills. *The Columbia Journalism Review*

article supported this claim that socialist perspectives can contribute to robust journalism, hearkening back to the muckraking socialist journalists at the turn of the century who called the country's attention to the Beef Trust, child labor, and urban poverty ("Comment," 1989).

Like ideology, a paradigm is not static but continually negotiated. Like ideology, the news paradigm contains self-contradictory oppositional values, such as a diversity of views in the newsroom vs. objective, value-free reporting. These values must be managed and adapted to the ideological requirements of the large society. In this article I have explored from an ideological perspective the nature of the news paradigm and some of its constitutive norms and practices. The MacDougall case helps illustrate the power of the news paradigm, as an occupational ideology, in enforcing boundaries within the mainstream press, and the way this power functions within the large hegemonic process. □

NOTES

¹The news paradigm has been remarkably resilient over the years. During the 1960s the Left mounted an attack with some success, particularly following the observation of discrepancies between the reality of social upheavals (Vietnam, campus unrest, civil rights marches) and mainstream press coverage of them. More recently, the Right has seized the momentum and has been more successful in keeping the media on the defensive.

²My focus in this article is not on reading off ideological codes from news texts or in evaluating them against some yardstick of bias, but on the news paradigm itself and what the contesting interpretations of the case tell us about that paradigm. The "meta-commentary" I examined did not center on an evaluation of specific articles, but rather on the reliability of news practices and whether strongly held beliefs should influence a journalist's work.

³His newspaper career included four Pulitzer Prize nominations and a Professional Journalism Fellowship at Stanford University (1969-1970). In addition, he edited one book (1972) and wrote another (1981), both published by Dow Jones.

⁴Most of MacDougall's writing for the Left press was done on the side during his five years at *The Herald-News*. He stopped the practice after six months at *The Wall Street Journal* (MacDougall, 1988a, pp. 17-18).

⁵I wish to thank Gale Wiley of the University of Texas Department of Journalism for help with accessing the VuText database.

⁶Scardino says the second story was set to run at the end of January or first of February and was to have coincided with a review of a new book by journalist Carl Bernstein, *Loyalties: A Son's Memoir*, about growing up with his left-wing parents. As it happened, the *Times* review was negative, and according to Scardino editors were reluctant to peg a story to a panned book (although one wonders why that should have made any difference). Scardino says reaction in his second story divided along generational lines. Younger editors tended to want passionate reporters, not just processors of data, while older editors hewed closer to the wire-service, "just the facts ma'am" model. Certainly, changing generations provide a major source of evolution in the news paradigm.

⁷MacDougall says that *The Nation* also apparently ordered up a major story but declined to run it (personal communication, June 5, 1989).

⁸This line recalls the Watergate case, in which it was said that "the system worked" by successfully rooting out political wrongdoing. In this sense, Watergate became not a threat to the system but an opportunity to reaffirm it. When successfully repaired, anomalous cases can have the same effect.

⁹The exception may be Warren Phillips, first of four managing editors MacDougall served under and now chairman of Dow Jones. MacDougall contends that Phillips is principally responsible for the denunciatory January letter (personal communication, June 5, 1989).

¹⁰Even a seemingly natural ally, *Journal* op-ed contributor Alexander Cockburn, got into the act. Cockburn, whom ironically MacDougall praised as a “sophisticated, stylish leftist critic” (MacDougall, 1988b, p. 23), attacked MacDougall for not making his views forthrightly. He minimized MacDougall in one such column using phrases like “a man called Kent MacDougall,” and “revealed with schoolboyish glee,” later calling him “Walter Mittyish.”

¹¹*The Wall Street Journal* does not appear to have a firm policy on its staff members writing for outside publications, and many writers do so, although I was told by a corporate relations spokesperson (March 29, 1989) that they would not want such work to reflect unfavorably on the paper.

¹²MacDougall says that the writer later apologized to him for that term, claiming that an editor had inserted it over his objection (personal communication, June 5, 1989).

¹³MacDougall considers it an important distinction that the attack on him originated from Dow Jones (the January 6 statement came from Dan Austin, Dow Jones Director of Corporate Relations) and not the *Journal*, (personal communication, June 5, 1989). I have observed that distinction in this paper.

¹⁴*TJFR: The Journalist and Financial Reporting*, however, ran its first story, a lengthy front-page feature, in the first week of January, just before the Dow Jones letter. One can speculate whether the letter responded more to the conservative attack or to publicity *TJFR* gave the case among business journalism insiders.

¹⁵In my initial telephone interview with MacDougall (March 21, 1989), he resisted the notion that his story would make a good case study on objectivity because he had not violated any of the rules. After obtaining an initial draft of this paper, he sent along several articles that I had missed as well as several pages of comments, which clearly demonstrated his penchant for meticulous reporting and helped me improve the accuracy of this paper.

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