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Citation for final published version:

Allan, Stuart 2019. Book Review: Becoming the news: How ordinary people respond to the media spotlight. *International Journal of Press/Politics* 24 (4) , pp. 553-556.
10.1177/1940161219868435

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1940161219868435>

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Book Review: *Becoming the News: How Ordinary People Respond to the Media Spotlight*

Stuart Allan

Have you ever been interviewed by a newspaper journalist for a news story? If so, this intriguing inquiry into how “ordinary citizens” find themselves involved in “making the news” is likely to resonate with your experience, perhaps in unexpected ways. In any case, reading the evidence Ruth Palmer brings to bear in the course of her investigation, you may agree certain familiar presumptions about the discursive dynamics at stake warrant careful recalibration.

In marked contrast with traditional scholarship privileging journalist-source relationships for elucidation, *Becoming the News* brings to the fore questions concerning how ordinary people make sense of their momentary status as media subjects. Ordinariness is in the eye of the beholder, of course, but here the definition revolves around private citizens, rather than public figures or celebrities. Palmer is curious to know why they agreed to speak with reporters in the first place, what they made of the interaction, their feelings upon seeing themselves represented in the news coverage, and whether participation

engendered any unanticipated implications. The ensuing systematic study drew from eighty-three semi-structured interviews (ranging from forty-five minutes to four hours) conducted with people who appeared in the reporting of one of four newspapers, namely the *New York Times*, the *New York Daily News*, the *New York Post*, or an anonymised daily serving “West City” (an unnamed mid-sized city in the western United States), from 2009 to 2011. Interviewees were identified in diverse roles in assorted types of news stories, including as witnesses, experts, people-on-the-street, survivors of accidents, criminals, community representatives, activists, and the like, yet shared in common a journalist’s recognition their voice warranted inclusion on the grounds of newsworthiness.

The central argument, as set out in the opening chapter, is that “ordinary news subjects’ experiences, varied as they are, follow a consistent pattern: subjects gradually give up control over their stories to journalists, only to be held accountable by the public for how they are represented in the news” (p. 4). This issue of control proves to be pivotal, its exploration helping to pinpoint subtle, frequently tacit features of the power differential between journalists and ordinary news subjects, not least with regard to the choices made by the latter throughout the newsmaking process. Responding to oral and behavioral cues from the journalist, they may well strive to influence the initial framing of the story, repositioning themselves in relation to the conversational rules of the interview to advantage. In

exchange for the credibility or status the journalist will be able to confer, however, a subject is likely to feel compelled to relinquish their say over the terms on which their view or opinion is to be narrativized. Under such circumstances, it is likely to become all too apparent—if not at the time of the encounter, then when the story is published—co-operation comes at a price. Even the most ethically scrupulous journalist striving to retell their story fairly and accurately may open-up reputational risks with long-term consequences.

Becoming the News's chapter sequence follows the chronological structure of the news subjects' personal accounts of their involvement, prompting Palmer to begin with their first association with a “trigger” event or issue, typically preceding the arrival of the journalist. Recognizing the decision to speak to a reporter may be considerably messier than the clarity of hindsight might concede, Chapter 2 delves into several such triggers and how they set the process of co-operation (or otherwise) in motion. Not surprisingly, the most common motivation for subjects to acquiesce was their belief they could make a worthwhile contribution on the basis of their first-hand knowledge or experience, and that it would be of interest, even possible benefit, to the wider public. Witnessing an event similarly proved to be a trigger related to awareness raising. “Many said they wanted to bear witness for the same reasons people wanted to speak out about ongoing issues,” Palmer writes, namely “to educate the public,

correct misperceptions, and pressure for change” (p. 31). Less altruistic impulses included the apparent thrill of being in possession of information others wanted, thereby eliciting—at least for some—a desire for attention, some referring to it as their “fifteen minutes of fame.” For several of those deliberately seizing the moment for publicity purposes, the strategic opportunity to engage in “old-fashioned public relations,” perhaps to bolster name recognition for their brand or business, seemed irresistible. In the same vein, some hoped speaking to the press would culminate in reputation management, either to divert potential harm, or to salvage value from a damaging situation. Other interviewees stressed the impact of social pressures from reference groups (e.g., friends, family, colleagues) on their motivations, either as a positive encouragement to share their story, or as active dissuasion for fear of negative ramifications. For the spotlight averse, partaking in the news process was often deemed either inconvenient or intrusive, possibly even traumatic.

The logistics of the “interview stage” are examined in relation to competing sets of conversational norms in Chapter 3, with particular emphasis placed on how subjects’ impressions of journalists shaped how they felt and behaved during the encounter. In Chapter 4, Palmer shifts focus to the substance of the interview exchanges, discerning the fluid contingencies by which subjects said they forged agreements (or navigated disagreements) over how the “raw material” under discussion should be best

reframed and then presented in the ensuing news story. A continuum of sorts emerges, ranging from a “pleasant exchange of information,” at one end, to an “outright battle over how a story should be told,” at the other. Chapters 5 and 6 are concerned with how subjects react when they finally see themselves represented in the coverage, with perceptions of truth and judgments about relative accuracy proving to be multi-layered, and often emotionally charged. Such interpretations can be particularly fraught where seeing a version of themselves (simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar) proves existentially unsettling. Rounding out the chronological structure, Chapters 7 and 8 evaluate interviewees’ accounts of the repercussions confronting them—social rewards for some, chastisements or stigmatization for others—subsequent to appearing in the news story. While we do not hear from the journalists directly, there is sufficient evidence to problematise the usual sorts of excuses made when lapses in reportorial integrity call into question professional standards, inviting further reflection on how to improve matters in future.

It is with this reformative agenda in mind that Chapter 9 adopts a lessons-learned approach to bring the book to a close. Its comparison of several key differences between how journalists and their interviewees regard the ethical commitments of news production (Palmer likening the latter to “folk theories”) helps to align normative ideals with practical, real-world priorities. What matters most, it follows, is rebuilding public trust in the press—and this

conviction, it behooves me to point out, is based on findings gathered several years before Donald Trump and his “fake news” lies began polluting the media ecosystem. “Altering the public’s deep story about journalism,” Palmer concludes, “demands a change in orientation, away from solely providing information to the public and toward engaging directly with the public in a more ongoing way.” A vital first step, she adds, is for news organizations to recast conventional tactics and protocols, “beginning with their listening to audiences in ways they have not before” (p. 218).

The same logic holds true, I would maintain, with respect to how journalism studies researchers will benefit from revisiting certain guiding tenets of inquiry in this realm. This book is an important step in the right direction, but further advances are needed. Each of its chapters is enhanced analytically by calling upon pertinent theoretical resources—e.g., James W. Carey’s ritual and transmission views of communication or Erving Goffman’s research into interpersonal interaction, including “face-work”—though what we gain in the breadth of examples under scrutiny is recurrently at the expense of rigorous conceptual critique. Erring on the side of thick description, this treatment relies on anonymised (for understandable reasons) selections taken from interview transcripts where, regrettably, a lack of contextual detail makes it difficult at times to appreciate their empirical provenance. Still, this is not to deny numerous interviewee insights remain richly suggestive,

revealing incipient points of tension promising to inspire theory-building. Newsmaking viewed from the perspective of those on the wrong side of gatekeeping power differentials casts the nuances of epistemic authority in a fresh light, alerting readers to fissures, compromises and silences typically eluding the purchase of top-down explanations. Palmer has made a persuasive case for rethinking the journalist–source relationship along this alternative trajectory, and I suspect it will be regarded as a formative intervention by future projects in the years to come.