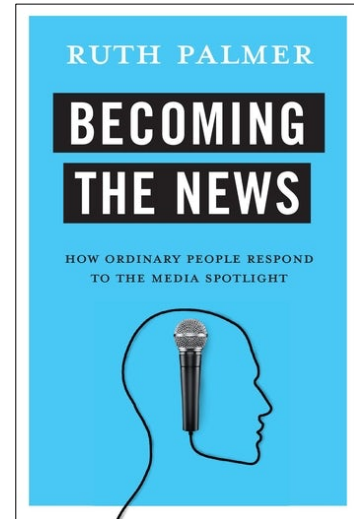


Ruth Palmer, **Becoming the News: How Ordinary People Respond to the Media Spotlight**, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018, 280 pp., \$35.00 (paperback).

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What is the impact of news on its subjects, specifically, everyday people such as your next-door-neighbor, should they find themselves in the newspaper, on the TV screen, and/or in an online article? Ruth Palmer's ***Becoming the News: How Ordinary People Respond to the Media Spotlight*** fills a void in the journalism research field, placing the subject at the center of her research question. Articles and books in this area of study usually concern the journalists (such as their techniques to uncover a story) or the findings of a particular investigation (such as *Betrayal: the Crisis in the Catholic Church*, authored by The Investigative Staff of *The Boston Globe* [2018]). Palmer argues that these works overlook the everyday people who are at the heart of the news. Without their witness statements and personal experiences of, say, being robbed, their stories could not be told. Thus, asks Palmer, how does being a news subject impact people's lives? To find out, she interviewed 83 subjects who were featured in the news for reasons ranging from desiring exposure of one's business (p. 34) to experiencing the excitement of being featured on the news with a comment on proposed public transport fare hikes (pp. 37–38). The 83 interviewees self-selected to be part of Palmer's study, resulting in the distribution of reasons for being on the news not representing an all-inclusive spectrum. This book provides a summary discussion of her qualitative study. Her focus is of great relevancy, especially due to the integral role the Internet (and social media in particular) holds in people's lives. With the Internet, news stories remain searchable for decades to come, meaning—unlike decades ago—news subjects cannot retreat back to anonymity.



The structure of the book is logical because her study and its findings are organized according to the chronological process whereby a news story is created. This order supports a novice's exploration of the topic. Following the introductory chapter, which provides essential background information on this study and topic (chapter 1), the readers are asked to consider "triggers" that would lead people to become news subjects (chapter 2). Chapters 3 and 4 look in-depth into the experiences of being interviewed, using examples by some of the 83 interviewees. Thereafter, the next experience for a news subject is to see the published article. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on this stage: Chapter 5 tackles the topic of whose "truth" prevails, that is, "How News Subjects Judge Accuracy and Error." Chapter 6 focuses on the other reactions subjects have when seeing themselves represented in the press—the title effectively sets reader expectations: "That's Me! . . . But It's Not Me: Aesthetic, Emotional, and Existential Effects of Confronting Our News Selves." Lastly, encountering the feedback to their media appearance brings the experience to a close (chapters 7 and 8). The concluding chapter 9, titled "Lessons for Subjects and Journalists," reframes the information of the previous chapters in a summary address to said subjects and journalists. As such, it does not add anything new to the topic's examination.

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The strongest part of the book is chapter 2, where Palmer most clearly demonstrates the thought processes she engaged in throughout her study. For example, based on her raw data of 83 subjects, she articulates seven triggers that explain why people acquiesce to becoming news subjects. They could make a "worthwhile contribution" from which others can benefit (p. 29); they witnessed something (pp. 30–33); they desired publicity (pp. 33–34); and/or they sought feedback (pp. 34–35); they aimed for social and emotional rewards for a personal reason (pp. 37–39); they wanted as much control as they could have in managing their reputation (pp. 35–36); or they were triggered due to social pressures to participate (pp. 36–37). Conversely, Palmer summarizes four reasons that make people hesitate to become news subjects: concern over negative effects (pp. 39–41); social pressures to not participate (pp. 41–42); "spotlight aversion" (p. 42, the opposite of the last-listed trigger in the previous paragraph); and "inconvenience or intrusion" (p. 43). Although subjects had these concerns, they ultimately did become news subjects, whether against their will (i.e., being named a suspect) or with their consent (e.g., eventually agreeing to an interview).

In contrast to chapter 2, the other chapters don't offer such summary analysis that provides the reader with specific and concise takeaways. The reason for this is that Palmer (understandably) promised subjects anonymity for participating in her study. Consequently, she had to anonymize the subjects' identities and experiences to ensure that no reader can find them with an online search. This means that an event a subject witnessed had to be removed from time and place. For instance, one subfocus in chapter 4 is whether some interviewers are trying to get their interviewee "to say something specific—to perform roles that the reporters need to cast" (p. 97). The provided example features interviewee Bella, who was interviewed for her opinion on "a [video] game." She was asked for her opinion, yet had had no opportunity to play the game prior to the interview. The interviewer informed her that due to the impending deadline for the article, this would be impossible. She explains to Palmer that it was "transparent" that the reporter had a "storyline" for the article and needed her to fill a particular role. Bella tried to not be miscast, and explains to Palmer that due to her consciously focusing on not saying what she perceived the reporter wanted her to say—that due to her being preoccupied with this goal, she provided very little valuable information in the interview (p. 98). Palmer continues by providing a summary paragraph of how representative Bella's example is of her sample without giving specific facts.

What is missing is the reporter's perspective on this interview. Maybe Bella's perception was incorrect. Also not provided is the context—in this case, what kind of game is it? Is it controversial for some reason? Or is it an innocent child's video game? Only by providing all relevant perspectives and factual information can this example be analyzed as to whether Bella had cause for concern. If she had cause for concern and Palmer has other interviewees with similar examples, she may be able to provide readers with prompts an interviewee should look out for when being interviewed. Conversely, if Bella did not have cause for concern and Palmer had other interviewees in a similar situation, she may be able to conclude which prompts an interviewee should look out for that suggest "a reporter follows a standard protocol without a hidden agenda." By only having Bella's perspective and little else, Palmer is left with little to evaluate and to draw conclusions from. Overall, Palmer's decision to strip the subjects' stories of identifying markers impacted the usefulness of her analysis. There is a paucity of tangible facts and analysis that can be reviewed in depth. Nor can a reader compare Palmer's argument to that advanced by someone else. For this reason,

Palmer's book is an entry-level text that mostly provides summary description and basic analysis of the researcher's interview findings.

The general public is the ideal reader for this text. They would benefit first and foremost from hearing about news subjects' experiences when they consider whether they would want to become a news subject, should the possibility arise. Secondly, aspiring journalists and students at the high school and college levels may find some examples to be particularly relevant for themselves and the types of stories student newspapers likely cover. Similarly, students considering careers as journalists may ask themselves how they want to be perceived by news subjects and consider interview technique. They may also want to explore whether their ethics code aligns with the needs of being a journalist who has to ask difficult questions and make subjects uncomfortable at times. The book provides plenty of examples to find answers to those personal questions.

Reference

The Investigative Staff of the *Boston Globe*. (2003). *Betrayal: The crisis in the Catholic church*. New York, NY: Back Bay Books.