

Kevin G. Barnhurst, **Mister Pulitzer and the Spider: Modern News from Realism to the Digital**, Urbana, Chicago and Springfield, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016, 312 pp., \$30.84 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Patricia Aufderheide
American University, USA

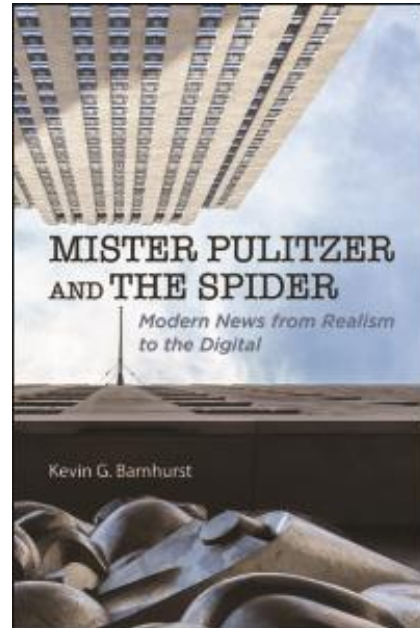
The late Kevin Barnhurst and his graduate students spent decades meticulously and laboriously documenting changes in journalistic formats, almost always defying common wisdom and the punditocracy. This ambitious and fascinating book is his attempt, released just after his untimely death, to pull together all that work into one place and provide an analysis that could explain a truly puzzling pattern.

Barnhurst discovered that throughout the 20th century, consistently across mainstream radio, TV and daily newspapers, both coastally and in the heartland, news stories got longer, with the journalist (the anchor, the correspondent, the writer) taking up more and more space/time in each piece. Stories became less about individuals, and more about organizations; people in stories were more likely to be authorities and institutional spokespeople. The stories were more likely to be about far-away places (with miked reporters doing stand-ups and call-ins from the site as our representatives from “home”); more about trends and issues, less about events; and more and more analytical.

These trends were not driven by technological innovation. Newspapers moved in this direction before TV news created any rivalry; digital sites continue the same pattern. Thus, the title **Mister Pulitzer and the Spider** is something of a red herring; the digital “spider” doesn’t really take down Pulitzer, but rather provides a new set of wrinkles in an ongoing story.

So far, so data-driven. With nice charts and graphs, Barnhurst reprises his body of careful, quantitative comparative work, which tells a remarkably consistent story. It defies the complaints about soundbite journalism, collapse of international reporting, the shrinking news hole and shrinking attention span of viewers. But what does all that mean, other than that much of the huffing and puffing about Journalism Today is simply, um, wrong?

To consider that, Barnhurst turns to cultural studies, philosophy and even science fiction—imaginative spaces about the construction of meaning. His core unifying conception is that journalism as the 20th century understood it was born in realism and moved uneasily into modernism. By realism, he means the conviction of a knowable world whose realities are fairly obvious. This leads to journalism as the recital of facts about people in places, usually nearby places; the more facts, events and people, the



better, and it doesn't take an expert to collect them. This is what lets journalists put objectivity on a pedestal. By modernism he means an understanding of the world that takes into consideration the role of communication in constructing reality, and sees the role of other abstractions—institutions, forces, cultures—as shaping historical process. Both realism and modernism are part of a general liberal process dedicated to participation and inclusion, a progressive understanding of the role of journalism in public life. But journalism's move into modernism is not necessarily an unalloyed benefit to public understanding and participation.

The puzzle Barnhurst addresses in part is this: If the tendency to a modernist expansion of the role of the professional journalist in explaining not events and people's actions but trends, issues, patterns and processes is so marked, why is it so invisible, especially to journalists? Why is the perception, both of journalists and consumers of journalism, so different from the quantitative reality?

I'm not sure that he finds an entirely satisfying answer to this question, but it's a richly intriguing one. A surely far-too-synoptic summary of his argument is that a journalistic commitment to mission rooted in realism and its concomitant objectivity and plain-as-the-nose-on-your-faceness of facts obscures the way journalism reacts both to its own professionalization and to the perceived complexity of relationships. As journalism openly takes its place as a shaper of ideology, attempting to shape consumers' understanding of overarching processes, and as journalists circulate among the elite and lose connections to the great mass of readers who become an anonymous public, journalism maintains its cultural grounding in claims to a common-man, common-sense reporting of reality incarnated the gruff journalists of *The Front Page*. Journalists do not take ownership of their own social role.

There's another puzzle as well: Why does journalism turn modernist, why does it professionalize, take on the role of shaper of ideology? Why does "access journalism" of the elite become elite journalism? We're still interested in human stories about weird things that happen around us, after all. Barnhurst drew on much and diverse literature to consider how the five W's and an H evolved in the 20th century and mutated with digital in the 21st. For instance, to consider the way in which time is treated, he turns to Edmund Husserl on the very notion of time. Bruno LaTour and Stuart Hall both are invoked in considering the role of journalism in shaping hegemony. Both Hannah Arendt and Ray Bradbury make an appearance in considering ideology and journalism. But to consider the historical evolution of journalism, you might need to also consider historical research, beyond the tunnel vision of journalism history. This was not where Barnhurst's curiosity took him, but you could take the same rich body of research he left and ask such questions.

Meanwhile, the book has a wealth of subsidiary insights. For instance, in his discussion about "where," Barnhurst discusses how television, and to some extent radio, "domesticated" distance by going far away but bringing it home to us with a familiar correspondent, located at the site. Thus, the distance between home and away was elided with the trusted presence of the professional interpreter of the meaning of events. Barnhurst's elegant charting of how journalists come to regard each other as experts, as they professionalize, is fully supported with his data, and also nicely analyzed and illustrated with examples from interviews, as a self-reinforcing process of boosting journalism's social status. He disturbingly describes how the public becomes "unknowable," playing "a tragic role in the romance of

modern news" (p. 72), as the journalist becomes professional. As the explainer and interpreter role becomes explicit and dominant, so does the public recede into a position of ignorance and unknowing, needful of the interpreter.

Journalism has indeed become, as Barnhurst argues, a primary tool of ideological hegemony. The confusion within journalism about the role it plays is a way that journalists mystify their own function. That confusion, furthermore, is shared widely in public representations of journalism, including in popular heroizing films. It is belied by the simple, laborious, painstaking, mind-numbing (according to Barnhurst himself!) work of tracking actual behavior by the numbers of journalists over time.

Barnhurst does not spend much time discussing the warping of the Progressive vision of John Dewey and others in the role of journalism in enlivening public life. (He makes modest suggestions about the way in which journalism might serve the public in the future, including returning to more unpretentious stories about real people nearby us.) But it is worth taking the insights of this book to continue that line of thought, and engage in more conversation about its implications. Much discussion about the public sphere and its function in a digital environment would be well served by the meticulous research accumulated, presented and analyzed in this book.

Barnhurst left the field too early. For those of us who knew him as an extraordinarily generous colleague, who nevertheless grounded himself in evidence, he left a big hole in the network. But this work is a worthy invitation to further research and discussion about the role of journalism in society.