Matthew Walsh

**An Occupy Retrospective**

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By the first week of October 2011, the Occupy movement had garnered national media coverage. Initially ignored by major news outlets, mass arrests of protestors in New York grabbed the nation’s attention—and its headlines. Discussion of the movement eventually expanded out of news articles and into the opinion pages, where prominent voices weighed in on the movement. These voices, carrying the authority and legitimacy of their respective news organizations, came to dominate the conversation. Pockets of consensus emerged around these voices, as new opinions established themselves in relation to the existing conversation, thus cementing the influence and import of those first voices. This progression through the news cycle is not unique to the Occupy movement—the same progression could describe the Tea Party before it or gay marriage after it. What is unique to Occupy, however, is that nobody within the Occupy movement spoke on behalf of the movement itself. The Occupy movement lacked a unified voice. This curious fact makes the Occupy movement, despite being yesterday’s news, an interesting case study today for the ways in which journalists, columnists, and editorialists—indeed the entire news media apparatus—engage with their newsworthy subjects and with one another.
The Occupy movement was both fruitful and problematic for journalism. As a movement, Occupy remained intentionally vague. Journalists were, in turn, divided in their approach to dealing with that ambiguity: it created an empty space into which an author could force an interpretation and out of which flew conflicting reports of the movement’s purpose, structure, and ideology. Serge Schmemann, the editorial editor of the International Herald Tribune, explained: “[Occupy] has no [Julian] Assange [of WikiLeaks] behind it to burden it with ideology or purpose; it lacks even the idealism and hope of its ancestor, the flower-power protests of my formative years. Like Malevich’s White on White, it is pure feeling on which most any analysis, interpretation, reaction—or op-ed—seems valid enough.”

But perhaps the difficulty lies less with Occupy and more with the perspective of journalists like Schmemann.

We view journalism as a ground-up discipline from which we can glean facts about the world. We turn to editorials and op-eds to inform our own view of the world through the perspective of a reliable source—a source who has the kind of relationship with his subject to warrant the claims he makes about it. But in the case of the example above, it seems that Schmemann’s warrants are a set of preexisting assumptions about the historical narrative of political protests instead of a genuine relationship with the Occupy movement. He uses his familiarity with “the flower-power protests” of his formative years as qualification to discuss Occupy; in his mind, Occupy is a subsequent stage in the same narrative. There is a problem, then, if the narrative itself dissolves under scrutiny.

Postmodernism, a school of thought that developed in the latter half of the twentieth century, argues that narratives such as the one evoked by Schmemann will always dissolve under scrutiny. The Occupy movement, which famously resisted interpretation, is a good demonstration of that dissolution. The alternative to forcing the Occupy movement into a larger history is to consider it independently, at a local level: first understand the movement apart from geography,
history, and ideology, and then look for the relationships that exist between various instances or sites of Occupy.

Postmodernism provides a way of understanding the world, and therefore also a way of writing about it. In the essay that follows I reframe journalism as an application of postmodernism, demonstrating with the Occupy movement that postmodern journalism eliminates many of the issues that I described above, and that it provides a more accurate account of a historical event than much of the journalism on Occupy that was written.

AN INTRODUCTION TO POSTMODERNISM

In the latter half of the twentieth century, political theorists developed a vocabulary and framework for the discussion of latent but unexplored frustrations with their field. These thinkers took issue with the universal aspirations of modern political theory. Indeed, at fault was even the notion that there are consistent enough relations between things to constitute the “human sciences” of economics, sociology, psychology, and history.²

These aspects of modern political theory took root in journalism, as well. As we saw with Schmemann above, a false sense of historical consistency compelled journalists to make tenuous comparisons between past and present, and to project those comparisons into the future. The universalizing tendency in academic thought that postmodernism responded to is no less troubling in a discipline like journalism. If there are foundational problems with the celebrated theories of Marx and Kant, then there must also be problems when those philosophies spill into popular culture and influence the way the everyman understands the world—and the way the journalist writes about it. The presence of these problems in journalism is indeed more damaging than their presence in academia, because the audience of the former is so much wider than that of the latter.

A central assumption of both modernism and postmodernism is that the world can be broken down into discrete narratives: units of historical measurement that contain distinct beginnings and ends. But the difference lies with how each theory treats them.

Metanarratives

Modernism posits that all narratives share the same fundamental principles; therefore, the goal of modern theories is to locate those principles and trace their influences across time. Examples of such principles include, but are not limited to, various definitions of human nature, progress, or reason. Modern theory then tries to explain the relationship between individual narratives as a function of those fundamental principles. Thus, a larger story develops to describe this movement; this larger arc is referred to as a metanarrative.

A metanarrative can trace a period of time in the past, or it can be extended into a hypothetical future that is the logical conclusion—the telos—of whatever set of principles has been put forward. Simply put, a metanarrative is a narrative about narratives.

A familiar example of modernism is Marx’s theory of human history, epitomized by the opening line of his “Communist Manifesto”: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.” Marx argues that there exists a fundamental human nature universal to all people. Certain social arrangements (class structures) alienate individuals from their fundamental nature, and that alienation causes friction within those social arrangements. Eventually and unavoidably, society will be rearranged to eliminate that friction and to reunite man with his fundamental nature—that is the metanarrative. Marx traces the metanarrative through changes in class structure, from feudalism, to capitalism, to socialism, and to communism. Within communism, the friction from alienation due to social arrangement will be eliminated, thus ending that metanarrative. Some other force may arise to move history forward, but that would be the beginning of another metanarrative.
Local Narratives

In theoretical opposition to the metanarrative is the local narrative, of which postmodernism is a proponent. Local narratives privilege the single narrative instead of trying to unify multiple narratives through a given principle. A local narrative is formed by accumulating as much information as possible about a single narrative, so long as that information is derived from the narrative itself instead of imposed onto the narrative in the form of interpretation or generalization.

Local narratives have a voice, meaning they are experienced from the perspective of a single person or entity; often, many local narratives are necessary to fully describe a single historical event. They are exclusive, meaning that they cannot be explained by—or even fully understood by—anyone but the owner of the narrative. Local narratives are contextualized, meaning that a single local narrative is not considered in isolation, but rather in collaboration with other relevant local narratives. These common features of local narratives complement one another: local narratives are exclusive because each has a different voice, and they need to be contextualized because they are exclusive, and they have different voices because the contextualization affects each differently. Together, local narratives can be used to understand many complicated details of a historical event.

Postmodernism is interested in the relationships that form between local narratives. It may compare multiple narratives along some variable, such as identity or power, asking, for example, “what influence did the hierarchy of the organization have on this person’s ability to communicate her ideas?” or, conversely, “how did the organization alter its hierarchy in response to her ideas?” The first
question is answerable only from the perspective of the individual, and the second question is answerable only from the perspective of the organization itself. Questions like these must be answered by the voices of the local narratives themselves. If there is no such voice, then the question must remain unanswered. For example, because the Occupy movement refused to appoint a single voice to speak on its behalf, the second question from above could not be answered as posed. The hierarchy of an Occupy site may change, but the change will be observable as the summation of many local narratives, not a decision by the organization itself.

Additionally, by seeking out voices themselves instead of attempting to speak on behalf of a person or event, postmodernism appreciates otherness and marginality as valid perspectives on experience. Indeed, postmodern theorists often focus on the marginalized, the exceptions to historical metanarratives, narratives inassimilable into modern theory. Because journalism is so often interested in reporting on the disenfranchised, marginalized, and oppressed, it makes sense that the discipline should assume the methods of a theory that champions those very views, as opposed to one that often overlooks them while condensing historical events into universal theories.

Finally, understanding an event through its local narratives preserves the autonomy of its participants. Jean-François Lyotard, a postmodern thinker, worried that encyclopedic volumes of world history would erase the names and identities of the different subgroups of humanity whose “little stories” combine to make the “great story” of history (in attempting to address the whole scope of humanity). Applying metanarratives to journalism similarly effaces its subjects. In Occupy’s case, the movement and its participants risk becoming just another chapter in a history of the financial crisis or in a history of social movements of the twenty-first century.

Interestingly, some participants in the Occupy movement took especial precaution against being swept into an impersonal metanarrative. The movement’s ostensibly faceless slogan, “We Are the 99%,” which seemed poised to homogenize its participants, began as an online movement of people taking pictures of themselves holding up personal stories next to their faces. These are the specific
stories that are erased when journalism focuses too broadly on the Occupy movement as a whole, as opposed to focusing narrowly on the local narratives that identify with the movement.

A POSTMODERN ACCOUNT OF KNOWLEDGE

The conclusions that postmodernism draws are specific to the circumstances it observes; in this way, postmodernism presents a complete approach to studying history, both over long spans of time and for unique historical events. Journalism ought to participate in this pursuit of knowledge, but the dominant approach in the field today builds clusters of affirmation around what I call dogma, instead of generating new pieces of knowledge that can be used to understand the world.

In opinionated journalism, dogmas are those opinions that come to dominate the discussion of an event. They may not be true, but they are deafeningly present. In Occupy’s case, the dogmas were the various popular interpretations of the movement: as an attempt for millennials to find their place in the world, as a demonstration against economic inequality, as an evolution of the protest as a democratic tool.

Dogma evinces a general difficulty with understanding an event as it is unfolding. All of the above examples attempt to use the Occupy movement to further explain another phenomenon, but they do little to explain the movement itself. Dogma cannibalizes a newsworthy event before true knowledge about that event can emerge. Further, dogma asks for a level of abstraction from an event that may not be warranted. There is a difference between searching for the motivation for an event and imposing a motivation that explains as much of the event as possible. Knowledge is born from the former, while dogma is confirmed by the latter. Finally, dogma actually impedes the generation of knowledge instead of merely competing with it. The nature of opinionated journalism is such that less prominent voices do not have a place in the press. Letters to the editor are one of the few ways for unaffiliated voices to enter the discussion, and even then the voice is a response instead of a unique idea.
To further explain dogma in journalism, I borrow from Foucault’s *The Order of Things*. In a concluding chapter titled “The Anthropological Sleep,” Foucault alludes to Kant’s claim to have been awakened from a “dogmatic slumber” by Hume’s skepticism of causality and reason. Kant responds to Hume that man’s mind is capable of actively shaping sensory information through deductive reasoning such that it conforms to *a priori* knowledge that exists independently of experience. Thus, all knowledge and all observations of history are fundamentally centered within man as subject: man reasons, man deduces, and man discovers knowledge. However, when this approach is applied to man himself—as in anthropology for Foucault or journalism for us—it creates a logical inconsistency: man as subject, from which knowledge is created, is reified into man as object, about which knowledge is desired. The subject tries to comprehend an object that is one and the same as itself. In Foucault’s words: “an attempt is made to make the man of nature, of exchange, or of discourse, serve as the foundation for his own finitude.”

This defeating maneuver bred for Foucault an unawareness and complacency in anthropology that was similar to the dogmatism from which Kant was awakened. In journalism, this complacency is evident when a journalist commits the offenses I described above: cannibalizing an event in order to explain a separate phenomenon, ascribing a motivation or explanation to an event before the event has fully developed, or resting on one’s stature as an established columnist. In short, dogma in opinionated journalism is apparent when journalists use coverage of an event as a platform for their own opinions.

Knowledge, on the other hand, is generated when a journalist’s opinions are actually born out of the event itself. This happens through a careful selection of which and whose narratives go to print, as well as a general openness towards the ensuing discussion. This is the purview of editors and columnists alike.
POSTMODERNISM AND THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT

Postmodernism argues that journalists should fully develop as many local narratives as possible. In Occupy’s case, this means living with the protestors, discussing their lives and their movement with them, and overcoming the temptation to conflate the movement with something familiar.

Journalists also ought to be critically aware of their own limitations in retelling another’s local narrative. Journalists frequently employ anecdotes to relate the experience of an event to their readers, and often these anecdotes are not their own but are gathered through interviews or observation. But recall that local narratives are exclusive, meaning that they can only be understood and explained fully by the owner of the narrative. It is impossible for the journalist to identify imaginatively and sympathetically with a local narrative that is not her own. Therefore, the journalist should be wary of how she wields others’ local narratives. Specifically, the journalist should not retell another’s story in a way that constructs an argument about that person’s involvement in that person’s own narrative or in a way that injects the journalist’s own voice into the individual’s personal story.

Bernard Harcourt takes this recommendation a step further. In addition to the prescription that one not misrepresent another’s personal narrative, Harcourt argues that one cannot directly engage with another’s narrative unless both voices have shared in the experience. Specifically, he writes that one cannot address the Occupy movement directly and normatively without physically, mentally, and emotionally taking part in the movement. He writes:

Normative statements about Occupy Wall Street—claims about what the movement should do—are functionally inaudible unless the speaker is physically occupying an occupation. [Peter] Hallward [of The Guardian] cannot audibly tell anyone what Occupy Wall Street should do—any more than The Wall Street Journal could—unless Hallward is physically occupying an Occupy space. And you can’t occupy sitting at your computer, publishing an editorial, or writing in this journal. You cannot occupy at a distance from an occupation.7

AN OCCUPY RETROSPECTIVE

Thus, if journalism aims to pursue knowledge, it must be similarly critical of its own mode of address to Occupy and other events.

Many pieces written about the Occupy movement, however, were not suitably critical of their own mode of address. Consider this excerpt from a New York Times piece by Andrew Ross Sorkin:

The problem with the movement, as many other columnists have pointed out before, was that its mission was always intentionally vague. It was deliberately leaderless. It never sought to become a political party or even a label like the Tea Party.

By the second or third time I went down to Zuccotti Park, it became clear to me that Occupy Wall Street, which began with a small band of passionate intellectuals, had been hijacked by misfits and vagabonds looking for food and shelter.

Given the way the organization—if it can be called that—was purposely open to taking all comers, the assembly lost its sense of purpose as various intramural squabbles emerged about the group’s end game.⁸

There are facts within this excerpt: the Occupy movement was leaderless, it never sought to become a political party or label, it was attended by both intellectuals and vagabonds, it was open to newcomers. However, these facts take on new meaning when they are funneled through the author’s virulent interpretation. “Misfits and vagabonds” provide unwanted local narratives, diluting the narratives of the founding “passionate intellectuals” that Sorkin prefers. Sorkin correctly describes the movement as “leaderless,” but then he uses this fact to reaffirm his own dogma by suggesting that “leaderless” might as well mean “in disarray.” Ultimately, what we’re left with is not knowledge in the sense of an accurate description of the movement and the factors that motivated it, but one man’s affirmation of his own dogma. As the postmodern thinker Giles Deleuze explains, in the postmodern approach, an analysis of an event “never consists in interpreting.”⁹ Events such as the Occupy movement do not present themselves for interpretation, but interpretations are nevertheless imposed upon them.
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A postmodern approach to journalism creates a problem for opinion pieces such as Sorkin’s. Many news organizations have a core group of columnists who are asked to provide their opinions on recent events. Readers come to identify with a particular voice or set of voices. But sometimes, according to a postmodern approach, a columnist may be unqualified to comment on a particular event. In the case of Sorkin, who admits to be writing from the outside of the movement looking in (“By the second or third time I went down to Zuccotti Park...”), his voice is illegitimate.

For an example of a more legitimate voice, consider Keith Gessen’s article, “Central Booking,” published in The New Yorker, in which the journalist tells the story of being arrested during an Occupy protest. After explaining how he was arrested, he offers these thoughts about the criminal justice system:

I learned more than I expected to. To be on the other side of the law-and-order machine in this country is awful. It is dehumanizing, and degrading, and deforming. It fills you with a helpless rage: because, once there, you can only make things worse for yourself by speaking up. From the brown phone in our cell at the Tombs, I’d called Emily a few times, and I called the office of n+1, the magazine where I’m an editor. But it felt like those people, my friends, might as well have been on a different planet. They could do what they pleased when they pleased. We could not. I left the world of jail with plenty of relief but more than anything with a sense of unease that I still can’t quite shake. We will be judged as a society and as a culture by how we treated our meanest and most vulnerable citizens. If we keep going the way we’re going, we will be judged very, very harshly—and sooner, perhaps, than we think.

These opinions come out of Gessen’s personal experience within the New York City jail, which he spends most of the article describing. Unlike Sorkin, Gessen does not have to adopt the personal narratives of vagabonds or intellectuals to make his argument; he can defer to his own narrative, about which he may legitimately speak.
The discipline of journalism is not on trial in this essay, merely the approach taken by some journalists. If journalism is interested in the pursuit of knowledge, then journalists should be circumspect when expressing their opinions and editors should be judicious about which narratives they send to print. Postmodernism provides a good set of principles to guide journalists and editors in doing so: employ local narratives whenever possible, avoid dogma, and resist interpretation.