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Publisher: Routledge

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## Journalism Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjos20>

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Zvi Reich & Yigal Godler

Published online: 11 Feb 2014.

To cite this article: Zvi Reich & Yigal Godler , Journalism Studies (2014): A Time of Uncertainty, Journalism Studies, DOI: [10.1080/1461670X.2014.882484](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2014.882484)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2014.882484>

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# A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY

## The effects of reporters' time schedule on their work

Zvi Reich and Yigal Godler

*The present study is the first systematic attempt to examine the role of time constraints in journalists' daily routines and practices, at the level of individual news items. Long-standing concerns about journalism's "stopwatch culture" and the negative impact of time pressures on newswork have been exacerbated in the digital age by growing demands for multi-platform technological proficiency, resulting in "hamsterization" of journalistic work. Through the step-by-step reconstruction of work processes underlying over a thousand discrete news items (N = 1023), this study traces statistical correlations between the amount of time at the reporters' disposal and the extent and complexity of journalistic work, across Israeli television, radio, print and online news outlets, outlining the implications of three temporal segments (pre-assignment, work duration, filing-to-publication) for all four media types. Consistent with the received wisdom among scholars we found, inter alia, that in cases of time shortage, newswork contained systematically less diversity and cross-checking, greater involvement of public relations, fewer senior sources and ordinary citizens, and fewer leaks. We conceptualize the reporters' time schedule as a meta-constraint, embodying developments such as dwindling workforce, homogenization of news content across media, and technological innovations which cause both necessary and unnecessary accelerations in news production.*

KEYWORDS deadlines; Israel; journalism; news practices; speed; time pressure

### Introduction

The term "News" refers to a fundamentally temporal phenomenon (Altheide 1976; Schudson 1987; Tuchman 1978), in at least three different senses. For one, as its lexical meaning suggests, "news" denotes recent occurrences which cease to be news as time passes (Roshco 1975). Secondly, as a form of information, news needs to be assembled and made presentable, necessitating time (Gans 2004; Zelizer 2004). Thirdly, news is always relative to cognizing subjects, which are dispersed in space, and hence takes time to disseminate (Allan 2004). However, studying the role of time in news reporting has additional rationales:

- *The functional rationale:* as an institution with normative purpose within democratic societies, journalism is entrusted with punctual accumulation and communication of critical information for real-time deliberative public debates and the exercise of democratic decision-making, while also satisfying more mundane information needs in which time is of the essence, such as weather, traffic, strikes, and environmental and health risks.
- *The professional rationale:* since practitioners tend to take the organizational settings which determine their routines and practices for granted (Waisbord 2013; Zelizer 2004),

*Journalism Studies*, 2014

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2014.882484>

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reporters may benefit from an informed reflection on the professional consequences of the time regimes dictated by unpredictable events, powerful political and business actors, editors and publishers, all of whom may potentially impact work standards and inhibit journalistic performance.

- *The scholarly rationale*: despite many speculations, there has been no broad-scale systematic empirical research on the relationship between time shortage and journalistic efforts. While some works have emphasized the limiting effects of speed on facets of journalism practice (Altheide 1976; Deuze 2007; Schlesinger 1978; Tuchman 1978), other scholars were more concerned with public relations- (PR) managed events, which were pre-scheduled and conveniently tailored to news organizations' deadlines (Boorstin 1971; Gitlin 1980; Molotch and Lester 1974; Phillips 2011), in order to manipulate the news in the interests of the powerful.

The present study employs quantitative methods in describing and accounting for journalistic practices and their temporal correlates. Data derive from face-to-face reconstruction interviews, during which a sample of news reporters from radio, television, print and online news, and from financial, political and security beats, detail for every item under what time regimes and through which practices it has been assembled ( $N = 1023$ ).

### Literature Review

The most explicit and widespread attitude toward the time dimension among journalism scholars can be termed "the hourglass view". Adherents to this view tend to conceptualize time as a finite and depletable resource always threatening to run out and leave the journalist with an incomplete, badly verified and sloppily written story. Under this view, the less time is left at the reporter's disposal, the more she is susceptible to manipulations by supervisors and powerful agenda-setting sources, and the less likely she is to even notice and far less to reflect on the blind-spots in her coverage (Altheide 1976; Deuze 2007; Gans 2004; García Avilés et al. 2004; Lewis, Williams, and Franklin 2008; Paulussen 2013; Tuchman 1978). According to Michael Schudson (1987, 99):

The more the media emphasize the immediacy of news, the more subject journalists are to manipulation by public officials who know how to prey on people with stopwatch mentalities.

Yet things become less straightforward when the subject is problematized and refracted through the sociology and philosophy of time, where we can roughly distinguish between natural time, individual time and social time. Accordingly, only the former category—that of cosmic or "natural" time—possesses a humanly independent status, while the latter two are constituted entirely of the interactions between individual psychology—sometimes referred to as the flow of one's consciousness—and the social world, giving rise to an intersubjective temporal dynamic, where points in time are defined and individuated by agreements, mores and institutional dictates. As sociologist and time theorist Norbert Elias (1992, 40) had noted:

If one takes the trouble to look at earlier stages in the development of human societies one can find ample evidence of ... changes in people's experience and conceptualization of what we now call "time".

Similarly, the British sociologist John Urry (1994) has argued that the notions of time undergo change, shifting from the once hegemonic clock-time, to a mix of instantaneous

and glacial times. Yet one need not dispose of the notion of universal time altogether. As Alfred Schütz (1945, 540) expressed it:

What occurs in the outer world belongs to the same time dimension in which events in inanimate nature occur. It can be registered by appropriate devices and measured by our chronometers. It is the spatialized, homogeneous time which is the universal form of objective or cosmic time.

Hence, while journalists perceive themselves to be disciplined by solid and mostly immovable deadlines, they are, by and large, accepting tacit expectations of timeliness and punctuality, which have evolved dynamically and arbitrarily over the course of their collective social and organizational lives, amounting to what Anthony Giddens (1984, 35) has termed, "the 'supra-individual' *durée* of the long-term existence of institutions, the *longue durée* of institutional time". Although, in this view, the temporal patterning of journalistic work would have necessarily arisen without any overseeing or intentional direction, simply by virtue of its institutional nature, it can be, and according to proponents of the "hourglass view" is, co-opted by owners of news organizations, whose bottom-line conception of efficiency is fundamentally at odds with journalists' professional efficiency (Schlesinger 1978; Waisbord 2013). In other words, organizational efficiency denotes lesser time for journalists to do their work and professional efficiency necessitates more relaxed deadlines to ensure quality in journalistic work. According to Witschge (2012, 168), economic pressures combined with rapid technological changes, lead to an "increased productivity which provides 'reporters' with little time per story, and which goes hand in hand with increased reliance on existing material", with "press releases ... rewritten in an extremely short time (five minutes), copied and pasted and tweaked only a bit". However, as Barnhurst (2011) has pointed out, there is a discrepancy between reporters' perception of the effects of time shortage on their work, and the actual temporal character of news, which have tended to expand into the past and future in American print, television and online news.

Other scholars regard time shortage as being built into and inherent to news, arguing that, by their very nature, news is the realm of happenstance events and serendipitous discoveries, made at short intervals between events and deadlines. According to this "metronome view", time not only serves as the news' pacemaker but also signals when newswork goes offbeat: the more relaxed are the time schedules, the more likely it is that reporters have constructed an artificial agenda of their own, created "events" (Molotch and Lester 1974; Reich 2006; Roshco 1975), or fallen victim to an instance of news management by powerful sources and spokespersons who conveniently prescheduled pseudo-events to ease reporters work-lot, gaining in return a favorable public image. As Daniel Boorstin (1971, 127) has tellingly described:

More and more news events become dramatic performances in which "men in the news" simply act out more or less well their prepared script. The story prepared "for future release" acquires an authenticity that competes with that of the actual occurrences on the scheduled date.

According to Todd Gitlin (1980, 234), when different points in time are signified by various media events—amounting to what he terms "event time"—a discontinuous and incoherent sense of political reality is created. Thus, dominant elite sources succeed in decontextualizing and obscuring the social meaning of their policies, and that of popular

reactions to them. Looking at television news, in a study of the temporal aspects of newscasts from the first Gulf War, Hoskins (2001, 230) concluded that “what becomes remembered as ‘instant history’ is actually the highly edited and most repeated ‘version’”. Similarly, according to Phillips (2011, 85):

For those who were listening and watching, [radio and television] news programmes appeared to provide an immediacy ... In reality, broadcast news was managed news.

We therefore hypothesize, as per the metronome view, that attempts at media management, such as PR and press releases sent as ready-made textual information, as well as frequently used sources, will be associated with time savings. On the other hand, we hypothesize, as per the hourglass view, that in the absence of PR, spokespersons and press releases, less time means less source diversity, fewer citizen sources, less cross-checking and leaks.

## Methodology

Research consisted primarily of a series of face-to-face reconstruction interviews, a method that has demonstrated its viability in exploring different facets of news processes (Albaek 2011; Anderson 2009; Brolin and Johansson 2009; Brueggemann 2011; Phillips 2012; Reich 2006, 2009, 2011, 2014; Shapiro et al. 2013). For this study, a sample of news reporters representing political, financial and domestic news beats, as well as television, print, radio and online news, were interviewed face-to-face, recreating the approximate time regimes and the work process behind each of their sampled items, enabling an authoritative examination of the effects of time schedules on journalistic practices. The interviews were preceded by three consecutive stages:

1. *Random selection of beats and reporters*: A full list of reporters and newsbeats at 11 leading national news organizations, representing all four media, was prepared in two months of byline monitoring.
2. *Identification of all published items*: The sampling period extended over four weeks—long enough to supply a rich mix of stories, but not long enough to tax participants’ memories.
3. *Random sampling of news items*: To limit interview duration to 60–75 minutes, the sample included 8–11 items per reporter (the exact number varied according to medium and size of organization).

Special seating arrangements were used to avoid infringement of source confidentiality. For print, online and radio items, the reporter (with a pile of sampled stories or printouts) and interviewer (with a pile of questionnaires) sat on opposite sides of a table with a screen placed between them to give the reporter privacy each time he or she was asked to choose another item from the sample pile and detail how it was obtained. Television reporters were given a laptop with video clips of their sampled items and a pair of earphones, enabling them to watch their items in privacy.

## Findings

The following findings reveal several theoretically meaningful correlations between time shortage and journalistic performance, based on the first broad-scale attempt to explore systematically the relationship between the time dimension and journalistic work processes at the level of individual news items, across traditional and online media.

Dozens of events evolve into full-fledged stories after longer than a 24-hour period—apparently undermining the notion of immediacy often attributed to news. A nuanced look at three previously unnoticed temporal segments encompassing the entire news cycle is useful in countering the received wisdom about the events' time-frames and their coverage in the news:

- *Pre-assignment*: this segment denotes the time-frame spanning between the occurrence of an event and the point at which a reporter begins to work on her assignment. At this stage, the event undergoes initial screening and selection, by either the reporter herself or the news organization, and its future fate as a story is determined. A large portion of the news begins immediately upon the occurrence of an event (20 percent), with an additional 47 percent of assignments beginning within 12 hours following the event.
- *Work duration*: this time segment contains the reporter's concerted work efforts, including the collection of information and the actual composition of the news report, and ends with the filing of the report. At this stage, the actual contents, emphases and framing of the story are tentatively determined, with most reports (76 percent) filed within six hours.
- *Filing-to-publication*: this segment stands for the time it takes for a report to be published after it has been filed. This is the phase at which editors get involved in the process and examine the appropriateness and breadth of the contents provided by the reporters. The length of this segment is determined by the nature of the medium's format and by the necessary amount of editing and corrections. Having been filed, most reports (87 percent) are then published within 12 hours. Although necessary delays occur in all media (ranging from one to six hours), this is especially true of print news, as discussed below (Table 1).

The four media—television, print, radio and online—exhibited somewhat different time regimes. Most of television's incipient news—that is, its pre-assignment periods—were localized in the immediate temporal proximity of the event or were postponed to 24 hours or longer after the event had occurred. Ten percent of television news was pre-scheduled events which were only about to occur and 22 percent of events were assigned to television reporters within 15 minutes after their occurrence. On the other hand, 35 percent of incipient television news was assigned after 24 hours and longer. Work duration for 70 percent of television news assignments lasted for six hours and longer. However, 87 percent of television news was broadcast within six hours after being filed.

**TABLE 1** Percentage of news items across time segments

	Pre-assignment (%)	Work Duration (%)	Filing-to-publication (%)
Before Event	5	–	–
Immediately	20	1	8
15 min	7	12	7
30 min	4	9	8
1 hour	12	20	14
3 hours	11	19	12
6 hours	8	15	7
9 hours	2	5	9
12 hours	3	6	22
18 hours	1	1	5
24 hours and longer	27	12	8

Print media had begun work on 64 percent of their incipient news within six hours. The work duration of 46 percent of the news assignments lasted between three and six hours. After filing, 70 percent of the news reports were published within 12 hours.

Both radio (69 percent) and internet (55 percent) news had begun work on more than half of their incipient news stories within an hour. Work duration for most items in radio (88 percent) and online (84 percent) news lasted for only three hours, and most stories (85 percent for radio and 68 percent for online) were published within an hour after filing, undermining the image of online news as the speediest news outlet (Table 2).

One clear indication that the "hourglass view" can still hold its ground was the changes in source diversity as a function of time schedule. Significant positive correlations were found between the amount of time at the reporters' disposal and the number of sources upon which they have relied. The less time reporters had, the fewer sources they were able to rely on ( $r = 0.367$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Similarly, less time also meant less cross-checking ( $r = 0.132$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and less leaked information ( $r = 0.146$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ).

The data also clearly indicated that time shortages were accompanied by a smaller percentage of citizen sources ( $r = 0.221$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). However, this point should not be overstated, as even senior institutional and political sources were less likely to be used under conditions of time pressure ( $r = 0.133$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ).

Still, the relationship between time schedules and journalistic practices has not been as straightforward as the above data suggest. As it happens, reliance on some sources has been associated with time savings rather than with time pressure, as predicted by the "metronome view". Specifically, our data indicate that reporters' work process has become shorter as the involvement of PR and spokesperson sources grew ( $r = -0.226$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ).

**TABLE 2** Time-regimes across media

Time Segment	Television (%)	Print (%)	Radio (%)	Internet (%)
<i>Pre-assignment</i>				
Before Event	10	4	5	2
15 min	22	21	43	33
1 hour	8	14	26	22
3 hours	10	15	6	7
6 hours	9	10	7	6
12 hours	6	6	1	2
24 hours and longer	35	30	12	28
<i>Work Duration</i>				
15 min	6	6	36	20
1 hour	6	24	43	52
3 hours	18	27	9	12
6 hours	26	19	2	4
12 hours	26	9	2	3
24 hours and longer	18	15	8	9
<i>Filing-to-publication</i>				
15 min	27	0	25	20
1 hour	13	0	60	48
3 hours	30	1	5	17
6 hours	17	3	5	5
12 hours	7	70	4	4
24 hours and longer	6	26	1	6

Similarly, sources frequently used by reporters, that is, sources routinely relied upon on a weekly or daily basis, some of whom were spokespersons, have been predictably found to save reporters' time during news-discovery ( $r = -0.123$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), the first instance at which the reporter heard of an occurrence, but more so during news-gathering ( $r = -0.210$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), that is, during the actual assembly of the story. Likewise, textual information, such as emails, Short Message Service and documents received by reporters via these channels, was related to noticeable time savings in work duration ( $r = -0.122$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) (Table 3).

## Discussion

Time matters. The received wisdom among journalism scholars and journalists alike, viewing time constraints as a notorious inhibitor of journalistic performance is certainly not to be taken lightly. Following many decades of speculations, generalizations and educated guesses about journalism constituting either a "stopwatch" (Schlesinger 1978) or a "hamster wheel" culture (Starkman 2010), time pressures have been shown to be significantly and negatively related to such fundamental properties of individual news items as source diversity, cross-checking and use of leaked information. Having said that, some sources, such as PR, spokespersons and frequent contacts, were apparently adept at bending time—as the reliance on them was associated with speedier journalistic performance. Thus, a practical explanation of how powerful sources shape the news can be offered, without resorting to hegemonic generalizations which treat power as invisible (Manning 2001).

Even though many events have taken longer than a whole day to evolve into news stories, contrary to journalism's image of speediness, there can be little doubt that time fluctuations play a practical role in newswork across all media. The "hourglass view" notion of susceptibility to manipulation with rising time pressures is supported by the data. For instance, while both senior bureaucrats and lay citizen sources tended to be comparably less likely to be used under conditions of time pressure, the correlation coefficient was larger for citizen sources, which are notoriously excluded from the news (Ericson 1998; Gans 2004). On the other hand, reliance on PR sources happened to accompany time savings throughout work duration, when news stories were actually being compiled, as predicted by the "metronome view". This suggests not only an initial tip that helped reporters ease into the news assignment, but an actual decrease in the work-lot per unit of time: the contribution of PR, for better or worse, is not merely an information subsidy (Gandy 1982), but primarily a time subsidy—a notion that tentatively points to PR's role in encouraging time savings, even though correlations *per se* are insufficient to conclusively establish causality. However, the data also point to the limits of the time dimension in accounting for the variation in news practices, as journalistic efforts tended to level out after approximately six hours of work.

More substantively, an objection could be raised that the present study's scale—namely the fact it covers several different media—is also its central weakness: the time variable's relationship to practices could be mediated through the organizational, technological and temporal characteristics of the medium. To test this alternative explanation, we looked at relationships between time schedules and practices *within* each of the media included in this study. By and large, the correlations between time and journalistic practices found across various media have been preserved within each



**TABLE 3**

The relationship between time and journalistic effort

	Work duration								Correlation coefficient ( <i>r</i> )	Significance ( <i>p</i> )
	15 minutes	30 minutes	1 hour	3 hours	6 hours	12 hours	24 hours	25 hours		
Number of sources	2.36	2.44	2.73	3.08	3.43	6.21	4.02	4.97	0.367	0.000
Citizen sources (%)	5	4	4	7	8	14	16	16	0.221	0.000
Senior sources (%)	19	19	17	24	29	29	23	25	0.133	0.000
PR involvement (%)	53	48	42	30	31	28	29	29	-0.226	0.000
Frequent sources (%) <sup>a</sup>	66	58	59	53	54	41	44	35	-0.210	0.000
Textual channels (%) <sup>b</sup>	34	33	36	25	19	18	27	22	-0.122	0.000
Cross-checking (%)	11	7	18	20	15	12	6	11	0.132	0.000
Leaks (%)	11	4	11	20	18	15	6	15	0.146	0.000

Correlations are measured using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. Since the table consists of different facets of newswork's mean measures, percentages do not add up to 100.

<sup>a</sup>Frequent sources are weekly or daily contacts.

<sup>b</sup>Textual channels include emails, Short Message Service, documents, and a slight portion of internet searches and social network information.

medium, among them the number of sources, reliance on citizen sources, the use of frequent sources, spokespersons and textual channels. A slightly weaker case can be made for cross-checking, whose correlation with the time dimension has been preserved in print, online and radio news, but has lost significance within television news, presumably indicating a deeper normative commitment to cross-checking that is independent of time pressures. While the data bear out the possibility that the medium may have had impact on pre-assignment (as in the speedy character of radio and online news) and on filing-to-publication (as in the tardiness of print news), no unequivocal medium-related impact on work duration could be found.

Understanding the role of time in the social dynamics which sustain news should rank high on the agenda for journalism scholars, especially as the journalistic work-lot expands and deadlines become more pressing—transforming time into a meta-constraint embodying developments such as dwindling workforce, homogenization of news content across media, and technological innovations which encourage and legitimize the acceleration of news production (Anderson, Bell, and Shirky 2012; Barnhurst 2011; Caspi 2007; Davidson 2012; Downie and Schudson 2009; Kershner 2012; Lee-Wright, Phillips, and Witschge 2010; Tsfati and Meyers 2012). While the present study comes at a specific point in journalism's economic, technological and professional evolution, and is anchored in the Israeli context, there is little reason to doubt the representativeness of the relationship between time and the extent of journalistic work as exemplified by the Israeli case.

The Israeli news market is dominated by national-level mainstream news organizations, serving a population of nearly eight million citizens from no more than 20 main newsrooms, many of which are located within approximately eight miles of one another in Tel Aviv, along with offshoots of two main television channels whose headquarters are in Jerusalem and Neve Ilan. The Israeli press is highly competitive, with the race to scoop competitors becoming more severe in the wake of sudden and unpredictable security-related events (Lavi 2012). Being overwhelmingly privately owned, the Israeli press suffers from the commercial crisis that characterizes Western media (Davidson 2012; Tsfati and Meyers 2012). Israeli journalists are technologically up to date, just as their audiences are compared with their counterparts in other OECD countries.<sup>1</sup> Print news in the four privately owned papers studied is published in a single daily edition, representing a non-updatable product. In terms of length, online news is similar to print items. The two radio stations included in this study, which are publicly owned, air an hourly bulletin comprised of extremely short news items. Meanwhile, the television channels—one public, two commercial—air a daily evening newscast, with no round-the-clock news channels as this article was being written.

In sum, the present study focused only on the measurable aspects of newswork, leaving to future studies the task of evaluating the effects of time pressure on the quality of news-writing, editing, contextualization and reporters' ability to penetrate complex subject matter, in addition to quantitative cross-cultural comparative work and studies of long-term trends.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank Inbal Avraham and Yifat Naim for their assistance in data collection, as well as Tali Avishay-Arbel for her statistical advice.

## FUNDING

This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation [grant number 1104/11].

## NOTE

1. OECD Key ICT Indicators: see [http://www.oecd.org/document/23/0,3746,en\\_2649\\_37441\\_33987543\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_37441,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/23/0,3746,en_2649_37441_33987543_1_1_1_37441,00.html).

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**Zvi Reich** (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), Department of Communication Studies, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel. E-mail: [zreich@bgu.ac.il](mailto:zreich@bgu.ac.il)

**Yigal Godler**, Department of Communication Studies, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel. E-mail: [igalgod@post.bgu.ac.il](mailto:igalgod@post.bgu.ac.il)