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PROBLEMS IN UTILIZING JOURNALISTIC SOURCES FOR HISTORICAL RESEARCH

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Unlike journalists, historians are responsible for an accurate portrayal of life and events of whatever era their research represents. Historians and journalists, like anyone investigating almost any subject, have to select information useful for explaining whatever problem or situation they are concerned with. Journalists have to choose information which makes or fits into a publishable story or an appealing television presentation. This constraint sometimes is innocent enough. But distortion resulting from requirements for successful journalism creates serious problems for historical use of such sources. When a reporter wants to use a story to make a point of journalistic interest, other information (likely to be of great interest in historical reconstruction of past events) is excluded--sometimes with excessive zeal. An historian employing journalistic sources (or any other sources, for that matter) has to evaluate them for distortion and somehow has to ascertain what happened after making allowance for crucial information which journalists, because of professional requirements, are inclined to suppress. Journalists have no obligation to provide accurate information for historical research, and probably would fail financially if they did. On that account, their materials must be used with considerable caution in any research aside from histories of journalism. Journalistic periodical sources, however, provide a massive amount of information. In addition, they have great importance in shaping public perceptions (however misleading) of events of their times. On that account, journalistic sources cannot be ignored.

Historians should not disparage journalistic accounts, but they need special training and awareness in order to employ that kind of documentation in successful research.

Aside from variance in interpretation, historians have problems with factual accuracy of detail in newspaper sources. Because of deadline pressures, journalists (while they strive for accuracy in whatever detail they choose to present) have a far greater excuse for factual error. But in dealing with journalistic sources, historians face a far more important problem with factual selection than with factual misinformation.

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