Journalists’ discursive construction of public opinion on President Obama and the economy: The uses of voters’ voices from a focus group.

Richard Buttny, Syracuse University
Kathleen Haspell
This study investigates the journalistic construction of the news from a focus-group of eleven Philadelphia-area voters. The journalists not only represent the participants’ voices, they also present themselves as keen observers—they attempt to display expertise as journalists. The written stories use the participants’ voices more than was found in the journalists’ oral discussion about the focus-group. In both the oral and written stories, the journalists ventriloquise participants’ voices within the genre, the news-feature story—how the dire political economy affects ordinary people. The journalists may represent the participants’ opinions while simultaneously recontextualizing participants’ voices within their own storyline.

**Keywords**: focus group of voters, voices, journalists’ practices, journalists’ discussion of the news, journalist display of expertise, oral and written discourse

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**Peter Hart, focus-group moderator**

gee I was remarkably struck by ah how we get … so wrapped up in the numbers and when ya step back from these numbers and ya get people’s voices boy they came out a lot differently than the numbers or whatever

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Watching television and flipping through the channels, I (the first author) came across a focus group of eleven voters with a moderator discussing President Obama and the US economy. After this focus group ended, to my surprise, five journalists entered the room who had just watched the focus-group from behind a one-way mirror. The journalists, along with the focus-group moderator, proceeded to discuss what they had just observed. Their discussion lasted about fifteen minutes. The journalists’ task seemed to be to produce some news on public opinion from the voters’ discussion. Indeed each of the journalists published a story or column soon thereafter. We found links on the Annenberg Public Policy web site (2009) to a streaming video and transcript of this focus group, a stream-
ing video of the journalists’ discussion, and the journalists’ written news stories. From watching or reading these three levels of discourse, we were intrigued by the journalists’ sense-making practices of the voters’ discussion. Journalists routinely size up events and write news stories about them, but seldom do we have the same access to the news event as they do and rarely can we listen in to journalists’ discussion prior to the production and publication of the news.

Our interest was also piqued by moderator Peter Hart’s comment, on stepping back “from the numbers” and hearing “people’s voices” (see epigram). “The numbers” here, of course, reference the statistical polling data in which public opinion is typically couched. A two-hour focus group of voters expressing opinions allows us to get more of a fully-contexted understanding of what voters are saying or feeling about President Obama and the political landscape, i.e., “people’s voices”. In the epigram, “voices” is used in contrast to the generalizations derived from statistical data. That is, the voice of the voter, rather than the aggregated, quantified generalization is cited as a source of public opinion. As Myers’ (2004, 17) critique of public opinion surveys puts it: “(S)urveys…are reduced to clear findings, and in the process we lose any sense of who said what to whom, after what, and to what end…More subtly, we lose the pace and feel of people talking, and this...(is) crucial to how we interpret how they might have meant their statements.” To investigate this notion of hearing “people’s voices,” our research questions are: What are the different ways in which journalists invoke people’s voices? How do journalists give import and context to people’s voices in constructing the news?

1. Voice and Journalistic Practice

The notion of “voices” is widely used by pundits and academics alike, e.g., the voice of the people, or more commonly, the voice of marginalized peoples not being heard. Hearing people’s voices is considered a good thing, as authentic or truly democratic in political contexts. Voice as an analytic concept comes to the fore when people’s voices are not being heard, not being part of the decision-making process. It is the lack of voice that moves scholars to examine it and how this not-being-heard process happens. Mishler (1984) shows how the constraints
of institutional structures, “the voice of medicine,” can predominate over the life-world concerns of patients. Johnson (2006) explores how teacher talk works as a “repression of voice” (213). More generally, Ribero (2006) claims that “voice captures agency (or lack of it)” (50-1). Blommaert (2005) characterizes voice as the ways people make themselves understood or fail to do so, that is, generate a desired uptake from others. Speakers who fail to receive such uptake may be said to lose voice. Craig (2011) finds the normative issues over voice involve representation, agency, and legitimate participation in democratic political processes. Thus while often referred to in abstract and passive terms, voice is actively produced, reproduced, and shaped by people in interaction.

Huspek and Kendall (1991) investigate how workers become alienated from wanting to have a political voice in their union and find that adopting an oppositional political vocabulary different from that of those in power effectively “deprives them of … resources for voicing critical interests effectively” (15). Similarly, Eliasoph (1998) finds that some volunteers avoid talk of politics and principles and do not voice their opinions or concerns, for fear that doing so would threaten their highly valued sense of togetherness (42-43). Eberly (2000), suggests that when intellectuals, in speaking on behalf of citizens or ‘others,’ speak of them as a homogeneous collective, effectively silencing the voices of those they claim to represent (28). In short, the voice of the people comes from, and is ideally expressed by, individual persons; therefore the ways in which it is represented in public discourse can be problematic.

Journalists or social researchers sensitive to this problem of voice sometimes attempt to resolve it by letting people speak for themselves in their written articles, such as through the use of quotes or narratives. But as Bakhtin (1981) has shown, when writers draw on another’s speech within their texts, they create a “double-voiced discourse” (324); that is, the voice of the quoted speaker is used for the intention of the writer. “(T)he author may also make use of someone else’s discourse for his own purposes…In one discourse, two semantic intentions appear, two voices” (Bakhtin 1984, 189). This raises the question of whose voice emerges as dominant, in other words, provides an interpretive frame for making sense of the discourse.

Such considerations have led scholars to claim that the concept of voice needs to be problematized. As Holsanova (2006) puts it, using quotes as voices is a
“staging of another person’s talk” (256), a kind of “ventriloquism” (Cooren 2010). Mazzei and Jackson (2009, 3) call for an examination of the “practices” by which voices are used and “the power relations that produce voices.” Clayman (1990, 100) advocates for a “research agenda aimed at analyzing...embedding practices of news writers: that is, the set of contextual resources invoked to provide for the specific sense of reported speech.” Along similar lines, Nyland (2006, 151) writes “there is a pressing need for media scholars to pay more attention to the ways...utterances are recontextualized into and re-presented as quotes in news stories” (emphasis added).

In light of these cautions over the uses of voice, we want to examine the practices that journalists use in drawing on and using people’s (or a person’s) voice. **What are the different ways that journalists use people’s voices? How does the journalist place these voices in context and give them import in their stories?**

### 2. Analytic Perspective and Methods

Our perspective here is discursive constructionism (Buttny 2004). We are interested in both participants’ speaking practices and the discursive realities claimed about people’s voices and political opinion. We examine not only the content of what participants say—their constructions, but also their speech practices in saying these—their constructing through discourse. As constructionists we are interested in how the journalists discursively make sense of the participants’ social world as newsworthy.

We focus on how the journalists reference people’s voices within their own oral and written discourse. For this study we operationalize voice as the journalists’ account or representation of the focus-group participants’ words, actions, or political views. We examine how journalists evoke the participants’ voice, contextualize them, and give import. In short, how do the people’s voices fit within the narrative of the journalist?

Our data involves three different discourses: the focus-group interaction, the journalists’ discussion of the focus group immediately afterwards, and the journalists written stories (Annenberg Public Policy 2009). Segments of the focus
group and the journalists’ discussion were transcribed using a modified Jefferson-
ian format.

3. Journalists Discussing the Focus Group

Prior to their discussion, the journalists had just watched a two-hour focus group
from behind a one-way mirror of the eleven voters from the Philadelphia area.
What do these journalists notice and comment on from the focus group and how
do they construct it as newsworthy? How do the journalists interpret what just
transpired as news? What kinds of attributions do they make of the voters and
their political opinion? Presumably the journalists were taking notes while watch-
ing the focus group as we see them referring to their note pads during the discus-

We start with the excerpt used in the epigram about stepping back from
“the numbers” and hearing “people’s voices.”

#1 (Journalists 11.30.09, 2:27-3:32. PH is Peter Hart the
focus-group leader and MS is Mark Shields a journalist)

01: PH: . . . but gee I was remarkably struck by ah:
02   (.). how we get (.). Mark so wrapped up in the
03   numbers and when ya step back from these numbers
04   and:: ya get people’s voices boy they came out
05   a lot differently than the numbers or whatever=
06 MS: =Yeah the- the ah: (.). the thing that hit me
07   {{clears throat}} over and over again and the
08   value of these is it really put a human face
09   on unemployment
10 PH: “Ye[ah”
11 MS: [I mean statistics don’t bleed
12 PH: Yeah >th(at’s right<
13 MS: [Ah but ah these people you could feel:
14 the pain the hurt not simply Patricia
15 but >I mean< [even Bill
PH: "Cheryl"

MS: Cheryl

PH: Ye[ah

MS: [I mean I thought Cheryl was just phenomenal

but when Bill talked about (.) he should walk more-

until he’s walked a mi::le in Cheryl’s shoes in

Patricia’s shoes I mean it was ah >ya know< it

was incredibly human ah and you understand

>what people are going through< and

the fact that he still is (.) $in good shape$

( .) he the President at this point is is I think

all the more remarkable (.I) I mean really >I mean<

In his assessment here (lines 1-5), Peter Hart (PH, the focus-group moderator) contrasts “the numbers” and “people’s voices.” “The numbers,” of course, is shorthand for the statistical aggregation of polling data on public opinion, the point being that “people’s voices” get lost or glossed over in the compilation of statistical, public-opinion data (Myers 2006, 17). People’s voices become more hearable in formats such as focus groups.

Notice that Peter Hart’s assessment about the numbers and people’s voices is addressed to “Mark” (i.e., Mark Shields (MS)) to solicit his comment. Mark Shields’ response aligns with Hart’s assessment and further specifies his impressions. Indeed, Shields underscores “the value of these” focus groups (line 7) which is something that Hart, as the focus-group coordinator, must like to hear. Constructing the news is a collaborative activity rather than just something in the mind of the individual journalist (Clayman and Reisner 1998).

Journalists display their savvy or expertise in their ability to size up situations, to be good observers, or to notice things that others do not. Both Hart and Shields begin by mentioning how they came to what they noticed. Hart introduces the topic with: “↑gee I was remarkably struck by…” (line 1), and Shields begins his response with, “the thing that hit me ((clears throat)) over and over again…” (lines 6-7). These metaphors of discovery involve physicality: being “struck” or “hit” by what is going on during the discussion. These observations are formed as heightened or intensified. Hart introduces this topic with rising
intonation on the surprise marker, “↑gee”; also he was “remarkably struck” (line 1). A moment later he adds the intensifier, “boy,” adding, “they came out a: lot differently” (lines 4-5). Shields cites the intensity and recurrence of his observation as: “hit…over and over again.” In presenting them with intensifiers, journalists mark their observations as notable, important, and potentially newsworthy.

In aligning with Hart, Shields formulates the value of hearing people’s voices as: “it really put a human face ↓on unemployment” (line 8). He elaborates, “I mean statistics don’t bleed” (line 10), and “these people you could feel: the pain the hurt” (line 12). Instead of just a statistic of the unemployment rate, Shields articulates a metaphorical version of people’s voices—the human suffering in their accounts of being without work. Through these assessments Shields interprets people’s voices in corporeal terms, as he puts it, the “human face” (line 8), involving intense physical responses: “bleed” (line 11), “pain,” “hurt” (line 14).

Shields references specific individuals from the focus group, e.g., Patricia, Bill (line 13) or, in conjunction with Hart, Cheryl (lines 14-17). Given that they all just watched the focus group, the journalists can reference participants’ names to recall their accounts of the impact of the bad economy. Patricia’s and Cheryl’s stories of unemployment and the impact on their family receive the most mention in the journalists’ written stories (following section). Yet Shields here cites the less obvious person, Bill, as he says, “but >I mean< even Bill” (line 15).

Shields not only cites Bill but invokes his voice through direct reported speech, “Bill talked about (.) he should walk more- until he’s walked a mi::le in Cheryl’s shoes in Patricia’s shoes” (line 18-19). As frequently happens with direct reported speech, Shields captures the spirit though not the exact wording of what Bill said. He gives voice to Bill through this quote, even though Bill’s words here can be heard as a platitude. What matters for our purposes is how the participants themselves take these utterances. Shields takes Bill’s voiced comment seriously, as epitomizing the economic situation and its consequences for people. Shields assesses it as “incredibly human” (line 20) and “you understand >what people are going through<” (line 21) echoing his prior comments about people’s pain and hurt (lines 13-14). He shifts from assessing Bill’s reported speech to the generalized attribution to “people” (line 24) The empathetic sentiment captured through Bill’s voice is put forward as emblematic of the broader problematic condition of the economy and its impact on ordinary people.
As a general observation, journalists draw upon people’s voices, but they do so for their own purposes. That is, journalists use people’s voices as a resource in support of their perspective. Journalists re-present people’s voices within their own framework. Here is where the journalist’s interpretative practices become apparent. Agreeing with Peter Hart’s statement in the epigram, people’s voices are heard, but they are heard as indicating or supporting the journalist’s particular frame for events. The journalist, in a sense, adds value or significance to people’s voices by hearing them within a broader framework. People’s voices are recontextualized by the voice of the journalist. So we have, on the one hand, “people’s voices,” and on the other, the voice of the journalist. That is, the journalist’s interpretative practices give voice to people’s voices as well as import and context to these voices.

As a case in point of the journalists’ interpretative practices, we see Mark Shields further develop his perspective of the human cost of unemployment by turning to the political aspects of unemployment. He observes that, despite all the bad economic news, President Obama “still is (.) §in good shape§,” which he assesses as “all the more remarkable” (lines 25-27). Shields offers his reading of the group’s favorable public opinion of the President. Notice how Shields intensifies his assessment: using staccato intonation in uttering “in good shape,” along with the emphasis on the temporal aspect, “still is” and “at this point.” Additionally he adds the extreme-case evaluation “all the more remarkable (.) I mean really (.) I mean really” (lines 25-27). Here again Shields positions himself as a keen observer of the participants’ opinion and political scene.

In the following excerpt, a continuation of #1, we see another journalist, Charlie Cook (CC), offer a more qualified perspective on the political consequences for Obama.

#2 (Journalists 11.30.09,3:22-3:45.CC is Charlie Cook a journalist from The National Journal)

25 MS: the fact that he still is (.) §in good shape§
26 (.) he the President at this point is is I think
27 all the more remarkable (.) I mean really >I mean<
28 CC: Good shape with his base
29 MS: With his base and with all of- but
they were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt
I mean even >ya know< John: I mean it was something
CC:{
MS: yeah at the very end[could say something positive =
CC:                 [Yeah
MS: = about him

Here Charlie Cook offers a second assessment to Mark Shields’ assessment of the group’s viewpoint. Cook uses the same locution as Shields did, “good shape” (line 25) but circumscribes this assessment to “his base” (line 28). Cook’s qualification provokes Shields to defend his view by referencing the focus-group participants’ stance, “they were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt” (line 30). Shields then moves from a general claim about the group to invoke what John, a Republican, said. He uses indirect reported speech to represent John’s propositional content, though not his words, “say something positive about him” (lines 31-35). So Shields here draws on both the general voice of the group and “even” John in support of his interpretation.

These competing assessments by Shields and Cook draw on their own opening statements. Peter Hart opened the discussion by asking each journalist “What surprised you.” Here the question comes to Mark Shields and then to Charlie Cook.

#3 (Journalists 11.30.09,0:48-1:11)
PH: Yeah ah Mark
MS: Ah the ah the benefit of the doubt,
    'ah: and how complicated it is when they blame
    the Congress for a Democratic President to run
    against a Democratic Congress
PH: Yeah (. ) ah ah Charlie?
CC: I thought that among the- the four or five just
    $dogged supporters of Obama$ boy they hung in there
    >I mean< they wanted him to succeed because
    they wanted him to succeed . . .
Shields uses the same pithy phrase, “the benefit of the doubt,” here (line 2) as he did later in responding to Cook in describing the participants’ stance (excerpt #2, line 30). These adept turns of phrase display Shields’ journalistic expertise in packaging an interpretative frame. Shields seems especially skillful at formulating participants’ stance and at framing it using vivid imagery; recall from excerpt #1 his locutions, “it really put a human face on unemployment” (lines 8-9) and “statistics don’t bleed” (line 11).

Cook’s opening answer (excerpt #3) describes the Obama supporters’ stance in relation to the dire economy which he later formulates as “his base” (excerpt #2, line 28). Cook’s formulation, “dogged supporters of Obama” is uttered in staccato to underscore their stance (line 8). Also, he uses “boy” to intensify his description “they hung in there” (line 8). In both Cook’s and Shields’ opening statements, they each support their perspective with a summary description of the focus-group participants’ political positioning. Throughout the discussion, when the journalists cite the participants, more often than not, they reference participants as a group or as an aggregate, rather than as an individual (see person references, Table 1). People’s voices get aggregated so the journalist can generalize his/her interpretation to the group.

Another instance of drawing on people’s voices in order to support an interpretation comes during the journalists’ discussion of public opinion on the President’s upcoming speech about the Afghanistan war. In the following excerpt we see the journalist, Jeanne Cummings, directly quoting different voters and then connecting these to her interpretative frame.

#4 (Journalists 11.30.09 5:03-5:37, JC is Jeanne Cummings, a journalist from Politico)

01 JC: . . . clearly the partisan lines were all fuzzed up?
02   ah where you have John |saying pull out =
03 PH:   [Right
04 JC: = ya have Tim on the other side
05 and Bill saying we gotta stay in
06   .hh so people are making a decision on Afghanistan
07   based on personal experiences and their own sense
08   of how the war should go and not necessarily as a
Republican or as a Democrat so I just feel like (.).

he’s got a much tougher sales pitch tomorrow night

cause they didn’t seem at all convinced-

not one of them thinks that we can win (.).and

not one of them seems to have a clear understanding

of what’s the end game

Here Cummings cites three of the participants and actively voices a portion of what John and Bill said (line 2 and 5) while Tim’s position is simply reported (line 4). These participant voices become relevant to support her interpretative frame that voters’ opinion on Afghanistan is more a function of “personal experience” than political party affiliation—i.e., Democrats against the war and Republicans for it. So Cummings gives import and context to these participants’ voices by noticing that they do not break down along party lines. She then makes her own assessment of where they stand collectively on the war (“they don’t seem at all convinced”) and uses this to make a point about President Obama’s persuasive challenge in his upcoming speech.

As further support for her interpretive frame, Cummings invokes the voice of the group on their skeptical opinion about the war (lines 11-14) and uses cognitive state descriptions to articulate participants’ voices: “convinced” (line 11), “thinks” (line 12), and “understanding” (line 13). These are particularly evaluative, and perhaps bold, claims for a journalist to make. Cummings seems to orient to them as such by using extreme case formulations (Pomerantz 1986) and in a parallel list-like structure to offer her interpretation of the group’s voice on the war, “they didn’t seem at all convinced” and “not one of them...” These formulations are couched in negative terms to underscore the absence of public support for the war. The locution, “not one of them,” gets repeated by Cummings in a negatively formulated three-part list (lines 11-14), not only articulating the group’s political stance, but emphasizing her interpretation of it. Three-part lists comprised of parallel phrases are regularly found in political speeches and public arguments (Haspel and Tracy 2007; Tannen 2007). So while Cummings displays her journalistic acumen in hearing participants’ voices in these particular ways, the way she organizes them and connects them to the President’s political situation reveals a framework that is not only interpretative, but rhetorical.
The journalists not only report what the voters said, they also comment on the quality of some of their statements. In the following excerpt, Charlie Cook notes a couple of instances where participants cite minutiae from the news, but he omits any reference to who said them.

#5 (Journalists, 11.30.09 8:38-9:12)
01 CC: Ya know it’s funny the little factoids that come
02 out ya wonder? some accurate some not ;I mean (.)
03 Pelosi does not have a 757 but but but- [but =
04 PH: [Right
05 CC: = not kissing- what was it the President of France?
06 [ { } ] >I had no idea what she was talking about< =
07 MS:[China ah ah France
08 CC: = but people (.{] whether it’s internet or =
09 PH: ]>Yeah<
10 CC: = cable news or whatever they seize on these: things
11 that ;it’s like wow
12 PH: Little stories little vignettes: ah: determine who
13 we are, ;the other thing I found interesting was...
reports, “stories…vignettes,” then attributes them to all voters, even the journalists, “determine who we are” (emphasis added). Hart’s formulation could almost be taken from a postmodern narrative theory text. Here there is no trace of being condescending or ironic towards the participants’ noticings and lay formulations of the news, as Hart lends their “little stories” legitimacy.

In the following excerpt Peter Hart offers a political assessment derived from watching the focus group.

#6 (Journalists, 11.30.09 4:00-4:32)
01 PH: Yeah but I would say ↓boy< all you have to do is
02 come here and realize if they don’t do something
03 about unemployment [ they aren’t understanding =
04 MS: [Ahh!
05 PH: = where we are as a country and that is just-
06 I mean it was so: stark and so: moving and
07 ah Patricia may have been on the verge of tears
08 but all of ’em had tearful stories one way or the
09 other and: ah: the other thing I was interested in
10 your reaction to: Afghanistan . . .

Hart begins his take here with the intensifier “↓boy<” said emphatically. Interestingly he uses a similar kind of intensifier in introducing the numbers-versus-people’s-voices comment, “but ↑gee I was remarkably struck…” (excerpt 1, line 1). Mark Shields inserts a response cry, “Ahh!” (line 4), which serves to intensify in aligning with Hart’s statement about the political need to address unemployment (lines 2-4). Hart’s interpretative frame of the urgency of unemployment gets heightened through his own and Shields’ intensifiers.

Hart then elaborates with an extreme-case formulation in this sad-telling, “it was so: stark and so: moving…but all of ‘em had tearful stories” (lines 6-8). In this formulation, he cites the emotional impact of the participants’ words, “so: stark and so: moving.” This formulation of participants’ affect builds on Shields’ prior metaphorical descriptions of people’s intense physical responses: “bleed,” “pain,” “hurt” (excerpt #1). He notes Patricia’s affect display, “on the verge of tears,” and then uses metadiscourse to reference the voice of whole group, “all of
‘em had tearful stories.” Metadiscourse, along with direct and indirect reported speech, feeling attributions, unattributed speech and extreme-case and summary formulations are different ways we have seen journalists represent participants’ voices and characterize them as victims of the economic downturn.

4. Journalists’ Written Stories on the Focus Group

In this section we turn from the journalists’ oral discussion to their written news stories about the focus group (The complete news stories are available at Annenberg Public Policy 2009). Not surprisingly, all their news stories deal with the bad economy, its impact upon ordinary folks, and its political repercussions. These news stories appear to be of “the news-feature story” genre (Cotter 2010). In representing oral communication, writers tend to simplify and reduce such phenomena (Caldas-Coulthard 1994). Interactive exchanges, such as between a moderator and participants, are often presented simply by the participant’s words. The participant’s words are commonly further reduced to only fragments of what was said. Continuing with the question of people’s voices: How are participants’ voices drawn on in the written stories? How does the journalist give context and import to the voters’ voices? How do the journalists’ written versions compare with their oral discussion?

A major difference between the journalists’ oral discussion and their written stories is their recipient design, which displays assumptions about what they take their viewers and readers to know about the events in question. In their oral discussion, the journalists show that they had just watched the focus group, and that they assume the C-SPAN audience has, in that they speak about the voters in shorthand ways. For instance, the journalists reference Patricia or Cheryl from the focus group by name, without any specific action descriptions. In writing their stories, however, the journalists cannot assume that their readers had previously watched the focus group on C-SPAN. Therefore they need to do more recipient-design work in their written discourse to provide context, by describing what took place during the focus group. Another difference between the oral and the written discourse is that the oral discussion was just that - a discussion - among the five
Given that all of the journalists wrote about Patricia in some fashion, we will focus on those segments of their written stories where Patricia was referenced. Patricia’s tellings appear to receive the most attention because she becomes the most emotional in telling her story of the economy’s effect on her family. Mark Murray refers to it as “the most gripping part of the evening,” and Charlie Cook characterizes it as “[t]he most moving moment.”

The journalists represent Patricia’s voice in different ways. For instance, Patricia’s moment of pathos gets variously portrayed in subtle but important ways:

#7. KK: Patricia…broke down in tears because her family is now facing homelessness
#8. MM: she was in tears when talking about her fear of losing her home
#9. MS: “My family is facing homelessness right now, which I never imagined could happen . . . sorry.” Patricia answered with understandable emotion
#10. CC: With her eyes glistening, Patricia, a 45-year old working mother, recounted the daily routine of her husband a carpenter and former marine: “He gets up every day, takes a shower, gets dressed, and no work”
#11. JC: Patricia…nearly brought the group to tears when she spoke of her unemployed husband, who is an ex-Marine and carpenter. “He gets up every day, takes a shower, gets dressed, and no work”

The first three journalistic accounts here (#7-9) attribute Patricia’s affect to her worry of becoming homeless. KK (#7) portrays Patricia by reported action, “broke down in tears,” followed by the reason for this. MM (#8) uses indirect speech in citing her tears while she is “talking” about her fear of homelessness. In both these descriptions Patricia is portrayed as “in tears,” but in #7 the affect overcomes her - she “broke down” - while in #8 she is not overcome, she continues “talking.” MS (#9) uses direct reported speech to convey Patricia’s own
words on her fear of becoming homeless, but with no mention of tears. Instead, MS characterizes her voice by the more ambiguous, “with understandable emotion.”

The other two journalists locate Patricia’s emotional intensity as characterizing a number of things she said. CC (#10) describes Patricia as “with her eyes glistening” as she recounts her narrative about her husband unable to find work. JC (#11) also gives voice to Patricia’s narrative about her husband but attributes the tears, not to Patricia, but to the group. Both JC (#11) and CC (#10) use direct reported speech of Patricia’s narrative about her husband, a carpenter and former Marine, looking for work: “He gets up every day, takes a shower, gets dressed, and no work.” These journalists draw on Patricia’s voice in recounting his daily (and futile) effort to find work.

The journalists draw on variable amounts of Patricia’s voice in their written stories. They all frame Patricia’s words in the context of the bad economy. In constructing this context some journalists intertextually draw on what was said during their prior oral discussion.

#12. CC: The most moving moments came when two women put
human faces on the nation’s jobless statistics.

This locution “put human faces” appeared in the oral discussion from Mark Shields’ assessment of the value of focus groups, “the value of these is it really put a human face on unemployment” (excerpt #1, lines 7-9).

Shields further draws from the oral discussion in echoing Peter Hart’s contrast between “numbers” and “voices.”

#13. MS: Numbers do not have emotions. . .

#14. MS: hear. . .the heartache and the fear in these
voters’ voices

Charlie Cook also draws on this “numbers-voices” contrast in his opening paragraph.

#15. CC: probing beyond the numbers, getting voters to voice their
hopes and fears
So the journalists draw on multiple voices in writing their stories: those of the participants as well as the voices of the focus-group leader and the other journalists. The oral discussion allows journalists not only to try out their interpretations but also to hear other ways of framing events which may be incorporated into their written stories.

In examining how the journalists represent Patricia’s voice, one notable finding is that the interactive aspects of her utterances are dropped out. We hear Patricia via the journalists’ direct or indirect reported speech, but do not get the moderator’s questions that occasioned her answers. For instance, consider the journalists use of direct speech to portray Patricia’s narrative about her husband looking for work: “He gets up every day, takes a shower, gets dressed, and no work” (#10-11). By way of background, the journalists were provided with a transcript of the focus group (below). Consider how Patricia’s narrative is represented in this transcript.

#16 (Transcript of the focus group provided to the journalists)
MISHERATOR: Yeah, and Patricia, how do you see things?
PATRICIA: Things are pretty bleak on my side of the street.
MISHERATOR: Good. Tell me about your side of the street.
PATRICIA: Well, thank you. My husband is a carpenter, ex-Marine carpenter. The man gets up, takes a shower, gets dressed, no work.
MISHERATOR: No work, yep.
PATRICIA: No work.
MISHERATOR: Yep. And, John, you were pretty down. . .

In addition to deleting the interactive aspects, the slight changes the journalists have made in their versions of Patricia’s story are intriguing. The journalists add “He gets up every day” (#10 & 11) to make the tacit point of Patricia’s narrative – that her husband routinely attempts to find work but fails -- explicit.

Patricia’s narrative arises from an interactive sequence with the moderator, Peter Hart. To better capture these interactive aspects, a more detailed transcription that we drew up is provided below.
When asked about her perceptions of “things,” Patricia answers with a critical assessment, “pretty bleak” (line 3-4). PH immediately probes her for more; he orients to her assessment as a kind of narrative abstract (Labov and Waletzky 1967) which needs to be unpacked. PH’s reply, “Good” (line 5) in response to Patricia’s shorthand assessment garners some laughter from other participants (line 6) which Patricia then plays along with by her ironic “Well thank you” (line 7) uttered with a smile voice. She then switches footings (Goffman 1981) and begins telling about her situation by identifying her husband as a carpenter to which she quickly adds “ex-Marine carpenter.” This additional person reference emphasizes her husband’s training and readiness, lending him gravitas and adding gravity to her narrative of unemployment. Patricia forms her telling as a narrative rather than as just a proposition. The narrative allows her dramatize the typical day with a three-part sequence, “gets up, takes a shower (0.5) gets dressed” and then a noticeable pause for emphasis before uttering “no work” (lines 9-13). PH
echoes Patricia’s “no work,” which she in turn repeats (in line 14), implicating the story’s end with this unresolved problem.

In a sense we have four different versions of Patricia’s narrative: Patricia’s interactive narrative from the focus group (excerpt #17), the journalists’ oral discussion of it (excerpt 6, line 7), the transcript provided to the journalists (excerpt #16), and finally the journalists written version (excerpts 10-11). Of course journalists cannot reproduce the original transcript in their written stories. Journalists must be selective and drastically reduce the amount of words while attempting to represent the spirit of Patricia’s voice. Of the eleven participants, we get more of Patricia’s voice than any others. Each of the journalists references her husband’s unsuccessful search for work and her fear of becoming homeless but how they refer to and embed Patricia’s narrative into their own varies.

We now turn to the issue of how Patricia’s voice is embedded or put in context. Mark Shields is the only one to represent Patricia’s words as a response to questions from the moderator. Patricia’s comments are presented along with those of other participants, especially with Cheryl’s accounts. These accounts from Patricia or Cheryl are presented as instances in support of the journalists’ framing of the economic downturn and the political ramifications arising from it. The participants’ voices are used to exemplify the journalist’s reading of the political economy.

5. Discussion

Returning to Peter Hart’s comment about “get(ting) people’s voices” during the focus group (epigram and excerpt #1), we see the journalists draw on people’s voices but for their own purposes. The journalists hear people’s voices but they need to size these up, package them, and present them in an intelligible and accessible way. Hearing people’s voices is one thing; the journalists’ practices of conveying people’s voices is quite another. People’s voices get embedded or framed within the storyline the journalist wants to tell. These voices are employed as instances in support of the journalist’s angle.

Here we consider the different journalistic practices in presenting people’s voices during their discussion and in their written stories. Starting with the jour-
nalists’ use of quotes or direct speech, we see much more of this practice in the written stories than during the journalists’ discussion. This difference is probably due to the fact that the journalists were given a transcript of the focus group for writing their stories. It is not surprising that during the fast-paced, oral discussion there are fewer direct quotes, and the few that are offered are noticeably shorter in length.

In the written stories Patricia is quoted more than others no doubt due to her emotional reaction to imminent homelessness. Patricia’s affect display is the one voice that each of the journalists wrote about. But Patricia’s voice is not simply conveyed in the form of a quote; the journalist selects, edits, and shortens her words. The journalist’s interpretative hand is especially evident in attributing emotion to Patricia in various ways (e.g., “in tears,” “with her eyes glistening,” “with understandable emotion”) or her effect on the other participants (e.g., “nearly brought the group to tears”). The journalists’ descriptions of Patricia’s affect add import to her telling and especially reveals voice (Ribiero 2006, 74). In describing and quoting Patricia’s narrative, clearly the journalists are telling the news-feature story - how an ordinary working person is affected by broader political and economic developments (Cotter 2010). Genre becomes a key part of contextualizing a participant’s words (Bakhtin 1986).

Another practice journalists use to present people’s voices is indirect speech or summary quotes of what an individual said. Here the journalist’s words, rather than those of the participant, are employed to represent what was said. Indirect speech relies more on the journalist’s interpretation of what the participant(s) said since the journalist uses his/her own words to paraphrase the participant’s message.

A third way the journalists present people’s voices is by aggregating them into some sort of general statement or summary quotes. This involves a move from the individual to the general level. For instance, metadiscourse is used to describe the group’s speech actions, e.g., “all of ‘em had tearful stories” (excerpt #6). Or reported action characterizes the group, e.g., “they seize on these things” (excerpt #5). Or cognitive states are employed to describe the group’s political opinion, e.g., “they didn’t seem at all convinced- not one of them thinks that we can win” (excerpt #4). Surprisingly most of the person references, in both the discussion and written stories, are of the group as a whole or some aggregate, rather than to a
particular individual. The journalistic practice here seems to be to generalize, albeit from a sample of eleven or less.

This practice of summarizing the group’s voice is often found in conjunction with a description of an individual, e.g., “Patricia may have been on the verge of tears but all of ‘em had tearful stories” (excerpt #6), or in excerpts 4 and 5 where we get reported speech of individuals before moving to a general summary quote. Or we get a general statement of the group voice followed by a specific individual’s voice, “they were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt I mean even >ya know< John:….could say something positive” (excerpt #2). The representation of the individual voice works as an illustration of the journalist’s general claim.

Other practices journalists use include what we may call their manner of framing the news. We saw the journalists use intensifiers (e.g., “gee,” “boy”) or extreme-case formulations (e.g., “they didn’t seem at all convinced,” “not one of them...”) to draw attention to their interpretation of events. Also, their prosodic features - what we gloss as a palpable excitement in their voice - a staccato intonation to underscore an important point (“the fact that he still is (. ) $in$ good shape$...$” (excerpt 1)). These devices work to mark their observations as important - as newsworthy. Journalists are not only representing the participants in their discussion or written stories; in presenting the news they themselves are participants in the discourse. Through these practices, the journalists demonstrate a need to display their expertise as journalists and show us how they strive to achieve this, in part, by invoking people’s voices and framing them as newsworthy.

Building off of the Bakhtinian notion of “double-voiced discourse” (1981), we do get a sense of “people’s voices,” though these voices are edited, recontextualized, and often aggregated by the journalist. Cooren’s (2010) notion of “ventriloquism” seems apt here: in positioning themselves as reporters, journalists draw on people’s voices in a way that speaks towards their own storyline. The journalists both represent the participants’ views while presenting these within their account. The journalists both discover the participants’ opinions while constructing these within a larger framework of their story, bringing to light a process we, as viewers and readers rarely see: the discursive construction of news.
Table 1. Person References from the Journalists’ Oral Discussion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person Reference as Aggregate (24)</th>
<th>Person Reference of an Individual (14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “they” (11 times)</td>
<td>• Bill (3 times)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “people’s” (3 times)</td>
<td>• John (3 times)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “the group”</td>
<td>• Patricia (2 times)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “everyone” (2 times)</td>
<td>• Tim (2 times)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “all of ‘em”</td>
<td>• Cheryl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “not one of them”</td>
<td>• Bernadette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “nobody”</td>
<td>• William</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “fifty-fifty audience”</td>
<td>• She</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “the Obama people”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “six people”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “four of five dogged supporters”</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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Authors’ address

Richard Buttny is a Professor of Communication and Rhetorical Studies at Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York 13244 USA, tel. +1-315-443-5137, email: rbuttny@syr.edu Web: http://works.bepress.com/richard_buttny/

Kathleen C. Haspel is an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Fairleigh Dickinson University, Madison, NJ 07940 USA, tel. 973-443-8466, haspel@fd.edu

About the authors

Richard Buttny received his Ph.D. in Communication Studies from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His research interests include accounts, reported speech, cultural discourses, and environmental discourses.