A NARRATIVE LOOK AT THE REGIONAL VOICE OF POLITICAL COLUMNIST

MOLLY IVINS

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Master of Arts, August 8, 2005
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Mass communication research that focuses on analyzing the opinion writing of prominent columnists is nearly non-existent. The columns of Austin, Texas-based nationally syndicated columnist Molly Ivins are studied, looking primarily at how her distinctive style, comprised of humor, strong language and regional dialect, has contributed to her columns about national politics. *Narrative analysis* is used to examine the ideological structure of her opinion writing, and to determine how these stylistic elements have broadened the appeal of her columns and contributed to the development of her singular, American voice.

Style manual or journal used: *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, Fifth Edition*

Computer software used: Microsoft Word 2003

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INTRODUCTION

Columns are one of the earliest and most valued public forums for punditry in the history of print journalism (Nimmo & Combs, 1992). The fundamental responsibility of a columnist, Estrada (1997) writes, is not that of gathering the news in a timely manner, but to "interpret, spin, humanize, and analyze events" (p. 8). With their distinctive and often more riveting and colorful language, columnists infuse newspapers with an idiosyncratic style and personality, providing readers with a human face and an alternative to the stylistically uniform news pages (Estrada, 1997). The columnist disconnects from other journalists, notes Estrada, in terms of social status, professional procedure, discursive freedom, folkloric tradition, and ability to shape discourse. As Glover (1999) observes:

> We all live in our tiny boxes, knowing a lot about a little, and the columnist moves between us, making connections we may not have understood as individuals, attempting to explain a more complete picture to those who have seen only a part of it (p. 291).

Audiences favor writers they can agree with, or despise. Grauer (1984) suggests that audiences depend on the opinion writer to interpret events and complex issues – to tell them in a non-perfunctory manner what to think – and they welcome the opportunity to react to another person rather than an institution. Although part of the news culture, columnists are set apart in their pedagogic function. They are granted a "license to instruct" (Nimmo & Combs, 1992), and are expected to be less superficial, and more analytic and probing (Weiner, 1977).

The work of Austin, Texas-based nationally syndicated columnist Molly Ivins is examined using *narrative analysis* as a means to investigate how humor, strong language, and regional dialect have contributed to her opinion writings that focus on national politics. This purpose of this study is to discover how these contributions broaden the appeal of her columns, as a way to understand how she has developed a singular, American voice. The tension between Molly Ivins the elite New England liberal and Molly Ivins the Texas populist – as expressed through humor, strong language, and regional dialect – is the driving force behind her writing.

Narrative analysis is an ideal method in which to examine Ivins's work, as narrative is present in nearly every media and cultural form. The impulse to tell stories is inherent in human responses to the world. Narrative also identifies ideology and is a way by which values and ideals are reproduced culturally. Therefore, it is used to examine the structure of her columns to uncover their ideological intent. Narrative analysis involves close reading and is best conducted on a limited number of texts (Stokes, 2003). Sixteen of her columns were analyzed, beginning in 1987 when she started writing columns regularly about national politics to the present. The selected columns were divided among the presidential administrations within this time period. The selection includes columns for mass distribution that appeared in newspapers and those written for specialized left-wing magazines, which include *The Nation*, *Mother Jones* and *The Progressive*.

How does Ivins use storytelling – characterized by humor, strong language and regional dialect – to reach such a broad and varied audience? How do her stories hang together and ring true? The ancient assumption is that all discourse is meant to accomplish at least one of three aims, to delight, to instruct, and to move, "which end

products we interpret respectively as the display of “beauty,” the transmission of “truth,” and the wielding of “power” (Lucaites & Condit, 1985, p. 91). While *narratio* has moved far from its classical origins (Farrell, 1985), these three fundamental modes of discourse – poetic, dialectic, and rhetoric – can function as the framework for examining Ivins’s work.

Heller (1999) points out that “all column writing is prey to theatricality,” and to establish a columnar identity one must not only express an opinion, but shout it out and “ham oneself up a little” (p. 16). Underneath Ivins’s “ham” is a substratum of enlightened political commitment, which is examined in this study. Commentary is featured most notably in newspapers in the relatively brief essays of syndicated columnists. To be defined as such columnists must write at least two columns each week, dealing with public affairs and social problems. Also in this category are humorists with politically relevant targets (Paletz, 2001).

A newspaper column is like an essay, writes Braden (1993), free to explore any subject. Columnists are the celebrities of the newspaper world, and syndicated columnists experience even greater recognition. Their messages are distributed nationwide and reach hundreds of thousands, and occasionally millions, of readers. Along with their regular platform in newspapers, syndicated columnists travel and lecture frequently. Many are panelists on current affairs talk shows and some appear regularly on prime-time network news programs. Collections of their columns sell briskly and often make the best-seller lists (Braden, 1993). In terms of journalistic status, a successful syndicated columnist ranks on the same level or higher than bureau chiefs and newspaper editors (Weiner, 1977). Yet surprisingly, little information is available about columnists. Most of what has

been written is biographical or focuses on the mechanics of opinion writing, and does not include analyses of their work.

A look at most opinion pages most days in most newspapers, large and small, Yoder (2004) notes, indicates that their creators are driven by a "spirit of deadly earnestness" (p. 219). Op-ed pages "provide information, analyses, benchmarks, and public forums to assist readers in making decisions and taking action on issues (Hynds, 1994, p. 573).

The serious and effective, however, need not be ponderous and somber. Columnists should forgo writing about every event that is seemingly important, whether or not it actually is, and whether or not the writer has anything original to contribute about it. Yoder (2004) observes that American politics is increasingly the playground of spin doctors and public relations agents; therefore it is helpful to keep in mind historian Daniel Boorstin's term, the "pseudo-event," events staged almost solely for media coverage and not for their inherent substance (Boorstin, 1973, p. 45). Pseudo-events abound these days, and generate what Yoder (2004) calls the "invented" piece, a pseudo-column as useless as the "duty" piece, a routine political commentary written without heart or passion.

A common misconception is that opinion pieces consist mainly of opinion, however, no thoughtful reader responds solely to opinion (Yoder, 2004). A columnist's primary goal is to persuade, and persuasion requires a balance between assertion and information. "A telling fact, artfully cited, will carry more weight than any view, however colorfully phrased" (Yoder, 2004, p. 220). Fisher (1944) calls columnists "the uncorseted press" who are the only non-political figures of record who can say 'Now here's what I think…' with assurance that millions will listen" (p. 3).

Ivins presents fascinating paradoxes that enrich her column writing. Her privileged background and top journalism credentials co-exist with her sagebrush witticisms and populist personality. She uses storytelling to align herself with the common people, yet she earned degrees from exclusive northeastern schools, Smith College and Columbia University. Mass culture functions to impose the dominant ideology, however, Ivins challenges the capitalist state while at the same time enjoying a lucrative career within that system. In a sense, Ivins bites the hand that feeds her. She is a bankable literary figure whose books are bestsellers, yet she is a regular contributor to leftist publications.

Mainstream success and leftist journalism seem oxymoronic, but not in Ivins's case. As she notes: "As usual, I keep writing for leftist editors who pay in the high two figures" (Ivins, 1998, p. viii). The establishment gave her the credibility she needed, observes Estrada (1997) and the alternative ties and the down-home, aw-shucks rhetoric are what makes Ivins stand out from the rest. It is likely the lowbrow-highbrow combination that makes her so appealing, and she would not be successful with one and not the other. Estrada comments on her unique and seemingly contradictory voice:

> The goofiness is inseparable from the serious conversation. And the real meat is buried under a thick mound of gravy… Her saucy humor and her trailer park writing style serve then as a ruse for her greater contribution to the dialectic of enlightenment – she is slipping radical thoughts in the cracks (p. 301).

Not everyone, however, appreciates her singular brand of colloquialism. One reviewer compares her use of metaphor, aphorism, and euphemisms to sucking salsa through a straw (Thurman, 2000). Nevertheless, underneath the gravy is a "recurring willingness to challenge the methods of the capitalist state, and a willingness to identify greed, corruption and class inequity" (Estrada, 1997, p. 301). Understanding the teller is

necessary in order to analyze the artifact. The following biographical section consists primarily of information obtained from Ivins exclusively for this study during a two-hour interview at her home. It is written in a journalistic style to instill the material with a more lively and engaging tone.

Biography

It's not surprising that Molly Ivins resides in South Austin, one of the most freewheeling sections of this tolerant city in central Texas – a blue dot in the overwhelmingly red Lone Star State. Signs in the front yards of former working-class homes in gentrified Travis Heights reflect the inhabitants' liberal politics. "Kerry/Edwards" signs are still staked in yards months after the 2004 presidential election, along with signs that read "Say No to the Bush Agenda," "Help Stop the War," "Americans for Peace," and "Buck Fush." Gnarled live oaks shade old wood-frame and stucco homes and driveways, where more hybrids and vintage pickup trucks are parked than SUVs. The state capitol – the largest in the United States – can be seen from the neighborhood's commercial district, an eclectic mix of bohemia, urban cowboy, and south-of-the-border kitsch. There's Little Al's Texas Music Café, curiosity shops selling Mexican Day of the Dead skulls, a Zen Japanese fast food restaurant, and Jo's Coffee House, where dogs are welcome and movies are shown in the parking lot. So strong is a sense of place that overzealous locals tattoo its 78704 ZIP code on their arms and display it on the back of their vehicles.

Barely visible in a jungle-like yard in Travis Heights is Ivins's Spanish-style house where she has lived since 1985. A Mexican straw donkey greets visitors at the front door that opens to an interior courtyard with a built-in goldfish pond. Another door leads to

rooms with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a tangle of native plants beneath a massive canopy of live oaks. On a blustery, mid-winter morning in her art-filled living room, Ivins talks about her career, her influences, and about the basic human need for humor and good stories. Unless otherwise cited, all of Ivins's direct quotes in this thesis are taken from this interview.

"I'm not very reflective about what I do, it's very difficult for me since I have a somewhat Bushian aversion to psychotherapy," she admits, settling her six-foot frame into a chair and igniting the first of several Marlboro Lights. "I have a horror of sounding self-important and pompous when I talk about my writing. It's like walking, I really don't think about it. I've been an opinion writer longer than I've been a reporter, yet I still think of myself as a reporter – one who thinks management is scum, whoever they are. I've had a somewhat eccentric career. The epitaph on my tombstone should read: She never made a shrewd career move."

This lack of professional calculation has not hindered her rise to the position of nationally syndicated columnist and best-selling author. This unconventional career path reflects her dual persona. She is a wisecracking, low-comic Calamity Jane; Wild West princess of the barbed one-liner. At the same time, she is an Ivy League educated, French speaking, *New York Times*-trained journalist. She is a lover of language whose distain for George W. Bush is due in part to the way he mangles words. Yet she herself debases standard English, and instills it with a homespun, colloquial tone. These paradoxes and contradictions lend her work a rich, multidimensional quality, and give column culture a distinctive voice. As Estrada (1997) observes, her detractors find her use of such expressions as "bidness," sumbitches," and "Meskins" troublesome, however, she uses

them as rhetorical devices to show how laughable Texas culture can be. Ivins is known for her candor, toughness, and the ridicule she heaps on public officials, writes Braden (1993), and she follows in a long tradition of American writers who use humor to comment on politics. A compelling storyteller, Ivins mastered the art by listening to Texas politicians.

"The beauty of covering Texas politics is that you don't have to make up anything, so my stories are true stories," explains Ivins, one of the first women to cover Texas politics. "For me, storytelling is a way to get as many people to rock with laughter. I read three or four papers every day. If something makes me absolutely furious, or something makes me burst out laughing, I know I have a column. But I have to be careful not to use the anger key too often because so much of what this [Bush] administration does makes me so angry. You must stay angry over injustice without becoming cynical."

If she can get her readers to laugh, she reasons, she can get them to think and eventually get them involved in politics. Newspapers tend to be dull, she observes, so a way to attract readers is to entertain them. Ivins criticizes journalists for making public affairs seem boring, when she sees the political arena as a three-ring circus, one that "we're all paying for so we might as well enjoy the show." Before national syndication in 1992, her national audience consisted mainly of people who read her columns in such alternative-left magazines as *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, and *Mother Jones*. Her columns are now distributed by the Los Angeles-based Creators Syndicate to more than three hundred newspapers throughout the United States. She went independent in 2000 and no longer has a base newspaper. While the opinions of columnists typically take root within their partisan niche, Ivins's idiomatic writing is well received by audiences in both

left-wing and mainstream publications. As Estrada (1997) observes, the establishment gave Ivins the credibility she needs, and the alternative ties and the down-home talk allow her to stand out from the rest.

"If I'm writing for *The Nation* or *The Progressive*, there is a slight letting down of hair, and I tell myself 'oh, thank God, these are people that I don't have to explain the joke to.' It's easier when you start from shared assumptions, but I also like the challenge of talking to a wide general audience. And, of course, you learn over time that writing for a wide audience has the most unexpected and often comical parallels, and you're bound to offend someone. People's sensitivities are hilarious. I once wrote that a group of Texas legislators lined up at the back of the mike looked like a bunch of real droolers, and god damned if I didn't get literature and an angry letter from the Society to Prevent Cruelty to Those Who Involuntarily Drool. A group, I must say, whose particular concerns I had not taken into consideration."

Today, she writes two columns a week – down from three after a recent bout with cancer – for Creator Syndicate and a monthly column for *The Progressive*. In addition to her regular assignments, her freelance work has appeared in *Esquire*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's*, *Playboy*, *TV Guide* and other publications. Her books with Lou Dubose on George W. Bush, *Shrub* and *Bushwhacked*, were national bestsellers. Although it takes her about three hours to write an 800-word column, many more hours are spent researching the particular topic. Throughout her career as a nationally syndicated columnist, she has had one or two research assistants, who also field requests for speaking engagements and other public appearances. She writes in her home office, a stuffed armadillo perched on her computer monitor.

When Ivins went independent**,** she worried that her "human connectedness" would weaken without having a newsroom to write from. If the continual ringing of her phone and front door is any indication, her human connectedness remains intact. Yet she says she's careful to maintain a certain degree of distance from her sources, as she did during her days as a reporter. "I write for my readers, those to whom I owe my loyalty, not my peers or politicians. I've avoided that awful clubby journalism, where journalists will have politicians to dinner and visa versa. I was very careful never to ask Ann Richards for an exclusive interview when she governor because she was a longtime personal friend." It is not surprising that Ivins and Richards are longtime friends. The first female governor of Texas in fifty-six years, Richards is also known for speaking her mind, often using her wry sense of humor to say what she thinks despite the consequences. It was Richards who coined the phrase, "Poor George [H. W. Bush] – he was born with a silver foot in his mouth."

Along with reading four or five newspapers a day, including Spanish and French newspapers, Ivins reads two or three books a week, and a number of conservative journals and newspapers. "It's my primary way of learning and getting column ideas. The only drawback to this absolutely wonderful job is the days when you have absolutely nothing to write about and you have to force yourself into a subject. It doesn't happen often, but it does happen."

Born Mary Tyler Ivins in Monterey, Calif. in 1944, Ivins grew up in an upper middle-class, conservative neighborhood in Houston. After graduating in 1966 with a degree in history from Smith College– where her mother and grandmother had gone before her – she earned a master's degree from Columbia Journalism School and studied a year at the

Institute of Political Science in Paris. Her first newspaper job was in 1964 as a summer intern at the *Houston Chronicle*, where she returned to work as a reporter after graduating from Smith. “In those days the *Chronicle* was a perfectly wretched newspaper, and quite squalid as well, and I just thought it was wonderful,” recalls Ivins, who was at the *Houston Chronicle* when she was accepted at Columbia Journalism School. “It was clear to me that as a woman I was not going to get very far in this business unless I had added credentials.” At Columbia, she was taught a highly formalistic style of journalism and one of her professors was Melvin Mencher, the author of a widely used and well regarded journalism textbook (Estrada, 1997).

During the interview, she recited a passage from one of her assigned readings at Columbia: “Gone are the days of the front page. No more do we see reporters with their hats on the back of their head and their ties askew, their feet up on the desk. Today’s reporters work in newsrooms that are much like an insurance office where professionals sit quietly working.” This depiction of old-style journalism is what Ivins remembers at the *Houston Chronicle*. “After they met the first edition deadline, their hats were on the back of their head, their ties were askew, and they were drinking gin and Cutty Sark out of coffee cups. It was really that world. It was such fun.”

Ivins still clings to this romanticized notion of journalism, believing that above all it should be exciting, vital work. “When I went off to Columbia, I wanted to become a famous correspondent. I was going to lope around the world having fabulous adventures in exotic places, being paid a princely sum while wearing a trench coat. At Columbia, we were being trained for the *New York Times*, or possibly the *Washington Post*. I was there for the last blaze of glory of the *New York Herald Tribune*. The New York newspaper

world was shifting madly then, and papers that had been around forever were dying. During this time I realized that great journalistic writing is an art, that newspaper reporting isn't a lesser form of writing."

In 1970, Ivins became co-editor covering the Texas legislature for the liberal *Texas Observer*, which for 50 years has provided a forum for Garry Trudeau, John Kenneth Galbraith, Sister Helen Prejean and hundreds of other left-leaning contributors. It was here that a young, impressionable Ivins met folk humorist, political commentator, and First Amendment defender John Henry Faulk, who was a contributing editor at the magazine at the time. Faulk, as Estrada (1997) points out, was influential not only in shaping her ideology, but her writing style as well.

"In 1970, I sort of dropped out of establishment journalism. It was a combination of youthful, political idealism coming back to Texas to help with the revolution, or whatever we thought we were doing. The restraints were stronger back then, in terms of what you were allowed to write and say. So it was a happy detour, my six years at the *Texas Observer*. I had the freedom to experiment, to figure out what worked and what didn't. It was a happy, golden time. I had absolutely no money, none of us did. We were paid $100 a week and I never got a raise. If I were to point to a single experience in my life that was most informative, the *Texas Observer* would be it, more so than graduate school."

That happy, golden time ended when Ivins accepted a position with the *New York Times*. Contradictions and paradoxes surrounding Ivins emerge again, as she expresses both respect and distain for the venerable paper. "For reasons no longer clear to me, I quit the *Observer* in 1976 and went to work for the *New York Times*," writes Ivins in the introduction to one of her books. "Naturally, I was miserable, at five times my previous

salary. The *New York Times* is a great newspaper; it is also no fun." (1991, p. xvi). Yet she's grateful to have had the opportunity to work for the *New York Times* because "it's like getting your credentials stamped," she says. "And I must say that it was daily journalism practiced at a level of excellence I had not seen before or have seen since. But what a pompous institution it was in those days."

After three years as a political reporter in Albany, N.Y., the *New York Times* dispatched Ivins out West to serve as its Rocky Mountain bureau chief. Like Texas, Ivins found in the Rockies plenty of colorful characters and customs to write about, however, her offbeat, singular style was edited aggressively. "They just bled the life out of a writer's work, just bled it," she recalls. "To write for the *New York Times* in those days was to be subjected to a death of a thousand cuts. The *Times* hired me because I could write, and then refused to let me."

She recalls a couple of bland changes made to her saucy descriptions. Once she described a man as having "a beer-gut that belonged in the Smithsonian," and he turned up in the pages of the *Times* as "a man with a protuberant abdomen." He "squawked like a $2 fiddle" was changed to "an inexpensive musical instrument." Ivins writes that she was finally fired from the *New York Times* for describing a small town chicken-slaughtering festival as "a gang-pluck" (1991, p. xvi). While Ivins may never have made a shrewd career decision, she nevertheless plays up the histrionic moments in her career, promoting them as part of her overall image – the image of an unrestrained, extravagant social commentator operating outside the perimeters of conventional journalism. This is, in part, an accurate image. Ivins has one foot in gonzo journalism and the other in the top echelon of the media establishment. She effectively straddles mainstream journalism and

a more progressive or alternative cultural milieu. The writing style that the *New York Times* could not tolerate, the *Dallas Times Herald* was eager to grab.

"The *Herald* called one day [in 1982] and said 'Come home, you can write about whatever you want to and say whatever you want to," she remembers. "And I thought, 'What a deal' after six years at the *New York Times*. I did a city column about Dallas that was terrific fun, my first opinion writing experience." Editors at the *Herald* gave her carte blanche and "took substantial heat" from her column. Dallas officials were irate, advertisers boycotted, and subscriptions were cancelled. Attempting to defuse the protests, the *Herald* rented billboards throughout Dallas that read "Molly Ivins Can't Say That, Can She?" The saying became the title of her 1991 collection of columns, which stayed on the *New York Times* best-seller list for more than a year. The success of her first book made her a hot personality and she was advised to try syndication.

The syndication of Ivins's columns coincided with her transfer to the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* after the demise of the *Dallas Times Herald* (Braden, 1993). Because of the book's immense popularity, Ivins became a celebrity, a reluctant one. She entered into an already established authorial star system in which the marketable "personalities" of authors are often as important as the quality of their literary production (Glass, 2004). Reacting negatively to fame, Ivins sought counsel with a therapist to determine if she feared success (Braden, 1993). "It wasn't fear of success that bothered me, just fear of becoming an asshole" (Ivins, 1994, p. 11). Apparently she came to terms with her celebrity, appearing on the *Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson and the *Late Show* with David Letterman. In 1996, she appeared as a commentator on CBS newsmagazine *60 Minutes* for nine episodes.

Ivins's schedule remains full. Along with opinion writing, she regularly gives speeches, including a pro bono one each month on First Amendment issues, and appears as a guest commentator on TV news shows. "I was recently on C-Span, and over and over again I got calls about being a Bush hater. I've never considered myself a Bush hater, although I think he's an absolutely horrible president. We've known each other since high school and you have to work to dislike him, but certainly not on policy issues."

In the introduction to one of her books, she writes, "Who knew Dubya Bush would be this bad? I realize there is nothing more annoying than someone who says 'I told you so.' But dammit, the next time I tell you someone from Texas should not be in the White House, would you *please* pay attention?" (2004, p. xviii). Ivins is working on a third book with Dubose, about average citizens fighting to retain their civil liberties. A topic that also interests Ivins these days is the "Texafication" of the United States, the notion that the entire country is becoming just like "greedy, reactionary, racist, poverty-blighted, religion-ridden Texas" (Dugger, 2004, p. 60). "It's a good theory for what is happening in our country today. The charming thing about this great state," says Ivins, laughing, "is that we're often more interesting than any place else."

Conclusion

This study would have been missing an important dimension without the candor of these first-hand accounts. The interviewing process is imperfect and unpredictable. Participants can get information wrong because of forgetfulness or deliberate distortion. Yet in my view imperfection and unpredictability are actually beneficial to the outcome. Despite its fallibility, the interviewing process is vital to achieving rich text and illumination.

Ivins has been attracting followers and detractors for two decades as a nationally-syndicated columnist. Yet, as noted in the next chapter, little has been written about her or her singular way of viewing the social and political landscape. Through the use of narrative analysis, close readings of the columns selected for this study revealed unexpected outcomes, and confirmed areas of contradictions in her work. These findings were discovered in Ivins's plot and story outlines, character development, and use of stylistic elements of humor, strong language and regional dialect.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

An analysis of the work of Molly Ivins is important because mass communication literature has barely recognized columnists (Estrada, 1997). This lack of scholarly attention is surprising, considering their degree of popular influence and status hierarchy in the news environment. Ivins is included in *New York Times* editorial writer Karl Meyer's *Pundits, Poets & Wits* (1990), an anthology of 72 of America's greatest columnists of all time who have raised journalism to a "venue for letters" (p. xii).

Yet Ivins has largely been absent in media studies despite her high degree of success, indicated in part by syndication in more than 300 newspapers and authoring books that have spent more than a year on *The New York Times* best-seller list. In addition, she has gained peer legitimacy as recipient of prestigious journalism awards, and as a three-time Pulitzer Prize finalist and member of the Pulitzer Prize jury. Ivins has published a considerable body of work in the popular press that has attracted the attention of critics, most notably since she became a columnist in 1980. Along with the occasional profile and interview, these are primarily reviews and critiques of her books and essays. Ivins is listed in the *Biographical Dictionary of American Newspaper Columnists* (Riley, 1995) and Braden (1993) includes her in a collection of interviews with women newspaper columnists. Additionally, Paletz (2001) gives Ivins a one-sentence mention, describing her as "tough-mindedly unpredictable" (p. 374).

Not only are there limited sources that focus on Ivins, but sources on past and present columnists similar to Ivins are equally scant. Most of what is available is in the form of biographical sketches. Braden's (1993) interviews with female columnists include examples of their columns, but no analyses are provided. While most of the columnists spoke candidly to Braden about their work and professional experiences, none commented on writing style.

Women are conspicuously underrepresented at the highest level of news and opinion journalism, and even fewer take on harsh, "masculine" subjects such as war and foreign policy (Williams, 1994). David Astor, who covers syndicates for *Editor & Publisher*, a prominent trade publication for the field of journalism, estimates that 33-40% of nationally syndicated columnists in all categories are women. This figure includes national advice columnists of the "Dear Abby" type of which at least 90% are female. Only about 23% of op-ed columnists distributed by the seven biggest syndicates are women. D. Astor (personal communication, August 15, 2004). Prominently placed "think" pieces that make up the news organizations powerhouse are primarily written by men (Smith, 1994).

Newspaper columns have been an American institution since the Colonial era (Braden, 1993), and women columnists began making significant contributions to public dialog in the mid-19th century. By the 1920s, the column was "the most sophisticated of the minor arts in America," wrote noted critic Gilbert Seldes (Braden, 1993, p. 3). Because of my interest in the vital role women have played in column culture, I limited my literature search to women who have made significant contributions to opinion writing about national politics. Today, there are relatively few female nationally

syndicated columnists and even fewer on the left side of the political spectrum. Along with Molly Ivins, among those few are Maureen Dowd of *The New York Times* and Cynthia Tucker, editorial page editor for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Dowd and Tucker are not included in the literature because it precedes their careers; therefore they are not included in my literature review.

Columnists: 1700-1900

Yoder (2004) writes that the newspaper column "has a long history and many cousins, including the sermon," and fine writers of commentary have a "unique angle of their very own on the world… along with a gift for flashy diction" (p. 219). Like the sermon, writes Yoder, the modern American opinion piece is filled with personal anecdotes and testimony that trace back to the 18th century – from the editorial battles of the new republic expressed in taverns and party presses, to the more movingly expressive commentary of James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and other master opinion writers. Fisher (1944) identifies the colonial pamphleteers as America's first columnists and newspapermen, who created an almost neighborly relationship with their readers. By the late 18th century, Edmund Burke observed that the press had become a political institution, having spread widely due to the developing technology of printing (Nimmo & Combs, 1992). Additionally, modern punditry can be traced to the sophists, a class of peripatetic, professional philosophers serving as "wisdom experts" who believed that wisdom could be taught (Nimmo & Combs, 1992).

The newspaper coverage of President Abraham Lincoln's assassination redefined the function of the press as the main source of news, and the press changed organizationally in order to support the new emphasis (Smythe, 2003). The American press, particularly in

the North, was a mixed medium, writes Smythe. Despite public interest in the news as a result of the Civil War, many editors and publishers expected to return to the partisan political practices of the antebellum period. News coverage was costly. Because political and social comment was cheaper, many papers returned to personal journalism, which focused on comment. Noticeable tension existed among journalists concerning the meaning of the shift to news (Smythe, 2003).

Early Women Columnists

During the 19th century, journalism became a means for respectable women to earn a living and voice social concerns. In order to do so, they had to dismantle barriers erected against their full participation in public life (Beasley & Gibbons, 1993). Some of the earliest columnists were women, who were likely given columns by editors or publishers not motivated altruistically, but from the wish to boost female readership (Riley, 1995).

Sara Parton, 1811-1872

One of America's pioneer columnists and the one of the highest paid newspaper writers of her day was Sara Parton , who, writing as "Fanny Fern," was paid $100 per weekly column at the *New York Ledger*, where she was employed from 1855 until just prior to her death (Riley, 1995). Some critics have dismissed Parton as a sentimental moralist; however, Warren (1986) contends that she wrote traditional sentimental columns as a way to open doors for her satirical pieces. Parton's use of humor was not traditionally feminine, but sharp, cutting, and at times cynical. "At a time when the 'cult of the lady' urged women to be gentle, feminine, and submissive, Fern's writing was satirical, outspoken, polemical – even outrageous" (Warren, 1986, p. ix).

Parton promoted women's rights in her columns, and, as Braden (1993) writes, was a

respected satirist of society's many foibles and shortcomings, commenting on prostitution, venereal disease, birth control, poverty, and other taboo subjects. She also used her columns to question male authority, conventional marriage customs, narrowness in religion, and the Civil War. The bedrock of her commentary was women's rights, most notably economic independence for women, which was a revolutionary concept at the time (Warren, 1992). Parton was out of sync with 19th century America, a period when women were encouraged to be gentle, feminine, and submissive (Warren, 1986). Socially acceptable topics for women journalists were home and hearth, gardening, gossip, and other subjects that reflected a woman's place in society. Braden (1993) writes that Parton was the first female columnist to break through these boundaries.

Although most of the ideas for Parton's columns were contrary to the predominant norms of her culture, readers would visit the office of the *New York Ledger* on the day the paper came out, eager to be the first to learn what Fanny Fern had to say (Warren, 1992). Warren (1992) attributes this enormous popularity to her archetypical style and the brilliant presentation of her ideas. Nearly as vital as the ideas themselves is her delivery of them in simple language, as well as her ability to shed light on the imperfections she recognized in society. It is Parton's capacity to transcend convention that makes her commentary so important today. Warren (1992) writes that as a social critic Parton challenges the limitations of convention, while at the same time depicting the more rational attitudes of her era.

Sara Lippincott, 1823-1904

Best known by her pen name, Grace Greenwood, Lippincott was an early newswoman in Washington for decades before becoming a columnist for the *New York Independent*,

from 1892 to 1904 (Riley (1995). Like other pioneer newswomen, she often wrote about serious issues of the day, such as suffrage, pay equity for women, prison reform, and an end to slavery. Along with the *Independent*, she served as Washington correspondent for the *New York Post*, and contributed to the *New York Times* and several magazines, including *Ladies' Home Journal*. In 1850, Lippincott published "Greenwood Leaves," a compilation of her newspaper and magazine articles that sold so well that twenty-four other books followed throughout the 1800s Riley (1995). Yet despite her success, Riley writes that her flowery and sentimental writing style, popular during the late 1800s, prevented her from being considered an important literary figure.

Jane Cunningham Croly, 1829-1901

Riley (1995) recognizes Croly as an important pioneer feminist and early full-time journalist, who worked intermittently as a columnist from 1859 to 1898. Using the pen name, Jennie June, she became the first woman journalist to have her own desk at the *New York Tribune* in 1855 (Riley, 1995). Her self-syndicated columns appeared in various newspapers, including the *Baltimore American*, *Chicago Times*, *Richmond Whig*, and *New Orleans Democrat*. Interestingly, some of her topics were similar to those women would grapple with a century later, such as the challenges women face when balancing domestic responsibilities with a career outside the home. Croly's opinion pieces also dealt with working conditions for women, public education, public sanitation, and ecological concerns.

In 1868, when New York's all-male Press Club sponsored a dinner for the English author Charles Dickens, its members refused tickets to Croly and other women journalists. They responded by founding Sorosis, one of the first American women's

clubs (Riley, 1995). Corly served as its president for several terms, and in 1889 she helped found and was first president of the Woman's Press Club of New York City. As Riley (1995) notes, her column topics "cut a wide swath" (p. 67) and what Corly chose to write about reflects the dual lifestyle of women that has changed little today. Along with writing serious copy, she also wrote about cooking, sewing, shopping, fashion and other subjects considered part of the female domain.

Emily Briggs, 1830-1910

One of America's pioneer female columnists, Briggs wrote a daily column concerning social news under the pen name "Olivia" for the *Philadelphia Press* from 1866 to 1882. After a brief career as a schoolteacher in Painesville, Ohio, she married John R. Briggs, a former Wisconsin legislator, who was a friend of Abraham Lincoln (Riley, 1995). For more than twenty years Briggs's column appeared in the *Philadelphia Press*, focusing primarily on Washington society and news that affected women. Briggs may have been the first woman to gain access to White House news regularly (Riley, 1995), and was one of the first female journalists allowed into the congressional press gallery. She was also one of the first women to use the telegraph to relay news stories.

Mary Ames, 1831-1884

Like Lippincott, Ames worked as a columnist for the *New York Independent.* Her political column, "A Woman's Letter from Washington," appeared in the *New York Independent* from 1866 until 1884. Riley (1995) writes that Ames "wrote seriously about the political scene and eschewed the gossip and fashion tittle-tattle expected of women writers in those days" (p. 10). Riley notes that Ames is possibly the first American woman columnist to use her actual name rather than signing a pen name. From 1869 to

1972, she also wrote a column for the *Brooklyn Daily Union*, under the same ownership as the *Independen*t. Ames advocated suffrage for women, and as Riley observes, achieved success in an arena dominated at that time by men.

Having secured her place in a male-dominated field, she remained concerned with being a proper lady and insisted on covering Congress not from the press gallery, but from the ladies' gallery (Riley, 1995). Prior to her work as a columnist, Ames wrote on a freelance basis for newspapers in Massachusetts and New York State – work that brought about a brief imprisonment by the Confederate forces at Harper's Ferry. Ames may have been one of the first female journalists to be imprisoned while covering a war. Clearly dedicated to their careers, both Lippincott and Ames wrote columns for the *Independent* until the year they died.

Columnists: 1900-Present

Newspaper ethos changed dramatically after the turn of the 20th century. Fisher (1944) writes that the highly personal relationship between the newspaper and reader vanished under the demand for speed and increased pages. Nonetheless, a feeling of humanity about the product remained, and editorials were seasoned with personal observation and sentiment. By the 20th century, journalism had become a "principle means of mediating, or standing between people and the world, and reporting to them what they could or could not see or experience themselves" (Nimmo & Combs, 1992, p. 11). Journalists not only reported the news, they frequently interpreted it. Those who did so gained a fresh and privileged position in the news environment. They reached the stature of media experts, becoming public figures showcased, praised, and acclaimed by their news organizations and later by their audiences for knowing the true meaning of news, and for

sharing their insight with audiences. Yet being featured in newspapers or through other mass media did not assure one's place as a media authority. For the most part, attaining such credentials depended on the believability of one's messages. The reputation of columnists as media experts has not relied on the truth or accuracy of what they instruct as special knowledge, but on *credibility*, write Nimmo & Combs (1992), who note that whether the reader is persuaded by a columnist's viewpoint likely depends not on *what* is written but *how*. Consequently, as Nimmo & Combs (1992) observe, the column is a victory of sophistic procedure and style over what Socrates might have deemed substance and reason.

Dorothy Thompson, 1893-1961

Arguably one of the most notable columnists of the first half of the 20th century – man or woman – Thompson has been written about far more extensively than the women columnists of the 1800s, therefore more attention is given to her in this section. This is likely due not only her high degree of success as a columnist, but also to her colorful personal life, which includes her marriage to Nobel Prize writer Sinclair Lewis.

In 1936, James Thurber drew a *New Yorker* cartoon depicting an irate husband attacking a typewriter while his wife explained to a guest: "He's giving Dorothy Thompson a piece of his mind" (Belford, 1986, p. 220). This was the reaction that many had to the outspoken and often combative *New York Herald Tribune* columnist, who had more than seven million readers in 1939. Her "On the Record" column ran for 21 years and appeared on the editorial pages of about 170 newspapers nationwide, likely garnering her has many enemies as friends (Belford, 1986). "On the Record" dealt with politics, economics, the military and the scope of the human condition. She used her column to

campaign for United States entry into World War II and as a weapon for attacking Hitler.

Thompson infused emotion into political commentary, which was new and different from the style of most male political columnists. “Thompson’s column was vivid, its force flowing from the way she expressed deeply felt emotion, from her thorough reporting, and from her penetrating analysis” (Braden, 1993, p. 14). Contemporaries said that she wrote in a white heat (Braden, 1993). Thompson appeared on cover of *Time* magazine’s June 12, 1939 issue, which featured a story pairing her with Eleanor Roosevelt as the two most influential women in America (Chambers, Steiner & Fleming, 2004).

Part of the first wave of the feminist movement, Thompson became a spokesperson for women’s suffrage while a student at Syracuse University, where she graduated with a liberal arts degree in 1914 (Riley, 1995). Possibly the first woman to serve as a bureau chief abroad, in 1925 the *New York Evening Post* appointed Thompson head of its Berlin bureau. Much of her eight years in Europe were spent trying to interview Hitler. He finally agreed to an interview in 1931 and kept her waiting for eight hours, writes Belford (1986), who speculates that this affront may have influenced Thompson’s staggering underestimation of him. In an article for *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Thompson wrote that she was certain that she was about to come face to face with the future dictator of Germany, and in less that fifty seconds after meeting him was sure that he was not (Belford, 1986). She compiled her impressions into a book, *I Saw Hitler* (1932), and spent many years attempting to right her miscalculation. According to a 1940 *New Yorker* profile, out of some 238,000 words she wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune* during 1938 and 1939, nearly 147,000 words, or more than three-fifths of the total, were aimed

at attacking Hitler's regime (Belford, 1986).

Thompson approached her private life with the same exhilaration. At her thirty-fourth birthday party while living in Berlin, she met American novelist Sinclair Lewis. She gave up her bureau position when they married in 1928, both for the second time. Lewis became the first American awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1930, the year their only child, Michael, was born. Despite his fame and stature in the literary world, Lewis apparently felt he was living in Thompson's shadow, a feeling he found intolerable. He did not share his wife's interest in international politics, and was jealous of her talent as a writer and emergence as a public figure (Belford, 1986). Lewis often relayed the story about an improbable Sunday morning when the White House secretary called while the couple was in bed, and Lewis listened for a half hour while Thompson discussed foreign policy with President Roosevelt (Kurth, 1990). Lewis left Thompson in 1937, a year after she began writing "On the Record," her popular column in the *New York Herald Tribune*, claiming that her stratospheric success "ruined their marriage" and "robbed him of his creative powers" (Kurth, 1990, p. 242).

Thompson said her true career in journalism did not begin until 1935, when she became"an interpreter rather than a chronicler of events" (Belford, 1986, p. 225). She complained about the legwork involved in reporting, and was attracted to developing her own ideas rather than gathering news. Evidently, her ideas appealed to Ogden Reid, the publisher of the *Herald Tribune*, who asked her to write a 1,000-word column three times a week. Along with an office, secretary and two months annual vacation, she insisted on being guaranteed the freedom to write as she pleased, provided that she remain within the canons of good taste and libel laws (Braden, 1993). On the front page of the second

section of the *Herald Tribune*, "On the Record" appeared alongside Walter Lippmann's "Today and Tomorrow," which some journalism historians cite as the first modern by-lined column of opinion (Grauer, 1984). Lippmann, who founded the liberal *New Republic*, welcomed the foci of Thompson's remarks and wrote to her that he liked "enormously having you as a neighbor, but have you any idea of what a term of hard labor you have committed yourself to?" (Braden, 1993, p. 14).

The staunchly Republican *Herald Tribune* dropped her column following her support of President Roosevelt's re-election against Wendell Willkie. In 1940 she joined the Bell Syndicate and the liberal but less esteemed *New York Post*, where she embarked on another cause, Arab rights in the Middle East (Belford, 1986). Her pro-Palestinian columns attracted charges of anti-Semitism, and in 1947 the *Post* severed ties with her (Riley, 1995). Following the death of her third husband, Czech refugee painter, Maxim Kopf, Thompson decided to end her syndicated column. In her farewell she wrote: "It seems that one knows increasingly less in this world. So much truth is clouded over by propaganda and misinformation. It's hard to get at the truth nowadays" (Belford, 1986, p. 227). Thompson published eight books, all of them collections or adaptations of her columns, articles, and radio broadcasts. In a *New York Times* obituary, she was referred to as "a go-getter who was go-getting for all" (Belford, 1986, p. 227).

Contemporary Political Columnists

Three surveys of opinion writers conducted during the 1970s and 1980s revealed a relatively grounded profession of highly educated journalists who believe their work has significant influence in society (Wilhoit & Drew, 1991). The majority said opinion writing should be founded on persuasive, logical arguments and evidence rather than

polemics (Wilhoit & Drew, 1991). About half of these opinion makers surveyed said that they lean toward the liberal side of the political spectrum, compared to about 20% of the general population that comprises their audience.

Paletz (2001) identifies Ivins and several other of today's leading opinion writers as liberal, noting that none of the individuals named are necessarily always ideologically consistent. But most good columnists are grounded in a coherent intellectual stance. Concerning economic-fiscal issues, liberals are for greater governmental intervention in the economy and regulation of business (Paletz, 2001). Liberals advocate some distribution of wealth through the tax structure, take a somewhat protectionist view of trade, and are for active social welfare programs. They are tolerant of nontraditional lifestyles and attitudes, and protective of civil rights and civil liberties.

With the demise of the cold war, opinions on foreign policy are in flux, notes Paletz (2001), making it difficult to categorize political writers, yet certain differences can be identified. Liberals tend to be globally oriented internationalists who judge foreign governments in terms of their commitment to democracy and civil liberties. They are dubious about the United States going to war, or even being involved in military action, although this can conflict with their support of intervention to stop the rise of reactionary autocratic regimes. Liberals support mutual disarmament with America's adversaries and cuts in what they typically perceive as a swollen and wasteful defense budget (Paletz, 2001).

Among the contemporary columnists who share Ivins' liberal orthodoxy are the late Mary McGrory, "the doyenne of distinguished liberal observers" (Paletz, 2001, p. 374) and Ellen Goodman, who often expresses a feminist perspective. Although noted foreign

correspondent and political columnist Georgie Anne Geyer is a self-described moderate (Braden, 1993) she and Ivins possess similar characteristics. Like Ivins, Geyer has the ability to describe political issues in a manner that is easily understood (Braden, 1993). Both have contributed to *The Progressive*, a voice for civil rights, civil liberties, and environmental awareness since 1909. *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd comes closest to Ivins' ilk as a preeminent Bush-basher whose wry observations and humor include bestowing Donald Rumsfeld with the *Dr. Strangelove* Award. Dowd, however, does not use storytelling or humor to the extent or in the manner in which Ivins does. While featured in the popular press, Dowd does not appear in any academic books or journals, with the exception of a one-sentence mention in *The Media of American Politics* (Paletz, 2001). This lack of scholarly attention may be due to the limited number of years Dowd has been a columnist. She was given an op-ed position at *The New York Times* in 1995. Her commentary during President Clinton's impeachment won her the Pulitzer in 1999.

Mary McGrory, 1918-2004

Mary McGrory rose to prominence during the Kennedy administration. Her commentary spanned five decades, beginning with the McCarthy hearings during the 1950s to the 2003 Iraq war. Her nationally syndicated column appeared in the *Washington Post* until March 2003 (Kerr, 2004). According to *Washington Post* executive editor Leonard Downie Jr., McGrory was one of the best opinion columnists of her time who wrote lyrically and never had difficulty expressing an opinion (Kerr, 2004). Passing judgment on political bullies became her hallmark. McGrory's political columns landed her on President Richard Nixon's enemies list and in 1974 she won the Pulitzer

for her columns on Watergate. In 1981, she joined the *Washington Post* as a columnist and was later syndicated by Universal. McGrory possessed a reportorial style of column writing that is "long on observation and short on ruminative punditry" (Riley, 1995, p. 208).

Known as a keen observer of the Washington political scene, McGrory was an unrestrained critic of Republican administrations, and was shunned during Reagan's two terms to the extent that she was never called on at press conferences (Braden, 1993). McGrory provoked the first President George Bush to complain in his private journal about her, writing that "She has destroyed me over and over again" (Kerr, 2004). Her good friend Robert Kennedy once said, "Mary is so gentle, until she gets behind a typewriter" (Belford, 1986, p. 271). Despite their friendship, Kennedy was berated in McGrory's column in 1968 when he challenged Eugene McCarthy for the Democratic nomination: "Kennedy thinks that American youth belongs to him, as the bequest of his brother" (Belford, 1986, p. 271).

Born in Boston, she attended the strict Girls Latin High School and in 1939 graduated with a B.A. in English from Emmanuel, a Catholic women's college in Boston. She began her career at the *Boston Herald* before transferring in 1947 to the *Washington Evening Star*, serving as book reviewer, feature writer, and later a columnist. The *Star* took a hawkish position during the Vietnam War and McGrory – who believed that America should not be in Southeast Asia – was distressed that the paper would not support her views and the placement of her column became an issue (Belford, 1986). After the *Star* folded in 1981, she joined the Washington *Post* where she became a syndicated columnist.

Despite her liberal leanings, McGrory never felt confined to one point of view in her political commentary. “Democrats do dumb things like the Persian Gulf resolution, so I say so in the Sunday paper. [House Leader] George Mitchell will glare at me – that’s his problem” (Braden, 1993, p. 29). Partisan pegging concerns other columnists. Dowd avoids broadcast journalism because political talk shows attempt to place guests firmly on the right or left, which she says is “not a good way to look at the world” (Reginato, 2004, p. 424).

For nearly half a century McGrory lambasted conservative politicians with her sharp tongue, yet she did not see her job as a mission. “I like to tell people what goes on, and occasionally what I think should go on, and I feel an obligation to expose the pompous and self-important” (Braden, 1993, p. 30). During a speech in 1985, McGrory mourned what she perceived as the lack of passion in America’s newspapers and their readers. She recalled being flooded with fervent letters during Vietnam and Watergate, but that impassioned letters such as those dropped off dramatically during the Reagan administration. She told the audience that she wondered what people now care about, or if they care at all (Kerr, 2004).

Georgie Ann Geyer, 1935-

Along with McGrory, Geyer is admired as much for her reporting as her opinion writing. Geyer has been a syndicated columnist since 1975, with the Los Angeles Times Syndicate from 1975 to 1980, and since 1980 with Universal Press Syndicate, writing three columns a week. Geyer’s success as a columnist is due to her years as a foreign correspondent who knows what is happening in many parts of the world, notes columnist Mike Royko, who worked with Geyer at the *Chicago Daily News* (Braden, 1993).

Geyer believes that writing a column and the pressure of having to voice opinions three times a week creates greater demands than being a foreign correspondent. One of her strengths as a columnist is her knack of assessing and describing the political structure and power in a foreign country. A combination of commentary and feature pieces, her columns are written in a way to make complex issues understandable for readers (Braden, 1993). Her aim, she has said, is to interpret parts of the world for her readers, and in doing so, provide information not only on events, but on attitudes and ideas (Riley, 1995).

Among the many world leaders Geyer has interviewed are Ayatollah Khomeini, Fidel Castro, Juan Peron and Yasser Arafat, along with Saddam Hussein nearly thirty years ago. She has interviewed Castro several times, beginning in the mid-1960s, and was eventually not allowed back into Cuba because she refused to write what Castro wanted (Braden, 1993). With her coiffed blonde hair and ruffled blouses, Geyer looks more likely to be found at garden club luncheon than in a century-old prison in Angola being interrogated by Marxist thugs. That is just one of many perilous situations she has found herself in during four decades spent roaming the globe. She has thrived on dangerous assignments covering revolutions and wars, beginning in the early 1960s when she accompanied guerrilla fighters into the jungles of Guatemala. “She has achieved a knowledge that few columnists – male or female – have. Because Geyer is still a reporter as well as a columnist, she actually breaks news in her columns” (Braden, 1993, p. 63). She prides herself on getting the whole story, which she says most foreign correspondents don’t do because of at pressure from totalitarian regimes (Braden, 1993).

Born on the South Side of Chicago, Geyer entered Northwestern University’s Medill

School of Journalism at sixteen, and spent a semester at Mexico City College, where she was "seduced by Latin culture" (Belford, 1986, p. 327). Her journalism career began in 1958 at Chicago's Southtown Economist, and in 1959 she was hired by the *Chicago Daily News* and from 1964 to 1975 was a foreign correspondent for that paper, working first in Latin America, then in other parts of the world. Geyer studied on a Fulbright Scholarship at the University of Vienna during 1976-1977 (Riley, 1995). In addition to her syndicated column, Geyer has contributed to the *New Republic, Atlantic, The Progressive* and other magazines, and has written several books, including one about Fidel Castro. She has also been a regular panelist on PBS's Washington Week in Review.

Ellen Goodman, 1941-

Like Geyer and other effective columnists, Ellen Goodman is able to take complex issues and distill them in terms the reader can comprehend and place them in a relevant context. A 1980 Pulitzer Prize winner for commentary, Goodman began as a columnist with the *Boston Globe* in 1971 and her columns are distributed to more than 400 newspapers by the Washington Post Writers Group (Riley, 1995). Often expressing the feminist perspective, Goodman's mix of social and political commentary contains substantial wit and lucidity. While many local columnists imitate her approach, no one has duplicated her "unique combination of non-strident commentary, humor, and moral values" (Belford, 1986, p. 338).

Goodman has created a unique niche for herself in being able to write about any topic, while keeping in mind how it affects the lives of her readers. It's not surprising that the substratum of her appraisals is the changing lifestyles of men and women. Many editorial-page editors who publish her column say Goodman attracts a high reader

response because she is able to get into issues without being overly sentimental (Belford, 1986). Goodman often writes about the everyday epiphanies that emerge from her private life. The tone of her column is "comfortably conversational," and the result is a 750-word rumination spiced with humor and intelligence of someone whom any readers consider a friend (Grauer, 1984). Some critics have noted, however, that she can take on too much in a short essay and leave the reader behind – a tendency that is both a strength and weakness of her writing (Belford, 1986). In 1979, while a Rocky Mountain correspondent for the *New York Times*, Ivins, not yet herself a columnist, criticized Goodman for generalizing in her review of *Close to Home* (1979), Goodman's first collection of columns:

> Ellen Goodman is at her weakest when maundering on about the state of the nation in one generalization after another. America is a country signally ill-suited to generalization… Miss Goodman has a tendency to seize on the travails of one or another of her friends and see them as universal. It is not that Miss Goodman's friends are any less representative than the rest of us, it is just that this is a big country (p. 174).

Goodman has admitted that generalizations are part of the nature of column writing; that "there are points to which if you qualify everything, you can't say anything" (Grauer, 1984, p. 174). Gauer (1984) writes that Goodman appears to make a virtue of being cranky and opinionated and rarely challenges, probes or develops the often slight observations at the center of her columns. Ivins also points out in her review of *Close to Home*:

> Much of the difference [in the columns] is bound to be a matter of skill, but it is also possible that virtue is intrinsically less interesting than vice. Ellen Goodman on the joys of being a cheerful riser is not half as funny as Fran Lebowitz [Metropolitan Life] on the joys of sleeping late (Belford, 1986, p. 338).

Born in Newton, Massachusetts, Goodman is a 1963 cum laude graduate of Radcliffe College and a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University during 1973-1974, where she researched the social changes that grew out of the women's movement. As "one of the few journalistic chroniclers of the women's movement" (Belford, 1986, p. 337), the results of Goodman's research have appeared in both her column and her first book, *Points Turning* (1979). Goodman takes feminism seriously, but at the same time she can write for and about women without having to announce herself a feminist (Belford, 1986). Molly Ivins wrote that if she could pick a voice for the women's movement she would "select Miss Goodman instantly over *Ms.* magazine and Germaine Greer" (Belford, 1986, p. 339).

Goodman is often quoted as an authority on women's place in society and her columns are laced with sagacious adages, e.g., "Losing privacy is a little like losing one's virginity. You can only do it once, and you can't get it back" (Belford, 1986, p. 337). On the relationship between business executives William Agee and Mary Cunningham when they worked together at Bendix Corporation, Goodman asked: "If women can sleep their way to the top, why aren't they there?" In "When a Child Goes Off to College" (September, 16, 1986) Goodman recalls joining "that long caravan of families in borrowed stations wagons and rented vans, moving the contents of a million bedrooms to a million dorm rooms," and compares the ritual to a "gigantic national swap-fest." Goodman's greatest contribution may be the ability to articulate the unspoken, to convey the often unformulated thoughts that readers have about social and political issues (Grauer, 1984).

Conclusion

Clearly, columns written by women are diverse in topic and style. Women columnists bring viewpoints to newspapers that are important to the national dialogue, and provide solidity to the abstract ideal of the newspaper as a marketplace for divergent ideas and opinions. Despite the influence of pioneer women columnists and today's women who have reached the highest level of punditry, most female opinion writing remains concentrated in areas perceived to be "soft news," such as human interest, features, and advice columns (Chambers, Steiner, & Fleming, 2004).

Each of these women columnists has contributed varying perspectives and fresh ways of seeing and interpreting the world – working under the credence that journalism and life are interchangeable. As Braden (1993) observes, collectively they might be characterized by a phrase in the *New York Times* used to describe the scope of Dorothy Thompson's column: "She gave herself to her own assignment, which was no less than the whole human situation" (p. 22). Newspapers need more female and minority columnists to provide diverse perspectives that result from their social and political analyses. As Grauer (1984) notes, to slog through the massive, unending flow of news which washes over us daily and focus our attention on issues and events that otherwise get lost in the deluge.

Molly Ivins follows a tradition that began in America during Colonial times, a tradition predicated on the notion that columnists are indispensable to democracy. Paletz (2001) points out that the media should inform people about the issues confronting their society and the world, and about the policy alternatives for attempting to resolve them. It is widely assumed that readers turn to syndicated columnists to shape their opinions, and for three centuries women journalists have played a key role as interpreters. Yet despite their

strong contribution to the nation's history of political commentary, today, as Smith (1994) and D. Astor (personal communication, August 15, 2004) note, prominently placed "think" pieces that make up the news organization's powerhouse are primarily written by men. It is important to keep in mind that "the spirit of the First Amendment demands an energetic and free exchange of information and opinion; the omission of women's voices diminishes the fruitfulness of that exchange" Braden (1993, p. 11).

Columns die, and the reputations of the columnists usually die with them, if not before, notes Glover (1999), who believes that even when columnists collect their works in book form or have them anthologized, they seem to have little to say across the years. Even if this turns out to be the case with Ivins, her impact on her audience today cannot be discounted. In the following chapter narrative analysis is explained and how this approach was applied to the study of Ivins's columns.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Narrative analysis is a useful means to dissect a text and discover the ideology of the structure, and is effective in uncovering the ideological intent of a piece of work (Stokes, 2003). This thesis uses narrative theory to examine a selection of the essays of Austin, Texas-based columnist Molly Ivins. In this study, the terms “story” and “narrative” are used interchangeably. This section provides a comprehensive overview of narrative theory and function, and more specifically how it is applied to a selection of Ivins’s columns.

I purposively selected fifteen of Ivins’s columns on national politics, deciding on this topic because it is the major focus of her nationally-syndicated columns. Politicians are her usual targets. To a lesser degree she writes about feminism and anything notable that sets Texas apart from the rest of the nation. My selection covers the late-1980s to the present. It begins at this time because this is when Ivins began writing columns regularly about national politics, although she has been reporting on politics for about 40 years. Prior to the late-1980s, Ivins wrote opinion pieces on national politics only intermittently. Her career as a columnist began in 1982, nearly 20 years after working as a reporter and editor. Her first opinion writing position was with the now-defunct *Dallas Times Herald*, where she primarily wrote about city politics.

Fifteen columns for study are adequate because my goal is not an exhaustive coverage of the columns of Molly Ivins. My intention was not to analyze large sets of statistical data. Instead, this study attempts to establish a connection between the ideological structure of her work and its stylistic components through the use of narrative analysis. My research concerns how humor, strong language, and regional dialect have contributed to Ivins's opinion writings on national politics. I have attempted to discover how these contributions broaden the appeal of her columns, as a way to understand how she has developed a singular, American voice. Additionally, I looked at the tension between her two personas – Ivins the elite New England liberal and Ivins the Texas populist – that adds yet another dimension to her distinctive writing style.

Because this study concerns her columns about national politics, and because her writing follows political cycles, it seems natural to use as a sub-category selection the four White House administrations in power during the period that she has regularly written about national politics. Columns selected for study are divided among the presidencies of Ronald Reagan (1981-1989), George H. W. Bush (1989-1993), William Jefferson Clinton (1993-2001), and George W. Bush (2001-present). The columns are cited in the appendixes according to the administration that the topic of the column relates to, as opposed to the publication date. As another way of making my selection more representative of her work, I selected from both her newspaper columns written for a mass audience and columns written for left-wing alternative magazines.

Included in this section is a look at *narrative analysis* in general – how it is defined, and how it is used to study the overall pattern of the *stories* or *narratives* of texts. Also examined is the way in which narrative is used to expose the ideological purpose of a

cultural artifact and uncover its structure. In addition, this section includes my variation on Propp's functions as a means to examine the various components of Ivins's work.

When writing about politics, the opportunities for humor are limited for both the writer and the reader. M. Ivins (personal communication, January 5, 2005). How Ivins uses her comic vitality to communicate authority and emotion – to help her readers learn about the world and reach informed decisions – is explored. Other factors that have influenced Ivins's linguistic style are also examined. Along with her use of humor, strong or "masculine" language, and her figurative and metaphoric voice rooted in the Texas vernacular, these include her educational background and various paradoxes apparent in her work.

Narrative Analysis: Theory and Method

Stories are among the most universal means of representing human events (Bennett & Edelman, 1985). Observes Mary Lawrence, who teaches journalism at the University of Missouri: "We're fooling ourselves if we think we communicate primarily by bursts of information. We live for stories – whether they're movies or TV shows or plays or poems or even newspaper pieces" (Banaszynski, 2002). A basic human trait is to tell stories about ourselves, our environment, and the people and phenomena we encounter – to interpret and respond to the world through narrativization, writes Stokes (2003), who notes that narration conveys the ideology of a culture and provides the means to culturally reproduce values and ideas.

In narrative analysis, the object of scrutiny is the entire text, focusing on the framework of the story or narrative. It is important to keep in mind that a text and a story are not the same thing, because there are many different texts that tell basically the same

story. For instance, observes Bal (1985), there are many different versions of certain jokes. Bal defines the *text* as a finite, structured whole made up of language signs. A *narrative text* is a text in which an agent relates a narrative.

Fisher (1984) challenges early rhetoric, what he refers to as the "rational paradigm" of science and logic, and suggests that all communication is narrative. Narrative discourse helps shape our world view and preserve our culture, and its rhetorical power is pervasive, occurring in live public speaking and performances, electronic form, and print media. Storytelling as a primary means of communication predates human history. Critics applying this method are urged to investigate the rhetorical content in terms of both the tale and the way the tale is told, along with giving attention to how the story serves an audience as a good reason for belief and behavior (Fisher, 1987).

Human beings communicate by telling stories, which would have only negligible worth if not recognized as being relevant. As Heidegger (1949) notes, "We are a conversation… conversation and its unity support our existence" (p. 278). Fisher (1984) defines narration as "words and/or deeds that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them" (p. 2). The coherence and fidelity of a story determines its rationality. The yardstick of *narrative coherence* is whether a story hangs together. Do the events of the story occur in a believable sequence, and do the characters act in a way that is expected of them in a given situation? *Narrative fidelity* considers whether a story rings true with the audience's experiences. Fisher (1984) views the world as a cluster of competing stories from which we select, and thus continually re-create, our identities.

Narrative criticism, according to Fisher, also involves *narrative probability*, which looks at a story's coherence, consistency and non-contradiction. Fisher writes that stories

are basic to communication because they provide the means to express human experience, and because they induce individuals to live in communities that share common understandings and explanations. The world is a set of stories, and the narrative impulse is fundamental to being human. Narratives – written or oral – are meaningful to all people, across culture, time, and place. Rhetoric and conversation are the primary art forms of everyday life, notes Farrell (1985), who believes they work truthfully "when they remember the truth there is to tell: its unmistakable past, its unfinished possibility" (p. 126).

Foss and Foss (1991) define rhetorical criticism as "the process of analyzing and assessing communication to discover such elements as the context in which it was created; its purpose within that context; its central ideas, structure and style; and its impact on the communicator and others who are reached by it" (p. 23). The narrative approach takes criticism a step further by providing the critic with the opportunity to explore rhetorical artifacts with a story form in order to bring to light the content of the world view that is conveyed within the structure of that form (Foss, 1989).

Stokes (2003) points out that the analysis of narrative is a powerful and useful method in which to examine media texts, yet is one that has been relatively neglected in recent years. The narrative approach requires the researcher to reveal the framework, or structure, of the cultural artifacts. Some of the earliest forms of culture took shape through stories, writes Stokes, and the theologies of the world's major religions are conveyed from generation to generation in narrative form. Myths, ballads and poetry are all brought to life by narration. This method views human communication as fusing the persuasive characteristics of argumentation and the aesthetic nature of literature.

Contemporary media are also structured around narrative. “This is what hooks us into a good film, an exciting television series or a compulsive computer game” (Stokes, 2003, p. 67). Films and television programs are the texts most frequently exposed to narrative analysis, and some cultural forms have a stronger narrative than others, yet narrative is part of nearly every media and cultural form to a greater or lesser extent (Stokes, 2003). Fisher (1985) argues that there is no genre, including technical communication, which is not an episode in the story of life; a part of conversation.

The media also create narratives. The news is constructed around stories and the elements of stories as much as any dramatic performance (Bell, 1991; Bell & Garrett, 1998). Yet unlike a literary narrative, observes Toolan (2001), press narratives are never ‘finished’ because there is always an upcoming edition. Nimmo & Combs (1992) go as far as to compare a column to a sonnet. Both texts, they maintain, have an expected and ritually-drawn structure that includes a statement of the problem, discussion of legitimate alternatives, argumentative defense of one choice and attack of others, conclusion, and recommendation.

A valid study should indicate the relationship between the object of analysis and the method. Opinion pieces are an ideal cultural artifact in which to apply narrative theory. As noted earlier, Nimmo & Combs (1992) observe that columnists are granted a license to instruct, and readers depend on the columnist to interpret events and complex issues (Grauer, 1984). Narrative’s rhetorical function is to persuade the audience of the probability of the argument being presented, writes Lucaites & Condit (1985), who define rhetorical narrative as “a story that serves as an interpretive lens through which the audience is asked to view and understand the verisimilitude of the propositions and proof

before it" (p. 94). Arguments convince audiences of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness (Ryan, 2004).

Sillars (1991) believes that the communication critic has two responsibilities: to interpret and to evaluate. "Narrative analysis is an approach that dissects the stories people tell… and ideological criticism digs out the politics that are hidden in the story" (Sillas, 1991, p. 195). The critic deconstructs the narrative structure. This deconstruction of the canon of texts is a *polysemic* process open to multiple meanings and diverse interpretations of syntax (Barthes, 1977). However, the truth or effectiveness of a narrative relies on both the speaker's intention and the audience's interpretation (Rybacki, K., & Rybacki, D., 1991).

Narrative has the power to establish new ideas and images, as well as reaffirming, revitalizing and reinforcing existing ones (Fisher, 1987). A key characteristic of narrative concerns its necessary source, the narrator, who, "being granted rights to lengthy verbal contribution" asserts his or her authority to "tell, to take up the role of knower, or entertainer, or producer, in relation to the addresses' adopted role of learner or consumer" (Toolan, 2001, p. 3).

The method of analyzing the internal structure of stories was pioneered by Labov & Waletzky (1967), who dealt with oral narrative as a "decontextualized phenomenon rather than as a conversational strategy for accomplishing some interactional end" (Norrick, 2000, p. 2). Narrative analysis has also been driven by anthropologist Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1968), originally published in Russian in 1928. Studying the history of late 19th century and early 20th century Russian folktales, Propp discovered significant commonality in structure across a wide range of stories. He

searched for recurring elements, as well as random or unpredictable ones. Folktale, along with myth and legend, comprise the main European generic classification of oral narratives that has been adopted in scholarly discourse.

Propp saw all folktales as having similar components, which he labeled ‘functions’ According to Propp, each character performs a task within the narrative and can be defined according to this role. The ‘hero’ is the person who is given a task to perform, and the ‘donor’ is the character who gives the heroes something to help them accomplish their task. Stokes believes that Proppian categories are applicable to any composed narration, if one identifies the key characters and the classification of those characters using Propp’s schema.

The narrative critic asks, what culture is reflected in the content and form of the story? The following model for conducting a narrative analysis was expanded upon for this study, and an explanation is provided later in this chapter. The following stages identified by Stokes are based on Propp’s functions and were used as a framework for analyzing the selected columns of Molly Ivins:

- *Select your texts carefully*. Narrative analysis involves very close reading and is best conducted on a limited number of texts.
- *Become familiar with the text.* Read several times and think about the explicit themes of the text. What is it about? Why is it interesting?
- *Define your hypothesis*. What do you want to say about the text? Work from your first interest in the text and work towards a hunch about the text. When you have an idea about what you think is interesting about the texts, work out if you can prove *why*.

- *Write out the skeleton of the plot as it happens in the text*. Pay attention to the characters and the order of events as they are told.
- *Using the plot outline, write down the story as it happens chronologically*. What is the 'back story'? Identify how the plot differs from the chronological order of events.
- *Identify the 'equilibrium' at the beginning and at the end of the text*. Has the world of the text changed before and after the story, or has the old order been restored? If there has been a change in the equilibrium, list the ways in which the world has changed before and after the story.
- *Define the characters according to their 'function' in the plot*. Who is the 'hero'? The 'villain'? The 'donor'? Whoever is in need of rescuing is 'the princess'. A character may begin as a hero and end as a villain.

In addition, Propp's model is adapted for this study in order to look at general analytical categories that include themes, characters (roles and types), outlines (plot outline and story outline), change and style (humor, strong language and regional dialect). Specific types within these general categories are identified in each column, and then calculated across the entire selection of columns to determine overall patterns. During the analysis process, I put the information into tabular form in order to cross reference items.

Driving narratives are specific rules and strategies that structure the text's components into a logical sequence (Porter, 2000). Most narratives are guided by a succession of events. A *story* is the telling of a happening or connected series of happenings, whether true or fictitious, that is written or told with the purpose of

entertaining or informing. By this definition a column can accurately be labeled a story. Embedded within the body of the text are shorter, anecdotal stories that provide an account, which is often entertaining, of a single incident. The story or text, which in this study is a column, provides the chronological chain of events that serve as the building blocks of the narrative. The narrative, for instance, presents the disturbance, followed by a crisis, ending in a resolution, or in the case of political commentary, a proposed solution. Ivins is a *storyteller* in the sense that she takes factual information and crafts it into an entertaining and informative text.

Sarbin (1986) identifies three functions of telling stories: to hold the audience's attention, to explain problematic affairs, and to warrant a claim. This study explores how Ivins handles these three functions to convey her underlying left-progressive messages – her unfettered flow of ideas harnessed in the narrative structure that underlies her political columns.

All stories contain a perspective, a specific point of view in understanding or judging things or events that shows them in their true relationship to one another. When we listen to someone utter a story, we are listening to his or her particular perspective. The context of the person telling the story, the specific way in which it's told, and the components of the story that are chosen to be relayed all inform the perspective (Meadows, 2002). What makes the world beyond direct experience look natural is a media *frame*, writes Gitlin (1980), who sees media frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual" (p. 7). Gitlin believes that any analytic approach to journalism must ask, what is the frame here, and why this frame and not

another? What difference do the frames make for the larger world?

Specific rules are needed to guide observation, and in this study narrative analysis is used to look at both the tale and the way the tale is told. When applying any system of analysis, however, it is important to keep in mind that there is no correct way in which to view data and all are equally real. Human development, Daiute and Lightfoot (2004) write, is a social procedure involving individuals, institutions, and cultures, and therefore, requires multiple levels of analysis. Foss (1983) asserts that knowledge about data is more accurately viewed as symbolic. Data is known only through symbolic constructs that generate numerous interpretations.

Foss believes a helpful way to understand knowledge, then, is in a metaphorical sense. This metaphorical view of data demands that the interpreter acknowledge that seemingly countless descriptions of data are available from many perspectives. There are as many groupings of truths or realities as there are vocabularies from which to carry out inquiry (Foss, 1983). “As a metaphor, narrative analysis involves explaining psychological phenomena as meanings that are ordered from some theoretical perspective, like that of a storyteller, and consist of information and comments about the significance of that information” (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004, p. x).

Using expert argumentation is vital to persuasive writing, yet the best arguments will not persuade if not written well. But good writing isn’t easy. “Few like to write; many like to have written” (Kennedy, Moen, & Ranly, 1993, p. 212). Texts are not simple, natural matters, as Berger (1984) makes clear, but complex works that accomplish their results due to the authors’ expertise in combining various devices, and providing information of various kinds to readers. The extent to which the reader is unaware of the

use of these techniques is one of the distinctions of a good writer.

While effective storytelling has the power to engage the imagination of the audience, many experienced writers fall into patterns and formulas that leech the pleasure and creativity out of their prose. “If you’re not getting a kick out of your writing, no one else is getting pleasure from reading you” (Kennedy, Moen, & Ranly, 1993, p. 213). Clearly, Ivins is still getting a kick out of writing and continues to be widely read. After 40 years, the writing process for Ivins remains a “great playground” that provides joy even when the news is dreadful. Her attitude is apparent in the introduction of *Who Let the Dogs In?* “Having fun while fighting for freedom is, as you will see in this book, my major life cause. I see no reason why we should not laugh, and in fact I think we should insist on it” (Ivins, 2004, p. xiii).

While the most compelling stories are mythic, the most useful and uplifting stories are moral, argues Fisher (1984). A moral argument as little value if it fails to support worthwhile ends that carry through to actual practices (McGee & Nelson, 1985). The purpose of pubic moral argument is to encourage opponents to take better notice of the issues and strive to create more effective policies. Understanding how human beings use stories to sway belief and behavior requires examining the framework of a story to determine what about it enables an audience to perceive it as a truth, or a persuasive argument. The following section looks at the ideological influence of Ivins’s work, as well as the specific stylistic components that create her distinctive voice.

Narrative Analysis Issues: Ideology, Strong Language and Humor

Introduction

Narrative analysis, Stokes argues, can be conducted on any form when you look at the underlying message of the text. As Berger (1997) writes, many phenomena that we do not label as narrative texts, are in actuality narratives, or at least contain significant narrative elements. There is no restriction as to what narrative must fit with what life circumstance, notes Gergen (2004). Narrative elements of fairy tales, dreams, radio, film, television, novels, comics and many other everyday phenomena have been examined, so it is surprising that newspaper columns have not been examined under the narrative lens.

Ideology

An ideology is a system of ideas or beliefs, writes Stokes (2003), and all media artifacts are the products of an ideology. Stokes points out that there is no single method called "ideological analysis." Any method can be used as part of an ideological study to discover the hidden meanings and values of a media text that may not be explicit in a first reading. This hermeneutical approach to the underlying philosophy at work in a text, adds Stokes, provides the mainstay of much textual analysis. Paletz (2001) argues that there are no syndicated columnists who can be categorized as radical. Yet an "ideological analysis" of the columns of Molly Ivins reveals that she is farther to the left than the majority of syndicated columnists and even conveys a degree of radicalism. Paletz (2002) places Ivins in the liberal category with other leading syndicated columnists including Maureen Dowd, Mark Shields, Ellen Goodman, Carl Rowan, and the late Mary McGrory.

Ivins describes herself in her columns as a *populist*, and to a lesser extent a *progressive.* Operational definitions for both terms are provided in this section. The term

progressive is used synonymously with liberal (Guralnik, 1978), however, a populist can be either liberal or conservative so Ivins is classified as a liberal populist. She refers to herself as a progressive in her monthly column for *The Progressive*, a magazine originally called *LaFollette's Weekly* that was founded in 1909 by Robert LaFollette, a Wisconsin senator who formed a branch of the Progressive Party in 1924. The name of the magazine was changed to *The Progressive* in 1929 (History of *The Progressive* magazine).

Paletz (2001) writes that such terms as radical, liberal, moderate, conservative, and reactionary are nebulous, and most expressions of opinion do not fit easily into their mold. Liberals favor reason and evenhandedness, writes Lynch (2005). They are tolerant, and believe in autonomy, individual rights, and equality. Paletz also provides general distinctions. Concerning economic-fiscal matters, liberals are for greater governmental intervention in the economy and regulation of business. On social issues, liberals are tolerant of nontraditional lifestyles and attitudes, committed to civil rights and civil liberties. On foreign policy issues, liberals tend to be globally oriented internationalists, who evaluate foreign governments in terms of their commitments to and practice of democracy and civil liberties. They question the need for the United States to go to war or even engage in military actions, although this can conflict with their support of intervention to deter or halt the domination of reactionary autocratic regimes (Paletz, 2001). Ivins's ideology contains both populist and liberal strains, and because of its complexities cannot be neatly categorized.

Kellner (1995) defines progressives as those who advocate the "struggles for human rights, the civil liberties of oppressed people, peace and justice, ecology, and a more

human organization of society" (p. 19). Carey (1989) writes that the progressive movement contains closely connected characteristics: attack upon the plutocracy, upon concentrated economic power, and upon the national social class that controls wealth and industry. And as Gans (1979) points out, progressive ideology sidesteps or cuts across the partisanship of political parties, and appeals to people who, like journalists, regard themselves as political independents. While a far greater champion of the Democrats, in her columns Ivins criticizes political leaders of both parties and cannot be assigned to partisanship for liberal Democrats. At times Ivins is a harsher critic of liberals than conservatives. She regularly turns down requests to speak at Democratic functions. B. Moon (personal communication, July 28, 2004). Opinionated in the public sphere, off duty she follows the journalistic ethics of detachment and objectivity.

Populism and liberalism are not as closely aligned as progressivism and liberalism. The Populist Party, in some states known as the People's Party, was formed in the late 19th century to represent the interests of farmers and laborers, who advocated public ownership of the railroads. Anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism are part of populist dogma, writes Kazin (1998), resulting in suspicion of politicians, powerful people, the wealthy, and high culture. Populists, Kazin observes, can oppose the *status quo* and challenge elites to promote change, or support the *status quo* to defend "the people" against a perceived threat by elites or subversive outsiders.

To analyze the columns of Ivins, it is necessary to understand two of the greatest influences on her style and system of ideas or beliefs – Texas writers John Henry Faulk and William Cowper Brann. Undoubtedly, no one left a greater mark on Ivins's writing style – her use of humor, storytelling, and regional dialect – than Faulk, the late political

humorist and folklorist who was a contributing editor at the liberal *Texas Observer* during the 1970s when Ivins served as its editor. His wife, Liz Faulk, later worked as Ivins's assistant. A study of Ivins is not complete without examining Faulk, who became one of her closest, longtime friends and greatest inspirations, both personally and professionally. M. Ivins (personal communication, January 6, 2005).

Interestingly, why Ivins more often calls herself a populist than a liberal may be etymological, along with having to do with her affinity for Faulk's folklorist background. The Latin word for "folk" is "populari" meaning "of the people," hence the term "popular culture," which is simply folklore of live people (Lee, 2004). As Faulk's progenitor, Ivins has contributed to the corpus of storytelling via her columns, which has enriched popular Texas culture. As an astute political observer, Ivins has added to her state's rich folklore tradition. She uses her brand of folksy, low-brow humor to render palatable keen political observations; observations that place her in the center of political debate and promote her progressive view. Ideas, after all, are entertaining.

In addition to Faulk, Ivins refers to Brann often in her writing and calls him one of her greatest heroes and "the great populist" (Ivins, 1991, p. xv). Brann published a newspaper, *The Iconoclast*, in Waco, Texas during the turn of the 20th century. Lee (2004) writes that *The Iconoclast* is a precursor of many of the underground newspapers of the sixties and seventies.

"Brann, a fearless man, loathed three things above all others – cant, hypocrisy and the Baptists" (Ivins, 1991, p. xv). Brann also loathed African Americans, to a degree that is shocking even in the context of his era and region. A number of his editorials express his rage against the "mischievous meddlers" who freed the slaves, and against the Bostonians

for accepting blacks in search of social equality and attempting to “refrain [the South] from roasting nigger rape-fiends” (Brann, 1899, p. 8). Having written scathingly about the Baptists once too often, Brann was shot in the back by a disgruntled Baylor University supporter and as he lay dying on a wooden sidewalk, drew his own gun and shot his murderer to death (Lee, 2004). Ivins has mythologized Brann to such heroic proportions as to emulate his dramatic and violent death.

“Me, I hope to go like Brann. A martyr to honest journalism” (Ivins, 1991, p. xv). That Ivins is able to separate Brann the iconoclast from Brann the communicator of such hateful, extremist beliefs is among her most puzzling contradictions. One of her most cherished possessions is the complete twenty-volume collection of Brann’s editorials. “Yes, he was a terrible racist, but I love his expressions of great indignation. The invectiveness in Brann is so rich – his rolling montage and great waves of nastiness.” M. Ivins (personal communication, Jan. 5, 2005). Calling Brann “a great populist” contradicts her definition of the populism movement, which she describes as an interracial movement that transcended not only race, but class and the vicious sectionalism of the day as well (Ivins, 1992, May/June).

Distinctions between populism and liberalism are not only ideological but geographical. “The Populist movement was born in the Texas Hill Country, as genuinely democratic an uprising as this country has ever known” writes Ivins in an essay about Texas in *These United States* (2003, p. 424). Ivins as the Texas populist is the voice of sagebrush colloquialisms and homespun humor, aligning herself with the working-class. “Having been born and raised amongst foot-washing Baptists, I’ve never considered them strange or Other. They are my friends, my neighbors, and my kinfolk” (Ivins, 2004, p.

xiv).

Ironically, with her Yankee pedigree and well-to-do Houston up-bringing, Ivins's background is more similar to George W. Bush's than to the foot-washing Baptists. They both attended exclusive private high schools in Houston and learned degrees at Ivy League universities. When Bush was running for president, Ivins wrote, "He is far more culturally a Texan than his father, at ease with the kind of locker-room bull, rough language, and physical contact characteristic of Texas politicians" (Ivins, 2000, p. xxi). This description fits Ivins. Tall and athletic, she was accepted as "one of the boys" by the mostly male Capitol press corps and state legislature, and played on the press corps's basketball team (Braden, 1993).

"I've drunk enough beer with politicians to float the Battleship Texas." M. Ivins (personal communication, January 5, 2005). It is this dual persona, the rough and tumbling, beer-swilling Texas populist and the eastern elite liberal who sprinkles her columns with French phrases that unite to form her distinctive, idiomatic style. Like Bush, Ivins identifies with her Texas roots more than her New England heritage, so it is no surprise that Ivins's populist side is a greater presence in her writing than her eastern liberalism.

In America, liberalism is often associated with upper-middle-class values, and most national journalists [like Ivins] are in this stratum (Gans, 1979). Ivins reveres the Constitution and the fundamental conventions of democracy too much to be a radical to any significant degree. Yet radicalism, traced back to her longtime friend and progenitor, folklorist and First Amendment defender John Henry Faulk, is part of her intellectual thought and emerges occasionally in her writing. Faulk's far-left viewpoints got him

blacklisted during the McCarthy era, and his father, Judge John Henry Faulk Sr., served as Eugene V. Debs' state campaign manager "in the days when socialists got a sight more votes than Republicans in Texas" (Ivins, 2004, p. 352). In 1983, Faulk lost a run for the U.S. Senate against then Democrat Phil Gramm (Lee, 2004).

While the sometimes opposing ideologies of populism and liberalism are central to Ivins's writing, hints at radicalism are indeed evident. In several of her columns she refers to political organizer Saul Alinsky, who "effectively advanced the great American radical ideal that democracy is for ordinary people" (Horwitt, 1989). Horwitt writes that Alinsky insisted that radicals were not to be confused with liberals, who did not have the passion or the unfettered commitment to the underdog and downtrodden. One of the strongest underlying messages in Ivins's columns is that responsible citizenship must include an unfettered commitment to the underdog and downtrodden.

"Liberals like people with their head" was the kindest thing Alinsky could say about them, notes Horwitt. "Radicals like people with both their head and their heart" (pp. 167-168). If one accepts Alinsky's definition, and Paletz's, that a radical is a person who contributes "to the marketplace of ideas by espousing beliefs that challenge, even outrage, conventional opinion" (p. 372), then Ivins can add the term radical to her list of ideological monikers.

The tension between Ivins's Texas populism and eastern liberalism is capitulated in Ivins's dedication to *Who Let the Dogs In?* (2004). "*Viva* Chateau Bubba" is a catchy three-word phrase that aptly expresses three primary elements of her writing style – humor, populism, and elitism, represented here by a French reference. "Long live the house of the common man" reflects Ivins's unfettered commitment to the underdog and

downtrodden. As noted earlier, “Having fun while fighting for freedom” is how Ivins (2004) describes her major life cause, a cause central to her opinion writing.

Ivins cloaks astute observations about serious issues with folksy dialogue and down-home humor. Yet at the same time, she loathes anti-intellectualism and refuses to write down to readers. M. Ivins (personal communication, January 5, 2002). Her writing reflects the old-fashioned notion that public discourse should be grounded in a classical, liberal arts education, providing the public with a greater scope and depth on issues. Denouncing mediocrity and the trivial, Ivins goes against a dominant societal trend to aim for the lowest common denominator, to water everything down. An underlying thought implicit in her columns is that beliefs should not be overvalued and overemphasized, because beliefs can be manipulated and controlled by those in power. Implied in her columns is the understanding that it is ideas and facts, not beliefs, which bring about informed citizenship and the betterment of society.

Political commentary is a journalistic art form unlike news stories or even other types of columns, writes Weiner (1977). “The pace of the column generally is more leisurely, the sentences longer, there usually are more adjectives, descriptive phrases and historical references, as well as opinion” (p. 15). Ivins’s columns follow a structure that contributes to the overall logic and argument of the text. This structure typically includes a statement of the problem, argumentative defense of one choice and an attack of others, discussion of legitimate alternatives, and a recommendation.

While the issues and characters change, the recurring message throughout most of her political columns is who is cheating and who is being cheated. Optimism permeates this unifying message. Government is fixable, “We just need to get the hogs out of the creek

so the water can clear up" (Ivins, 1998, p. xxiv). In the next section, Ivins's use of strong language is explored. While she has admitted to having "a foul mouth," expletives are used infrequently in her columns (Braden, 1993, p. 192). Strong language is more typically present in the form of insults and ridicule, which are often heaped on Republican politicians.

Strong Language

Ivins's humor is at its best when it is biting and caustic, and strong language is a component of this style of humor. Texas humor, writes Ivins (December 3, 2004), involves "a sort of macho one-upmanship. The stronger and saltier the language, the more points you get for it" (p. 6). Ivins's humor in her magazine columns is more often sprinkled with strong, scurrilous language; words such as "shit-kicker," "asshole," "fuck," and "pussy" have appeared in some of these columns. Writing in the *Texas Observer* (2004) about some of the notable characters she has placed in her Redneck Hall of Fame, Ivins delights in describing a Texas woman who "dyed her pussy pink and shaved it into a heart-shape. Outstanding" (p. 6). It is difficult to imagine another nationally-syndicated columnist, man or woman, using the word "pussy," and doing so with such relish.

Power is a fundamental difference between women's and men's language, or more specifically, white heterosexual men and women. A primary reason why women lack rhetorical power is because women do not have the ancient rhetorical history that men possess. As Campell (1989) notes, for much of their history women have been forbidden to speak, a denial strengthened by such notable authorities as Homer, Aristotle and Scripture. In the Odyssey, for instance, Telemachus berates his mother Penelope and

reminds her, “Public speech [*mythos*] shall be men’s concern” (Homer, 1980). In *Politics*, Aristotle proclaims, “Silence is a woman’s glory” (Aristole, 1923), and the epistles of Paul instruct women to keep silent.

In 19th century America, notes Campbell (1989), femininity and public speech were viewed as mutually exclusive. One of the nation’s most significant milestones in the history of public discourse is the presence of women on the public platform (Zaeske, 2000). During the early 19th century, engaging in public discourse was considered improper for women. Zaeske (2000) points out that the public sphere consisted of the “promiscuous audience,” an audience comprised of both women and men. Denying females the opportunity to address mixed audiences drew upon deeply rooted myths about women and their suitable place in society. Attitudes concerning the impropriety of promiscuous behavior began to shift as women reformers during the antebellum era spoke out against slavery. Zaeske (2000) writes that the demise of the “promiscuous audience” notion ushered in the first phases of the women’s rights movements. Ivins’s use of strong language and persuasive techniques can be traced back to these early reformers. As Campbell (1989) writes:

> Because the very act of speaking publicly violated concepts of womanhood, the rhetoric of early women’s rights advocates always had at least two dimensions – presentation of their grievances and justification of a woman’s right to function in the public sphere, to speak with authority in any area of human life (p. 14).

Women are not permitted to use profane language, because social and linguistic mores do not allow it (Spender, 1980). Folk-linguists assert that women’s speech differs from men’s in a number of important ways that mirror and reinforce the inferior status of

women in America. Bradley (1981) investigated this claim by studying the reactions to women and men discussants that applied different linguistic and substantive strategies to voice disagreements in small decision-making groups. Results conveyed that both men and women were more influential and viewed in a more positive light when they used well supported assertions than when they promoted their arguments without support. Qualifying phrases only had a negative affect when females used them. Women whose arguments included tag questions and disclaimers generated scant influence and were perceived as possessing little knowledge or intelligence (Bradley, 1981).

Strong language is gender-neutral language. Incorporating characteristics of both women's language and men's language has neutralized Ivins's rhetorical style. Wood (1994) describes masculine speech as exercising control, preserving freedom, and augmenting status. Talk is used to prove oneself and negotiate rank. They frequently use speech to "establish and defend their personal status and their ideas, by asserting themselves and/or by challenging others" (p. 143).

Because Ivins has reached "auteur" status, her effective use of strong language is worthy of evaluation. With her use of strong language, she has managed not to conform to the dominant linguistic ideologies and expectations of gendered speech. Her ability to achieve high status as a national columnist and author without the exclusive use of "women's language" has resulted in the transformation of gendered reality. The study of linguistic imbalances is important in order to cast light on real-life imbalances and inequities, and provide clues that certain external situations need changing (Lakoff, 2004).

Ivins's communication style is forceful, direct, and authoritative, which has long characterized men's speech. Women have a well-founded fear of being perceived as pushy and overbearing, and that fear may keep women "from asserting themselves in ways that we except and accept by men" (Johnson and Goodchilds, 1976, p. 70). Ivins is not afraid of being thought of as pushy and overbearing, as indicated by her use of strong, assertive language. The fundamental difference between "women's language" and "men's language" is power, and Ivins's public discourse is a controlling force that conveys mastery, might and influence.

Foss and Foss (1991) note that if communication is to be of significance, it must take place in the public realm. It is in the public realm that Ivins uses strong language and humor to convey authority and emotion, in order to help the audience learn about the world and reach informed decisions.

Perhaps because America has become increasingly litigious, her insults are strongest in her early, pre-syndication columns when she wrote primarily about Texas politics. She recalls in the introduction to *Molly Ivins Can't Say That, Can She?* (Ivins, 1991), how she would call "some sorry sumbitch in the Lege" an "egg-suckin' child-molester who ran on all fours and had the brains of an adolescent pissant" (p. xv). Yet insults and scathing observations remain key characteristics of her writing style, and appear in subtle and not-so-subtle forms. In "Notes from Another Country" (*The Nation*, 1992), for instance, Ivins declares that without a speech writer most presidents would sound like "borderline morons." In the following section, the relationship between strong language and humor become evident, particularly Ivins's caustic, satirical brand of humor.

Humor

Narrative analysis is also applied in this thesis to describe, analyze and evaluate how the use of humor has made Molly Ivins a premier voice of the left and enabled her to promote her underlying message of progressive reform. Ivins sees humor as her most effective communication tool. M. Ivins (personal communication, January 6, 2005). At its best, humor deals with the immutable (human nature), rather than the transient (current affairs), yet, ironically, humor is rarely given the critical attention it warrants (Grauer, 1984). "If variety is the spice of life, humor is the honey of journalism, sweetening the usually dry and often bitter fare served up by most newspapers and magazines most of the time" (Kennedy, Moen, & Ranly, 1993, p. 204).

Ivins' potent use of humor is worthy of investigation, and Grauer (1984) notes that the social and political analyses of syndicated columnists are "often as perceptive – and sometimes more devastating – by virtue of the deceptively light manner in which they are presented" (p. 1). That humor can convey even serious messages more palatably than can straight exposition (Kennedy, Moen, & Ranly, 1993) is concept that Ivins has discovered and used to great effect.

The enjoyment of humor that consists of an aggregate of miniature plots in which certain individuals or groups prevail over others who have been debased, demeaned and ridiculed can be explained by the application of the disposition theory of humor (Zillman, & Bryant, 1991). "For comedy to be effective, then, it is imperative that characters not be met with affective indifference. Loveable and hateable characters must be developed, especially the latter kind" (p. 271). Ivins's hateable characters (conservative politicians and representatives of large corporations), are typically more developed than her loveable

characters (liberal politicians and the American public).

Humor is not kind, observes Gilbert (2004), who describes humor as "judo rhetoric" that uses opponents against themselves. Humor humanizes by humiliating, targeting and exploiting the opponent's flaws, writes Gilbert, who sees the rhetorical dimension of humor as a social phenomenon directly linked to aggression that is tied to power relations among individuals and groups. Bergson (1956) contends that laughter is, foremost, a corrective. It is intended to humiliate, and inevitably must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. Yet political humor, Schutz (1977b) writes, functions as a "positive negativity" that exposes defects, weaknesses, and contradictions. Negative in its critique but positive for its palliative effect, political humor serves as an "escape valve" for anxieties and aggression. Schultz suggests that political humor serves the status quo and that "to laugh at someone and with others in political humor is a step toward community" (p. 15).

Ivins contends that "We should all laugh more at our elected officials – it's good for us and good for them" (May/June, 1995, p. 133). She talks about the importance she places on political humor because of its persuasive and cathartic power. M. Ivins (personal communication, January 5, 2005):

> My friend Liz Carpenter used to say, 'If you can start with a laugh, it just washes all the fritz out of their [the audience's] mind.' That's the reason preachers start with lame jokes – and that's a whole category of humor, preacher humor – it's the world's lamest stuff but they use it is because it works. Politicians use it for the same reason. Politician humor is almost as lame as preacher humor. Have you ever heard George W. Bush try to get a crowd to laugh? It can be painful. The world *is* funny, politics in particular.

Along with insults and scathing observations, the combination of vernacular regional speech and sharp wit is also a key component of her trademark humor. Storytelling is

rooted in the Texas vernacular, a rural tradition of stories that are told over and over again on porches (Ivins, 1998). As Rather (2004) observes, Texans are heir to two distinct and distinctive American traditions. At a geographic crossroad, Texans are part of both the South and the West. Rather (2004) sums up their linguistic style:

> The southern literary impulse gets compacted, the western impulse toward terseness gets drawn out, a dash of campfire oral tradition is thrown into the mix and the result is a form of speech in which bang-for-the-buck (or word in this case) becomes paramount consideration (p. 142).

Ivins follows a time-honored tradition, when opinion pieces featured in southern rural newspapers were "couched in the simple semi-illiterate vernacular of the backwoods community, and highly flavored with dashes of folk humor" (Hinkle & Henry, 1969, p. 8).

Ivins calls her old friend and mentor the John Henry Faulk "the greatest storyteller I ever knew" (Ivins, 2004, December 3, p. 6). He in turn was the protégé and friend of J. Frank Dobie, who is considered the greatest Texas folklorist (Lee, 2004). Ivins emulates Faulk's style of humor that is both folksy and satirical, but does so using real characters instead of fictional ones. M. Ivins (personal communication, January 5, 2005):

> Johnny never said anything controversial in his own voice. It was always Cousin Claude, the unreconstructed racist, or some other loony from Johnny's invented family who sounded off. When I have something to say that I know is going to make a lot of people angry, I won't communicate in anyone else's voice, because I don't *have* anyone else's voice, so instead I try to build a laugh into my message.

Ivins's special brand of humor is part rural and part urban, which supports the notion that her writing style is a product of both her Texas populist and eastern liberal personas. "Urban humor tends toward the one-liner, the quick quip, and is often sardonic, sarcastic, or a putdown. I know tons of Texans who are superb at one-liners, but they rarely have

the storytelling gene as well" writes Ivins (2004, December 3, p. 6). Ivins exhibits both the urban and the storytelling gene.

In order to take a deeper look at the stylistic elements of Ivins's columns that have been discussed in this section, I modified Propp's model of narrative analysis to make it more suitable for this particular study. The following section explains how this modified version was used to examine more closely instances of humor, strong language and vernacular speech, as well as any paradoxes in her writing.

Adaptation of Propp's Model of Narrative Analysis

Despite the differences of opinion and bias concerning the approaches to qualitative communication inquiry, there is a "solid consensus" concerning its goal – to discover "how people engage in symbolic performances to create the meaningful worlds in which they live' (Lindlof, & Taylor, 2002, p. xi). Propp's functional model of narrative analysis was used to study Ivins's symbolic performances and underlying ideology. To provide a richer, more textured understanding of the object of analysis, it was adapted to identify common elements across a selection of Ivins's columns.

I used general analytical categories adapted from Propp's model to identify not only dominant patterns, but to also discover when Ivins deviates from the norm. Specific types of themes, characters, outlines, change and style were identified in each of Ivins's columns, and are included in the conclusion.

Modifying Propp's approach, I analyzed each of the sample columns along seven categories:

- *Theme* – the underlying message of the column
- *Characters* – the types of people featured in the column, and their roles

- *Plot outline* – the outline of the column itself
- *Story outline* – the outline of the primary event featured in the column
- *Ideology* – Ivins's political beliefs expressed in the column
- *Strong language* – the use of expletives or outrageous speech in the column
- *Humor* – the use of amusing accounts of the people and events in the column

Each of the seven categories of analysis was used to identify specific types of elements and structures within each column. The columns were then cross-compared to discover overall patterns across the entire sample. A valid study should demonstrate the relationship between the object of analysis and the method, notes Stokes (2003), and show that the choice of method was the correct one to make a desired point. This adaptation of Propp's model was used for the purpose of discovering the dominant and less dominant messages within Ivins's columns.

Conclusion

The narrative method is used to take a closer look at the stylistic elements of Ivins's writing – humor, strong language and regional dialect – that give her a distinctive voice among nationally syndicated columnists. Human beings communicate by telling stories about themselves, their environment, and the people and phenomena they encounter, writes Stokes (2003). They interpret and respond to the world through narrativization. According to Scanlan ("Sharing the Secrets," 2002), fine narrative journalism requires that the writer take up residence in the story, which brings about a sense of authority vital to the success of a columnist. The six points of narrative journalism that Scanlan points to that guide Bill Blundell of *The Wall Street Journal* also guide Ivins: the scope, what the

story is about; its history; its primary reasons – political, economic, social; the impact; the contrary forces for and against, and what the future holds, if this continues.

Although the analysis of narrative is a potent and valuable tool for examining media texts, it is a method that has been somewhat neglected in recent years, according to Stokes. Not only are myths, ballads and poetry brought to life by narration, but contemporary media are structured around narrative as well. There is no genre, argues Fisher (1985) that is not an episode in the story of life. Media also create narratives and the news is built around stories. Narrative analysis, therefore, provides an ideal means in which to examine the newspaper and magazine columns of Molly Ivins.

This chapter looks at narrative analysis in both general and specific terms, the methods and analytic procedures applied and the logic of this study's design. Narrative analysis is used to discover the ideological purpose of media texts, and is adapted and expanded upon for this particular study. The following chapter includes the analyses of fifteen selected columns categorized by the White House administrations in power during the years Ivins has written regularly about national politics.

ANALYSIS

Introduction

Given length restrictions, an opinion column requires an *idea* and rarely more than one, notes Wicker (1991), who argues that "an idea does not require acceptance to justify its existence; nor does it necessarily exist to achieve anything other than an intellectual end" (p. 83). Examined are key ideas and thematic concepts consistent throughout a selection of columns by Molly Ivins that focus on national politics. Ivins's commentary of the national political scene began to appear regularly by the late-1980s. Chosen for analysis are sixteen columns published from 1987 to 2005 that have appeared in newspapers across America and left-wing magazines which include *The Progressive*, *The Nation*, *Mother Jones*, and the *Texas Observer*.

The purpose of this research is to investigate how Ivins's distinctive style – comprised of humor, strong language and regional dialect – has contributed to her opinion writings about national politics. Narrative analysis is used to look at the ideological structure of her work, and how these stylistic elements have broadened the appeal of her columns and contributed to the development of her singular, American voice. Zinsser (2001) in *On Writing Well*, observes that we have become a society afraid to reveal who we are, and have "evolved a national language of impersonality" (p. 23).

Astor observes Ivins's distinctive style that he believes is unique among her peers. D. Astor (personal communication, March 2, 2005):

> Molly Ivins is funnier than most op-ed columnists in daily newspapers, and leans more to the left than most op-ed columnists in daily newspapers. Ivins also writes in a way that makes it clear where she's from, Texas; many op-ed columnists write in a way that gives the reader no idea where they're from. I know of no other columnists syndicated to mainstream dailies who write like Ivins. Coming close is Jim Hightower, also from Texas, but he's not with a major newspaper syndicate like Ivins.

As noted earlier, Ivins represents a slew of contradictions and paradoxes, most notably low-comic and folkloric discourse verses a worldly-wise, privileged background. About following her grandmother and mother to Smith College, an elite women's college in Massachusetts, Ivins wrote, "I know – this is so WASP, I'm about to urp myself," (Ivins, 1998, p. 243). These contradictions that define Ivins are both geographically and ideologically based – Ivins the Texas trailer-park populist and Ivins the elite eastern liberal. The opposing ideologies of populism and liberalism in the political columns of Molly Ivins are resolved through Ivins's use of a regional voice, which is characterized by humor, strong language and a distinct narrative pattern.

Ivins's columns for Creators Syndicate, which reach a mass audience to more than 300 newspapers, are more highly structured than her columns written for magazines. This may be because of a greater need to persuade and to make relatively complex issues like federal budget cuts and tort reform understandable to such a vast audience – an audience made up of people being affected by these issues. "Because Ivins knows she's not 'preaching to the choir,' her Creators columns may be a little less hard-hitting and contain more explanatory material than the columns she does for progressive publications," Astor observes. D. Astor (personal communication, March 2, 2005). In the introduction to *Adventures in Medialand* (1993), Ivins notes the importance of providing fair and thorough news coverage for "the Joe or the Annie out there making an honest

living fixing cars or grooming poodles while trying to make sense of the public debate in their spare time" (p. x).

Ivins takes a more deconstructivist approach to her columns written for magazines. Attention-getting devices, which include humor, strong language and regional dialect, are used more frequently. Instead of staying on a single topic as she typically does with her newspaper columns, her columns written for magazines contain a subtext that allows for more complexity of feelings, motives, and underlying meanings. Another difference is length. Her monthly 800- word column on the back page of *The Progressive* is the same length of her newspaper columns distributed by Creators. Her essays for *The Nation*, *Mother Jones* and other leftist magazines, however, average about 2,000 words.

Widely distributed newspaper columns must be written for mass appeal. In her newspaper columns, Ivins provides the type of information that people need to make sense of the world. She does so in a structured, orderly way to maximize her ability to persuade the greatest number of people, and reduce the risk of alienating readers and being misunderstood. With her newspaper columns, she typically does not use literary gimmicks or jump around in time in order not to confuse her readers. In most of her newspaper columns, she structures the text to closely follow the chronology of the events that she writes about. The plot structure is rarely distinct from the story. Franzosi (1998) writes that the story is the action itself, and the plot is how the reader learns of the action.

Although she infrequently veers off a linear path with her newspaper columns, the text is punctuated with humor, strong language and regional dialect. But not nearly to the degree found in her columns written for magazines, which are more unrestrained and tend not to follow the conventional rules of composition and form. The underlying theme of

who is cheating whom carries through both her newspaper and magazine columns, but the message reaches the audience in significantly different ways.

Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush Eras (1981-1993)

This long reign of the Republicans in the White House during this period provided Ivins with an appreciation for the absurd. M. Ivins (personal communication, January 5, 2005). In the introduction to one of her books she recalls covering the presidencies of Reagan and George H. W. Bush, "Expecting things to make no sense gave me a great leg up during the Reagan years. As for George Bush of Kennebunkport, Maine – personally, I think he's further evidence that the Great Scriptwriter in the Sky has an overdeveloped sense of irony" (1991, p. xiv). Ivins began writing about national politics on a regular basis during Reagan's second term.

The sixteen selected columns are presented chronologically, beginning with this early column that appeared in *The Progressive,* which for two decades has run Ivins's columns on its last page. The first column analyzed was "Sympathy for the Devil" (see Appendix A), where Ivins chastises liberals for being too easy on conservatives. Key character types and their roles are Republican officials in the position of victimizer and liberals as sympathizers. The plot outline applied here involves beginning and ending the column with satirical humor. This is among Ivins's most frequently used plots, designed to allow for the use of ridicule, sarcasm and irony in order to expose and attack. Political humor is negative, writes Schutz (1977), who notes that the basic structure of almost all political humor is the comic agon, a conflict of characters. It is a "competition between two or more contestants in which one is perceived as the antagonist and the other, the ironist who retaliates humorously" (p. 68).

In “Sympathy for the Devil,” Ivins softens her scathing assessment by writing collectively: “we,” not “you.” Liberals, she writes, should be rejoicing over the Senate trashing of Robert Bork as a candidate to the Supreme Court, instead ”we suffer an incurable impulse to succor the loser.” After urging liberals not to be so “bleeding heart” and kowtowing, Ivins shifts a bit off-course to chastise the right-wing for accusing everyone who disagrees with them of treason – for confusing criticism with subversion. A change in the equilibrium has occurred – the state of balance between opposing forces. Ivins believes the American people are better off than before due to the trashing of Bork. Humor is used to frame a serious topic, as it is used with most of her columns. Strong language, either in the form of profanity or insults, is not applied in this column, or is the use of regional dialect.

The loosely structured column ends with a story about Texas Governor Bill Clements that seems aimed at providing too-serious liberals with something to laugh about. Seated next to Mme. George Pompidou at a luncheon in Dallas, Clements asked her why her husband didn’t come, too. “He’s been dead for seven years,” she replied. Ivins ends the column with a humorous remark, “As they say in France, *Quel fromage.”* What a cheese, in reference to Clement’s blunder.

The French phrases occasionally found in Ivins’s columns are part of her multi-layered writing style that broadens her audience. To borrow from other languages when it is not necessary, write Strunk & White (2000), is a “bad habit” that conveys a desire to show off with no regard for the reader’s comfort. Perhaps Ivins is showing off, however, it is likely that these phrases are used to provide an additional dimension to her writing. They are embellishments that do not distort the meaning of her essays if the audience

does not happen to read French. In the following column, Ivins reminisces about the Reagan years in the following column.

In "Thanks for the Memories," written for *The Progressive* in December 1988 (see Appendix A), Ivins uses a narrative technique she frequently uses that enables her to allow her adversary to "hang" or his or her own words and what she perceives as their public blunders. Ivins selects what she believes to be the worse decisions, mishaps, and statements made by Ronald Reagan and his administration during his two terms. Her own "voice" appears only in the lead two paragraphs and a one-sentence conclusion. Her satirical humor is used heavily in this column, which begins with what appears to be a poem or a verse about the Reagan years:

You may have been a headache,
But you were never a bore,
How lovely it was.

As "the Gipper rides slowly into the sunset," writes Ivins, she urges readers to "pause to recollect some of the many magic moments he and his friends have brought us over the years." Here she uses the personal pronoun "us," which, along with "we," is used more often in her left-wing columns. It is an inclusive technique similar to an actor in a movie or a play, who turns to address the audience. She rarely uses personal pronouns in her columns written for mainstream publications, and instead takes a more detached approach.

After these two short lead paragraphs is the body of the column, fourteen bulleted "magic moments" that are dated. Like most of her columns written for left leaning magazines, the plot outline of the text does not follow the story chronology. The Reagan moments are ordered by their level of absurdity as determined by Ivins, rather than

following the story chronology, the order in which the events actually occurred. The plot-structure or *mythos* is distinct from the story – the action itself – in many of Ivins's columns. The plot and story include the same events, but in the plot the events are arranged and connected according to the orderly sequence in which they were presented in the work (Franzosi, 1998).

Rights endangered, a common theme in Ivins's columns, is found here, along with finding humor in an inept presidency. Republican officials as victimizers and citizens as victims are the character types and roles present in this column and many of the columns analyzed. Again, Ivins's plot outline is the use of satirical humor to frame the story. The story outline – a president is elected and citizens experience either a positive or negative outcome – is one that is identified here and in several of Ivins's columns.

Ivins's use of strong language appears in the first bulleted magic moment in 1981 when Secretary of State Alexander Haig accused the Soviet Union of using chemical warfare in Southeast Asia by spraying a lethal "yellow rain" on members of remote tribes. "The subject was later identified as bee shit," writes Ivins. At the end of the bulleted and dated list of "magic moments," Ivins ends with a succinct and sardonically humorous statement: "We'll have these moments to remember."

Along with national politics, feminist issues are important to Ivins and she devotes her column to them with some regularity. Women are an oppressed group that Ivins often champions in her columns.

In "Hill's Allegations Hit a Nerve with Many Kinds of Women" (see Appendix A), Ivins looks at sexism and sexual harassment in the context of the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas debate. Ivins aligns herself with *liberal feminism,* which applies liberal political

ideas to the problem of devaluation, and attempts to make changes within the boundaries of the political system (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991). Writes Ivins in response to Senator Alan Simpson telling the Senate that Hill will be destroyed at the hearings, "That, friends, is why women don't file sexual-harassment complaints." She is surprised that the anger over the way Hill was treated at the Senate hearings was not limited to feminists who would most likely identify with Hill, but also women in the "pink-collar ghettos and those who make their living being beautiful." Ivins as the tough Texas cowgirl notes that she likes men who "like whiskey and women, nothing against them at all." But there is a difference, she writes, between a man who comes on to a woman who is in a position to tell him to "go soak his head" if she so chooses, and a man who hits on women who are economically and psychologically vulnerable, as she asserts, is the case of Thomas with Hill.

Found in the Anita Hill column are two prevalent themes – the endangerment of rights and citizens defrauded by the political system, along with prevalent character types and roles – Republican officials in a position of power over citizens, in this case Hill. The plot outline follows the story chronology. The element of change is a common one found across her columns – the protagonist's situation goes from bad to worse because of a failure in the political system. Concerning stylistic elements, Ivins places her satirical humor at the beginning and end of the column. One folksy analogy is provided that reflects her use of regional dialect and no strong language is used.

Some of Ivins's columns are profiles of people, living and dead, that she most admires. Unlike Anita Hill, Ivins does not view Barbara Jordan as a victim but a woman she praises for overcoming great odds. In "She Sounded Like God" (see Appendix A)

Ivins writes that Jordan "was always a First and an Only… She wasn't just black, she was female; she was homely, she was heavy, and she was dark black." Ivins's love of proper English emerges in the way she expresses admiration for Jordan's "perfect enunciation," so perfect that she "sounded like God." Racist colleagues are the demonized characters in this story, who attempt to demean her hard-earned place in politics by referring to her as "that nigger-mammy washerwoman" and bringing in friends to gawk at her when she spoke with eloquence and empowerment in the Senate gallery. The endangerment of rights, more specifically racism, is the column's predominant theme, and Republican officials emerge as evil (racist) characters. Humor is absent, however, regional dialect is used several times in the form of quaint Texas sayings. The element of change is that Americans are better off, in this case because of Barbara Jordan as public servant.

William Jefferson Clinton Era (1993-2001)

After three terms of Republican presidents, it would not be unreasonable to assume that Ivins's attacks on the White House would lose some of their bite, and they did to a certain degree during Clinton's two terms. Unconcerned with his "moral imperfections" and impressed by his innate talent as a politician, she nevertheless found his signing of the welfare reform bill in 1996 unforgivable. "My expectations of Democratic politicians exceed my expectations by only the smallest of margins; but real Democrats don't hurt children. Clinton did." (Ivins, 1998, p. xxi). The first two columns in this section were published in 1992, but are placed here because they focus on Clinton and the presidential campaign.

Unlike her other columns written for left-wing magazines, "Notes from Another Country" (see Appendix B) is highly structured with the plot line closely following the

story chronology. Ivins is reporting from the 1992 Republican convention in Houston. She begins on a humorous note: “Nothing like a Republican convention to drive you screaming back into the arms of the Democrats.” The text follows the events at the convention as they unfold. Caustic humor and satire are used heavily by Ivins, who cannot resist the opportunity to poke fun at so many Republicans at one time. She described the Republicans as being more silly than scary, “like watching people dressed in bad Halloween werewolf costumes.” She jokes about filing worker’s compensation against *The Nation* for attending the God and Country rally featuring Phyllis Schlafly, Pat Robertson and Pat Boone.

Ivins’s Texas populist and eastern liberal ideologies both appear prominently in this essay. Her populist side is at odds with the “limousine liberals” such as Peggy Noonan, who she criticizes for her statement made at the convention that the United States has become an increasingly homogenized country where “we are becoming all alike, sophisticated, Gapped, linened, and Lancomed.” Ivins writes that Noonan must not live in the same country as she does:

> In her country, people aren’t worried about their jobs, they aren’t caught in hideous health insurance binds, they aren’t watching their standard of living slip slowly down, their hopes for a home slip slowly away, their dreams for the future dwindle. It’s another country, the country of those who are Doing Well.

Ivins as defender of the English language emerges in the last section of “Notes from Another Country,” where she attacks George Bush for his “verbal dyslexia,” a line of attack she continues with his son. “What is this man actually trying to say? What could he possibly mean? Hold it, I think I see it!” Clarity of thought is necessary not only for clarity in syntax, but also for the development of ideas, Ivins argues. As she does in

several of her columns, Ivins criticizes the media, this time for "pretending that Bush can actually talk – can convince, inspire and lead us."

About three times longer than her typical 800-word column, a number of Ivins's themes are present in this essay: citizen involvement, rights endangered, having fun while fighting for freedom, spineless liberals, and finding humor in an inept presidency. Key characters are Republican politicians and other conservative public figures. Strong language in the form of insults against conservatives is used liberally, as well as Ivins's caustic humor.

One of Ivins's most optimistic columns is "When Clinton Talks People Listen – and Visa Versa" (see Appendix A). Predicting Clinton's imminent victory, Ivins is looking at the American political scene through rosy lenses, certain that the cheated (the American public) are about to get a reprieve from the cheaters (the Republicans). Observing Clinton and Gore on the campaign trail, Ivins the populist is jubilant that Clinton not only connects with the people, but *is* one of the people. She admires his ability to listen to people, to remember what they said, and repeat their stories.

Her nonpartisanship appears when she uses Democrat Lloyd Bentsen as an example of the many politicians who move through the crowds smiling and shaking hands, but the smile never reaches their eyes. "You can tell they'd much rather be back in Washington cutting deals with powerful people." She delights in telling the story of how the Bush team, under Jim Baker, made the mistake of condemning the Democrats for leaving God out of their platform. "An Episcopalian really should know better than to try to out-Bible a couple of Baptist boys." In this column, significant changes occur in the characters' circumstances, a presidential power shift from Republicans to Democrats.

That politics matters seems to be the dominant theme. Democratic politicians and American citizens are the main characters. In a rare instance, a Republican politician, Ronald Reagan, is mentioned without insults or satirical humor. She refers to Clinton's "we-can-do-it" pitch as classic Reagan. We are the optimists; they are the pessimists. Also atypical here is a lack of humor. Interestingly, it may be because this column has such as optimistic tone that it is devoid of Ivins's satirical wit. The plotline follows the storyline. Ivins is on the Clinton-Gore campaign trail and chronicles it in an orderly fashion. The element of change is that the American people are better off, because Clinton, she predicts, is about to be elected.

The technique of telling a subject's story using other sources – sometimes the subjects themselves – was used with Ronald Reagan in "Thanks for the Memories" and again with "Richard Nixon" (see Appendix B). With the exception of few journalists such as Ivins and Hunter Thompson – who described Nixon as a "cheap crook" after his death – much of the press and even Nixon's old enemies were paying him respectful tributes. Here Ivins responds to Nixon's laudatory obituaries by digging up the most derogatory comments ever uttered about Nixon by his former friends and colleagues. The result is one of Ivins's boldest, funniest, and most innovatively approached essays. As she did in her column about Reagan, Ivins uses the voice of others to communicate her message about Nixon. By directing what others have to say, she attempts to redirect the myth and memory of Richard Nixon. Ivins's own voice appears only in the lead paragraph that begins with a trademark French phrase. Sardonic humor is used to set the tone:

> *Quel triomph* for the old Trickster. One last time we got a new Nixon. The Dead Nixon was, according to all those glowing tributes on television, a man of vision, courage, and leadership. For those of you thinking you must have lost your marbles lately to have forgotten what a great American Richard

Nixon was, here's a little pop quiz to refresh your memories (p. 46).

After this introductory paragraph, Ivins formats the column like a quiz, with ten questions in italics that are "answered" by various individuals who knew Nixon. The "quiz" begins with: *How did Bob Haldeman, who was Nixon's closest aide in the White House, describe Nixon in writing from prison?*

"Dirty, mean, coldly calculating, devious, craftily manipulative, the weirdest man ever to live in the White House" (p. 46).

Other examples of questions and answers in the "quiz":

And what did Nixon think of reformers?

"He told Theodore White about campaigning, "All the while you're smiling, you want to kick them in the shins."

How did historian Barbara Tuchman describe Nixon's legacy?

> An accumulated tale of cover-up, blackmail, suborned testimony, hush money, espionage, sabotage, use of federal powers for the harassment of "enemies," and a program by some fifty hired operators to pervert and subvert the campaigns of Democratic candidates by 'dirty tricks,' or what in the choice language of the White House crew was referred to as "ratfucking." The final list of indictable crimes would include burglary, bribery, forgery, perjury, theft, conspiracy, and obstructing justice.

Richard Nixon has been described by his biographer as a "humorless man"; did he ever say anything funny?

"Yes. Upon being shown the Great Wall of China, Nixon said, 'This is, indeed, a great wall.'"

The events that took place during Nixon's presidency do not follow chronological order in the text. This is one of the most notable differences in the structure of her

columns that appear in left-wing publications, as compared to those written for a mainstream audience. Rarely does the plot outline of the text follow the story chronology. As mentioned earlier, Ivins uses humor, strong language and regional dialect to a greater degree in her left-wing columns. Several themes are present, most notably the nastiness in America's political dialog and the importance of an informed citizenry.

In "Clinton Got a Few Things Accomplished" (see Appendix B), the relationship between the cheaters, the Republicans, and the cheated, Clinton and the American public, is explored. Ivins looks back on Clinton's two terms as wasted time and wasted talent. As with most of her other newspaper columns, the plot outline and story chronology follow closely, beginning with Clinton's "sorry posse of old enemies in Arkansas." A litany of cheaters appearing in this column include Republican politicians who tried to destroy the Clinton administration, mainstream media, and interestingly Bill Clinton himself, who appears here as both a cheater and a victim. He was victimized by the Republicans and cheated the American people by having an affair in his position as public servant. The establishment media is an additional character, scolded by Ivins for taking the "baloney" about Clinton seriously.

Yet Ivins is not about to exhibit blind partisanship concerning Clinton, citing what she believes are two great failures of Clinton's administration, Russia and the wealth gap. Although Ivins believes a public servant's private life is none of her business, she thinks "we had the right to expect him to keep it zipped for eight years. Shame on him." Ivins frequently applies the "leave 'em laughing" technique by ending her columns with humor, as she does here, "Life will be duller once Elvis has left the building." The element of change is that Americans are worse off without Clinton in the White House.

George W. Bush Era (2001-present)

George W. Bush, first as governor of Texas and later as president of the United States, has been one of Ivins's most frequent subjects, in newspaper columns and columns written for leftist magazines. Ivins has also co-written two books about Bush with Texas journalist Lou Dubose. While Ivins's commentary that appears in mainstream publications is highly structured, occasionally the theme is buried in the body of the essay as it is in "Bush's Chance to Show His Compassion" (see Appendix B). The primary message is capital punishment, however, the column begins by scolding the Democrats for "having no idea how to steal an election" during the 2000 Florida recount. The plot outline of her text does not follow the same sequence as the story's chronology. She begins the column with her usual satirical humor: "My favorite moment, so far, was when George W. Bush won New Mexico by four votes. That's not a result – it's a fabulous freak that should be clapped under glass immediately and shipped off to the Your-Vote-Counts Museum."

Timing is often a factor in Ivins's column, as it is here. Bush's decision as governor of Texas to execute a retarded man is to be carried out the day after Bush appears before the American people "attempting to look and sound presidential." And once again, her populist nonpartisanship emerges when she notes that Bill Clinton's most despicable act was when he, too, granted the execution of a retarded man while pursuing the presidency in 1992. In an unsentimental manner, Ivins tells the story of John Paul Penry, a man with an IQ of 56 who still believes in Santa Claus, who raped and killed "a lovely young woman who sang in the church choir." Penry is cheated by Bush and Texas officials for failing to protect him when he was abused by his mother, Ivins writes. They cheat

society, too, for failing to control Penry for the safety of others when he became an adult and committed repeated rapes. Both Bush and Clinton are seen as villains in this story, having granted the execution of retarded men on the eve of their presidencies. The most significant changes in the characters' circumstances are Bush winning the presidency and Penry's execution.

Written with scathing humor, in "Let the Entertainment Begin," Ivins (see Appendix B) attempts to show the American people what they are in for with George W. Bush as their president. Ivins takes a creative approach here, presenting a double-spaced list of twenty-two reasons for non-Bush supporters to be happy about his presidency, along with five quotes from Bush meant to humorously convey his lack of ability to be president of the United States. Here are two of the Bush quotes selected that Ivins uses as a way to make a case concerning his presidential ineptitude:

> I am mindful of the difference between the executive branch and the legislative branch. I assured all four of the leaders that I know the difference, and that difference is they pass the laws and I execute them. December 18, 2000.
>
> The Legislature's job is to write law. It's the executive branch's job to interpret law. November 22, 2000.

Along with a heavy dose of her biting wit, regional dialect emerges in the form of Texas colloquialism. Strong language is present in the form of insults, which are provided indirectly through the voice of Bush himself. Ivins's contradictory nature emerges when she expresses distain for what she sees as Bush's inability to express himself well in the English language, yet at the same time she finds his mangling a "constant source of delight." This is an example of the shortcomings of one's enemies being a source of entertainment. "You can almost always tell what he is trying to say,"

she notes. “The Texanism is, ‘my tongue got caught in my eyeteeth, so I couldn’t see what I saw saying.’”

Danger of minority rule or more specifically imperialism is the theme in “Four more years of Dubya? Oh dear!” (see Appendix C). Ivins criticizes the Bush administration for damaging the United State’s relationship with Canada. Again, Ivins applies one of her favorite narrative techniques – using not her voice to communicate her message about politicians and other public figures, but their own voice or the voice of others as she did to great effect with Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Rush Limbaugh and George W. Bush. In a sense, she allows her subjects to “hang” on their own words and what she believes are their misguided decisions. The column begins with Bush’s identification of Canada as “one of our most important neighbors to the north.”

Ivins wrote this column after being interviewed on Canadian television during the 2004 presidential campaign. Ivins describes the Canadians as “nice, polite, calm, reserved and chock full of common sense,” who, living next to the United States must be “like having the Simpsons for next-door neighbors.” She recalls the difficulty in trying to explain to a “politely astonished” interviewer how Americans could re-elect Bush, who alienated “the best neighbor any country ever had.” The message here is how the Bush administration has increased anti-Americanism around the globe. But instead of criticizing the Bush administration herself, Ivins uses the voice of the Canadian people who – perceiving him as was having done great harm to his own country – are “stupefied” by the notion that he might be re-elected. Giving voice to others who share her views is a way to strengthen the credibility of her views. It is Ivins who perceives Bush as having done great harm to his own country.

Several of Ivins's thematic concepts are present in "Four More Years of Dubya? Oh Dear! Politics matter, rights endangered, informed citizenry, and finding humor in an inept president. Bush is in the role of victimizer, and the citizens of the United States and Canada his victim. The plot is outlined in a straight chronological fashion. The story outline is a common one – a president is elected and good or bad happens to the people, in this case bad. The change is that Americans a worse off, which is a common outcome in her columns. Although strong language and regional dialect are absent, her satirical humor permeates the column to a greater degree than other examples of newspaper columns.

"Four More Years of Dubya? Oh Dear!" is a relatively lighthearted look at Bush's reelection compared to the way in which Ivins approaches the same topic in "A Rotting Dead Chicken," written for *The Progressive* (see Appendix C). Even the title is aggressive and unflinching. Surprisingly, Ivins does not believe her writing for mainstream newspapers and leftist magazines differ to any notable degree. M. Ivins (personal communication, January 5, 2005). Yet it is unlikely that newspapers across America would have picked up this column, in which the Bush administration is figuratively presented as a rotting dead chicken wired around the neck of the American people.

As mentioned earlier, Ivins's early relationship with folklorist John Henry Faulk, writes Estrada (1997), had much to do with shaping not only her populist ideology, but her writing style. "A Rotting Dead Chicken" begins with a tale told by Faulk about breaking a dog of the habit of killing chickens. Take one of the chickens the dog has killed and wire it around the dog's neck. Leave it there "until the last little bit of flesh rots

and falls off" and the dog will not kill chickens again. Having the Bush administration wired around the neck of Americans for four more years is long enough for the stench to sicken everybody, writes Ivins.

Ivins takes a free associative approach to this column. She appears to have written this column in anger and dismay over Bush's reelection, tossing into the text whatever comes to mind as examples Bush's incompetence and deviance. Following the rotting dead chicken vignette are several paragraphs about Bush acting in favor of a large drug manufacturer despite evidence that it knowingly put patients at risk with a drug that increases the chance of a heart attack. Veering once again, she ends the column criticizing liberals for being out of touch with their evangelical neighbors who won Bush the election.

The characters presented in the column and their roles are clearly defined even though the structure is not. Conservative politicians and the American people are once again the main protagonists. Changes in the characters' circumstances involve Bush's reelection and John Ashcroft leaving the White House. Circumstances are viewed as much worse for the American people. Ivins uses the personalized "you" structure to set a paternal tone, that she and the reader are family, and conveys a feeling of "we're all in this together." Applying the personalized "you" structure is a way to force the reader to take responsibility. She is telling her reader: it is *your* problem, and in some cases, *you* are the problem.

In "Lyin' Bully," Ivins (see Appendix B) uses humor in the form of a quick quip against her opposition, in this case conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh who she attacks for poisoning the well of public debate. Having been publicly attacked a number

of times by Limbaugh, she describes the experience as "somewhat akin to being gummed by a newt. It doesn't actually hurt, but it leaves you with slimy stuff on your ankle" (p. 132). The key thematic concept in this column is the increase in nastiness in America's political discussion, of which Ivins views Limbaugh as a major carrier. Ivins takes humor seriously, having spent much of her professional life making fun of politicians, which she believes is a great American tradition and should be encouraged. She objects not to Limbaugh's type of humor but those he targets.

"When you use satire against powerless people, as Limbaugh does, it is not only cruel, it's profoundly vulgar. It is like kicking a cripple" (p. 133). Ivins berates Limbaugh for using Chelsea Clinton as a target. On his television show early in the Clinton administration, Limbaugh put up a picture of Socks, the White House cat, and asked, "Did you know there's a White House dog?" Then he put up a picture of Chelsea Clinton, "who was thirteen at the time and as far as we know had never done any harm to anyone" (p. 133). Ivins provides another example of what she believes is one of Limbaugh's inappropriate sources of humor, former Labor Secretary Robert Reich's diminutive size that is the result of a childhood disease.

Limbaugh must be taken seriously, Ivins maintains, not because he is offensive or right-wing, but because he is one of the few people addressing a large group of disaffected people in the United States, a group she refers to singularly as "Bubba, a guy I know and grew up with." In explaining Bubba's displaced anger, it is evident that Ivins the Texas populist not only understands their plight, but empathizes:

> Bubba listens to Limbaugh because Limbaugh gives him someone to blame for the fact that Bubba is getting screwed. He's working harder, getting paid less in constant dollars, and falling further and further behind. Not only is Bubba never gonna be able to buy a house, he can barely afford a trailer.

> Hell, he can barely afford the payments on the pickup… Bubba feels like a victim himself – and he is – but he never got any sympathy from liberals (p.134).

"Bubba," Limbaugh's audience of eighteen to thirty-four year olds without a college education, know they are being shafted, Ivins asserts, even if they do not know why or how or by whom. Limbaugh offers them scapegoats, she writes, the "feminazis," the minorities, and the limousine liberals.

Characteristic of her columns in left-wing publications, the text and story chronology in "Lyin' Bully," are not closely aligned. Because he is an increasingly powerful voice for the country's conservative movement, Ivins's critical analysis of Limbaugh is important to revisit. Limbaugh's opinions reach 20 million listeners on nearly 600 radio stations every week, and his contract with Premiere Radio Networks runs through 2009 (Earth Shakers, 2005).

Additionally, Ivins would argue that the circumstances of Limbaugh's followers – the Bubbas -- have changed for the worse under the Bush administration. "Lyin' Bully" is structured in a way that takes the reader back and forth several times from the past to the present. In the second half of the column, Ivins uses one of her trademark plot-outline techniques to make her argument through the words of her opponent. She explains her use of this technique. (Ivins, personal communication, Jan. 5, 2005):

> I'll find someone who is just a complete loon, and quote them to set up an argument. Sometimes the best way to get people to think is to get them to listen to their own arguments and play them back

From the watchdog organization Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, she acquired several "Limbaughisms" that are used to illustrate that Limbaugh is not just wrong but that "he's ridiculous, one of the silliest people in America" (p. 135). Each statement by

Limbaugh is followed by a rebuttal titled “Reality” that contains information from various sources used to discredit his remarks. An example:

> Limbaugh: “The poorest people in America are better off than the mainstream families of Europe” (radio, 1993).
>
> Reality: The poorest 20 percent of Americans can purchase an average of $5,433 worth of goods with their income. Meanwhile, in Germany, the average person can purchase $20,610 worth of goods; in France, $19,200; in Britain, $16,730 (World Development Report, 1994, published by the World Bank).

This technique allows Ivins make Limbaugh accountable for his statements, to give comments uttered on radio and television shows permanency in print. By putting his statements on record, she gives readers the opportunity to deduce their meanings. Jim Hightower (2004) makes a game out of this technique by asking readers to draw a line from Bush’s statements in a column on the left to match them with his subsequent statements or actions on the right.

In “Learn from All the Patriotic Bullying over Iraq” (see Appendix C), the text closely follows the order of events. She begins with her satirical humor, by asking readers to remember what it was like just before the Iraq war, “when Saddam Hussein had weapons for mass destruction, a reconstituted nuclear program, and numerous ties to Al-Qaida.” She reminds readers that Bush told them they couldn’t afford to wait until the smoking gun was a mushroom cloud. Now that the United States is at war, she urges readers to figure out why “so many of us became so invested in this awful enterprise.” Wretched excess accompanies war fever, she notes, and the bullying, swaggering tone remains with us, in our politics. In the middle of this tightly structured chronology of events surrounding the Iraq war, Ivins inserts a quote from Thucydides, writing in 415 B. C.

about Athens sending its fleet off to destruction in Sicily, which Ivins compares to the mindset of the Bush administration:

> To think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just another attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; ability to understand the question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action; fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man…Anyone who held violent opinions could always be trusted, and anyone who objected to them became suspect.

This column is an anti-war declaration, and Ivins the elite eastern liberal is in conflict with Ivins the Texas populist who identifies with the working class, the group that supplies the majority of soldiers to fight the wars.

Common themes are present, citizen involvement, rights endangered, informed citizenry and the danger of minority rule. The media are present here, along with more frequently present characters types and roles, Republican officials as defrauders and the American people as the defrauded. In Ivins's columns, the media are placed in the role of watchdog or victimizer, either helping or hurting the American people. Here the media are depicted as victimizers by failing to inform the public about the circumstances surrounding the Iraq war. The change that takes place is that Americans are worse off in their role as protagonists in a situation that deteriorates because of a failure in the political system, and of the media to adequately and accurately report it.

While the outcome in "Tort 'Deform' Measure Shameful" (see Appendix C) is not as far reaching as that of the Iraq war, Ivins introduces a greater number of character types and roles intertwined in this relatively complex event. Ivins looks at the U.S. Senate vote for tort reform following the news that executives of W.R. Grace and Co. were indicted on criminal charges for knowingly putting their workers and the public in danger by

exposing them to asbestos ore. Because of its complexity, the plot outline of this newspaper column closely follows the story chronology, which enables Ivins to make the topic understandable to the newspaper reader. People get sick, media investigates, Grace is indicted, Grace files bankruptcy, justice department investigates bankruptcy filing, Bush administration announces desire for legislation preventing frivolous tort claims, U.S. Senate passes the Class Action Fairness Act, designed to limit those involved in a class action suit. Her concern for the underdog, a theme that frames all her work, is evident here. “Frankly, I think both the trail lawyers and big business can take care of themselves – it’s the rest of us I worry about” (p. 7A).

“Tort ‘Deform’ Shameful” contains the core group of characters often found in her columns, most notably the cheaters and the cheated. The cheaters are typically conservative politicians and big business, and the cheated are the American public and to a lesser degree liberal politicians. The American people are the protagonists around whom the action centers, and whose circumstances change most often in her columns.

In “Tort ‘Deform’ Measure is Shameful,” the cheaters are W. R. Grace & Company executives, the Bush administration, and the senators who voted for the bill. The victims are whose hurt by the pollution and their families, and all consumers damaged by corporate behavior. The ability of those hurt by the mine pollution to sue for damages becomes increasingly limited by the end of the story. The agent of change is the Bush administration and the senators who voted for the bill. Also present among this large cast of characters are trail lawyers and members the justice department, who here function in the role of helpers. Also functioning constructively are the media, unlike their role in “Learn from all the Patriotic Bullying over Iraq.”

Children are the underdogs and the cheated in “Bush Budget Hits Young Hardest” (see Appendix C). The cheaters are the members of the Bush administration who propose cuts in government spending will mostly hurt children and benefit “*only* the really, really rich.” Ivins as the populist emerges here to criticize mainstream establishment journalists for no longer taking the time to read proposed budgets. Instead, she notes, they wait to hear from various special interest groups and take notice of the ones that scream the loudest. The recurring theme of concern for the underdog emerges, as well as a plot outline that closely follows the story chronology. In this column, not only are conservative politicians the cheaters, but mainstream media for their lack of investigative vigor, and the “God-fearing, Christian Republican” for not considering a tax increase to prevent these budget cuts. Within this structured plot outline, she uses parallelism as a literary device to convey her message. Parallelism, the technique of repeating a phrase, is used effectively to illustrate the potential ramifications of the proposed budget cuts:

> More kids will be hungry and malnourished. More kids who get sick will be unable to see a doctor. More kids with diseases will go undiagnosed. More kids will show up to start school without being the least prepared. More kids will be left alone or in unsafe places. More kids who are being severely abused will go unnoticed.

Summary of Analysis

Berger (1997) writes that texts are complex works that accomplish their outcome as the result of the writer’s skill in combining action, dialogue and characterization, and providing information of various kinds to readers. Narratives may be simple or complex, he notes, yet understanding how they function and how people attempt to make sense of them is a topic that has for centuries puzzled literary theorists.

As stated earlier, seven categories were identified in each column and across the columns. These categories included themes, characters, plot outline, story outline, ideology, strong language and humor. A number of categorical types were identified within these broad groupings. The most frequently found theme – identified in nearly all fifteen columns – was endangerment of citizens' rights, followed by two closely-linked themes, the importance of citizen political involvement and politics matter. Identified in about half of the selected columns were several other underlying messages, which include the danger of minority rule, finding humor in an inept presidency, and the nastiness of America's political dialog. Some of the themes that appeared the least are those that I expected to be more prevalent across the selection. These include racism and corporate responsibility, which were each found once. Identified only twice was the theme have fun while fighting for freedom, a dictate that Ivins has included in the introduction to several of her books.

The characters in narratives, Berger (1997) maintains, are typically not representative of ordinary people. Yet it is not surprising that the ordinary individual, the American citizen, is the most commonly identified character type in Ivins's columns, along with Republican politicians and conservatives in general. Citizens appear in various guises such as consumer, child, minority and liberal political candidate, and are typically in the role of victim overpowered by the victimizer, the Republican politicians. These opposing character types appear in all of the fifteen columns. These stock characters are stereotypical personalities that make it easier for the reader to understand their behavior and motivations for their actions. Characters appearing less frequently are liberals, corporate officials, and the media, either in the role of watchdog or victimizer.

The plot is the manner in which the writer tells a story and arranges for events to occur (Berger, 1994). Ivins says she is not aware of any significant differences between the writing style or story structure used in her commentary written for newspapers and magazines. M. Ivins (personal communication, January 5, 2005). While the same basic thematic concepts underlie her columns in both mainstream and left-wing publications, there are notable and at times dramatic differences in style and structure.

Unlike her columns in liberal publications, in her newspaper columns written for Creators Syndicate the plot outline of the text, which is how the story is told, closely follows the story chronology, how the events actually occurred. Chronology is the most frequently used method to organize a story (Mencher, 2003). Ivins takes a less linear approach to most of her columns written for left-wing magazines, and sometimes jumps from one topic to another. In most of the fifteen columns, the plot outline involves placing satirical humor at the beginning and at the end of the column. Her story outlines tend to follow her themes. The most common storyline is disempowerment experienced by a citizen or citizens, who are consequently victimized by those in power.

Looking at change, I tried to determine if the world of the text had changed before and after the story. Or if the old order had been restored, which did not occur in any of the columns. The protagonist's situation going from bad to worse because of a failure in the system was the most prevalent change. I expected to find few, if any, positive changes because so many of Ivins's columns involve corruption of power and other negative influences on the American people. However, Americans are better off was the change in the equilibrium in four of the columns.

Having examined the stylistic components of Ivins's writing – humor, strong language and regional dialect – it is humor that is used to a much greater extent. In her writing, however, strong language and regional dialect can often be identified as humor. Humor – satirical, biting and at times wrongheaded – was found to be the most pervasive stylistic element in Ivins's writing. There is a dearth of left-wing columnists who are not afraid, like Ivins, to lash out with their humor. Wolff (2005) observes that right-wing pundits are funny while their left-wing counterparts are "stuck in plodding solemnity" as "self-serious, earnest, striving, humorless, correct people, seeking to become ever more earnest, faultless, evenhanded" (p. 106). Ivins's aggressive, irreverent and politically incorrect humor does not comply with today's liberal-journalism ethos.

The use of strong language was in the form of insults instead of expletives in all but one of the columns analyzed. Regional dialect was identified in half of the columns, in the form of folksy analogies and Texas tales rather than the debasement of the English language, a gimmicky device that perhaps Ivins uses to poke fun at the Texas vernacular. Bidness, sumbitch and Meskins are examples of these distortions that appear in some of her columns, but not in any selected for this study. Along with the use of obscenities, it is one of her most extreme stylistic qualities. No obscene or debased words or phrases appeared in any of the columns analyzed. This may be because the use of obscene and debased language is outside the norm and therefore more attention grabbing, so they are assumed to be expressed more frequently than they actually are. Public personalities get typecast by their extreme behavior – but in actuality they may not be exhibiting these particular traits as much as we assume.

Ivins's signature brand of satirical humor is used to begin and end her column, even

those that deal with grave topics, in all but one of the fifteen columns analyzed. While bursting with compassion for the downtrodden and disenfranchised, at the same time Ivins heaps ridicule on politicians, which she believes is one of her primary missions and a great American tradition. M. Ivins (personal communication, January 5, 2005).

Although appearing at times almost sophomoric if taken out of context, even Ivins's use of low humor is deceptively skillful, serving as a significant component of her writing style as a means to instruct and entertain. Walter Benjamin of the Frankfort School argued that low art empowers and energizes the masses (Martin-Barbero,1993). Estrada (1997) notes that "the high value of Molly Ivins's low humor is what makes her far-left politics play so well in America's living rooms" (p. 249).

After analyzing a selection of her columns written for newspapers and magazines, however, it is evident that her syndicated newspaper columns that are read in living rooms across America are treated to her special brand of humor to a lesser degree than her columns written for left-wing magazines. Astor also believes that her newspaper columns distributed widely by Creators Syndicate are infused with a bigger dose of her distinctive humor than her columns that appear left-wing magazines. "Her Creators work might be a little funnier. Given that her columns are far more left-leaning than most other mainstream newspaper columns, she might feel she has to soften the blow with timid readers by using more humor" D. Astor (personal communication, March 2, 2005). Close readings, however, reveal the opposite of Astor's and Estrada's observations. Humor is used more sparingly in her columns that appear in newspapers across America than those written for leftist alternative magazines.

After looking at a selection of Ivins's columns individually and then collectively,

distinct patterns emerged, along with certain atypical and unexpected discoveries. Some of my ideas changed in light of the evidence gleaned. Ivins's columns tend to be more formulaic than I anticipated, involving repeated themes, recognizable plot and story structures, and stock characters involved in predictable types of actions. This observation, however, is in no way meant to devalue her work. Conventional schemes are used as a framework to support her injections of humor, strong language and vernacular dialect that has resulted in her singular voice. In a few of her columns the framework itself is inventive, such as the structuring of other voices to communicate her message, or engaging the reader in a question and answer type exercise.

Narrative analysis was a useful tool to examine these overall patterns and uncover the structure of the columns of Molly Ivins. The written commentary is a cultural form with a strong enough narrative in which to apply this method. It allowed for the interpretation of each column and the selected columns as a whole. As Stokes (2003) points out, a good piece of writing hides its mechanism, so we "need to prevent the text from doing its job of making us forget it is a narrative" (p. 68).

Some news reports are more suitable to narrative analysis than others, argues Hanson (1999), who believes that the method works best when there are obvious plotlines and vivid characters. Ivins's columns contain obvious plotlines and vivid characters, and even evoke ancient myths such as good verses evil. Narrative analysis relies greatly on the analytical ability and writing skills of the researcher. The value of quantitative studies is due to the experimental design and weight of the results. As an interpretive science, narrative analysis depends on the researcher's subjective ability, Hanson writes, and requires the researcher to provide an argument and one's own perception of a work rather

than prove a theorem. As Hanson (1999, para. 15) notes, “the results do not have to be re-applicable, but they must be plausible and persuasive, hence the need for insight.” Because of my nonfiction writing expertise, I believe that I am qualified to conduct a narrative analysis.

In *The Elements of Style* (2000), Strunk and White advise writers to “Choose a suitable design and hold on to it. A basic structured design underlies every kind of writing… the first principle of composition, therefore, is to foresee or determine the shape of what is to come and pursue that shape” (p.15). Ivins pursues entirely different shapes with her columns, depending on the audience for whom the message is intended. Regional speech, strong language and most notably humor have contributed to her distinctive style and are used to entertain and persuade. Although the writing style and content of her newspaper and magazine columns vary significantly, manifest in all her columns is the belief that politics is about *us*, not “*those people* in Washington” that “we hired to drive the bus for a while” (Ivins, 2004, p. xii).

CONCLUSION

Introduction

Opinion is at its best when it "jogs a firmly held set of beliefs and forces us to re-examine them," informing us when "the truths that we hold to be self-evident cease to be true" (Zinsser, 2001, p. 152). Even more fundamental than the basic human need for stories is the basic need to know. Readers turn to syndicated columnists to help shape their opinions on the compelling stories and important issues of the day.

The media are a profound and often misperceived source of cultural pedagogy, Kellner (2003) observes, and they contribute to educating use how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear, and desire – and what not to. Columnists, with their license to instruct, have even greater power to educate us. Adams (2002) argues that mass audiences want to strengthen their understanding of history, but do not have the time or ability to always differentiate between the many versions of history that are targeted at them.

A similar case can be made for making sense of contemporary culture. With her astute insight and unique comedic voice, Ivins has the ability to lighten, explain and render palatable complex government policies and controversial views on societal issues – and she often does so using a style characteristic of men's speech. Mills (2003) argues that women's speech is not always different from men's, and there are times when women speakers communicate as impolitely and as confrontationally as men. However, when

women communicate in such a non-feminine manner, they typically do so in the private rather than public realm. Ivins's strong language is not only expressed through the use of insults, scathing observations and expletives. Her use of French phrases and classical references are also part of her authoritative manner of expression that characterizes men's speech.

All types of genres of human communication are fundamentally storytelling (Rybacki and Rybacki, 1991). And as Shoemaker and Reese (1991) write, a story must have an inherent appeal for humans in order to ring true. How readers respond to Ivins's columns has to do largely to whether they believe her message is in accord to what they have experienced. Readers accept as truth those stories that are most similar to their own experiences.

Ivins's influential power lies in her ability to circulate progressive discourse in the mainstream press. In the 19th century, there was fear that journalists would not simply record the world, but would think about it and promote their own thinking (Hatch, 1988). In the 20th century a new worry developed, that journalists would simply record and not think, thereby promoting someone else's thinking, namely that of the government and other powerful interests.

Political columnist George Will once observed that columnists, like artists, have the ability to see what everybody sees, but not in quite the same way as everybody sees it. Newspaper columnists have long been providing us with their distinctive way of seeing America's social landscape. But until the mid-19th century, most of the voices telling us how to think were men's**.** Ivins follows in the tradition of America's pioneer columnists, outspoken women voicing social concerns instead of writing about home and hearth

topics for female readers. The content and style of Ivins's opinion writing is rooted in the work of 19th century novelist Fanny Fern, who became one the first and highest paid female columnists to break into the male dominated field. Like Ivins, Fern's use of humor was not traditionally feminine, but sharp, cutting, and at times outrageous – used to convey her opinions on such substantial topics as women's rights, narrowness of religion and the Civil War.

"Unfettered by the need to be objective or fair, columnists can be scathing in their criticism, unabashed in their praise, funny or poignant, arrogant or intensely personal" (Braden, 1993, p. 1). Ivins communicates all of these traits, sometimes all in the same column. Undoubtedly, Fern would have shared Ivins's sentiment conveyed in the introduction to *Nothin' but Good Times Ahead* (Ivins, 1994, p. 10):

> Any nation that can survive what we have lately in the way of government is on the high road to permanent glory. So hang in there, keep fightin' for freedom, raise more hell, and don't forget to laugh, too.

Future research

Little research has been found that focuses on in-depth analyses of the columns of nationally syndicated columnists. As noted in the literature review, most of the material concerning columnists is biographical, along with a few "how to" books on writing effective columns. These biographical works need updating to include today's columnists. Future research should also be directed toward studying in detail the work of other notable opinion writers. Because nationally syndicated columnists have the power to shape public discussion, there is value in going beyond casual reading to examine how they construct their columns that reach a mass audience on the average of two to four times per week.

Ivins's place in American columnist history has yet to be fully determined. A deeper understanding of her work could be achieved by comparing the stylistic elements of her writing to that of other nationally syndicated columnists. A look at other types of Ivins's columns would also broaden the scope of this study. Although the majority of her columns address political matters and politicians, Ivins also writes about feminism, Texas culture and personal events, which have included her battle with breast cancer and the death of her mother.

A mass communication theory that can be applied to a columnist's effects on readers is uses and gratifications. It is built on the notion that the media serve a number of societal needs and looks at why people use the media and for what purposes. Another area for additional research is reader response. Clearly, newspaper columns play a role in the national dialogue, but it is difficult to determine their impact (Braden, 1993). A columnist's name recognition, along with the number of telephone calls, letters and e-mail messages in response to a column are among the ways to evaluate their power to influence. The mass distribution of Ivins's columns and her celebrity status indicate that readers are responding to her work, but how and to what extent? In order to gauge a columnist's influence on public debate, future research could be directed toward a more quantitative approach such as a reader response survey. Reader response theory and criticism can be traced back to Aristotle and Plato, both of whom based their critical arguments at least in part on literature's effect on the reader (John Hopkins, 2005). Hall (2000) provides general reader response questions that could be used to gain information from Ivins's readers:

- What is the *predominant effect* of the text on you?

- Why do you think the text had that effect?
- Did you have prior knowledge of or expectations about the text in general?
- What does your response tell you about yourself? (About your style of reading, about your values, our society, our codes of behavior, your notion of what is "normal" and "conventional."

Berger (1997) points out that any text requires readers to fill in large blank areas, and different readers fill in these blanks in different ways. Reader-response theorists suggest that no two people read a given text – be it a political column or a fairy tale – in quite the same way. And some columnists have loyal readers who do not share their ideology. A man who had been reading Ivins's columns for ten years sent a letter expressing his delight at finally agreeing with her.

Along with a study measuring the degree of influence on her general readership, future research might include an attempt to discover whether Ivins's columns have swayed the national or local political agenda. Agenda setting theory can be used to help determine the degree to which audiences are aware of issues presented through news coverage and the degree of significance audiences place on these issues. As a result, effects on public policy may develop.

Efforts to determine whether her political commentary has produced a change in policy might begin with a survey asking politicians if they read Ivins's columns or listen to her commentary on talk shows. A correlation would then have to be established between the content of a given column and the time in which it was published in relation to new policy. Yet even designed by a researcher with the necessary expertise, such a study would likely be highly problematic, due in part to the difficulty of pinpointing the

influence of a single columnist on complex policy shifts.

Generally, punditry does not directly result in new policy, but in a reshaping of the "political framework" in Washington that allows politicians to succeed and policy to be set, according to Republican political consultant Don Sipple (Rothenberg, 1990). Syndicated columnists Robert Novak and the late Rowland Evans are credited for making Reagan's theory of supply-side economics respectable enough for mainstream Washington. Another columnist credited for reshaping the political framework is Anthony Lewis of *The New York Times*, who, Rothenberg writes, helped unite opposition to Judge Robert Bork's nomination to the Supreme Court in 1987.

For some columnists, however, having an effect on policy is not an objective. Some attempt to persuade and influence events, but many others resist the notion of telling their readers – citizens or policymakers – what to do. Braden (1993) cites columnist John Fisher on the function of the column and the columnist's role as society's arbitrator:

> [A column] is to help readers arrive at conclusions of their own… Whether they agree with the columnist's interpretation doesn't matter much… It offers the reader a chance to become familiar enough with a given point of view so that he can use it to work out his own intellectual bearings (p.12).

The power of columnists is tangential, not direct, observes retired *New York Times* political columnist James Reston (Braden, 1993). Reston believes that if columnists can make a compelling case on an issue, and debate it long enough, Congress may act on it. Their power is in beginning the debate, Reston suggests, wherein lies "the power to initiate thought, to change the question" (Braden, 1993, p. 13). Estrada (1997) argues that columnists have the ability to influence other journalists and in turn, influence political leaders. Columnists may serve as role models and shapers of the news agenda, as

Estrada believes. But there is scant research looking at the extent to which columnists influence policy, either directly or indirectly through other journalists. Future research might also focus on blogs, information that is instantly published to a website. An increasingly popular publishing method, blogs include opinions on social issues and provide a forum for informal critique of today's leading columnists.

Significance

As stated earlier, an analysis of the work of Molly Ivins is important because mass communication literature has barely recognized columnists despite their prominent position in the news environment. It is important to study Ivins's approach to column writing to demystify her process, thus providing a model that can be used to convey liberal thought more powerfully, based on truth rather than the distortion or concealment of truth.

Arguably, Ivins's narrative approach and distinctive use of humor, strong language and regional dialect could be used as a prototype to assist columnists of any ideology to communicate more effectively and provide a platform for rational deliberation. There is, however, a need for a stronger liberal voice in the United States to help balance today's political discourse. Column writing is a significant outlet for free speech in the United States, yet liberal columnists are underrepresented. "Daily newspapers sorely need more left-leaning op-ed voices; most columnists range from centrist to far right." D. Astor (personal communication, March 2, 2005).

A common critique of conservative communicators is that they obscure the truth in their quest for power. Democrats lost the 2004 presidential election, Kennedy (2005) argues, not because of a philosophical divide between red and blue states, but due to an

information deficit caused by a breakdown in our national media. Massey (2005) includes Ivins among the few "liberal voices in the punditocracy" getting air time only because they serve as foils for right-wing hosts on conservative talk shows (p. 142).

"This threat to the flow of information, vital to democracy's survival, has been compounded in recent years by the growing power of right-wing media that twist the news and deliberately deceive the public to advance their radical agenda" (Kennedy, 2005, p. 214). The media, Kennedy asserts, are more concerned with entertaining than informing, and have abandoned their former obligation to present the public with both sides of issues.

Americans are discovering that their news outlets do not adequately serve their needs and they desire more serious news, argues Fenton (2005). Serious news is balanced news, news that is interpreted and expressed by a more fair representation of liberal, independent voices. "Empirical reality is replaced by spin" when people stop listening to opposing voices, yet "the news business cannot serve the public while simultaneously acting as a mindless profit-center for corporate needs" (Fenton, 2005, p. 219).

Herman and Chomsky (2002) maintain that the media shun their responsibility to provide the public with the information needed to assert meaningful control over the political process. Instead, the media's "societal purpose" is to "inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and state" (Herman and Chomsky, 2002, p. 298). Ivins does indeed provide the public with the information needed to assert meaningful control over the political process. She does so by using narrative techniques analyzed in this study that are meant to entertain *and* inform; to reveal rather than conceal truths.

Journalists do not get rewarded for telling hard truths in a profit-seeking environment, veteran television journalist Bill Moyers observes (Kennedy, 2005). Moyers contends that "We have an ideological press that is interested in the election of Republicans, and a mainstream press that's interested in the bottom line. Therefore, we don't have a vigilant, independent press whose interest is the American people" (Kennedy, 2005, p. 268).

There is a market for independent voices like Ivins whose interest is the American people. In the United States is a massive base for serious reform for an active government providing greater opportunity and security, writes Noble (2004). Public opinion surveys indicate that Americans want an efficient, effective government, one that has the ability to help them survive in uncertain times. Although not wanting to dismantle corporate capitalism, most Americans desire the progressive values of the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, with a practical approach to governing a 21st century economy (Noble, 2004).

A need exists not simply for more liberal voices, but liberal voices with passion. Needed are convictions, writes Walzer (2004), not beliefs, doctrines, dogmas or ideologies. As Lamott (1994) points out, a moral position is not merely a message, but "a passionate caring inside you" (p. 108). Ivins's passion is expressed through her use of humor, strong language and regional dialect.

While the most compelling stories are mythic, the most useful and uplifting stories are moral, argues Fisher (1984), who writes that compelling stories should provide a rationale for decision and action. Little good comes from a moral argument if it fails to support worthwhile ends that carry through to actual practices (McGee & Nelson, 1985). There is no point in gathering an audience and demanding its attention unless you have

something to say that is important and constructive, notes Lamott (1994). Yet pubic moral argument is ineffective and problematical if it does not compel opponents to take better notice of the issues and work to produce better policies. Understanding how human beings use stories to sway belief and behavior requires examining the framework of a story to determine what about it enables an audience to perceive it as a truth, or a persuasive argument.

Yet for the most part, as Meyer (1990) notes, the content of political columns ultimately perishes, in E. B. White's phrase, "like snakes with the setting sun, their bite vanishing with the controversies that provoked them." As noted earlier, whether the reader is persuaded by a columnist's viewpoint likely depends not on what is written, but how. Therefore an analysis emphasizing the way in which the tale is told – looking at not only *what* Ivins says but *how* she says it – may be of most use to tomorrow's critics and columnists.

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APPENDIX A

Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush Eras (1981-1993)

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APPENDIX B

William Jefferson Clinton Era (1993-2001)

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APPENDIX C

(George W. Bush Era (2001-present)

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