HARDLY A DYING ART:
THE FLOURISHING OF PRINT NEWS IN LITERARY JOURNALISM BOOKS

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ABSTRACT

While most media scholars are turning their attention toward virtual means of communication, few individuals or research organizations have taken notice of new developments related to physical forms of news in print. The increasing popularity of socially and politically relevant literary journalism books like Barbara Ehrenreich’s Nickel and Dimed (2001) and Tracy Kidder’s Mountains Beyond Mountains (2003) is a journalistic trend that has been largely viewed from a literary perspective—and only minimally examined by news media scholars or experts.

This thesis seeks to bridge the chasm between literary examinations of literary journalism books and scholarship on contemporary mass media, by highlighting socially and politically relevant literary journalism books as a form of powerful and influential communications media. Though these books contain literary and subjective elements like first-person perspective, they also share a number of important characteristics with modern-day mainstream print news, making them a hybrid media form.
Through an examination of bibliographic, textual and literary characteristics of Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* and Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, I demonstrate that the books’ definitions and functions are intrinsically connected to those of traditional American print news. In addition, I utilize the media effects theory and methodology of “uses and gratifications” in order to guide and analyze original focus group and survey research. This approach enables a unique comparison between individuals’ understandings of and reactions to *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* with their uses and gratifications of mainstream print news media. Ultimately, this thesis not only provides evidence that socially and politically relevant literary journalism books represent a flourishing genre of print news, but also identifies characteristics and qualities of the books that may be valuable for future scholarship.
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Chapter 1. Introduction

In its “comprehensive” annual review of the “State of the News Media,” the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2006) suggests that American journalism is undergoing “a seismic transformation.” As digital and online media becomes more popular and accessible, the lines between news media producers and consumers, and journalists and citizens, are becoming increasingly fuzzy. Simultaneously, traditional forms of “old media,” such as newspapers and television, are encountering financial straits and declining public trust. “Scan the headlines of 2005,” the report posits, “and one question seems inevitable: Will we recall this as the year when journalism in print began to die?” (p. 4).

Certainly, newspaper journalism—one of the most traditional forms of print news—has seen better days. In 2005, many of America’s leading newspapers, including The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times and the Philadelphia Inquirer, faced diminishing circulation and stock prices and were forced to shrink newsroom staffs (p. 4). Major magazines like U.S. News and Newsweek also fared poorly, posting significant drops in revenues (p. 24). Yet, despite the signs that may seem to presage newspapers’ and magazines’ “early extinction” (p. 4), not every form of print news is faring poorly. In fact, one form of print media is currently experiencing tremendous popularity and prestige, and deserves to be viewed as a powerful medium of communication: literary journalism books.
This thesis considers a specific type of literary journalism book as a form or genre of print news: a work that employs literary techniques (such as narrative, first-person perspective or voice) to tell fact-based stories that deal with or are related to important contemporary social or political issues (such as public education or poverty). Examples of these types of books include: Tracy Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003), Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation* (2002) and Jon Krakauer’s *Under the Banner of Heaven* (2003)—all of which share a number of important characteristics with traditional mass media. Not only are books like these read by a large portion of the public (and frequent fixtures on bestseller lists), they are also rigorously researched and reported, and written according to standards of mainstream American media.

As I explain in this thesis, a great deal of confusion exists among both scholars and the public over which types of books may be considered “literary journalism” (or, as the form is also frequently labeled, “creative nonfiction”). I suspect that readers of my work might also lack a clear understanding of what I refer to as “literary journalism,” and, more specifically, as “socially and politically relevant literary journalism.” Therefore, I am presenting the following preliminary table of characteristics of the genre, as well as a few guidelines for what is not embodied by the genre. After exploring the various ways in which we might view these types of literary journalism books as print news media (in following pages of this thesis), I hope to
expand the table to include even more attributes of the genre.

Table 1.1: Characteristics of socially and politically relevant literary journalism books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Popularity among readers is evidenced by time on national bestseller lists</td>
<td>Limited readership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deals with, or is related to, issues of social or political significance</td>
<td>Deals mainly with history or personal stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposes/examines something not commonly noticed or known</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employs one or more literary techniques (such as prose, first-person perspective, plot, setting, detail, voice)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Includes information that is as accurate as possible</td>
<td>Includes fictional, embellished or inaccurate elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on information that the author spent significant time/effort to learn and report</td>
<td>Based on author’s own memories, musings, political beliefs/agenda, jokes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author’s priority is educating or informing</td>
<td>Author’s priority is entertaining</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples

Nickel and Dimed (Barbara Ehrenreich, 2001), Mountains Beyond Mountains (Tracy Kidder, 2003), Fast Food Nation (Eric Schlosser, 2001), There Are No Children Here (Alex Kotlowitz, 1991)

A Million Little Pieces (James Frey, 2005), Dreams from My Father (Barack Obama, 2004), The Glass Castle (Jeannette Walls, 2005), Marley and Me (John Grogan, 2005)

The modern-day socially and politically relevant literary journalism book is a unique form; as a commodity that bridges the journalistic and literary worlds, it simultaneously communicates new ideas and raises provocative questions. The recent popularity of didactic-yet-entertaining documentary films, such as Michael Moore’s Bowling for Columbine (2002) and Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004), Morgan Spurlock’s Super...
Size Me (2004), and Al Gore’s (and director Davis Guggenheim’s) An Inconvenient Truth (2006) is another trend that reflects the growth and spread of long-form journalism in American media formats that are more commonly associated with entertainment.

While most media scholars are turning their attention toward virtual means of communication, such as blogs and online news aggregators, few individuals or research organizations have taken notice of new developments related to physical forms of news in print, nor of reality-based entertainment and news. The Project for Excellence in Journalism’s (2006) study of American journalism, for instance, does not leave room for a category of nonfiction books. Its only concessions for “alternative” news sources are “ethnic” news and “alternative news weeklies.” Other prominent media studies scholars, like Michael Schudson and Susan E. Tifft (2005) and W. Lance Bennett (1983), also neglect to notice or assess the role of literary journalism in contemporary social and political communications. Despite this dearth of information about literary journalism—and because I have personally found books like Kidder’s Mountains Beyond Mountains (2003) and Ehrenreich’s Nickel and Dimed (2001) to have a profound impact upon my civic awareness and engagement—I believe it is necessary to closely examine the genre’s place in modern American journalism.

Thus, it has been with a strong curiosity and a hope to demonstrate that news may take the form of a literary journalism book—and that journalism in a book may be
more significant and influential than traditional news because of its unconventional form—that I have raised the following questions in the course of my research for this thesis: What elements of socially and politically relevant literary journalism make the genre worthy of inclusion in the category of print “news media”? To put this question another way, in what ways can we view socially and politically relevant literary journalism books as forms of print news? How does the first-person perspective in books like Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* (2001) and Tracy Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003) complicate or challenge definitions of American journalism? How do readers react to the works, and in what ways are their reactions indicative of the genre’s power to inform the public?

By exploring the answers to these questions—and the myriad of new questions that these ones raise—through the examples of Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* (2001) and Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003), I will demonstrate that literary journalism’s importance in and contribution to American journalism has heretofore been underappreciated. By reviewing the history of socially minded American news and literature, I will illustrate the various links between American journalism history and Kidder’s (2003) and Ehrenreich’s (2001) literary journalism works. Of course, I will pay particular attention to the issue of objectivity in journalism, since the ideal is challenged by Ehrenreich’s (2001) and Kidder’s (2003) inclusion of their own thoughts, opinions and immersive reporting experiences in their books.
This examination of the link between literary journalism books and news media is not the first of its kind. Indeed, in 1973, Tom Wolfe argued, “the most important literature being written in America today is in nonfiction”: the “New Journalism” (p. ii). In the introductory chapters of *The New Journalism*, Wolfe claimed that merging literary narrative techniques with the journalistic ideals of fact-based reporting would more accurately represent reality and truth than the emotionless, even-handed mainstream news of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, Wolfe emphasized the New Journalists’ incorporation of conventions and techniques of fiction into nonfiction—meaning that New Journalism works (and many pieces of literary journalism that were produced in the following decades) were typically seen as literature, rather than factual, informative media. Few compilations of literary journalism or essays on the genre acknowledged the power of literary journalism to communicate substantial information of political or social relevance.

In 2005, New York University journalism professor and journalist Robert S. Boynton modified Wolfe’s (1973) term to describe “a group of writers [that] has been quietly securing a place at the very center of contemporary American literature for reportorially based, narrative-driven long-form nonfiction” (p. xi): “The New New Journalists.” These writers, like Eric Schlosser, Alex Kotlowitz and Ted Conover, think of themselves primarily as journalists and their works as “wholly within the nonfiction genre,” Boynton (2005) asserts. In addition, he observes, this new
generation of journalist-authors more stringently adheres to reportorial standards, like objectivity, accuracy and professionalism (p. 9). Although Boynton does not write about or interview Barbara Ehrenreich or Tracy Kidder for The New New Journalists, I believe that both authors also have produced the same type of literary journalism as “New New Journalists.”

In analyzing “New New Journalists” works, and Ehrenreich’s (2001) and Kidder’s (2003) books in particular, it is important to consider the significance of their immersive reporting techniques and first-person perspectives in writing—a topic that has been widely debated among journalists and media scholars, as well as literature and writing experts. Incorporating reporters’ own opinions and actions into the news was common among early American journalists (Stephens, 2007a, pp. 164-168), but by the turn of the 20th century the journalistic ideal of objectivity was beginning to take hold among professional journalists, undercutting reporters’ ability to include themselves in their stories (Schudson, 1978, p. 71). The predominance of this belief in objective, unbiased news may also have been partially responsible for the creation and popularity of New Journalism in the middle of the 20th century; journalists like Wolfe, Gay Talese and Joan Didion were knowingly challenging the prevailing sentiment that truth and facts could only be represented through a strict adherence to an objective, third-person point of view (Connery, 1998, p. 425).
Since the middle of the 20th century, journalists’ and the American public’s faith in standards and ideals of objective reporting have waned. Subjective reporting, in certain media contexts and fields, is perfectly acceptable and even expected. Magazines like *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*, for instance, frequently feature journalism that incorporates literary techniques (and have done so since before the time of the New Journalists) (Weingarten, 2006). In addition, new forms of online media, such as blogs, are frequently touted as “citizen-produced” journalism, in which it is perfectly acceptable and common for authors to include their own voices and perspectives (Allan, 2003).

Though most journalists are aware that complete objectivity is impossible, many of them also continue to at least strive to accomplish the ideal, perhaps because, as sociologist Gaye Tuchman (1972) explains, objectivity serves as a “strategic ritual” that protects journalists from criticism and reinforces their professional status (p. 676). This enduring goal of attaining objectivity can be traced in the language and production of mainstream news in America today; with the exception of opinion and editorial pieces, newspaper and television news stories still rarely include reporters’ own thoughts or allow authors to acknowledge their own presence in news reports.

Thus, in American journalism and news media as a whole, a conflict continues to exist over the necessity and uses of objective reporting. Literary journalism books that incorporate authors’ own presence, actions and opinions, like Barbara
Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* (2001) and Tracy Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003), might seem to fall outside the standards of “objective” journalism. Their identity as literary journalism works that are still popularly assumed to belong to the world of fiction and literature, in addition to their distribution in the unabashedly commercial venue of bookstores, makes them easy to dismiss as not valuable, credible or reliable forms of news media. Yet, as I argue in this thesis, the authors’ subjective voices in *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) may actually strengthen the works’ ability to capture readers’ attention and communicate important information, making the two books incredibly relevant to a discussion about American news media.

When we view socially and politically relevant literary journalism books as news media, it makes sense to also analyze them through a communications, or mass media lens. Toward this end, I have conducted a study of Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* (2001) and Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003), using the media effects framework of “uses and gratifications.” This approach, which assumes individuals’ “active” or conscious choice of media use (reading the two books, in this case), considers individuals’ interest in and reasons for consuming particular forms or examples of news. By taking into account individual expectations and uses of media, and the ways in which media consumption gratifies (or fails to satisfy) those needs, the approach will provide clues about readers’ relationship to the subjects of literary
journalism books. To my knowledge, this sort of investigation into the uses of and
gratifications provided by socially and politically relevant literary journalism books
has never been conducted.

It is my hope that this thesis will interest not only scholars and students of
communication and culture, but also consumers of “new media,” traditional
mainstream American news, and any other sorts of “alternative” news in between. This
thesis is also written for anyone who simply appreciates a good book. Although
literature and news media are often viewed as separate entities in academia, I hope that
my thesis will encourage scholars—and the general public—to think more broadly
about definitions of both “literature” and “news,” and to examine more closely the
various intersections and overlaps between the fields. I hope that my analysis of
Ehrenreich’s Nickel and Dimed (2001) and Kidder’s Mountains Beyond Mountains
(2001) and their impact on readers will contribute to communications scholarship by
highlighting an important and underestimated form of journalism, and help to bridge
the current chasm between literary examinations of literary journalism and scholarship
on modern-day news media.
Outline of Chapters

This thesis is organized thematically into eight chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two will present a review of scholarly literature about the evolution of mainstream American news and literary journalism books.

Chapter Three will introduce my hypotheses and discuss the methodological and theoretical bases of the thesis.

Chapter Four will provide background on the publication and distribution histories of the two books, and establish the context in which I am conducting this study of the two books.

Chapter Five will analyze excerpts from Nickel and Dimed and Mountains Beyond Mountains and compare and contrast them to traditional and mainstream American print news.

Chapter Six will analyze individuals’ uses and gratifications of the two books, using original focus group and survey data.

Chapter Seven will also utilize original focus group and survey data to compare the uses and gratifications of the two books with those of mainstream print news.

Finally, the Conclusion will summarize my findings and offer suggestions and insight for future research on this subject.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

In 1922, Walter Lippmann observed that the modern world had become so complex, complicated and fast-moving that it was impossible for anyone to know about all of the issues and events that impacted his or her life. Keeping the public apprised of news, Lippmann wrote in *Public Opinion*, was assumed to be the job of the press. If the press performed this function well, “every day and twice a day it will present us with a true picture of all the outer world in which we are interested” (1997, p. 203).

Yet, Lippmann, who had worked to manipulate public opinion in favor of the Allies during World War I, was not convinced a simple relationship between the news media and the public was possible. What if the press did not do its job well? What if it actually did not relay information accurately, and instead presented news that was distorted, one-sided? What if, purposely or accidentally, the press left out vital news and information? And, then, as Ronald Steel (1997) puts it, “What if the public didn’t know what it didn’t know?” (p. xii).

Lippmann’s curiosity (and concern) about the public’s dependency on the mass media to obtain information remains incredibly relevant today. His uneasiness about the representation and filtering of news and information begs a larger question underlying not only this thesis, but also much scholarship about the mass media: *Is it possible to accurately represent or communicate truth—about any issue or topic*—
through an intermediary form of media, like a newspaper or a nonfiction book?

Indeed, the issue of representing reality is central to popular understandings (and misunderstandings) of both mainstream American news and nonfiction books.

This chapter will examine the development of modern American news and nonfiction books, with particular emphasis on the longstanding debate over the role and function of objectivity (and subjectivity) in the two forms. A review of scholarship on the production and dissemination of traditional news media will provide a useful framework and guiding definitions with which to compare literary journalism books in later chapters. The chapter also addresses the recent history of the genre of “literary journalism,” examines its contested definitions and various labels, and looks at why this very confusion over the genre’s name, function and form may be a reason for its exclusion from “news media.”

### Objectivity and the Development of Mainstream American News

For as long as American journalism has existed, its ideals have continually evolved. One attribute of American news’ history and development that deserves particular attention in the context of this thesis is the notion of objectivity: privileging facts, information and an unbiased perspective… and distrusting values and passion. This ideal, which today is often (assumed to be) upheld by specific practices of newsgathering and reporting (Tuchman, 1972), has evolved alongside American
journalism over the course of nearly three centuries. Despite the fact that few
journalists or news consumers today believe in the ability to truly capture or convey
information objectively, the ideal remains relevant to many journalists’ work; attempts
to achieve objectivity are evident in everything from front-page newspaper stories that
exclude the reporter’s presence to the practice of adding bylines to opinion columns.

Most scholars believe that the first predecessors of “objective” news media
were the “penny papers” of the early 1800s. This form of popular journalism,
exemplified by newspapers like the New York Sun, was marketed not toward an elite
readership (as previous newspapers had been), but rather to the masses. Penny papers’
price of one penny (or a few) was significantly less expensive than other newspapers,
broadening the population of news consumers (Schudson, 1978, p. 17; Stephens,
2007a, p. 184). Since the papers’ success depended on their wide circulation and
expanded advertising revenue, their content was similarly broad, including topics like
crime, human-interest stories and bizarre occurrences (Stephens, 2007a, p. 184;

Yet, the penny paper itself was only half of the story of its significance.
Experts have shown that the social and cultural atmosphere of the 19th century was also
ripe for a more democratic and unbiased news product. Michael Schudson (1978)
identifies technological developments, such as the invention of new printing presses
and paper-making processes, the spread of railroads and canals, and the invention and
popular use of the telegraph for professional communication, as having provided journalists and publishers with an opportunity to produce news for masses (pp. 31-35). In addition, democratic values and social trends of the mid-19th century—such as the explosion of literacy among lower-class Americans—prompted newspapers’ wider circulation and expanded content (pp. 35-36). The mid-1800s were clearly important years in journalism history; they represented a time in which “the groundwork on which a belief in facts and a distrust of the reality, or objectivity, of ‘values’ could thrive” (p. 60).

Stuart Allan (1999), who identifies a similar range of historical characteristics and developments in the early history of American journalistic objectivity, also notes that the introduction of the telegraph to American culture in the 1840s and its subsequent use in long-distance news agencies like the Associated Press was “a crucial contributory factor” in priming objectivity to become a professional ideal (p. 17). Because cooperative wire services like the Associated Press distributed stories to multiple newspapers (with various readerships and political affiliations), the news they relayed necessarily had a degree of objectivity (Allan, 1999, p. 18; Stephens, 2007a, p. 247).

Despite the popularity of Allan’s (1999) and Stephens’ (2007a) view among scholars, Schudson (1978) claims that this responsibility has been over-exaggerated. He finds, instead, that objective reporting “did not become the chief norm or practice
in journalism in the late nineteenth century when the Associated Press was growing” (p. 5). Indeed, many newspapers of the mid-1800s remained devoted to particular political or social values, even as they seemingly welcomed a broader range of readers’ political backgrounds. James T. Hamilton (1999) reveals that most newspapers in 1870 still maintained political identities: “Republican papers accounted for 54% of all metropolitan dailies… Democratic papers comprised 33% of daily newspapers” (p. 37). Yet, he asserts, newspapers’ political affiliations were dropped in favor of being “independent” in the following decades, so that by 1900, 47% of metropolitan daily newspapers were independent. Newspapers’ motivations for adopting techniques and ideals of objectivity, Hamilton asserts, were primarily economic: publishers realized their papers would sell more copies if they catered to a larger number of readers, and thus, they began to abandon their old, partisan identities (p. 38).

By the turn of the 20th century, new techniques and principles of newsgathering and reporting both challenged and reinforced, the maturing ideal of objectivity. Some journalists, like Nellie Bly and Jacob Riis, began to experiment with immersive and investigative reporting (Stephens, 2007a, pp. xxii-xxiii), shaping “an activist brand of journalism” that attacked upper-classes and advocated for change: “muckraking” (Schudson and Tifft, 2005, p. 23). A famous “muckraker,” Lincoln Steffens often advocated for news with an “activist” dimension to be told through literary techniques,
in order to communicate the experience of the “other.” As Steffens said of journalists’ work at the New York Commercial Advertiser:

Our stated ideal for a murder story was that it should be so understood and told that the murderer would not be hanged, not by our readers… We never achieved our ideal, but there it was; and it is scientifically and artistically the true ideal for an artist and for a newspaper: to get the news so completely and to report it so humanly that the reader will see himself in the other fellow’s place (Boynton, 2005, p. xxiv).

As Steffens’ words indicate, muckraking journalism not only sought to show a different perspective on quotidian news, but also challenged the idea of communicating truth through objectivity by incorporating subjective and artistic reporting.

Though muckraking’s popularity waned quickly, it never truly disappeared. Indeed, some media experts believe that socially conscious works like George Orwell’s The Road to Wigan Pier (1937) and Jack London’s The People of the Abyss (1902), as well as modern-day books like Eric Schlosser’s Fast Food Nation (2001), echo the aims and ambitions of muckraking journalists (Weingarten, 2006, pp. 14-15; Boynton, 2005, pp. xxiv-xxviii). Because these types of works have been produced with a clear argument and purpose in mind, however, muckraking journalism is typically viewed as at odds with the emergent ideal of objectivity.

Another style of reporting that was seen as rejecting objectivity was “yellow journalism,” or “news” that embellished information with literary elements like hyperbole and melodrama. Yellow journalism also featured aggressive, energetic
headlines and liberal use of images in newspapers (Campbell, 2001, p. 2). The sensational *New York World* and *New York Journal* newspapers exemplified the form in the late 1800s (and, consistent with Hamilton’s (2004) theory about innovation in journalism being driven by economic motivations, were fierce competitors (Schudson and Tifft, 2005, p. 23)). Although scholars have typically dismissed or decried yellow journalism’s validity as a form of reliable news because of its subjective nature, W. Joseph Campbell (2001) argues that the form’s influence has been underestimated. In fact, he argues that “the genetic material of yellow journalism can be found in various strains of contemporary journalism” (p. 186)—in everything from jingoistic, laudatory coverage of political leaders, to the notion of “public” or “civic” journalism (in which the press is regarded as a force with which common people can reassert their participation in democratic government), to investigative crime-solving journalism (pp. 176-177).

Enhancing the argument for the importance of yellow journalism in the genesis of modern-day news media, Campbell (2001) and Schudson (1978) note that both the subjective genres of yellow journalism and muckraking served as benchmarks against which increasingly objective newspapers like the *New York Times* defined themselves.¹ The *Times*, which purposely strove to present news in an informational and unbiased

¹ Indeed, *New York Times* owner Adolph Ochs described some of the notable attributes of yellow journalism in 1901, as he laid out instructions on how journalists were not to run the *Philadelphia Times*: “No red ink. No pictures. No double column heads. No freak typography. No free advertisements. No free circulation…No personal journalism. No pessimism. No friends to favor. No enemies to punish. No drinking by employees” (Campbell, 2001, p. 63).
manner, attracted an elite, upper-class readership, establishing itself as the “higher journalism.” Thus, the history of muckraking, yellow journalism and the *New York Times* were each necessary and important in setting the tone for value-free, information-based news in the coming years (Campbell, 2001, p. 63; Schudson, 1978, pp. 5, 120).

Though journalists increasingly adopted the fact-based model of news in the early 1900s, it may have been Americans’—and journalists’ in particular—disillusionment with democracy in the years following World War I that served as one of the strongest influences on the development of objectivity in American news media. Many journalists had been directly involved in propaganda campaigns during the war (Steel, 1997, p. xii), and the experience had made them cynical about the role of the news media in informing the public. At the same time, wartime communications and its powerful impact had led to a tremendous increase in the number of professionals involved in public relations (Schudson, 1978, p. 144).

As journalists gained greater awareness of the unavoidable subjectivities in and misrepresentations of news, they also began to believe that establishing certain standards and principles of newsgathering would better ensure the veracity and accuracy. As Schudson (1978) explains, journalists “needed a framework within which they could take their own work seriously and persuade their readers and their critics to take it seriously, too” (p. 151). Gaye Tuchman (1972) observes that practices of
objective reporting (such as using standardized, detached and de-personalized language and tone) began to serve as “strategic rituals” to protect journalists from criticism and reinforce their professional status. Thus, armed with a belief in objectivity—despite a general sense of its impossibility—journalists in the first half of the 1900s embraced the professionalization of their field and took seriously what they saw as their responsibility to relay truth (Allan, 1999, p. 24).

By the middle of the 20th century, ideals of objectivity were applied to radio and television news, as well. Yet, as Allan (1999) asserts, objectivity’s guiding standards were often responsible for “the shallowness of much of what passed as reporting.” Anxieties about the lines between “impartiality” and “editorialization” were so prevalent in newsrooms that journalists often self-censored their work—an act that compromised organizations’ commitment to providing news in the public interest (Allan, 1999, p. 46). Journalist and media scholar Jonathan Z. Larsen (2001) observes the same journalistic failure in “the reign of terror presided over by Senator Joe McCarthy through the early ‘50s, [which had been] largely unchecked by the Fourth Estate. An evenhanded reportorial approach had simply managed to legitimize and publicize his lies and slanders” (p. 41). The downfall of McCarthy, only made possible through his own televised unraveling during the Army-McCarthy hearings, was one of many instances that prompted journalists to reassess the desirability—or even the feasibility—of achieving objectivity in the 1960s and 1970s. Objectivity came to be
seen even more widely as an unattainable myth of journalism. Journalists’ very
acknowledgement of the impossibility of achieving objectivity, however, only
reinforced the survival of the concept.

In the 1960s, a new generation of reporters struggled with the debate over the
validity and attainability of objectivity in news. They began to produce a “new
journalism” that drew upon both the muckraking tradition and the literary tradition of
news reporting, and “responded to, and helped create, the audience of the critical
culture” (Schudson, 1978, p. 188). Nat Hentoff (1968) described this “new journalism”
as writing “powered by feeling as well as intellect,” the sort of work that “can help
break the glass between the reader and the world he lives in” (cited in Schudson, 1978,
p. 187). And Tom Wolfe (1973), perhaps the most famous practitioner of this type of
journalism (which he called “New Journalism”), wrote enthusiastically about how
literary techniques like stream-of-consciousness writing and close attention to detail in
reporting could “excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally” (p. 15). This
“new journalism” “fed the imaginations of daily reporters,” popularized creative
entertainment magazines like Rolling Stone, and encouraged freelance journalists to
incorporate “flair, personality, style, and insight” into their writing (Schudson, 1978, p.
188). Yet, it was the very literary and subjective aspects of this type of journalism (and
thus, its perceived lack of adherence to standards and ideals of objectivity) that led the
genre to be traditionally viewed as outside the framework of mainstream news.
The Indefinable Nature of Modern-Day News

In recent decades, American journalism and journalists have maintained a strong belief in objectivity, but “news” has increasingly taken a variety of forms and functions. Schudson (1978), whose review of American journalism illustrated that the development of objectivity has been an integral and essential part of the evolution of American news media, suggests that news has long held the aim of disseminating information about current events, ideas and people to the public. But, perhaps wisely, Schudson refuses to write a “prospectus” for a newspaper of the time (p. 194), since he has (like Walter Lippmann (1922)), realized that the press may never truly be able to fulfill its function of communicating truth.

The face of American journalism since the time of Schudson’s Discovering the News (1978) has become intensely rich and complex. In 2005, Schudson and Tiffit find that within American news media, “[c]ontradictions abound. The journalist’s role as arbiter of information has diminished, yet the need to alert citizens to the misleading, the false, and the propagandistic has never been greater” (pp. 42-43). In recent years, a significant amount of scholarship has examined and analyzed the implications of new technologies and forms of media, such as television “infotainment,” the non-stop news cycle, and online and digital news. Stuart Allan’s (2003) study of online journalism following the events of September 11, 2001 suggests, for instance, that citizen-
produced journalism challenges traditional definitions of news, as personal weblogs and news sites begin to incorporate individuals’ personal stories and viewpoints (p. 33). For this reason, in 2004 the Project for Excellence in Journalism asserted that journalism was “in the midst of an epochal transformation, as momentous probably as the invention of the telegraph or television.” This high degree of interactivity and personal connection with news seems to be unique to the newest generation of news consumers and reporters.

At the same time, however, many of America’s most traditional forms of news media—such as the print newspaper and magazine—are experiencing dire circumstances. The Project for Excellence in Journalism (2006) questions whether 2005 will be remembered as “the year when journalism in print began to die” for good reason: major national and regional newspapers were forced to slash budgets and posted significant drops in revenue. Philip Meyer (2004) also notes the power of economics in determining the success and survival of news media forms. Meyer observes that when other forms of media, like the Internet, provide the same or better services to the public at a more favorable cost than traditional forms like newspapers, conventional media’s survival is jeopardized (p. 227). “Quality” journalism may be the antidote to news media’s peril. When journalists dedicate themselves to not only reporting high-quality news, but also making it interesting and attractive to consumers,
Meyer writes, traditional media forms are more likely to be revived by publishers and readers (pp. 228-229).

Meyer’s optimistic hope for journalists to produce quality journalism also addresses another problem facing traditional print media: plummeting levels of public confidence and trust in newspapers and magazines (Pew Center for the People & the Press, 2005, p. 49). The American public is keenly aware of recent and continuing scandals at major newspapers and media organizations involving journalists’ plagiarism, fabrication or unethical behaviors. Instances like Jayson Blair’s ousting from the *New York Times* for plagiarism in 2003 and Jack Kelley’s dismissal from *USA Today* for similar actions in 2004, directed readers’ attention to the individuals involved in newsgathering, reporting and editing, and influenced newspapers and media organizations across the country to institute more serious measures of fact-checking. At the same time, these scandals indirectly reinforced the journalistic value of objectivity, by spotlighting unethical (and subjective) reporting.

While it is unclear whether the early years of the 21st century may be notable in journalism history for the simultaneous explosion of new media forms and the decline of traditional print journalism, it is evident that American news media has expanded significantly over the course of its history, and definitions of journalism are also in flux. American journalism still holds objectivity as its guiding ideal, but it now includes more genres of news media than ever before. In the following segment, I will
take a closer look at a form of media that still has yet to be widely included in scholarly assessments of American print news: literary journalism books.

**Recent History of Literary Journalism Books**

A close look at the past few decades of history and scholarship related to literary journalism books reveals significant developmental overlaps between the form and traditional American print news. Tom Wolfe (1973) was one of the first scholars (and journalists) to demonstrate that the history and principles of journalism have intersected with theory and practices of modern-day literary writing to create the new form. In the early 1960s, Wolfe writes, inventive reporting by journalists like Gay Talese and Jimmy Breslin helped many of their peers to realize “that it just might be possible to write journalism that would… read like a novel” (p. 9). This new style of writing, which Wolfe initially noticed in magazines like *Esquire* and *New York* (the *Herald Tribune*’s Sunday supplement), came about in reaction to the mainstream journalism that was disseminated in newspapers of the 1950s and 1960s. Wolfe likened the typical news reporter’s writing style and tone to “off-white or putty-colored walls,”

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2 Although I am specifically interested in literary journalism books that deal with current social or political issues, most scholars and experts on the form do not discriminate between books based on their subjects, and instead tend to write about (what they assume to be) the entire canon of literary journalism or creative nonfiction books. Thus, this review of the books’ history and theory generally applies to a (relatively) broad umbrella of “literary journalism” or “creative nonfiction,” but where it is possible, I have focused on the more specific genre of socially and politically relevant literary journalism books.
and made no effort to disguise his frustration with the standardized journalism that
dominated the era:

When [readers] came upon that pale beige tone, it began to signal to them,
unconsciously, that a well-known bore was here again, “the journalist,” a
pedestrian mind, a phlegmatic spirit, a faded personality, and there was no
way to get rid of the pallid little troll, short of ceasing to read… The
standard non-fiction writer’s voice was like the standard announcer’s
voice… a drag, a droning…(p. 18)

To Wolfe, the New Journalism was likely to become the most powerful, influential and
artful form because of its stark contrast with traditional news writing of the time.

To elucidate readers’ understanding of what constitutes New Journalism
writing, Wolfe identified four attributes, or “devices” of the form, that he believed
New Journalism writers like Joan Didion, Rex Reed, Michael Herr and George
Plimpton employed. The devices were: “scene-by-scene construction,” through which
storytelling moves from scene to scene and shies away from historical narrative;

extensive dialogue, in order to “involve the reader” and define characters; “third-

person point of view,” or the act of presenting scenes to readers through characters’

own eyes; and the inclusion of specific details. By this fourth and final technique,

Wolfe had a specific meaning, but found it necessary to explain extensively because

the technique was commonly misunderstood.

This is the recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs,
styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of traveling, eating, keeping

house, modes of behaving toward children, servants, superiors, inferiors,
peers, plus the various looks, glances, poses, styles of walking and other
symbolic details that might exist within a scene. Symbolic of what? Symbolic, generally, of people’s status life, using that term in the broad sense of the entire pattern of behavior and possessions through which people express their position in the world or what they think it is or what they hope it to be… It lies as close to the center of the power of realism as any other device in literature (pp. 31-32).

Through this close attention to detail, Wolfe connected New Journalism to the literary genre of realism. He asserted that contemporary novelists faced a “status crisis” in literature: New Journalism was usurping the novel’s traditional status as the epitome of great American literature. To back this assertion, Wolfe pointed to the fact that prominent authors like Gore Vidal, Herbert Gold, William Styron and Ronald Sukenick had recently begun to experiment with part-fictional nonfiction, or to insert real people (with real names) into fictional plots.

Despite Wolfe’s belief in the significance of New Journalism in the literary world, few critics and scholars considered the form worthy of their attention, or “new.” “[E]ndless panel discussions” were held in the early 1970s, about the form’s ability to relay truth (Sheed, 1972, p. BR 2), and a number of scholars publicly dismissed the form. Robert J. Van Dellen (1975), for instance, called New Journalism “both dishonest art and dishonest journalism” (though he admitted he would still read it for entertainment) (p. 133).

Journalists were also hesitant to embrace New Journalism. Wolfe (1973) included some of their criticism in his own book: John Leonard, the editor of The New
York Times Book Review, called the New Journalism “zoot-suited prose.” Writer Renata Adler had called it “zippy prose about inconsequential people” (Wolfe, 1973, p. 38). Daniel J. Balz (1971) wrote, “New Journalism has allowed emotions to substitute for facts, instead of to amplify them… this has produced sloppy reporters and in some cases, shallow stories—something New Journalism is supposed to prevent” (p. 51).

Like Balz, Gerald Grant (1970) believed that New Journalism was a fad that produced only cursory insight into issues. “We don’t need a whole new breed of novelists in action,” he wrote in Columbia Journalism Review, “we need more cogent journalism that tells us about problems rather than sketching conflict… We do not need more passion but more intellect, more understanding” (p. 13).

Even some of the authors included in The New Journalism disliked Wolfe’s (1973) ideas. Gay Talese later revealed that he had never considered his work to share commonalities with other “New Journalists” like Hunter S. Thompson. In fact, any labeling of his work was “all bullshit,” Talese said (Boynton, 2005, p. 365). Jack Newfield, who was linked to New Journalism in an Atlantic Monthly article by Michael Arlen (1972), reacted in a similar manner: “I think there is no such thing as New Journalism,” Newfield (1972) wrote in Columbia Journalism Review. “It still comes down to good writing, and hard work, and clear thinking. The rest is bullshit” (p. 47). Ironically, it seems, at least two of those who were purported to produce New Journalism were the ones who most disliked the idea of the form.
Perhaps because of disinterest in or distrust of the form, New Journalism was relatively short-lived. By 1975, only two years after the publication of Wolfe’s *The New Journalism* (1973), critics like Thomas Powers of *Commonweal* were wondering, “Whatever happened to the New Journalism?” By the 1980s, writes Boynton (2005), “the consensus was that the New Journalism was dead” (pp. xix-xx). Though literary journalism that echoed or was influenced by New Journalism was still produced during the 1980s and 1990s, it was generally viewed as a part of the literary and artistic world. These works were not publicly purporting to bridge the gap between literature and journalism, and little critical attention was paid to their form during these decades.

Thus, as Boynton (2005) suggests, most scholars who have studied literary journalism (whether or not this sort of writing was included under Wolfe’s “New Journalism” label) focus on the characteristics that literary journalism shares with fictional literature, narrative writing and poetry. Robert L. Root, Jr. and Michael Steinberg (1999), for instance, suggest that “creative nonfiction” is the “fourth genre” of literature, alongside poetry, drama and fiction (p. xxiii). In introducing selections of “creative nonfiction” by writers like Tracy Kidder, Richard Rodriguez and Annie Dillard, in *The Fourth Genre*, Root and Steinberg present the flexibility and stylistics of literary writing as the most promising and exciting characteristics of literary journalism (p. 2). Similarly, Bill Roorbach (2001) shows “creative nonfiction” to fall almost neatly within the literary umbrella, and far from journalistic history or
institutions. “For the sake of ... definition, let us say that creative nonfiction is nonfiction that deserves (or...that aspires to deserve) to be placed up there on the literature shelves along with the best fiction and poetry,” Rorback writes (p. 3).

Lee Gutkind (2005), an English professor and founder and editor of the *Creative Nonfiction* journal, also considers the genre to be more a form of art than journalism. He implicitly likens “creative nonfiction” to literary art in *In Fact*, as he tries to justify the form’s blurred boundaries between fact and fiction: “[W]hy, I wonder, are critics and journalists always questioning the ethics and parameters of creative nonfiction writers? Are there no ethical boundaries in poetry and fiction?” (p. xxiii). The aim of creative nonfiction writers, Gutkind asserts, is to “touch and affect someone else’s life—which is the goal creative nonfiction writers share with novelists and poets” (p. xxxiii).

John C. Hartsock (2000) suggests that the genre of “literary journalism” falls between and overlaps with the English academy and journalism. Taking into account the history and development of American news media, Hartsock touches on a characteristic of news that this chapter has already discussed at length: objectivity. Objectivity—or, rather, the perceived lack of it in literary journalism—is what has led scholars to be more likely to include the genre within the same frameworks as narrative and fictional literature, than journalism, Hartsock argues (p. 249). Though Hartsock may be correct in identifying subjectivity in literary journalism works, the few scholars
who see the form as a type of news media do not find subjective or literary attributes to devalue the works’ identity as journalism.

Mark Kramer (1995) is one such scholar and writer who might qualify the genre as more journalistic than literary or artistic. In “Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists,” he argues that the form of “literary journalism” produced by writers like Tracy Kidder enables their writing to do the same work as journalism—only more effectively. The ability of literary journalists to incorporate their own voice, coloring their narrative with such qualities as irony, intimacy and frankness, is the “defining mark” of the form, Kramer posits. He continues:

It is an effective tool for a difficult modern job. It enables an author to step around acculturated views of relationship and issues that are usually guarded by walls of formal language and invisible institutional alliances. Formality of language protects pieties, faiths, taboos, appearances, official truths. The intimate voice sidesteps such prohibitions, says things in the mode that professionals-in-the-know use when they leave work feeling pensive and confide to friends or lovers. It is the voice in which we disclose how people and institutions really are. It is a key characteristic of literary journalism, and it is indeed something new to journalism (p. 30).

With this belief in the importance of style in order to accomplish the ultimate goal of relaying truthful tales, Kramer and Norman Sims (1995) broaden Tom Wolfe’s definition of “New Journalism.” In their minds, “literary journalism” includes “immersion reporting, accuracy, voice, structure, responsibility, and symbolic representation,” as well as writers’ personal involvement with materials and subjects,
and “an artistic creativity.” However, Sims (1995) notes, because literary journalism is still developing, it “resists narrow definitions” (p. 9). While these new traits of literary journalism might seem to expand the genre’s definition too broadly for writers, critics and the public to recognize it, Sims’ and Kramers’ purposeful maintenance of the term “journalism” in their label, as well as their insistence that the form focuses on mediating truth and fact above all, is an indication that they see literary journalism more as a technique or method for conveying information, than a literary endeavor.

Robert S. Boynton (2005) also supports the idea that literary journalism belongs to the world of news media. Boynton’s (2005) perspective—that the history of “New Journalists” and the developing legacy of “New New Journalists” like Eric Schlosser, Alex Kotlowitz and Jane Kramer, is inherently linked to American journalistic traditions and practices—sheds light on how and why modern literary journalism can disseminate political and social information. He defines the New New Journalists’ books as “[r]igorously reported, psychologically astute, sociologically sophisticated and politically aware,” and cites the journalists’ “predecessors” as both the writers of the 1960s that Wolfe (1973) described, and late-19th century muckrakers like Lincoln Steffens, Jacob Riis and Stephen Crane (Boynton, 2005, p. xi). While New Journalists saw themselves as “parsing the philosophical line between fact and fiction,” the newest generation of creative nonfiction writers perceives their work to be “wholly within the nonfiction genre,” and come from backgrounds of not only
newspaper and magazine journalism, but also academic disciplines of sociology and anthropology. The newest generation of journalist-authors more stringently adheres to reportorial standards, and ideals of objectivity, accuracy and professionalism, he asserts. “[T]heir most significant innovations have involved experiments with reporting, rather than the language or forms they used to tell their stories” (p. xii). Most of the writers find creative ways to become “part of [the] lives” of their subjects; Ted Conover, for instance, lived as a hobo for his 1984 *Rolling Nowhere*, and worked as a prison guard in order to research his 2000 book, *Newjack* (p. xiii). This aim of understanding and conveying the “other,” or some under-acknowledged aspect or “truth” of ordinary life through creative expression, is reminiscent of such historical journalism trends as muckraking, and clearly illustrates the link between modern-day literary journalism books and the development of American news media.

**Traits and Terms**

While it is difficult to summarize the meaning of labels like “New Journalism,” “New New Journalism,” “literary journalism” and “creative nonfiction” (as I tried to do in the previous section), it is often even more problematic to use these very labels when there is no scholarly or practical consensus on their significance. Tom Wolfe (1973) used “New Journalism” as the label for 1960s- and 1970s-era literary journalism, mainly because the writing of some of the individuals he included in his
collection had already been labeled with the term. Wolfe had first heard of the term in 1965, when he learned that journalist Pete Hamill had wanted to write an article called “New Journalism” about writers like Gay Talese and Jimmy Breslin. In 1969, Gay Talese had also referred to his own writing style as “new journalism” (using only lower-case punctuation) (p. ix)—as opposed to the “old” journalism he used to produce for the *New York Times*. As Talese later said, he disliked labeling his work at all, but found that using certain categorical terms had become necessary in order for bookstores to organize their products (Boynton, 2005, p. 365).

Robert S. Boynton’s (2005) modification of the term “New Journalism” to create “New New Journalism” clearly references the writing produced by Talese and Wolfe in the 1960s and 1970s. Interestingly, however, Boynton seems unimpressed by Wolfe’s *The New Journalism* (1973), characterizing the work as governed by “because I said so logic” (Boynton, 2005, p. xx). Boynton’s choice of building upon a term generally associated with Wolfe—at the same time as he makes a very different argument from Wolfe’s—is therefore counterintuitive. New Journalism garnered much derision and scorn for its presumptuous moniker; the negative connotations of even “New New Journalism” are likely to confuse or repel the same readers Boynton seeks.

Besides the term “New New Journalism,” another popular, yet also potentially problematic, label for nonfiction writing that “reads like a novel” (Wolfe, 1973, p. 9) has been “creative nonfiction.” Lee Gutkind (2005) is one proponent of using this term
to describe literary journalism. While it was often unclear whether New Journalists should privilege creativity or the accurate representation of reality, Gutkind’s explanation of the term illustrates his belief in the “creative nonfiction” as an art form:

I am a *creative* nonfiction writer, “creative” being indicative of the style in which the nonfiction is written so as to make it more dramatic and compelling. We embrace many of the techniques of the fiction writer, including dialogue, description, plot, intimacy and specificity of detail, characterization, point of view; except, because it is nonfiction—and this is the difference—it is true.

Jon Franklin (1986), who has won two Pulitzer Prizes for his nonfiction writing, possesses a comparable view about the characteristics of what he calls “dramatic nonfiction.” In *Writing for Story*, he instructs writers to utilize basic journalism techniques, like interviewing and researching, in writing nonfiction short stories. Otherwise, however, the two forms of (fictional) short story and nonfiction short story “are identical.” He views the “dramatic nonfiction” genre as an art that could become “a viable commercial form… destined to heal the wound inflicted by the demise of the short-fiction market” (p. 27). In other words, Franklin suggests, the nonfiction story presents an opportunity to revive a troubled segment of the literary world. Echoing Franklin’s (1986) and Gutkind’s (2005) enthusiasm for viewing “creative nonfiction” or “dramatic nonfiction” under the spectrum of literature, Barbara Lounsberry (1990) calls writers like Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe, John McPhee, Joan
Didion and Norman Mailer “contemporary artists of nonfiction.” Her term of choice clearly privileges the creative aspect of the form’s identity.

Artistic or “creative” nonfiction is often equated with “literary journalism,” though many scholars who write about the genre of “literary journalism” would place a much greater emphasis upon the journalistic, information-based aspects of the form. In Norman Sims’ and Mark Kramer’s *Literary Journalism* (1995), for instance, “literary journalism” is the editors’ preferred label because, as Kramer (1995) says, “[i]ts virtue may be its innocuousness.” Unlike the questionable “new” in New Journalism, “literary journalism” contains what Kramer considers a “self-congratulating” “literary” and the word “journalism,” “masking the form’s inventiveness.” But, he finds, the two words “cancel each other’s vices and describe the sort of nonfiction in which arts of style and narrative construction long associated with fiction help pierce to the quick of what’s happening—the essence of journalism” (p. 21). In this definition, then, communicating truth and information is represented as the major priority of the form.

John C. Hartsock (2000) also chooses to use the term “literary journalism” in *A History of American Literary Journalism*. He observes that despite the predominance of nonfiction works over fiction in *The New York Times Book Review*, historians and individuals who work with institutional and scholarly cataloging systems like the Modern Language Association Bibliography often do not know what to make of the genre. Because a range of scholars, professionals and writers, apply so many different
labels to works of “literary journalism” (pp. 1-4), it makes sense that the genre still seems to be emerging and developing; few have come to a consensus about the form’s function, characteristics and history, much less its name.

With no “official” title for the genre of literary journalism or creative nonfiction books, the general ignorance of the form’s identity as a medium of news makes sense and will likely continue. As I noted in the Introduction, studies of the news media’s functions and impact on Americans’ lives neglect to consider nonfiction books as a form of news media, despite the many historical connections and overlaps between literary journalism books and mainstream news media. Indeed, I have yet to actually find a comprehensive study of American news media or journalism that includes any sort of political communications theory analysis of literary journalism books like *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003). Yet, as we shall see in the following chapters, *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* have been incredibly popular and influential among certain readers, making them excellent candidates for examination as forms of mass media.
Chapter 3. Hypotheses, Theoretical Frameworks and Methodologies

It is from the very absence of serious scholarly attention to literary journalism books as news media that this thesis draws its inspiration and aims. While viewing literary journalism books through a literary lens may shed some light on the form as a medium of communication and entertainment, books like *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) and *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) can and should be examined as legitimate forms of print news media as well. This thesis seeks to demonstrate that socially and politically relevant literary journalism books serve the same purposes for readers as traditional forms of print news media, despite such differences in storytelling as the lack of objectivity and subjective authorial voice and point of view. Thus, my primary hypothesis is:

- **H1**: *Literary journalism books like Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) and Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) constitute a form of American news media that significantly impacts readers’ lives.*

Within this hypothesis lie two sub-hypotheses:

- **H$_{1a}$**: *Literary journalism books like Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) and Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) share many of the same characteristics and history as mainstream print news media.*

- **H$_{1b}$**: *Readers use literary journalism books like Nickel and Dimed and Mountains Beyond Mountains for many of the same uses and gratifications that they look for and obtain from mainstream print news media.*
Assessing whether or not there is support for these hypotheses requires utilizing theoretical frameworks and methodologies from a number of different fields, making this thesis truly interdisciplinary.

It is important to note here that I am using Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* (2001) and Tracy Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003) as examples of socially and politically relevant literary journalism books. I have chosen to base the thesis upon examinations of these two books because I felt that both had significantly impacted my political and social beliefs and actions, and I suspected that they might have similar effects on others. The theoretical frameworks and methodologies I employ in this study, as well as my findings (detailed in the remainder of the chapters), are therefore pertinent primarily for these two books.

**Textual, Literary and Cultural Studies Approaches**

The first sub-hypothesis of this study (H₁₅: *Literary journalism books like Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) and Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) share many of the same characteristics and history as mainstream print news media*) may be addressed through a combination of theoretical frameworks and methodologies from textual, literary and cultural studies.

The first theoretical approach this thesis utilizes is the analysis of the “bibliographic code,” promoted by book historians and textual theorists like Jerome
McGann (2002). Books’ bibliographic codes are composed of such elements as their publication history and circulation. As McGann observes, the details of books’ publication (such as the numerous versions, editions and formats in which they are used) undeniably impacts the manner in which they are read and understood. Too often, McGann writes, literary scholars ignore the bibliographic codes of the books they study, to the detriment of their true understanding of the works (p. 45).

The concept of bibliographic codes is particularly interesting when one compares books to traditional mainstream news media like newspapers. The success (or failure) of print newspapers is commonly gauged by readership and circulation—in a sense, by an element of print news’ “bibliographic code.” In order to assess literary journalism books’ similarity to mainstream media, then, it makes sense to take into account the books’ bibliographic codes as well. These quantitative measures of the books’ histories also provide valuable information about their audiences: potentially, demographic information about readers and producers of the books. Because the bibliographic code is primarily related to the physical characteristics of books, I will incorporate it as a theoretical framework more fully into my next chapter, in which I conduct a bibliographic analysis of *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, and compare it with traditional print news media.

Cultural and literary studies approaches to analyzing books and readers are also relevant in addressing H1a. Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984) (often
categorized as a cultural and gender studies text) has provided a model for many of my ideas and questions about literary journalism books and readers (although I should stress that Radway’s focus on fictional romance novels is quite different from my own interest in literary journalism books and their readers). Radway examines the explosion in popularity of romance novels in the 1970s and 1980s, and integrates information and observations about the books into broader cultural theories and arguments.

Her examination relies on not only “bibliographic code” research (she addresses the technological and organizational changes in book publishing and sales that led to romance novels’ popularity), but also social science and ethnographic methodological approaches (including surveys, group interviews and participant-observation) to closely examine the functions and meanings of “reading the romance” in the lives of a small group of women. Radway employs literary analysis and comparison of the narrative structure, content and characteristics of popular romance novels to distinguish analytically between “the significance of the event of reading and the meaning of the text constructed as its consequence” (p. 7). This technique allows her to gain a thorough understanding of the novels to supplement her analysis of the context(s) in which they are read.

Among Radway’s conclusions is the notion that the romance novels (which were typically assumed to portray patriarchal values) could be read for something other than a reaffirmation of patriarchy. Indeed, they might be interpreted as media through
which women reject dominant social gender biases and instead reassert control over their identities and social roles. More generally, this means that certain types of books could signify important social or political values among particular groups of consumers, regardless of authors’ intentions. Radway’s study is finally significant for highlighting an aspect of communications studies that plays a major role in the remainder of my thesis: audience research.

**Audience Research**

In order to address my second sub-hypothesis (H1b: *Readers use literary journalism books like Nickel and Dimed and Mountains Beyond Mountains for many of the same uses and gratifications that they look for and obtain from mainstream print news media*), I will use a communications studies approach to audience research. The ultimate aim of this sub-hypothesis is to discover and compare functions of literary journalism books with those of mainstream print news, but this goal cannot be accomplished without a close study of readers’ patterns of use of and opinions about both media forms.

There are a number of manners and perspectives from which media audiences may be studied. However, it is often incredibly difficult to discover much about them because the act(s) of using media can vary so widely and dramatically. Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn (2002) observe that audience studies are interpreted in vastly
different ways, even by those who consider themselves “audience studies academics” in fields like cultural studies, gender studies and media studies. The “audience” itself is often a loosely defined term, “equally and simultaneously identifiable and elusive, imaginable and unpredictable” (p. 4). For book historians, studies of audiences (readers) have also been sparse. Scholars in this field have only recently begun to consider questions of who reads what and how people make sense of what they read (Darnton, 2002, pp. 20-22).

Within communications studies, audiences’ relationships with society and traditional forms of mass news media have been topics of extensive discussion and debate. Through such early theories as the “hypodermic effects” model of media reception, media scholars initially viewed audiences as passive receptacles of information. The hypodermic effects model (so-named for its allusion to a hypodermic injection) assumes that audiences passively receive “direct effects” from media; in other words, that the message delivered is exactly what is received (Kitzinger, 2004, p. 170). More recently, however, audiences’ active engagement with media has been observed and studied. The notion that audiences possess significant agency in consuming forms, types and content of news remains a widely accepted perspective on the relationship between audiences and media. The consequence of this new understanding of media audiences is that the definition of “audiences” has broadened
to encompass more than simply the individuals who receive and use certain types of media. As Denis McQuail (2005a) writes,

Audiences are both a product of social context (which leads to shared cultural interests, understandings and information needs) and a response to a particular pattern of media provision. Often they are both at the same time, as when a medium sets out to appeal to the members of a social category or the residents of a certain place (p. 396).

Because the “audience” has been a contested concept among communications scholars, as well as book history and popular culture theorists, the methods of and reasons for researching audiences also vary widely (p. 401). McQuail (2005a) identifies three approaches to conducting audience research within mass communications: “structural,” “behavioural” and “socio-cultural” or “cultural” (p. 403). The “structural” tradition is the earliest form of mass audience research, and is primarily concerned with determining the size and composition of audiences. The “behavioural” approach to audience research springs from early communications research that was often concerned with the negative “effects” of media on vulnerable populations, such as children. An early model of this approach assumed that audiences passively received media (as in the “hypodermic effects” perspective). However, a newer “behavioral” perspective promoted a view of audiences as a motivated set of media consumers, leading scholars to consider individuals’ “uses and gratifications” of media. The third approach to audience research, taking into account the “socio-cultural” context of media use, emphasizes a view of media use “as in itself a
significant aspect of ‘everyday life.’” Scholars who employ this approach often do so by borrowing ethnographic research practices, such as observing and examining the situations in which the media are used and interpreted, and “reading” the media text(s) through the perceptions of their audiences (p. 404).

McQuail’s chart of the three audience research traditions is a particularly useful way to visually compare these three approaches of audience study (see Figure 3.1), although it is important to note that qualitative (namely, “cultural”) and quantitative (“structural” and, to some degree, “behavioural”) research approaches are increasingly being combined, as in the research of Schroder (1987) and Curran (1990) (McQuail, 2005a, pp. 404-405).

**Figure 3.1: “Three audience research traditions compared”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Structural</th>
<th>Behavioural</th>
<th>Cultural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main aims</strong></td>
<td>Describe composition; enumerate; relate to society</td>
<td>Explain and predict choices, reactions, effects</td>
<td>Understand meaning of content received and of use in context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main data</strong></td>
<td>Social-demographic, media and time use</td>
<td>Motives; acts of choice; reactions</td>
<td>Perceptions of meaning re social and cultural context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main methods</strong></td>
<td>Survey and statistical analysis</td>
<td>Survey; experiment; mental measurement</td>
<td>Ethnographic; qualitative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(McQuail, 2005b)
My own study employs a combination of all three audience research methods highlighted by McQuail (2005a; 2005b), and therefore also incorporates both qualitative and quantitative approaches by using both an online survey and focus groups to gather data.

**Uses and Gratifications Theory**

I have chosen to analyze my findings through the theoretical framework of audience “uses and gratifications” studies, outlined by Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (1973-1974). The “uses and gratifications” approach to communications studies assumes that individuals use specific media for unique and particular purposes. As Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch write, uses and gratifications research takes into account the social and psychological origins of needs, individual expectations of media, different patterns of media exposure and the ways in which media consumption gratifies (or fails to satisfy) those needs. The approach “represents an attempt to explain something of the way in which individuals use communications, among other resources in their environment, to satisfy their needs and to achieve their goals, and to do so by simply asking them” (p. 510). As Jenny Kitzinger (2004) writes, uses and gratifications theory “demands that we ask ‘not what the media do to the public but what the public do with the media’” (p. 170).
In a critique of the approach, some scholars have suggested that media use or consumption may be more casual (and passive) than active and therefore may not always be an accurate indicator of public expectations and use of media. However, in the case of my study, concerning Ehrenreich’s 221-page-long *Nickel and Dimed* (2001) and Kidder’s 336-page-long *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003), it is likely that most individuals who “use” the books have consciously chosen to do so. The act of reading a particular book indicates a preference of that book over other media for at least few hours. Even those who are reading as an academic assignment likely expect that the book(s) will accomplish a certain task or function that other forms of media and communications would or could not (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1973-1974, p. 511).

Besides taking for granted the “active” nature of media users, the uses and gratifications method also requires subjects to play a role in supplying information and data about themselves and their patterns of media use to researchers. While it seems difficult to obtain completely correct information through this method (since there is a chance that respondents will exaggerate or conceal certain opinions and behaviors), Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973-1974) believe that researchers working with uses and gratifications theory should trust their respondents. As they write, “people are sufficiently self-aware to be able to report their interests and motives in particular cases, or at least to recognize them when confronted with them in an intelligible and
familiar verbal formulation” (p. 511). Jack McLeod, Scott Ward and Karen Tancill (1965-1966) preferred respondents’ self-reporting in their study because the method allowed researchers to avoid “making unreliable inferences from more indirect measures” (p. 586).

From early studies of audiences’ uses and gratifications, researchers proposed a series of charts, tables and lists of gratifications sought and obtained by media users. In their study of “Alienation and Uses of the Mass Media,” McLeod, Ward and Tancill (1965-1966) compiled an early set of categories for uses and gratifications of mass media, (borrowing some from the earlier work of Bernard Berelson (1949)) with their “reasons given for reading newspapers.” These categorizations and specific reasons are listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informational reasons:</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For interpretation of important events</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help me keep up with things</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vicarious reasons:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To help me get away from daily worries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To bring some excitement into my life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To feel as though I am taking part in others’ lives without actually being there</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other reasons:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As an aid in solving problems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To give me something to talk about with others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For the pleasure of reading.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(McLeod, Ward and Tancill, 1965-1966, p. 591)

Although these reasons (or what might be more correctly termed “needs,” in uses and gratifications research) were originally applied only to individuals’ uses and
gratifications of reading the newspaper, the categories and uses they highlighted were relevant for the broader scope of mass media, as well. McQuail, Blumler and Brown (1972) echoed many of McLeod, Ward and Tancill’s (1965-1966) “reasons” when they outlined four categories of functions of the media. Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973-1974) summarize these types of uses and gratifications:

- Diversion (including escape from the constraints of routine and the burdens of problems, and emotional release); personal relationships (including substitute companionship as well as social utility); personal identity (including personal reference, reality exploration, and value reinforcement); and surveillance. (pp. 512-513)

Many studies in the 1970s and following decades that observed and analyzed uses and gratifications according to these tidy categories (or similar groupings). However, by 2005, Denis McQuail no longer neatly sorted gratifications in his explanation of the theory. Instead, he listed a dozen “Media gratifications sought or obtained.” His list is below:

- Information and education
- Guidance and advice
- Diversion and relaxation
- Social contact
- Value reinforcement
- Cultural satisfaction
- Emotional release
- Identity formation and confirmation
- Lifestyle expression

3 Here, McQuail (2005a) refers readers to his list of “Social uses of the media,” which include: “Managing relations with others,” “Conversation and social exchange,” “Social attachment and avoidance,” “Social learning and identification with role models,” “Control,” “Sharing activity,” “Vicarious companionship,” “Filling time,” and “Framing daily activity” (pp. 439-440).
• Security
• Sexual arousal
• Filling time (2005a, p. 428)

By not grouping gratifications, McQuail’s modern-day no-frills approach to uses and gratifications acknowledges that many reasons for use of and gratifications obtained from media are interrelated. While it may make discussion of uses and gratifications more complicated and seemingly less organized, approaching and analyzing these factors with a sizeable list may ultimately be more in line with the original purpose and value of uses and gratifications theory: understanding the various reasons that individuals use particular forms of media.

My own review of individuals’ uses and gratifications of *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001), *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) and mainstream print news will incorporate elements from McQuail’s (2005a) dozen specific uses and gratifications, McQuail, Blumler and Brown’s (1972) four categories of uses and gratifications, and McLeod, Ward and Tancill’s (1965-1966) “reasons” for uses and gratifications of the newspaper. However, I will focus upon the uses and gratifications that are raised most frequently by my survey respondents and focus group participants, a technique that will ultimately yield a unique list of uses and gratifications of literary journalism books and mainstream print news.
Relevant Findings from Past Studies

Past uses and gratifications research has provided inspiration for my predictions about how and why American readers “use” literary journalism books. The act of reading such print media as books, newspapers, magazines and online news has been addressed in a number of past uses and gratifications studies. Multiple articles from the mid-20th century about “audience gratifications,” or the impacts of certain media on certain audiences, show that reading may be associated with “the need to feel that one is spending one’s time in a worthwhile way” (Waples, Berelson, Bradshaw, 1940; Berelson, 1949; cited in Katz, Blumler, Gurevitch, 1973-1974, p. 514). A 1968 study of Swedish media consumers found a different perspective on reading: that the medium of magazines frequently functioned as a means of escape, or “retreat” from daily life, for readers (Lundberg and Hulten, 1968; cited in Katz, Blumler, Gurevitch, 1973-1974, p. 515).

In fact, the concept of escaping one’s immediate environment through reading seems to hold across cultures. In a 1973 study of the educational use of Israeli media, books were found to enhance individuals’ sense of “self-fulfillment and self-gratification: they help to ‘connect’ individuals to themselves.” In contrast to traditional media forms like newspapers, radio and television (which were found to be associated with connecting individuals to society), books (and movies) were found to serve a more individual, non-social function (Katz, Gurevitch, Hass, 1973; cited in
Katz, Blumler, Gurevitch, 1973-1974, p. 515). The fact that gratifications of books and cinema corresponded suggests that books may often be viewed as forms of entertainment, rather than information media—an important concept to keep in mind when analyzing nonfiction books and their readers.

Despite past studies of audience gratifications that suggested that books serve mainly individual needs, many researchers have also found that books can satisfy social needs for readers; after all, escape from society and self-fulfillment through (temporary) withdrawal from one’s immediate environment are gratifications that are inversely related to individuals’ social relationships and identities. Indeed, McQuail, Blumler and Brown’s (1972) study of the television audience identifies functions of media that are largely concerned with individuals’ relationship to society. In particular, the uses and gratifications of “personal relationships (including substitute companionship as well as social utility),” “diversion” as it relates to “escape,” and “surveillance,” are all dependent on relationships with others (Katz, Blumler, Gurevitch, 1973-1974, pp. 512-513). Even a study of alienated individuals and their patterns of media use demonstrated that social factors motivate media uses and gratifications. Though researchers expected that alienated individuals would be more likely to read books (seen as “fantasy-oriented,” and thus, escapist, media) than their heavily social peers, they found that more alienated individuals were less likely to read books than other respondents (p. 587). If we can assume that the opposite of this
finding is also true—that non-alienated individuals are more likely to read books than other respondents—the study suggests that books, or the act of reading them, may actually aid in connecting individuals to society.

Recent studies that employ uses and gratifications theory have assessed everything from college students’ use of Ratemyprofessors.com (Kindred and Mohammed, 2005), to cancer communication through narratives (Green, 2006), to an assessment of using older technologies like telephones in new ways (Reed and Monk, 2004), to political communication through the Internet (Kaye and Johnson, 2004). Many of the most recent works involving uses and gratifications assess new media forms, such as online newspapers, blogs and political campaign web sites.

An important contribution to 21st century uses and gratifications studies literature is John D. H. Downing’s “Audiences and Readers of Alternative Media: The Absent Lure of the Virtually Unknown” (2003). Downing notes an increasing “gulf” between scholarship on “alternative” media (which he sees as encompassing everything from performance art, graffiti and dance to web sites and satirical entertainment media) and traditional media forms. He bemoans this lack of scholarly interest because, as he posits, consumers of alternative media represent some of the most “active” consumers and users, by virtue of the non-mainstream character of their preferred media forms. As Downing demonstrates through examinations of such historical alternative media as Nazi newspapers, alternative media often has a strongly political and activist
dimension (pp. 626-635). This analysis highlights the importance of examining the uses and gratifications of literary journalism books like *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) as alternative media; because literary journalism is not considered to be a mainstream media form, those who use the books as news media might be more motivated and active in their use than regular readers, and could also gain particularly strong or unique gratifications from them.

While Radway (1984) does not explicitly refer to uses and gratifications theory in *Reading the Romance*, her study also focuses upon readers’ uses and gratifications. Many of Radway’s findings correspond to the conclusions of earlier uses and gratifications studies of books and readers, such as the idea that novels constitute a form of “escape” from social and familial pressures. While she privileges gender and cultural theory over political communications methods or theories, Radway demonstrates that uses and gratifications theory is also valid and powerful in more culturally-oriented and multidisciplinary research and can yield valuable findings, about not only certain types of media, but also specific audiences.

**Designing An Original Study**

Using uses and gratifications theory to guide my data collection techniques, I conducted two focus groups, with 15 participants total, in order to gather information about literary journalism readers: the Nickel and Dimed Focus Group (2007) (in which
an excerpt from *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) was discussed); and the
Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group (2007) (in which an excerpt from
*Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) was discussed). I also distributed an
online survey to more than 400 individuals to gain more quantitative information about
individuals’ uses and gratifications of literary journalism books: the Literary
Journalism Survey (2007).

The focus groups served as research settings in which individuals could voice
their own opinions about media within a controlled social context. Focus groups’ social
setting is a boon to the purposes of audience research (and to the purposes of this
thesis), particularly since it has already been established that audiences of certain
media forms are contingent on social relationships. While the presence of others may
influence respondents’ opinions and comments, a social atmosphere often evinces
“processes of collective meaning-making” that are beneficial for researchers to
observe. As Liebes and Katz (1990) write:

> They permit tentative interpretations to be floated by someone and shot
down by someone else… they permit bullies to try to impose themselves on others… interpretations are molded and twisted to fit the
underground loves and hates that permeate interpersonal relations. This
is what happens in life (p. 82, quoted in Delli Carpini and Williams,
1994, p. 65).

Focus groups thus serve as an arena in which to learn about individuals’ opinions and
to gain insight into why and how those beliefs come about or disintegrate. In practical
terms, focus groups give researchers the opportunity to ask questions of large numbers of people at once (Delli Carpini and Williams, 1994, p. 63).

Focus groups for this thesis were held at a relatively early point in the research and writing process, enabling me to test some of my ideas about literary journalism and its relationship to mass media with the group (for instance, I asked the participants in the Nickel and Dimed Focus Group (2007) questions like: “What do you think about my definition of ‘creative nonfiction’ or ‘literary journalism’ books?” and “Did I leave out a characteristic of the genre that you would have included?”). Both focus groups began with participants’ completing a brief survey about their literary journalism reading habits. A working definition of the sort of literary journalism with which this thesis is concerned (“Works that employ literary techniques (such as first-person narration, prose, plot, setting, etc.) to tell stories that deal with, or are related to, modern-day political or social issues (such as public education, global warming, welfare reform, etc.)”) was included on the survey and explained to all participants at the start of the discussion. Excerpts from Nickel and Dimed and Mountains Beyond Mountains were provided so that all participants would have a common piece of literature to keep in mind and refer back to during the group discussion, regardless of whether they had read literary journalism books prior to the focus group.

At both focus groups, a number of key topics and questions were raised, including: motivations for reading literary journalism, gratifications of reading literary
journalism, the role and impact of the author’s voice in the story, and comparing literary journalism books to mainstream print news media. Because of the casual, conversational tone of focus groups and their intention to capture true social exchanges, however, conversations were allowed to occasionally range off-topic. This technique was intended to help participants to feel more at ease and comfortable with voicing their opinions. Please refer to Appendix A for more details about how focus groups were conducted.

My online survey was distributed over a two-week period to a convenience sample of 403 computer users (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007). The survey contained 31 open-ended, multiple choice and multiple-selection/ordered questions. Questions addressed individuals’ consumption of literary journalism books, uses and gratifications of Ehrenreich’s (2001) and Kidder’s (2003) books, uses and gratifications of print news media in general, and beliefs about the role of authorial perspective in news media’s and literary journalism’s objectivity. Please refer to Appendix B for more details about the survey’s structure, content and distribution.

Because I realized (after the survey was released) that many of the questions depended on respondents’ having read either Nickel and Dimed or Mountains Beyond Mountains, I believe a major limitation of the survey was its design. To try to remedy this problem and obtain a greater number of respondents, I attempted to distribute my survey to a more specific population: individuals who had read one or both of the books. The Library of Congress’ list of “One Book” projects (2007) (through which communities across the United States read a single book (or a few) over a specific period of time), contained contact information for eight communities that had chosen to read Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) and 16 communities that had chosen to read Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001), as of February 2007. I emailed approximately five librarians or organizers from each of these communities, to ask whether they could distribute my survey to readers in their areas. Unfortunately, only a few individuals responded, and none were able to distribute the survey.
Of particular note in the survey are the criteria I used to allow survey respondents to categorize their uses and gratifications of the media forms. I borrowed many of the uses and gratifications of literary journalism books and news media (specified in questions 8, 10, 13, 15, 21 and 23) from McLeod, Ward and Tancill’s (1965-1966) “Alienation and Uses of the Mass Media,” because its list of “reasons given for reading newspapers” seemed particularly comprehensive and still relevant to both modern-day mainstream news media and literary journalism books.

The individuals involved in the survey and focus groups were not as diverse in background or beliefs as the larger population of Americans (about which I had originally intended to write); the majority of participants were white, female, highly educated and in their late 20s (Nickel and Dimed Focus Group, 2007; Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007; Literary Journalism Survey, 2007). However, this population was remarkably relevant for a study of literary journalism book readers. In fact, 46 percent of survey respondents (126 of 275) who answered a question about when they last read a socially or politically relevant literary journalism book said they had read one within the past six months; 23 percent (62 of 275) said they had actually read one of these types of books within the past month. In addition, questions about Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) and Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) revealed that more than 100 survey respondents had read one or both books (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007). Focus group participants also seemed to be avid
literary journalism readers (and since I also solicited participants through emails to Georgetown students and friends, I suspect that only those with some knowledge of or enthusiasm for literary journalism books chose to participate). The relatively high rate of survey and focus group participants’ familiarity with *Nickel and Dimed*, *Mountains Beyond Mountains* and other socially and politically relevant literary journalism books indicate that my convenience sample population was actually quite appropriate for a study of individuals’ uses and gratifications of literary journalism books.

In the next chapter, I will return to the textual, literary and cultural studies approaches to analyzing *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003), in order to lay the groundwork for my later study of individuals’ uses and gratifications of the books.
Chapter 4. Book Histories

In the world of book publishing, bestseller lists are crucial indicators of the financial success and cultural popularity of books. As Lynda Fuller Clendenning and John Unsworth (2004) observe, books’ rankings on bestseller lists can “make or break novels and authors, and are perceived as a barometer of American cultural life” (“Making the Bestseller List”). In the United States, bestseller lists have featured (and foreshadowed the success of) such fictional classics as Eleanor H. Porter’s Pollyanna (1913), Betty Smith’s A Tree Grows in Brooklyn (1943) and Kurt Vonnegut’s Breakfast of Champions (1973), and such socially and politically relevant works as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s (fictional) Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1851) and Upton Sinclair’s (muckraking nonfiction/literary journalism) book The Jungle (1906) (“Making the Bestseller List”; “Social Criticism and Attitudes”). In recent years, socially and politically relevant literary journalism books like Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) and Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) have become frequent fixtures on nationwide bestseller lists—a clear indication of their genre’s phenomenal popularity.

This chapter closely examines the context in which Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) and Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) have been published, distributed and consumed by American readers, in order to better understand the books’ unique role in society, and, ultimately, to shed light on their relationship to mainstream print news. Reviewing the history of the books’ public
reception and subsequent impact upon communities and organization will provide an excellent background for finding support for my primary hypothesis (H₁) that *literary journalism books like Nickel and Dimed and Mountains Beyond Mountains constitute a form of American news media that significantly impacts readers’ political and social consciousness.*

**“Bibliographic Codes”**

As textual theorist Jerome McGann (2002) observes, the “bibliographic codes” of books (composed of such elements as their publication and circulation history) undeniably impact the manner in which they are read and understood (p. 45). Examining the “codes” of *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) and *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) can help demonstrate how the works function as mass communications media. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, the books’ long-term national bestseller status is a primary element of their “bibliographic code,” and a testament to their broad relevance and appeal among readers.

Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003) has been incredibly popular with both chain and independent booksellers and their customers. First published in September 2003 by Random House in a hardcover edition and sold for approximately 27 dollars (Amazon.com, n.d.a), *Mountains Beyond Mountains* appeared on the *New York Times*’ hardcover nonfiction list on October 5, 2003, as the 14th most purchased
book (The New York Times, 2003).\(^5\) While it never again appeared among the top 15 books on the list, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*’ success in hardcover was enough to earn it a release in paperback (as a Random House Trade Paperback book) in August 2004. The new edition was sold for approximately 15 dollars (Amazon.com, n.d.b), increasing the likelihood that even more readers would purchase and read the book.

Soon after, in September 2004, *Mountains Beyond Mountains* was chosen as a “Book Sense Pick” by the online community of hundreds of independent booksellers around the country, Book Sense (2004). Since then, the Random House trade paperback edition of *Mountains Beyond Mountains* has been an almost permanent fixture on Book Sense’s nonfiction bestseller list. By May 27, 2006, more than 143,500 copies of the book had been sold (McEvoy, 2006), and by the week of April 5, 2007, Kidder’s (2003) book had been among the top 15 Book Sense nonfiction bestsellers for 101 weeks (The Times-Tribune, 2007).\(^6\)

The continued popularity of *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) almost four years after its initial publication as a hardcover book, and nearly three years after its release as a paperback indicate that the book remains relevant and intriguing for a wide range of individuals. The prominence of *Mountains Beyond Mountains* in independent bookstores also provides clues about the demographics of

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\(^5\) This figure actually represents the sales of *Mountains Beyond Mountains* for the week ending on Sept. 20, 2003 (The New York Times, 2003).

\(^6\) This figure was published on April 5, 2007, although the sales it refers to ended on April 1, 2007 (The Times-Tribune, 2007).
Kidder’s readers. As Book Sense’s web site indicates, independent booksellers often provide personalized and eclectic atmospheres and book recommendations, and likely attract individuals who also appreciate unique reading experiences. Mountains Beyond Mountains’ readership therefore may include individuals who not only support independent business, but also like to be informed and passionate about their reading material (Book Sense, 2007).\(^7\)

In contrast to Mountains Beyond Mountains’ success in independent bookstores, Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) has been a long-term fixture in more mainstream national bestseller lists, like the New York Times bestseller list. The Times’ list reflects sales for almost 4,000 bookstores and 60,000 other retailers and is “statistically weighted to represent all such outlets nationwide” (The New York Times, 2001). The first edition of Nickel and Dimed that was published in a hardcover edition by Metropolitan/Holt and sold for approximately 23 dollars made its debut on the New York Times bestseller list of June 10, 2001 as the 14\(^{th}\) bestselling (hardcover) nonfiction book in the United States (The New York Times, 2001).\(^8\) When the Metropolitan/Owl/Holt 13-dollar paperback version of Nickel and Dimed was

\(^7\) Although I made a number of dedicated (and time-consuming) attempts to find information about the demographics of individuals who purchase Mountains Beyond Mountains and Nickel and Dimed, I was unable to locate any real facts or figures to use in this thesis. Thus, my analysis here is based upon my understanding of the types of readers represented by bestsellers lists like those published by Book Sense and The New York Times.

\(^8\) This figure actually represents the sales of Nickel and Dimed for the week ending on May 26, 2001. The New York Times weekly bestseller lists are published two weeks after the data is collected. (The New York Times, 2001).

By 2005, when Ehrenreich’s newest literary journalism book, Bait and Switch, was published, more than one million copies (in both paperback and hardcover) of Nickel and Dimed had been sold (Miller, 2005). Nearly six years after its original publication, Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) remains incredibly relevant to readers. In an October 9, 2006 blog entry celebrating the 109th week of Nickel and Dimed’s spot on the Times’ paperback bestseller list, Ehrenreich (2006) noted that she still receives reader questions almost daily. And in an April 16, 2007 TIME magazine article, Lev Grossman reviewed Nickel and Dimed (2001) alongside other nonfiction bestsellers like Malcolm Gladwell’s BLINK (2007) and The Tipping Point (2002) and Thomas L. Friedman’s The World is Flat (2006) as one of many popular economics books that have “turned their authors into rock stars” (pp. 68-69). Nickel and Dimed’s long-term popularity and seemingly unending prominence in mainstream American popular culture speaks to its potential to impact a diverse range of individuals and communities alike.

Social and Cultural Reading Contexts

As Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) and Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) have maintained their bestseller status, they have been increasingly
selected as recommended reading in a number of social groups and cultural contexts. The Library of Congress’ Center for the Book’s “One Book” project, which promotes the concept of communities’ reading a single book at the same time, provides a useful indication of the contexts in which the literary journalism books have been read (Library of Congress, 2007). While there are no real guidelines or restrictions on the types of books that may be chosen, many communities that sponsor “One Book” projects select works that foster discussion and/or education about topics of current relevance. Local libraries and schools often complement the book program(s) with a series of related lectures, discussions or film screenings.

Since Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* was published in 2001 (and as of April 2007), 17 communities have chosen it as their “One Book,” including Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Kalamazoo, Michigan; South Hadley, Massachusetts; and Galveston County, Texas (Library of Congress, 2007), and each has utilized the book both to foster a sense of community and to educate. For example, when Kalamazoo, Michigan selected *Nickel and Dimed* as its “Reading Together” “One Book” selection in 2004, organizers said they chose to read the book because of its relevance to local low wage workers and its appeal to a broad audience. Community activities were held to supplement the common reading experience, including a public screening of Michael Moore’s documentary *Roger & Me* (1989) (a film about the social effects of layoffs from a Flint, Michigan General Motors plant, and another example of a popular “alternative”
entertainment-as-news media form that contains a muckraking, activist tone).

Organizers of Kalamazoo’s reading project and related events noted that “people are excited about the chance to talk about the issues raised in the book” (Towns, 2004), an indication that Nickel and Dimed had inspired original thoughts and discussion among readers in the community.

Though Kidder’s Mountains Beyond Mountains (2003) has not been as popular a “One Book” choice as Nickel and Dimed (nor has it been available as long), it was selected by certain communities because of Kidders’ ability to provide an alternative—or for many readers, perhaps, the only—perspective on poverty and health care in developing countries like Haiti. As of April 2007, nine communities had chosen to read Mountains Beyond Mountains, including Eastern Connecticut; Cambridge, Massachusetts; Falmouth, Massachusetts; and Ann Arbor, Michigan (Library of Congress, 2007). For the “Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti Reads” 2007 program, a committee of students, educators and community leaders chose Mountains Beyond Mountains as their “One Book” because the book fits into the community’s theme for the project, “We the people…” This theme centers on “the many people that we are, the diverse communities we have created, and the challenges we face in fostering a continuing sense of belonging and civic engagement in a rapidly changing world,” according to the program’s web site (“Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti Reads,” 2007). Community members who posted comments on the Ann Arbor District Library’s web site about Mountains
Beyond Mountains also echoed the opinion that the book carries important messages and information. One reader said that the book prompted him or her to research information related to the book, and believed that it would prompt conversations in the community (“amy,” 2006).

Interestingly, while Ehrenreich’s readership (as represented by the “One Book” program) seems to be evenly distributed across the country, Kidder’s is concentrated in Southern New England (seven of the nine communities that chose Mountains Beyond Mountains are in Massachusetts) (Library of Congress, 2007). The differences in the popularity of the books as “One Books” might be explained by a certain degree of regionalism among readers and books’ publicity; Kidder resides in Massachusetts, and Farmer works at the Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston (Kidder, 2003). In addition, Kidder’s Mountains Beyond Mountains may not be as popular as Nickel and Dimed among “One Book” communities simply because it deals with issues and events beyond the immediate scope of American culture. To provide some perspective on the popularity of the two books across American communities, however, it is important to note that only certain “classics,” like Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird (1960) and Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 (1953) seem to have been read by dozens of communities in the “One Book” program. Indeed, most of the books on the “One Book” list have only been read by two or three communities thus far (Library of Congress, 2007).
Besides the literary journalism books’ demonstrated popularity in community reading groups, they have been incorporated into academic curricula around the country, affirming their value as informational sources that can traverse boundaries of news and literary genres, as well as social contexts. Rebecca Miller (2005) writes that *Nickel and Dimed* has been read in more than 40 freshman college reading courses—although anecdotal information from my own friends and family suggest that this estimate is actually quite conservative. In fact, *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) is assigned for a wide variety of subjects in colleges and high schools, including cultural studies, anthropology, sociology and English. *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003), again, seems no less popular in this aspect of social consumption. A number of colleges have assigned *Mountains Beyond Mountains* as required reading for their incoming freshman classes. The University of Washington, for instance, asked all 5,400 of its incoming freshmen to read Kidder’s book in fall 2006. According to *Seattle Times* reporter Nick Perry (2007), Kidder has lost count of the number of colleges that have assigned his book to students; he estimated that 40 had chosen his book and invited him to speak about it in person as well. The books’ popularity in academic assignments for young adults signifies the literary journalism works’ perceived potential to educate, inform and even transform the lives of readers.
Readers’ Social and Political Activism

The social and political activism and involvement of *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) readers may also be indicative of the books’ ability to inform and engage the public in current events and issues. Both books have, in fact, been reputed to inspire readers to change their beliefs, lifestyles and political and/or social actions (such as fundraising or volunteering for specific causes or organizations).

Ehrenreich has noticed that *Nickel and Dimed* (2001)—and the publicity it has received through mainstream media’s and the public’s reactions—may have prompted readers who work in low wage jobs or identify with the struggles of low wage workers to take action to remedy unfair situations. *Nickel and Dimed* may serve as a wake-up call for those who work in unfairly demanding and minimally rewarding jobs, Ehrenreich believes. “You can get used to these things,” she said, and not even realize the inequality and absurdity of certain situations (Quinn, 2002). For these low-income readers, Ehrenreich hopes her book leads to a new or improved understanding of their relationship to an often-misunderstood facet of American society. To that end, *Nickel and Dimed* has been used for a broad range of social and political purposes: it has been “handed out in social service agencies, and has been deployed in union organizing drives, living wage campaigns, and efforts to raise state minimum wages (which, by the way, have been successful in 20 states so far),” according to Ehrenreich.
Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) has led a number of readers to take action in their lives, as well. Perhaps the best evidence of readers’ involvement and interest in issues of global health and poverty (after reading the book) has been the rapidly increasing success of the Partners in Health (PIH) organization since the publication of Kidder’s book in 2003. Partners in Health, the non-profit organization founded in 1987 by Paul Farmer, Thomas J. White and Todd McCormack, and about which Kidder writes in Mountains Beyond Mountains, provides “a preferential option for the poor in health care” in the United States, Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and Russia (PIH, 2006a). The organization’s web site and news archive are full of evidence of high school and college students’ involvement in the organization after reading Mountains Beyond Mountains (PIH, 2004b, p. 7; PIH, 2005a).

The organization also actively acknowledges the impact of Mountains Beyond Mountains readers on its web site. “We have been utterly stunned by the positive response, worldwide, to Mountains Beyond Mountains,” a statement reads on the Frequently Asked Questions page. “We are enormously grateful that the book has helped bring new attention and resources to bear on global health issues” (PIH, 2006a). In the organization’s Winter/Spring 2005 newsletter, a front-page story by Paul Farmer also acknowledges the impact of the book. He notes that, “the publicity that followed the publication” of Mountains Beyond Mountains (among other organizational
accomplishments) “changed our prospects.” As a result of these developments, PIH was able to expand its services and launch a new project site in Rwanda (Farmer, 2005, p. 1). Another major milestone was the organization’s reception in September 2005 of the world’s largest monetary award, the Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize of 1.5 million dollars. “Winning the Hilton Prize is the greatest recognition yet received by Partners In Health,” said Farmer, “and we are proud, honored and grateful” (Watson, 2005). Finally, in 2006, PIH launched another new site, in Lesotho, South Africa (PIH, 2006b).

PIH’s enthusiastic embrace of Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) and acknowledgement of readers’ role in encouraging the organizations’ success suggests that Kidder’s literary journalism work does more than simply provide information to a large audience; the book provides an alternative point of view about an issue that is (or has become) important to many. In addition, Mountains Beyond Mountains fulfills the same function as Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) (and a good deal of mainstream news media, for that matter), by prompting readers to strengthen or reassess their political and social beliefs and actions.9

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9 The authors of both books have also taken direct action to encourage the type of social and political change that their books support. Kidder has given back to the very organization about which he writes in Mountains Beyond Mountains. According to the Partners in Health organization’s annual reports, Kidder and his wife have donated more than 1,000 dollars annually to PIH since 2003 (PIH, 2004a, p. 30). In 2004, the couple gave between 10,000 and 50,000 dollars to the organization (PIH, 2005b, p. 34), and in 2005 they gave between 10,000 and 25,000 dollars to PIH (PIH, 2006c, p. 33). Ehrenreich has also provided financial support for the issues and individuals about which she writes in Nickel and Dimed. She writes in her blog that she has donated some of the proceeds from Nickel and Dimed to groups working for a “living wage, affordable housing, and other much-needed
The intended and unexpected impacts of both *Mountains Beyond Mountains* and *Nickel and Dimed* on readers, social organizations and political policy, have demonstrated that literary journalism books may play a powerful role in informing and motivating an active audience. The popularity of Kidder’s and Ehrenreich’s books—particularly as evidenced by time on bestseller lists and by their selection as community and academic reading assignments—cannot be underestimated. As I compare the textual characteristics of the literary journalism books with those of mainstream print news, and later consider individuals’ uses and gratifications of literary journalism books and mainstream print news, the “bibliographic codes” and public reception of *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* are important to keep in mind. These benchmarks of the book’s histories indicate a strong motivation among the public to read works of literary journalism.

What makes people propel *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) onto bestseller lists or to recommend that their entire communities read the books as alternative sources of information about current events? What motivates individuals to fundraise for Partners in Health after reading *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, or to support living wage legislation after reading *Nickel and Dimed*? What do readers anticipate from these forms of alternative reforms” (2006).
media, and how well are these expectations satisfied? These questions highlight the necessity to look even closer at the books’ themselves, to examine their content and compare their textual and literary elements with those of mainstream print news media.

In the following chapters, I will look not only at how the books are used and perceived by individual readers, but also closely examine the content and journalistic elements of *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* themselves.
Chapter 5. Textual and Literary Analysis

Given the current popularity and cultural impact of *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003), it is no surprise that journalists have also taken note of the two books. The *Columbia Journalism Review (CJR)*, a magazine written by and for journalists, featured a particularly interesting article about Barbara Ehrenreich and *Nickel and Dimed* in 2003. In “Class Warrior: Barbara Ehrenreich’s Singular Crusade,” Scott Sherman (2003) glosses over the question of whether *Nickel and Dimed* is a work of journalism, and links Ehrenreich’s writing and reporting techniques with historical journalistic trends and practices like immersive reporting and muckraking. Despite the fact that Ehrenreich has “never studied journalism, never embraced objectivity, never held a full-time job with a news organization, and never relinquished her disdain for authority,” she is a full-fledged “veteran journalist at the very top of her game,” in Sherman’s mind. And while Ehrenreich’s book seemingly lacks the ideal of objectivity, Sherman asserts that the first-person perspective and subjective voice in *Nickel and Dimed* “[pay] off again and again,” actually strengthening the book’s appeal to readers.

Sherman’s analysis of Ehrenreich’s identity as a journalist and her work as journalism exemplifies the larger concept behind this chapter: that socially and politically relevant literary journalism books share so many of the textual characteristics and historical models with traditional American print news that it is
difficult not to view them as forms of news media. This chapter thus seeks to support the hypothesis (H₁a) that literary journalism books like Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) and Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) share many of the same characteristics and history as mainstream print news media. Through a close reading of excerpts from Nickel and Dimed and Mountains Beyond Mountains,¹⁰ this chapter will demonstrate that the two books contain many of the same elements as traditional and mainstream American print journalism. In addition, we will see that even the textual and stylistic characteristics that differentiate books like Nickel and Dimed and Mountains Beyond Mountains from other mainstream print media help literary journalism to fulfill the traditional news function of communicating relevant information to a mass public.

¹⁰The excerpts from Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) and Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) that will be examined in this chapter were chosen because I felt that they were good representations of the entire works. Each excerpt contains approximately 10 to 20 pages. These excerpts are also the same ones that I asked focus group participants to read and refer to during discussions (Nickel and Dimed Focus Group, 2007; Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007). From Nickel and Dimed—about Ehrenreich’s (2001) efforts to secure and subsist off low-wage work in three different locations around the country—I chose to examine all of the “Introduction: Getting Ready” and the first segment of Chapter One, “Serving in Florida.” In this excerpt, Ehrenreich describes how she became inspired to write Nickel and Dimed, as well as her initial encounter with low wage life, as a waitress for “Hearthside” restaurant. The excerpt includes a description of Ehrenreich’s introduction to her co-workers, her duties as a server, and some of her first impressions of the work (pp. 1-21). The segment I analyze from Mountains Beyond Mountains is Chapter 4 of the 25-chapter book (Kidder, 2003, pp. 33-44). The chapter provides information about Harvard-educated doctor Paul Farmer’s efforts to treat infectious diseases like tuberculosis and AIDS in Haiti. Though the chapter includes a number of anecdotes and historical details about Farmer’s work in Haiti, its primary focus is a five-hour hike that Farmer undertakes (with author Tracy Kidder in tow) to visit and check on a rural tuberculosis patient.
Similarities and Connections

Relevance, Purpose and Impressions of Objectivity

As American print news has evolved over the past centuries, it has retained the essential element of relevancy. News media must, by definition, contain information about something “new” or novel to consumers. In the 21st century’s age of multimedia, high-speed, 24-hour news, however, physical forms of print media, such as newspapers and magazines, are increasingly becoming too slow to compete with online news in presenting new and relevant information. More and more, mainstream print news sources are therefore seeking to provide new perspectives or context on already-publicized information, events and issues (Stephens, 2007b). *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) are effective in not only presenting new perspectives from which to view already-publicized information, but also bringing poorly understood and under-covered issues and information to the fore.

*Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) both contextualizes and provides a fresh perspective on tired facts and figures about low wage work. Indeed, Ehrenreich said she believed that most mainstream journalism sources had shied away from serious discussion of poverty and class in America during the years in which she was researching and writing *Nickel and Dimed* (between 1998 and 2000). Those years were known as “a time of ‘unprecedented boom,’” in which there were “[t]wenty-seven-
year-old millionaires all over the place, in the dotcom industry,” Ehrenreich said. “[I]t was like this [poverty] disappeared, it was never discussed…The fact that there is anything systematic going on is very hard to talk about. Or not welcome in a lot of mainstream media” (Birnbaum, 2001). By supplementing information about low wage workers and the negative impacts of welfare reform with her own, personalized take on the situation, Ehrenreich’s book presents new perspectives on familiar issues.

Kidder, whose international subjects and issues in Mountains Beyond Mountains (2003) (poverty and disease in developing countries like Haiti) are perhaps even less familiar to American consumers than issues of poverty and class in the United States, also provides important contextual analysis. Like Ehrenreich, Kidder has acknowledged his desire to fill a void in current mainstream reportorial coverage, and he cites the very lack of information among Americans about global health and poverty in low-income countries like Haiti as an impetus for writing about Farmer and his work in Mountains Beyond Mountains (BookBrowse, 2007).\footnote{This dearth of information in the news was also perceived by Farmer, and was likely the reason he agreed to allow Kidder to write Mountains Beyond Mountains; both men had recognized that “a book about [Farmer’s] life and work might bring attention both to the issues that he cares most about and also to the little organization that he helped to create: Partners In Health” (BookBrowse, 2007).} The literary journalism work Kidder produced was thus envisioned from the start as a new and different journalistic take on pressing social and political issues.

Like the element of relevancy and originality, the ideal of objectivity has long been important and influential in definitions of mainstream print news. While many
journalists and news consumers today believe that objectivity is unattainable in news, scholars like Gaye Tuchman (1972) have shown that specific practices of newsgathering and reporting by journalists reinforce the impression that their work is objective, or at least produced in a manner that is as objective as possible. Techniques like gathering and organizing a range of “facts” and information from a variety of sources in a “detached, unbiased, impersonal manner,” may thus be viewed as “strategic rituals” that convey and reinforce impressions of objectivity (p. 664). Authors of socially and politically relevant literary journalism also enact these “rituals.”

In *Nickel and Dimed*, Ehrenreich (2001) relates a variety of independently verifiable information to her personal experiences with low wage work to enhance the objective appearance of her writing. Some of the facts she incorporates within the first 21 pages of *Nickel and Dimed* include the National Coalition for the Homeless’ estimate that a “living wage” for a one-bedroom apartment was $8.89 an hour in 1998 (Ehrenreich, 2001, p. 3), and that 81 percent of large employers required pre-employment drug testing in 2001 (an increase of 21 percent since 1987) (p. 14). When Ehrenreich writes that she secured a waitressing job that paid “$2.43 an hour plus tips,” she adds a footnote in which she cites the Fair Labor Standards Act that authorized this low wage (p. 16). By referencing the legal stipulations by which she is paid an incredibly minimal amount, as well as general figures about low-wage employment
screening and “living wage” rates, Ehrenreich contextualizes her experiences as inseparable from American society and politics. She also confirms that her account of life at this level of income was, in fact, an experience that others could replicate.

Ehrenreich also satisfies readers’ expectations of objective reporting—albeit indirectly—by acknowledging her subjectivities and political aims from the start. This act encourages readers to approach her work from an informed perspective. “I am, of course, very different from the people who normally fill America’s least attractive jobs, and in ways that both helped and limited me,” Ehrenreich admits. She continues:

Most obviously, I was only visiting a world that others inhabit full-time, often for most of their lives. With all the real-life assets I’ve built up in middle age—bank account, IRA, health insurance, multiroom home—waiting indulgently in the background, there was no way I was going to “experience poverty” or find out how it “really feels” to be a long-term low-wage worker. My aim here was much more straightforward and objective—just to see whether I could match income to expenses, as the truly poor attempt to do every day. (p. 6)

In this passage, as in other sections where Ehrenreich reveals her prior prejudices and assumptions, Ehrenreich demonstrates a strong commitment to both fact- and experience-based reporting. She emphasizes that her values and beliefs are not to be taken as truth, and that her experiences are not necessarily representative of others’, a technique that helps her work to fulfill both public expectations and professional standards of news as guided by “strategic rituals” of objectivity.

Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) also includes a great deal of independently verifiable information that supports the impression of journalistic
objectivity. By providing contextual analysis of information through in-depth
descriptions and details, historical summaries, medical background about infectious
diseases like tuberculosis, and socio-cultural background on Haiti and other
impoverished countries, Kidder clearly demonstrates the “strategic ritual” of presenting
unbiased, de-personalized information from a range of sources.

Haitian adages play a major role enhancing the impression of objectivity in
Kidder’s book. These phrases—often translated from Creole by Kidder or Farmer—
provide important cues and context about Haiti. For instance, when Kidder cites the
proverb that is adapted for the title of the book, “Beyond mountains there are
mountains,” he alludes to the distance between Farmer’s health facility and one of his
patients’ homes in rural Morne Michel (a two- to three-hour hike, each way) to
emphasize the unique Haitian environment in which much of the book is set (p. 36). At
times, Kidder also quotes Haitians and Farmer (when he speaks in Haitian) directly,
and then translates these words to English. For example, when Kidder and Farmer are
greeted on their way to Morne Michel, Kidder writes of the interaction in both
languages: “Bonjou, Doc mwen”—”Good morning, my Doc” (p. 39). This technique
essentially allows readers familiar with Creole to double-check Kidder’s interpretation
of the words and situation. Though I suspect many of the American readers of
Mountains Beyond Mountains are unfamiliar with Creole, Kidder’s very act of
including Creole phrases communicates that he is dedicated to preserving the accuracy
and impressions of objectivity of his book.

While Kidder (2003) does not utilize any footnotes in *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, he includes a Selected Bibliography of more than 12 pages—a visual demonstration of the range of source material upon which *Mountains Beyond Mountains* is based. Ehrenreich (2001), in contrast, utilizes footnotes in *Nickel and Dimed*, but does not include a bibliography. Both authors’ use of contemporary works about similar subjects demonstrates to readers their commitment to accuracy and reliability, and illustrate the books’ adherence to definitions and expectations of mainstream print media.

**Historical Ties**

While I have highlighted some of the elements that *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) and *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) share with modern-day mainstream print news, it is also enlightening to examine the books’ relationship to American journalism history. The most obvious connection between Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* and past journalism trends and techniques is, as Sherman (2003) observes, the author’s incorporation of her own social and political identity and beliefs into the journalistic work. As she explains in her Introduction, Ehrenreich (2001) aimed to uncover the answers to specific questions: “How does anyone live on the wages available to the unskilled?” And how, specifically, “were the
roughly four million women about to be booted into the labor market by welfare reform going to make it on $6 or $7 an hour?” (p. 1).

Ehrenreich’s investigative and activist approach to researching and writing *Nickel and Dimed* makes it easy to qualify the book as a work of journalistic muckraking that follows in the footsteps of such famed reporters as Nellie Bly, Jacob Riis and Lincoln Steffens. Like George Orwell, a muckraker who aimed to show middle-class readers “a world apart which one can quite easily go through life without ever hearing about” with *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Ehrenreich wrote *Nickel and Dimed* to bring to light topics and issues that are poorly understood or overlooked by many Americans (Sherman, 2003). Because the first chapter of *Nickel and Dimed* was written for *Harper’s Magazine*, Ehrenreich approached the entire project as a “journalist” (Birnbaum, 2001), and employed an unconventional, immersive reporting method. She went “undercover” to examine America’s working class. She selectively omitted parts of her identity (such as her doctorate in biology), and invented new aspects (presenting herself as a single mother reentering the workforce after many years) (Ehrenreich, 2001, p. 5). Her book’s content (“exposing” the realities of life

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12 From a journalistic (or even academic, social science-based research) perspective, there are a number of ethical problems with the way in which Ehrenreich went about her “undercover” reporting (such as the fact that she did not tell her “subjects” that they would be immortalized in a book before gaining information about their lives). However, I believe that Ehrenreich’s deceptive actions were justified. Understating her academic and professional accomplishments was necessary in order for her applications to low wage jobs to be taken seriously. Furthermore, if Ehrenreich had told managers and employers about her intentions to document the inequalities and disadvantages of the working poor, few probably would have allowed her the type of access to individuals and organizations that was so vital to her book.
for low wage working poor) makes it clear that the book is not intended for or marketed to those familiar with low-wage service sector work. Rather, middle- and upper-class Americans with little or no real experience with low wage work seem to be the intended audience—the readers who might gain a new understanding of an issue or topic through Ehrenreich’s book. Thus, for these readers, *Nickel and Dimed* has the potential to create social impact and change, as a modern-day work of muckraking.

In *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Kidder (2003) plays a much more understated role as reporter than Ehrenreich (2001). Few would consider his book to be a work of contemporary muckraking. However, Kidder employs a different type of immersive reporting, playing a sort of fly on the wall of Paul Farmer’s world.\(^{13}\) This detailed, “participant-observer” reporting also has an important place in journalism history. Many of the mid-20\(^{th}\) century journalists that were deemed “New Journalists” (including Truman Capote and Tom Wolfe), as well as many modern-day “New New Journalists” (like Ted Conover and Leon Dash), have been practitioners of this reporting technique and gained great acclaim for their work (Boynton, 2005, pp. xii-xiii). Readers become aware that Kidder (2003) has employed this sort of immersive reporting nearly from the very start of the book, when he reveals that Farmer urged him to visit in Haiti to learn about his “œuvre” (p. 17). By documenting such details of

\(^{13}\) In anthropology, this position might be called the “participant-observer” role, by which the researcher of an ethnography spends a great deal of time with the culture or people under investigation, and also participates in its or their socio-cultural activities and interactions. Barbara Ehrenreich’s role and manner of storytelling in *Nickel and Dimed* (2001) may also be viewed from this perspective.
Farmer’s daily work as a five-hour round-trip trek to visit a patient, Kidder makes it clear that he has spent a significant amount of time with Farmer.

In addition, rather than seek out and conduct individual interviews for the book (as do reporters for traditional news media), Kidder simply experiences and absorbs information and conversations with characters, and then uses these details in his storytelling—a fact readers may notice when he provides spontaneous dialogue between characters. In Chapter 4, Kidder emphasizes the informal and immersive situations in which he gained information for the book. In the following scene, for instance, it seems that Kidder’s only role was to observe, because he writes with third-person omniscient narration, instead of a first-person perspective, and his own presence is not mentioned:

Farmer asked the patient, a young man, if he disliked his TB medicines.
“Are you kidding?” he replied. “I wouldn’t be here without them.”
It turned out that he’d been given confusing instructions the last time he was in Cange [at PIH’s health care facility], and he hadn’t received the standard cash stipend. He hadn’t missed any doses of his TB drugs, however. Good news for Farmer. Mission accomplished. He’d made sure that the patient’s cure wasn’t being interrupted. (p. 41)

In contrast to Kidder’s near-wallflower status in the previous passage, he plays an important role by acting as a sort of “everyman” with whom average readers can relate. Kidder intended for his inclusion of himself to ground readers, “to interpret [Farmer] and to make him believable,” since Kidder believes that Farmer’s level of dedication and altruism seem nearly implausible (BookBrowse, 2007). This
“everyman” role comes into play at the end of Chapter 4, when, after listening to Farmer give a particularly impassioned, impromptu lecture on understanding global politics and poverty, Kidder (2003) reveals uncertainty about the meaning of Farmer’s words. Farmer “seemed to think I knew exactly what he meant, and I realized, with some irritation, that I didn’t dare say anything just then, for fear of disappointing him” (p. 44). By establishing and revealing the fluctuating nature of his relationship with Farmer at this and other points in the book, Kidder avoids idealizing himself or Farmer, and invites readers to also view the same characters from multiple perspectives.

Besides shedding light on characters’ multifaceted personalities, Kidder’s fly-on-the-wall reporting also enables him to reveal details and information about the level of destitution and quality of life of rural Haitians. Kidder also uses situations in which he observes Haitian society to raise philosophical—and to some degree, political—questions about social assumptions, as in the following scene:

[S]uddenly a couple of chairs materialized, metal chairs with torn Naugahyde seats, one red, one blue. This always happened in the countryside when I was with Farmer, the appearance of chairs, one for Dokte Paul, one for his blan. We sat. In a moment, we were surrounded. By women, a dozen or more—elderly-looking women, lovely young women in sundresses with one torn shoulder strap. A middle-aged woman, with a beautiful face but several front teeth missing, leaned against a tree and spoke softly to Farmer. The others stood by other trees or sat in the dirt close by, some speaking to him, too, from time to time. One woman was telling him that they needed an additional community health worker up here, but mostly they were just passing the time. Is there a more widespread notion than the one that rural people are laconic, and is there a
rural place anywhere in the world whose people really are? (p. 43)

The statement Kidder implicitly makes through the passage—that extreme poverty and a lack of access to resources causes rural people to lose hope of accomplishing anything but “just passing the time”—is one of many that address common perceptions about the poor. The passage thus exemplifies how Kidder’s immersive reporting accomplishes multiple tasks; not only does it showcase Kidder’s keen sense of observation and unique role as an entrenched participant-observer/narrator, but also it brings the world of impoverished Haitians into a situation and context with which nearly any reader can relate.

**Differences Between the Books and Mainstream Print Media**

**Subjective Points of View**

Both Kidder’s (2003) and Ehrenreich’s (2001) first-person perspectives and immersive reporting experiences clearly echo past traditions and aims of American journalism. Yet, at the same time, the authors’ role as both narrators and characters in their books is one of many characteristics that distinguish the literary journalism books from mainstream print news media. Authorial voice and casual tone are other elements of the books that highlight their subjective nature. However, these literary attributes do not significantly detract from the books’ ability to inform and engage readers. Indeed, such characteristics actually heighten the books’ appeal to readers and enhance their
ability to fulfill the journalistic function of communicating to a mass audience.

Though Ehrenreich’s (2001) slanted perspective on welfare reform and Kidder’s (2003) subtle support of and participation in Paul Farmer’s mission might initially seem to better exemplify strategies and standards of muckraking reporting and yellow journalism of the past than modern-day “objective” journalism, this opinionated approach is actually in line with a current trend in mainstream media. News with a point of view is found in everything from television programs that feature pundits like FOX’s *The O’Reilly Factor*, to blogs to podcasts. And as individuals who are reporting or providing news are increasingly becoming a part of the news product, the media form becomes a hybrid of news and entertainment.

This shift toward “soft” or celebrity-driven news is not necessarily a negative development, however. Fame or individual treatment of a particular issue can help the public overcome ignorance of important subjects (Hamilton, 2004, p. 4). To use a metaphor of Walter Lippmann’s (1922), the news media, in all its forms, is “like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of the darkness into vision” (Steel, 1997, p. xiv). Thus, even when works of literary journalism do not precisely obey the standards of objectivity or seem overly reliant on an author’s perspective, their function of bringing information into public consciousness by virtue of the books’ or their authors’ fame is one of the elements that
make them significant journalistic works.\(^{14}\)

**Entertainment**

Another key component that determines the success of books—and to some degree, print news—among the public is the degree to which they function as forms of entertainment. Consumers’ pleasure in reading is also necessary for mainstream print news; the “story” must be well-written, with an accessible vocabulary and approachable tone, in order to capture and maintain the interest of a public that is increasingly “assailed by many forces competing for attention” (Zinsser, 2001, p. 9).

But this entertaining, artful and attention-grabbing characteristic of writing is one that literary journalism books exemplify extremely well. (It is also, incidentally, the primary characteristic that leads scholars to categorize the genre as literary, rather than journalistic, as analyses by Wolfe (1973), Root and Steinberg (1999), Roorbach (2001) and others have shown.) In many cases, literary journalism may be more successful at entertaining than mainstream print news. Literary journalism’s flexibility in such elements as style, tone, perspective and language enable both Ehrenreich (2001) and Kidder (2003) to utilize narrative story-telling conventions (and to therefore attract a

\(^{14}\) Indeed, it is worth noting that both Tracy Kidder and Barbara Ehrenreich had enjoyed a considerable amount of journalistic and literary prestige, even before these two books were published. Kidder had won a Pulitzer Prize in 1982 for his literary journalism book *Soul of a New Machine* (Lyceum Agency, 2007, p. 2). Ehrenreich had earned respect among reporters and editors at popular magazines like *TIME* and *Harper’s*, as well as among academics for her books about social class and economics (Sherman, 2003). In addition, both authors undoubtedly became more famous after the publication of their books.
diverse readership) to a greater degree than most print news articles.

In *Nickel and Dimed*, for instance, Ehrenreich’s (2001) breezy, casual and conversational tone lends approachability and amusement to her work that is rarely found in serious “hard news” reports in newspapers or on national television. Her first chapter begins with a few lines that are simply written, but full of details and colorful imagery:

Mostly out of laziness, I decide to start my low-wage life in the town nearest to where I actually live, Key West, Florida, which with a population of about 25,000 is elbowing its way up to the status of a genuine city. The downside of familiarity, I soon realize, is that it’s not easy to go from being a consumer, thoughtlessly throwing money around in exchange for groceries and movie and gas, to being a worker in the very same place. I am terrified, especially at the beginning, of being recognized by some friendly business owner or erstwhile neighbor and having to stammer out some explanation of my project. (p. 11)

Ehrenreich’s frankness about her own feelings and actions throughout her life as a low wage worker encourages readers to identify with her experiences, even if they have never waited tables or cleaned toilets. Connecting with the characters, or the narrator, is an important requisite for entertaining and informing readers, according to other contemporary literary journalists, as well. Alex Kotlowitz, the author of books like *There Are No Children Here* (1991) and *The Other Side of the River* (1998) has said: “I look to achieve empathy with my readers. To get them to a place where they, too, are in the shoes of my characters, and in some cases… in my shoes, empathizing with me, the narrator” (Boynton, 2005, pp. 130-131). Like Kotlowitz, Ehrenreich (2001) writes
in a manner that garners empathy, as it simultaneously delivers information and a new perspective on a familiar issue.

**Voice**

Kidder (2003) also employs techniques that foster readers’ connection to the subject(s) of *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. I have already discussed how Kidder utilizes his own presence in the story as an “everyman,” to give readers a character with whom to empathize. His primary tool for this aim, however, is the narrative technique of voice, a literary style that combines a writer’s language and tone, among other attributes, to give writing a unique “sound” or “feeling.” While traditional print journalists have tended to avoid voice, and to “place [themselves] in the background” of stories (Strunk & White, 2000, p. 70; quoted in Wefing, 2004, p. 21), literary journalists like Kidder employ voice to enhance reporting. In *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Kidder (2003) narrates and lends his voice through the first-person perspective. In a dissertation on the maturation of Kidder’s voice, Henry O. Wefing, Jr. (2004) observes that Kidder’s voice often includes a rich array of “metaphoric description that might well appear in fiction but not in conventional journalism” (p. 128). In *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, this unique imaginative language lends a poetic sensibility and unique, resonant imagery to otherwise ordinary scenes. Wefing highlights some examples:
A person standing outside the Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston is surrounded by “a Wall Street of medicine” (9). The Brigham envelops as renovated Victorian lobby “like a city around a Roman ruin” (9). The way Farmer folded himself around a patient lying on a hospital bed made Kidder “think of a grasshopper” (12)... Farmer, in a baseball cap, setting out to hike to a patient’s home, is, in Kidder’s imagination, “a gawky teenager on the way to a ball game with his dad” (283)... The sound of Voodoo drums is “like so many hearts beating through a single stethoscope.” (298). (pp. 140-142)

These evocative descriptions aid the reader by “plac[ing] events in rich perspective” (Wefing, 2004, p. 148) and lend flavor to the information presented, without imparting Kidder’s opinions and beliefs too strongly. For individuals whose primary aim in reading Mountains Beyond Mountains is to be entertained, Kidder’s (2003) literary voice is likely the most important and attractive aspect of the book. Yet, because his voice is used to enhance, contextualize and artfully communicate relevant information, Kidder still may achieve the intended effect of mainstream print media (for those readers): to present and contextualize important information.

While Kidder’s (2003) voice is reflective and whimsical, Ehrenreich’s literary voice in Nickel and Dimed (2001) contains a comedic undertone. The humor in Ehrenreich’s voice likely helps her to capture and hold the attention of (as well as entertain) readers. One notable instance of Ehrenreich’s humor appears in the initial pages of Nickel and Dimed, as she describes a revelation she experienced while working as a waitress:

At Hearthside, we utilize whatever bits of autonomy we have to ply our customers with the illicit calories that signal our love. It is our job as
servers to assemble the salads and desserts, pour the dressings, and squire the whipped cream. We also control the number of butter pats our customers get and the amount of sour cream on their baked potatoes. So if you wonder why Americans are so obese, consider the fact that waitresses both express their humanity and earn their tips through the covert distribution of fats. (p. 20)

In another witty account of her experience (taken from outside the range of pages in the excerpt, but still worth including here), Ehrenreich relaxes after a tough day of work at Wal-Mart by watching television:

Tonight I find the new sensation, Survivor, on CBS, where “real people” are struggling to light a fire on their desert island. Who are these nutcases who would volunteer for an artificially daunting situation in order to entertain millions of strangers with their half-assed efforts to survive? Then I remember where I am and why I am here. (p. 160)

As these passages demonstrate, much of the humor in Ehrenreich’s book is elicited through sarcasm, irony and absurdity. However, the use of humor in Nickel and Dimed brings serious topics like the unbalanced relationship between managers and employees in workplaces like Wal-Mart into an accessible and quotidian context for readers.

Because they utilize literary techniques like humor, voice, metaphor and first-person perspective to advance the narratives and to contextualize information, literary journalism books might appear to completely lack objectivity. Indeed, when we consider Ehrenreich’s (2001) and Kidder’s (2003) subjective points of view, it seems counterintuitive to qualify either Nickel and Dimed or Mountains Beyond Mountains as forms of mainstream print news. Yet, when even short excerpts from the books are
analyzed for their adherence to traditional definitions and expectations of print news media, it is clear that they need not be discounted from studies of modern-day journalism. Socially and politically relevant literary journalism books present information and contextual analysis that is incredibly relevant to today’s world, and include numerous independently verifiable facts and figures, illustrating the authors’ adherence to “strategic rituals” (Tuchman, 1972) of objectivity in reporting and writing. Beyond their textual similarities to mainstream print news, the two books are connected to journalism through a rich history of immersive reporting techniques like muckraking and detailed observation. And though the books borrow literary stylistics and characteristics, the fact that these very literary attributes likely contribute to the books’ ability to engage readers means that the books have the potential to fulfill a primary purpose of news media as well: communicating to a mass audience. Having demonstrated that there is ample support for the hypothesis that socially and politically relevant literary journalism books share similar literary and textual characteristics with mainstream print news, the following two chapters investigate how and whether readers actually use and perceive the books as forms of news media.
Chapter 6. Uses and Gratifications of Literary Journalism Books

While the previous chapter demonstrated that socially and politically relevant literary journalism books share notable textual and literary characteristics and history with mainstream print news, the remainder of this thesis (the next two chapters) is concerned with finding support for the hypothesis \( H_{1b} \) that readers use literary journalism books like *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) for many of the same uses and gratifications that they look for and obtain from mainstream print news media. In this chapter, I assess individuals’ uses and gratifications of the two literary journalism books in order to obtain an understanding of how the books are viewed and used as communications media. The theoretical framework established in this chapter will then be compared to individuals’ uses and gratifications of mainstream print news in Chapter Seven, to aid in assessing the validity of \( H_{1b} \).

In order to obtain an understanding of individuals’ uses and gratifications of literary journalism books like *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, I asked 109 Literary Journalism Survey (2007) respondents (out of a convenience sample of approximately 400) and 15 participants from the Nickel and Dimed Focus Group (2007) and Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group (2007) who had read parts or the entirety of one or both of these books, questions about their uses and gratifications of literary journalism books. According to this population, individuals’
uses and gratifications of the books are motivated by a number of needs that are remarkably similar to those identified and analyzed by communications scholars like McQuail (2005a), McQuail, Blumler and Brown (1972) and McLeod, Ward and Tancill (1965-66).

Because I am seeking to explore the unique relationship between contemporary first-person, socially and politically relevant literary journalism books like *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* and mainstream print news media, however, I have chosen to focus upon a specific set of uses and gratifications (inspired by previous scholarship) that will help me to illuminate similarities and differences between print news and the books. These uses and gratifications include:

“informational/educational” (in which readers use the books as an opportunity to learn new information or gain new perspectives), “social” (through which readers use the books or the books’ content as a social tool with which to communicate with others or communicate messages about themselves to others), and a third, broader group of escapist motivations like the opportunity for vicarious experience and voyeurism.

“Other” uses, such as pleasure and entertainment, are apparent in my results as well, although I will not devote much attention to the entertainment value of the books since I am primarily interested in shedding light on the books’ power to prompt personal, cognitive and behavioral changes.
Uses of *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains*

The quantitative information I will analyze in this section comes primarily from the following chart of Literary Journalism Survey (2007) respondents’ “expectations,” or uses, of *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. The table below contains readers’ responses to the questions “Before you began reading *Nickel and Dimed*, what were you expecting from it? (please check all that apply)” and “Before you began reading *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, what were you expecting from it? (please check all that apply).” I am presenting the data according to the major types of uses and gratifications delivered (“informational/educational,” “vicarious, escapist,” “social” and “other”) (similar to the way in which McLeod, Ward and Tancill (1965-1966) present their chart of individuals’ “reasons” for reading the newspaper (p. 591)); however, in the actual survey, these uses and gratifications were listed in a random order.
Table 6.1: Individuals’ uses or “expectations” of *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains*

**Beyond Mountains**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uses/Gratifications</th>
<th>Nickel and Dimed</th>
<th>Mountains Beyond Mountains</th>
<th>Response Total</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational/Educational uses/values</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help me to interpret important events</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help me to solve problems</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide true, factual information</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach me something new</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicarious, escapist uses/values</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would feel as though I am taking part in others’ lives without actually being there</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help me get away from daily worries</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring some excitement to my life</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social use/values</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give me something to talk about with others</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other uses/values</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertaining</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author’s views on the subject matter are consistent with my own views</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change my political views</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total respondents</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>109</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)
Informational and Educational Uses

For a majority of readers of *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003), the most important use of the books is to satisfy informational and educational needs. In other words, readers come to Ehrenreich’s (2001) and Kidder’s (2003) books expecting the books to provide relevant, practical and fact-based information. This finding is reflected by Literary Journalism Survey (2007) results: 85 percent (93 of 109) of respondents to the questions “Before you began to read *Nickel and Dimed*, what were you expecting from it?” and “Before you began to read *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, what were you expecting from it?” said they believed “that it would teach me something new.” In response to the same question, 69 percent (75 of 109) of respondents said they also expected either of the books to give “true, factual information.” In addition, 39 percent (42 of 179) of respondents said they expected the books to help them “interpret important events.” Many readers who chose to answer the question about either book with the open-ended “other” option expressed the same sentiments in their own words and in more specific formulations. One individual had hoped that *Mountains Beyond Mountains* “would teach me something about Haiti.” From *Nickel and Dimed*, another respondent expected to “learn about the hidden class society in the U.S.;” a third believed it would “offer a new perspective” (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007).
In focus groups, this informational and educational use was expressed as well. Kim said she would want to read more of *Mountains Beyond Mountains* if she were interested in public health issues or information: “If I knew that the writer was talking about some areas of public health that I didn’t know about and critiquing some things that I maybe thought had been interesting, or good, [then I would read more of the book].” Speaking about literary journalism books more generally, Lia said she was often attracted to read literary journalism books because she expected them to provide her with new information that might relate to her life in some way. Others were conversant with this use of literary journalism books for informational and educational purposes, as well, as the following discussion suggests:

**Lia:** [When I read] *Nickel and Dimed*, it was after I had been working with students who had seemed to fit that income bracket. Having no understanding of it myself, I was like, “Well, I’d like to read this book.” And so I think that’s what sort of makes me pick something up, is this sort of… a little affinity for—

**Katie Aberbach:** A little prior knowledge?

**Lia:** Or a little bit of interest…

**Kim:** What I like about what [Lia was] just saying is I think that … when it’s something that you have an interest in, but you’re just sort of going about your daily life, you don’t have this in-depth view of it. That’s kind of the thing that this book gives you, it’s speaking to your viewpoint, so it’s kind of filtering itself … and it’s saying, “Okay, now I’m going to give you these answers that you’re looking for, now I’m going to give you that in-depth look that you didn’t have the time to do,” and then you can kind of move forward and do whatever you want.
Shannon: And it’s in everyday language, I think. Because you could get a lot of this information, you know, from sources like the NIH [National Institutes of Health]. But who wants to download a report?

Kim: And it’s a lot of work, too [laughs].

Shannon: And it’s a lot of work, to find it… I mean, you could easily get this sort of information, but this is faster, it’s portable, it’s entertaining, I mean, to a certain point.

Seth: I think that goes back to the trust issue too. It’s like, you kind of trust that he did his research—

Lia: For you.

Seth: …for you. Because you know that there are some… there is some stuff in there that you could get, but it’s extensive…

Shannon: Yeah, and would you understand it? If you had to get it yourself?

Kim: And it’s packaged in a way that’s kind of really, you know, pleasant to read. I mean, it’s very digestible. (Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007)

In this conversation, a number of informational uses of the literary journalism books—implicitly acknowledged and agreed upon between the participants—become clear: illuminating and putting into plain language and an accessible format material that is difficult to obtain or understand; relevance to readers’ lives; pertinence to current events and issues; and “filtering” of in-depth information into a unique perspective.

Despite the clear threat to objectivity presented by the authors’ subjective voice and presence, some readers said they were inclined to overlook the possibility of gaining biased or inaccurate information from literary journalism books—at least when
they hoped or intended to learn from them before picking them up. Yet, as focus group participants discussed the informational and educational value of *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003), nearly all became conscious of the (seemingly) paradoxical act of trusting a non-objective nonfiction book. Some hypothesized that the fact that literary journalism was contained in the physical form of a book contributed to their tendency to look for and trust the validity of the journalistic content. In addition, they suggested, the label of the books as “nonfiction” might contribute to readers’ tendency to not second-guess the books’ ability to present accurate information. As Kim said, “Part of it is that it’s nonfiction. You’re just like, ‘Okay.’ It’s based on something and you may go back and you may find a fact that you don’t think jives with what you thought were the facts. But there is something about it just being called that…” (Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007).

This (practically de facto) informational use of literary journalism books is not always seen as an opportunity to add to one’s knowledge in a positive way, however. Ryan said he avoided reading or discussing the literary journalism book *Fast Food Nation* (Schlosser, 2001) (as well as the documentary *Super Size Me* (Spurlock, 2004), both of which are about the fast food industry), despite the fact that others around him were interested in the book and film, because he did not want to learn details from either that were related to his lifestyle or eating habits (Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007). Regardless of Ryan’s eventual use of—or refusal to use—the
books and film, his behavior clearly indicates that he also regards certain literary
journalism books as sources of information and truth.

Social Uses

In addition to informational uses of literary journalism books, social reasons are
nearly as important in motivating readers to use literary journalism books. In fact, the
third-most popular expectation of both books, according to Literary Journalism Survey
(2007) data, was that the books “would give me something to talk about with others.”
More than half of survey respondents shared this expectation; 52 percent (57 of 109) of
respondents anticipated this social gratification from Nickel and Dimed and/or
Mountains Beyond Mountains.

The popular “social” use of the two literary journalism books to gain
knowledge to discuss with others is likely influenced by readers’ practical motivations
for reading the books. Table 6.2 (below) reveals that the most popular reason that
people survey respondents read either book was because of word-of-mouth
recommendations.
Table 6.2: Individuals’ practical reasons for reading *Nickel and Dimed* and/or *Mountains Beyond Mountains*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th><em>Nickel and Dimed</em></th>
<th><em>Mountains Beyond Mountains</em></th>
<th>Response Total</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A School assignment</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Book club pick</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A friend or family member recommended it</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I found it in the bookstore or library</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned about it on my own</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total respondents</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>108</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)

As Table 6.2 shows, more than 30 percent of respondents (33 of 108) said their “family or friends recommended” one or both of the books. In these instances, it is likely that social discussion about the books took place both before and after the book(s) were read. For 29 percent of readers (31 of 108) one or both of the books were required as part of a school (high school, college or graduate-level) assignment. The fact that the books are incorporated into academic curricula—despite their relatively short publication histories—also reflects the fact that they are viewed as a source of information or a framework through which to see a new perspective on contemporary issues and events. The books’ placement on syllabi practically ensures that academic and/or social discussion occurs regarding the books themselves or their content.
In focus groups, readers also touched upon the social uses of literary journalism books. Krystal said she had not read *Nickel and Dimed* to learn new information, but rather to better understand and discuss a situation about which she had already learned from mainstream news. She had hoped to internalize the information, relate it to the world around her, and to then connect and converse with others about related social and political current events and issues. In her own words:

I think with *Nickel and Dimed*, I already knew all the statistics about poverty, and [that] so many people make minimum wage, and what the difference is in rents between cities and what they’re actually making on welfare, and the fact that a lot of people are getting forced out of welfare. That was a huge thing when she was writing this book, so I had all the statistics from the news media and then I think that this was just a way to reinforce for me, those kind of ideas that were already in my head, to process everything and make it into a narrative that you can relate to other people, and that’s a better way to give those statistics out. If I’m in a conversation with somebody about minimum wage, I think it’s a relatable story.

Jamie voiced a similar opinion:

[In] a huge newspaper [like the] *Washington Post*, [there are] thousands of stories in a day... You read a story, and like two days later... you don’t remember half the stuff you read. Whereas [with] a book like this, you carry it around, and you actually can read the entire thing. I think it stays with you and you can talk about it and discuss it with the other friends who have read it and whatever, and you can sort of get more out of it... You learn more. (Nickel and Dimed Focus Group, 2007)

For Jamie and Krystal, as for at least 60 other individuals that participated in the Literary Journalism Survey (2007) and focus groups, a primary social motivation for reading the books is to gain, process and contextualize knowledge in order to
incorporate it into discussions and social relationships. Viewed in light of readers’
media uses, the books may be seen as forms of social or cultural capital, or as aspects
that shape a shared popular cultural understanding of current events, or even of other
individuals. It is not difficult to see the books’ connection to news media in this regard;
consumers who read a certain newspaper or visit a particular web site for news often
come to the media for (and likely take away from it) a shared perspective or
understanding of facts and information. These common perceptions, gained by being a
part of the same audience for a particular form of media, also serve as popular frames
for knowledge, behavior and language, among other social factors.

Another strong indicator of Nickel and Dimed and Mountains Beyond
Mountains’ uses for social needs is the books’ perceived trendiness among young,
well-educated Americans like those who participated in my online survey and focus
groups. One survey respondent, for instance, read Mountains Beyond Mountains not
because of a particular word-of-mouth recommendation or an academic requirement,
but simply to be more in touch with others in his or her community. Mountains Beyond
Mountains “was selected as the common reading for the freshmen at the university I
worked at, and I read it due to the buzz created by the selection,” the respondent said
(Literary Journalism Survey, 2007).

Nickel and Dimed Focus Group (2007) participant Priya echoed the notion that
popular cultural hype surrounding certain socially or politically relevant literary
journalism books can snowball within communities. She said that she and others might not have read Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* (2001) without having noticed the “buzz” surrounding it:

Even just around the table, pretty much all of us read this book in like 2003, 2004, I don’t know what year it was published, but maybe… Maybe there was something going on in 2003 that we all noticed it or something… But like some of the other books, the *Fast Food Nation* and things like that. And particularly, this book. We talked about it before, but I think this [book] spurred a lot of, not a lot of other projects, but other projects or awareness around this issue. Like the guy who did *Super Size Me*.

Priya’s reference to Eric Schlosser’s literary journalism book, *Fast Food Nation* (2001), as well as to Morgan Spurlock’s documentary/literary journalism film *Super Size Me* (2004), as she simultaneously made a statement about *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), implies that she views the popularity of all three works as part of a larger social trend. Priya’s hypothesis that *Nickel and Dimed* “spurred” other projects and “awareness” around issues of welfare and low-wage work suggests that she sees the “buzz” around Ehrenreich’s book as partially responsible for significant social and/or political action among her readers—in other words, that she believes the book delivers significant “gratifications,” even to readers who may only approach it for a social use.

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15 Indeed, other focus group participants shared their perceptions that literary journalism books of this type had become popular within recent years. A significant amount of discussion that followed comments in this vein centered on what factors might have prompted this explosion of interest in literary journalism production and consumption. Ideas included technological innovations, individual frustration with mainstream mass media, and the concurrent popularity of reality television and documentaries as both entertainment and information (Nickel and Dimed Focus Group, 2007).
Ryan also drew attention to the use of literary journalism books like *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) to satisfy social purposes but spoke about a different dimension of this use. He posited that those who read these types of books are self-consciously attempting to position themselves as socially elite and/or as subscribers to particular political ideas. His comments suggest that he perceives those who read books like *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* to be a select, educated, self-aware and socially conscious (if arrogant) group:

What about reading a book like this, isn’t there that level where you’re sort of, I don’t know if it’s feeling good about yourself or self-satisfaction, or something like that, where the process of reading a book in the first place is like saying, “I’m a literate person, in our society at least.” We really [making “quotes” symbol with fingers] value books. Very few people actually read books, so if you’re one of these people that is actually sitting there reading a book, you’re like, “Look at me, I’m not only literate, but I’m literary, and I’m reading about something important, that you probably know nothing about.” (Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007)

Ryan’s words testify to the possibility of readers’ uses of literary journalism books for communicating indirectly to (rather than with) others, and underscore the notion that certain readers are aware that their choices of literature and media have significance in their personal and social lives.

Scholars who have studied relationships between readers’ social status and reading material have also identified this social dimension of “you-are-what-you-read.” Joan Shelley Rubin (1992) records some of the various relationships between mass
reading and “voluntary education” projects like the Book-of-the-Month Club and “Great books” discussion groups. In the early 20th century, she writes, reading projects like these came to define and dictate individuals’ social identity as “middlebrow,” or middle-class (pp. xi-xiii). Janice Radway (1984) acknowledges this same impact of reading material on social identity as she attempts to defend romance readers from their typical characterization as lower-class, non-intellectuals (a stereotype they were assigned largely because of the fantasy- and romance-oriented content of their reading material, as well as because of sexist stereotypes), by showing that their literature might actually be read to challenge negative, patriarchal stereotypes and social mores. While neither Radway (1984) nor Rubin (1992) write about literary journalism books or their readers, the two authors’ assertions that individuals’ reading choices often make statements—or are perceived by others as making statements—about their identity suggests that the “you-are-what-you-read” concept might hold true across print media forms and genres, and certainly may be a consideration in some readers’ uses of literary journalism books.

**Vicarious Uses**

Another popular use of *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) is readers’ expectation and enjoyment of vicariously living through certain experiences, or in unusual, new environments. Twenty-seven
percent of Literary Journalism Survey (2007) respondents (30 of 109) said they expected one or both of the books to allow them to “feel as though I am taking part in others’ lives without actually being there.” These readers turn to socially and politically relevant literary journalism books for one of the same uses that was intended approximately a century earlier by muckraking journalists: to feel as though they were “in the other fellow’s place,” in Lincoln Steffen’s words (Boynton, 2005, pp. xxiv). As readers’ comments related to vicarious uses of the books reflect, this value may be prompted by both social and informational motivations, as well as by a desire to grow and change personally. While readers learn about the world around them and others through being “in the other fellow’s place” (Boynton, 2005, pp. xxiv) (or at least by being in the journalist’s place by way of first-person narration), they also deepen their understanding of their own social and personal identities.

Some of the most obvious vicarious uses of literary journalism books like *Mountains Beyond Mountains* and *Nickel and Dimed* are as vehicles through which readers can escape from their own worlds and experience places or situations about which they have no knowledge or are curious. For this reason, Nickel and Dimed Focus Group (2007) participant Natalie characterized the books as “more important than fiction.” She referred to Jennifer Toth’s *The Mole People: Life in the Tunnels Beneath New York City* (1993) (about individuals living in New York City’s subway tunnels) as an example of a literary journalism book that enables readers to vicariously
experience important, yet dangerous, shocking or uncommon situations. This “wow” factor, as Kim called it in the Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group (2007), of certain works is also a characteristic that reinforces literary journalism books’ status as a form of entertainment and/or distraction from daily life. Despite the connection between novelty and entertainment in books like *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003), focus group participants generally pointed out the books’ potential to educate and inspire personal growth through vicarious experiences. Lia, Ryan and Shannon, for instance, joked about the attraction of “living through” the outrageous experiences in literary journalism books:

**Lia:** I feel like sometimes when I read new books, I’m reading them—and this is exactly what [others] were saying—I’m reading them because I wish I had done what that person had done, but there’s no way I would [laughing] because I don’t have the time and I don’t have the means. So it’s almost, I guess, fulfilling some wish that I could have done that, you know? … [To Ryan:] You read the [Jon] Krakauer books, like you’re always telling me to read *Into the Wild.* Is that because you really wish you could climb Mount Everest?

**Ryan:** Oh, yeah. It’s like, part of me, but it’s like so… but on the other hand, you see how incredibly unpleasant it is, and that makes me feel smart for not attempting it because—

**Shannon:** Let someone else do it for you.

**Ryan:** Yeah. Let them get frostbite.

In explaining her decision to read Izabella St. James’ *Bunny Tales: Behind Closed Doors at the Playboy Mansion* (2006), Lia referenced the alluring and provocative nature of the book’s subject matter as a primary reason for her use of the
book, eliciting laughter and nods from others: “With Bunny Tales,” Lia said, “it was definitely like, ‘What are they doing in that mansion?’” For her decision to read Jon Krakauer’s Under the Banner of Heaven (2004), Lia talked about the same type of vicarious and voyeuristic use: “[It’s a] sick fascination with, ‘What are these fundamentalist religious Mormons doing?!’” (Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007).

This notion of withdrawing from a familiar world into a foreign atmosphere or even into the head of an unusual or unfamiliar character (such as cynical, comical Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) or whimsical “everyman” Tracy Kidder (2003)) led many individuals in the focus groups to compare literary journalism books to anthropological studies. For Seth, Mountains Beyond Mountains “reads like an ethnography” because he views Kidder as a “participant-observer” who has immersed himself in Paul Farmer’s international “culture.” Others echoed this sentiment as they referenced the first-person perspective relayed by Kidder’s narration:

Kim: I like the fact that you’re getting someone’s perspective, which is ethnographic, too. I mean, I just like the fact that you’re in someone’s world and you’re not taking all the time to couch it and do the counterargument and all that stuff, and you can just immerse yourself.

Shannon: It’s like you can explore that culture from, you know, the comfort and the safety of your own experience, so you almost feel like you’re being taken somewhere where you can’t go. Or you don’t want to go, but you can still experience it.

Ryan: Oh, I like what you’re saying about someplace you don’t want to go. A lot of times that’s something where I will, you know, I like to, I
would rather read something that I can learn about that I didn’t know about it. (Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007)

For these readers, the “wow” factor, pleasurable diversionary experience and surveillance opportunities seem to be inseparable from the ethnographic and informational voices of the books’ authors.

The use of books for vicarious, voyeuristic experiences is also often intertwined with an element of morbid curiosity, as some readers’ comments reveal. Two focus group participants, reflecting upon Mountains Beyond Mountains, went so far as to suggest that literary journalism books with social or political relevance are nearly always hinged upon voyeuristic tendencies to examine others’ discontent or dire circumstances:

**Shannon:** I’m just trying to think of how many of these sorts of books come out about something really good that has happened. You know what I mean? Or something really positive, that’s not controversial.

**Kim:** Don’t they, though? I mean, there’s gotta be a bunch of books about schoolchildren being—

**Shannon:** I haven’t read any. (Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007)

Shannon’s and Kim’s failure to remember any “good” or “positive” subjects of contemporary social or political literary journalism books testifies, to some degree, to the validity of the notion that literary journalism readers use the books to satisfy a fascination with negative circumstances or unfavorable situations. Their comments
might also reflect a relative lack of upbeat, optimistic media of this type in American culture. It would be inappropriate, however, to regard their opinions as representative of a broader population or based on extensive knowledge of contemporary literary journalism books. At the very least, the women’s inability to remember “positive” literary journalism that may be used for vicarious and voyeuristic ends suggests that satisfying a curiosity about others’ suffering is connected to their own personal tastes and expectations of these types of books.

Despite the sometimes-pessimistic tone or content of books like Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) and Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003), certain readers satisfy their “morbid curiosity” in order to deepen their self-understanding. As Sophia explained, besides using the book as an educational source in college, some people read Nickel and Dimed to better understand both themselves and others:

**Sophia:** [W]hen my classmates were reading it, there was a lot of what you could call a personal discussion. It was a freshman level class, so there [weren’t] a lot of people that really had anything to do with writing theory or anything yet. So there was a lot of personal things, and I think that it was mostly the middle class and what made people interested in it was there must have been a sense of like, they already knew something was wrong so they were curious about reading it because even though it might make you feel guilty, it’s like, you sort of… I don’t want to say the word obligation, that sounds negative, but they wanted to know, or they wanted to look for solutions. Especially in an anthropology class… they attract pretty do-good-y people.

**Andrea:** I think that my friends who have read it often use it as sort of the reassertion of class-consciousness in the upper-middle class, because its like, “Oh! We’re not just people, we’re upper-middle-class people.” People who are white and upper-middle-class [and] come
from the suburbs don’t have to think of themselves as racialized and
classified beings, but reading books like this makes it relative and you
have to think about where you are in the scale and what your role is in
systems like this is. (Nickel and Dimed Focus Group, 2007)

For Andrea and Sophia, as for their friends, the voyeuristic, vicarious experience
afforded by Ehrenreich’s narration in Nickel and Dimed (2001) enabled them to define
themselves against lower-class Americans—to see what their lives were not like—and
by doing so, to gain a sense of their own position(s) in social hierarchies. While the
two readers’ comments raise many of the informational and social uses of literary
journalism books that I have already discussed (including educational motivations and
social consciousness about the act(s) of reading), these reflections are also pertinent to
the interrelated themes of vicarious experience, voyeurism and morbid curiosity. They
suggest that the manner in which information is relayed in Nickel and Dimed allows
for multiple expectations and uses of the book, and other first-person literary
journalism works like it.

Other Uses: Value Confirmation and Political Identification

Additional uses of books like Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) and
Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) that rely on a degree of vicarious
experience are typically for confirmation or change of personal values or beliefs. One
Literary Journalism Survey (2007) respondent said he or she read Nickel and Dimed
because “I heard it was really good and would change my perspective on the working
class.” This individual clearly intended for the book to provoke or alter his or her thoughts and values. Most readers, however, said they had wanted to read *Nickel and Dimed* and/or *Mountains Beyond Mountains* not because they were seeking change, but simply because they shared the authors’ views on current events and issues (both prior to and during reading) and wanted to reinforce them. An ample number of survey respondents revealed this expectation of literary journalism books; 26 percent (29 of 109) of individuals who had read either *Nickel and Dimed* or *Mountains Beyond Mountains* said they had expected “that the author’s views on the subject matter would be consistent with my own views on the subject matter.”

A few focus group participants put this concept into their own words. Krystal said she read *Nickel and Dimed* because she trusted her sister’s recommendation of the book. She had been aware, before reading the book, that it might “reinforce” what she knew and believed about issues of low-wage work and welfare. Speaking more generally, Sophia echoed the same belief that individuals might only read socially and politically relevant literary journalism books to gather support for their own, personal political views, rather than because they were aiming for the books to alter them. After all, she reasoned, “if you approached [*Nickel and Dimed*] hostilely, I could certainly see [how you could] break [down] Barbara [Ehrenreich], what she says.” Patrick and Krystal backed up Sophia’s statement:

**Patrick:** I think it has the potential to change views, just like most political nonfiction books, but I don’t know how much it actually does,
because people tend to read what they already agree with or what they think they’re going to agree with. You know, I don’t think too many hardcore, fiscally conservative Republicans read this book and if they did, they would probably rip it apart for whatever reason, just like I don’t read Sean Cannity’s book.

**Krystal:** They’d probably go into it thinking they were going to rip it apart—

**Patrick:** Yeah, or not read it at all. Yeah, so, that’s not anything against the book, that’s just the way people tend to treat politics and divisive opinions.

**Krystal:** And their free time. (Nickel and Dimed Focus Group, 2007)

This perspective suggests that the books might reaffirm readers’ personal opinions and increase their likelihood of taking part in, or continuing to take part in, social or political activities.

**Gratifications of Nickel and Dimed and Mountains Beyond Mountains**

The quantitative information I will analyze in this section comes primarily from the following chart of Literary Journalism Survey (2007) respondents’ “experiences reading,” or gratifications, of *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. The table below contains readers’ responses to the questions “How would you characterize your experience reading *Nickel and Dimed*? (please check all that apply)” and “How would you characterize your experience reading *Mountains Beyond Mountains*? (please check all that apply).”

116
Table 6.3: Individuals’ gratifications or “experiences reading” *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nickel and Dimed</th>
<th>Mountains Beyond Mountains</th>
<th>Response Total</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informational/Educational uses/gratifications</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped me to interpret important events</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped me to solve problems</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided true, factual information</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught me something new</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vicarious, escapist uses/gratifications</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt as though I were taking part in others’ lives without actually being there</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped me get away from daily worries</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brought some excitement to my life</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social use/gratification</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave me something to talk about with others</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other uses/gratifications</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertaining</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author’s views on the subject matter were consistent with my own views</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed my political views</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total respondents</strong></td>
<td>85</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>108</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)
Vicarious Gratifications

While using literary journalism books for vicarious or escapist motivations was a topic raised in multiple ways by many focus group and survey participants, it is notable that more people reported receiving gratifications of this type than had anticipated them. While 28 percent (30 of 109) of readers said they expected to “feel as though I am taking part in others’ lives without actually being there” before reading *Nickel and Dimed* or *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, 45 percent (49 of 108) said they this was how they felt after reading one or both of the books. This difference may be compared visually in Figure 6.1 (below).
Figure 6.1: Vicarious uses and gratifications of *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains*

(Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)

The increase in the frequency of readers’ sense of vicarious experience, reflected by the above chart, indicates that the books provided significant escapist gratifications, whether or not readers had originally planned on using them to “get away.”
Echoing this vicarious gratification, a number of Literary Journalism Survey (2007) respondents who chose to characterize their experiences reading *Nickel and Dimed* in their own words (by selecting “other” as a response to the multiple choice questions about gratifications) presented the idea that their experiences and knowledge might have been only available to an “insider” to the culture under investigation, were it not for the books’ first-person presentations. Many respondents wrote about how one or both of the books “provided insight” and “insider” perspectives that were not common in other media sources. In addition, a number of readers’ comments revealed that they related closely to the people, places and issues in the books. As the following quotes demonstrate, readers summarized what they learned from the books as if they had personally cleaned hotel toilets (as Ehrenreich does in *Nickel and Dimed* (2001)) or hiked for hours through rural Haiti to visit patients (as Kidder and Farmer do in *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003)). Of *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, readers wrote:

I learned a lot about TB [tuberculosis], about the hierarchies of medical coverages/costs, even more about how shitty American foreign policy is… and the list goes on and on.

Difficult to quantify, but saw a different perspective on life than my own more clearly.

Of *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001), readers said:

Learned about the hard realities of minimum wage workers and how difficult it is to get by and to be comfortable.
The little details & problems of living on minimum wage such as not being able to afford cookware, or dishes & therefore live off fast food & other poor nutrition sources.

Can’t believe some of the troubles that occur with minimum wage jobs, particular task[s], wages, living by paycheck to paycheck, etc.

That it is nearly impossible for people on minimum wage to support themselves, which means they will never be able to participate in the “American Dream.”

Insights into how a person can become trapped in a low-wage lifestyle; 20th century indentured servitude as it were. A hole from which there is no escape.

Being poor sucks. (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)

The bitter and angry tone in which many of these respondents write reflects the role that emotion plays in delivering vicarious gratifications, and in making readers connect with and remember the books. Based on these comments, it seems that feeling personally outraged at, involved in or even implicated by the situations described in the books makes readers remember and relate with the information and perspectives presented.

**Informational and Educational Gratifications**

Many of the gratifications obtained as a result of vicarious and escapist needs and uses—particularly those mentioned by anonymous survey respondents quoted in the previous section—may also be viewed as informational and educational gratifications. Informational and educational needs were readers’ most common
reasons to “use” Kidder’s (2003) and Ehrenreich’s (2001) literary journalism books, and gratifications that satisfied those needs were indeed frequently obtained. In response to the question, “After reading either Nickel and Dimed or Mountains Beyond Mountains, did you gain any knowledge?” 86 percent (85 of 99) of readers answered “Yes” (please see Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2: Informational gratifications (evidenced by knowledge gained) of Nickel and Dimed and Mountains Beyond Mountains

(Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)
When prompted to briefly describe what they learned in an open-ended question, 82 individuals chose to respond, validating their claims of gaining knowledge. Many respondents broadly referenced the issues in the book. The following two comments pertain to informational and educational gratifications obtained from *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003):

- Learned more about Paul Farmer, his work, global health crises, more about Haiti.
- Tracy Kidder’s book taught me much about the complex political and medical situation in Haiti today, beginning with a very accessible narration of significant events in the past. (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)

While responses like these are vague, the fact that many readers could describe the informational gist of either book reflects that both books and their subjects remained in readers’ memory.

Further support for the books’ staying power in readers’ memory and civic awareness is found among a smaller subsection of readers: those who took away specific types of information from the books. The following reader response reveals this trend: “From *Nickel and Dimed* I learned never to hire a cleaning service as they don’t do a good job. I learned that Walmart screws over their workers and doesn’t allow legal unionization (more, of course!).” Another reader noted gaining “new facts and statistics about employment and unemployment” (Literary Journalism Survey,
2007). The specialized areas in which readers focused their comments are significant because they indicate that the books delivered very specific (and diverse) gratifications. Personalized increases in knowledge testify to the theory behind media uses and gratifications studies: that individuals use particular forms of media to obtain particular gratifications (Katz, Blumler, Gurevitch, 1973-1974).

Many other survey respondents described what they learned from one or both books by framing their statements with references to their previous lack of knowledge. This manner of response indicates that the experience of using books for informational purposes results in gratifications on a personal and psychological level by bolstering readers’ knowledge. Of *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003), for instance, readers said:

I was unaware of the abhorrent health conditions in Haiti, and I think books like that serve to open our eyes to the tragedies that occur so close to our own country.

I learned more about the terrible health conditions that Dr. Farmer encountered and the great lengths they all went to to help the people of Haiti.

It made me aware of a situation that I was previously uninformed of and it inspired me.

I became more aware of the medical crises that under-developed countries face.

*And of Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001), readers wrote that they gained:

Better understanding of the challenges facing the working poor.
More understanding of the need for a living wage in the U.S. Strict standards regarding safety in workplaces and workers rights. (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)

The repetition of phrases like “becoming more aware” and “better understanding” among these readers is a clear indication that the books increased readers’ knowledge and consciousness of particular socially and politically relevant issues and events.

Focus group respondents also discussed their informational gratifications, but in a less detailed manner. They tended to bring up informational gratifications only in relation to how and why they learned specific knowledge. For instance, Seth told others what he learned from Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) as he simultaneously explained how he appreciated Kidder’s first-person narration:

I read the whole book, and the thing that I got out of it most was like, you feel really connected to Paul Farmer, the doctor. I guess you develop a relationship with him because you’re experiencing it as Tracy Kidder did, and you’re at his point of view. But the thing that I also found interesting was I came away with a lot of information about international health and TB [tuberculosis] in the developing world, but it’s not about that. It’s about this one guy’s quest to fight TB. But it’s also informational at the same time. (Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007)

Though Seth believed that Mountains Beyond Mountains was primarily about Paul Farmer, his informational gratifications (“information about international health and TB in the developing world”) were only indirectly related to Farmer. Gaining this type of knowledge as an unanticipated consequence of reading about Farmer and his work
might make it obvious to a reader like Seth that *Mountains Beyond Mountains* can be read to satisfy educational needs.

Another gratification in the same informational vein that *Mountains Beyond Mountains* and *Nickel and Dimed* deliver is providing readers with new points of view. The majority of Literary Journalism Survey (2007) respondents (91 percent, or 39 of 43) who said that they changed after reading either book said they “just thought about things from a new or different perspective” (please see Table 6.4).
Table 6.4: Changes in political or social beliefs or actions after reading *Nickel and Dimed* or *Mountains Beyond Mountains*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Response Total</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I voted (in a political election) differently than I originally might have.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I donated money or volunteered for a charitable organization related to an issue I read about in the book(s).</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I contacted or visited a public official (at any level of government) to express my opinion on an issue I read about in the book(s).</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wrote to a newspaper or magazine to express my opinion on an issue I read about in the book(s).</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I took part in a protest or march related to an issue I read about in the book(s).</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I signed a petition on an issue I read about in the book(s).</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I bought or chose not to buy a certain product because of information I learned from the book(s).</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I just thought about things from a new or different perspective.</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Respondents</strong></td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)

When prompted to state specifically what they learned from either book, a number of readers consciously acknowledged changing their perspectives, often also implicitly referencing vicarious learning experiences:

Both gave me a much deeper understanding of problems I knew were there, but only on the abstract level.
How another class of people that I rarely if ever come into contact with lives, what they worry about, and what their perspective on life is.

Some readers even said they felt their lives had been profoundly changed after reading the books:

I learned that I’m much more privileged than I had previously felt I was. I gained a new appreciation for my life. (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)

Mountains was amazing and really changed the way I think about the world, and my place in it. I liked it so much, that when I found out a colleague of mine was meeting with Jim Kim [a co-worker of Paul Farmer’s], I got him to sign a copy of the book for me. He wrote “if you ever have an interest in a career in global health, drop me a line” and gave me his email address. What a cool guy! (Anonymous, 2007)

The fact that the readers point directly to the books for changing their understanding of themselves, of others, and of social and political issues in today’s world, is a strong demonstration that Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) and Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) deliver important psychological and emotional gratifications. The books’ ability to change readers’ perceptions also speaks to the power of the books to satisfy informational and educational needs.

Despite the high percentage of readers who obtained informational and educational gratifications from books like Nickel and Dimed and Mountains Beyond

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16 An individual who had been invited to take the online survey, but reached the survey after it closed sent me an online message through Facebook.com, from which this quote is taken. This person knew that my survey was related to Mountains Beyond Mountains, and chose to email me about gratifications he obtained from the book (I had not prompted him to reveal any aspect of his experiences reading it) (Anonymous, 2007).
Mountains, it is important to note that a smaller number of readers cited this gratification than had expected it. To be more precise, while 69 percent (75 of 108) of readers expected that the books “would provide true, factual information,” only 55 percent (59 of 108) believed that the books had provided “true, factual information” (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007).

Focus group participants also revealed skepticism of the truth or educational nature of the books’ content. After participants read a segment of Mountains Beyond Mountains in which Kidder (2003) recounts a tale from Paul Farmer’s past (told to him by Farmer and/or others) (pp. 33-44), I asked, “Does the author’s perspective in the book make you more or less likely to consider the book as a source of information?” As they gave their answers, individuals seemed hesitant to support a definitive “yes” or “no” to the question, and instead brought up Kidder’s unavoidable subjectivities as a reporter and author writing about events he did not witness:

Shannon: I think, for me, it makes the author… I don’t know if this is the right way to say it… it makes the author more transparent, almost, because one thing that struck me reading it is that, like when you read any narrative that’s in first-person, the narrator always has that sense of omniscience. And he has that, even though it’s, you know, literary journalism. Like I just was looking at the page in front of me, on [page] 35 and it’s the first paragraph, when he’s talking about a past moment with the doctor [reading from page]: “When he first interviewed her about a year before, she’d taken a mild offense at his questions.” Blah, blah, blah. He had no way of knowing that. And he didn’t cite it to the doctor. He’s talking about it as if he just knows this. And so I think you want to believe it because we’re taught to read fiction that way. So the narrator is speaking, the narrator is like the voice of god and you believe what the narrator is writing, sort of. So I found myself not, like I would
have with an article, I wasn’t questioning, “Ok, well maybe that’s not true. Or maybe that’s, you know, his perspective.”

**Kim:** I think it really shapes who I choose to read. Like, I’m not going to go and read… Rush Limbaugh’s literary journalism text. But, you know, if [it’s] someone who I’m interested in and I’m interested in what their opinions are, and who I kind of have a certain amount of trust for, or think I trust, then I’ll choose to read it. And I tend to kind of take it at face value, which may or may not be good. But… yeah. It definitely is a lot about the person and their personal opinions.

**Lia:** At first I thought because it was nonfiction, that we’re trained to think that nonfiction is real. But I think [Kim’s] point is really good. I mean, I, too, if I were to read something that wasn’t politically agreeable to me, I would find these things.

…

**Megan:** I work in the news-slash-propaganda industry right now, and I was a journalism major, and whenever I read things like this, those two backgrounds combine and kind of make me want to question things more than I think I would if I hadn’t had that training. I might not do it while I’m reading it, but I would definitely go back and ask questions about his authority. (Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007)

Two important factors that might influence readers’ belief in the accuracy and truth of literary journalism emerge from the above discussion. First, it becomes clear that for readers like Megan, who are interested in the independently verifiable nature of nonfiction and traditional “objective” American journalism, the authors’ first-person perspective throws into question the validity of everything he or she writes. And second is that the notion that readers are more likely to find what they expect in literary journalism books (as, perhaps, is true of all media sources). This unconscious self-
gratification might also influence readers’ perceptions of whether they obtain informational or educational gratifications from the books. To put this another way, as Lia and Kim mentioned, readers who know they will find “politically agreeable” perspectives in certain books might be more inclined to also believe that these viewpoints are truthful, regardless of whether they are presented objectively. However, the converse might also be true, and might help to explain the discrepancy in the number of readers who expected to find and actually believed they found informational gratifications: disagreeing with the authors’ perspectives or manner of representation might make readers less likely to report gaining knowledge from the books.

Participants in the Nickel and Dimed Focus Group (2007) spoke about experiencing some of these elements of psychological or political dissonance with Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001). Carrie, for instance, said she had felt frustrated that Ehrenreich never proposed any solutions to the social and political problems she highlighted. This comment spurred similar thoughts from a few others, and eventually led to participants’ acknowledging Ehrenreich’s subjectivities and biases as a writer and reporter:

Carrie: I remember it left me thinking, “I wish she had gone more into what you could do to change [circumstances described in the book]. Or… recommendations.”

Katie Aberbach: Was anyone else who read it frustrated with it in the same way?
Krystal: Yeah, I mean, it wasn’t prescriptive. It didn’t give a solution, but I don’t know if she set out to do that. I mean, it would have been nice if she could have done both but…it felt like a complete work.

Sophia: …I agree that the first time I read the book, I was like, “Well, that’s great, but what are we going to do about it?” But I’m not really sure if that was the purpose so much as to get people talking about it. And I have to say, I did appreciate in the beginning of this, that she qualifies herself, saying, “I’m not doing this as some like fun experiment. I recognize that I have all these advantages going for me even. That I can pretend to be a working-class person, but I’m not really a working-class person,” and I appreciated that she sort of qualifies that.

Mandi: I think that’s one of the really important things that creative nonfiction has to do, this kind of creative nonfiction, because you get this personal story, and it’s very easy to present it as: this is absolutely truth. When in fact it’s not. It’s just one more perspective on the experience. So I thought it was so important that she really lays out the fact that she can make a lot of choices here, that she never has to be homeless, that she, you know, can whip out her ATM card when it comes down to it. And I don’t know if that makes me more or less comfortable with her, or with this undertaking.

For these readers, the saving grace of Ehrenreich’s non-”prescriptive” book is her subjective first-person perspective. As I have noted in previous chapters, the book’s basis upon individual experiences and impressions distinguishes Nickel and Dimed (and Mountains Beyond Mountains) from traditional, mainstream print news. Readers who said they did not find educational value, or “true, factual information,” from either of these books may have been cognizant of—and indeed, bothered by—the authors’ lack of objectivity.17

17 In fact, a small number of survey participants noted that they disliked the books. Of Nickel and Dimed, one respondent said: “I did not like the book. I thought the author was bias and aloof which detracted from my reading experience.” Another said: “I was disappointed in the lack of hard fact
**Social Gratifications**

Social gratifications, another common “expectation” or use of *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003), are also reflected in Literary Journalism Survey (2007) data. Sixty-one percent (66 of 108) of respondents said that either or both of the books “gave me something to talk about with others.” As with the gratifications of a sense of vicarious experience and escape from daily life, more readers received social gratifications than had expected them; only 53 percent (57 of 108) of readers said they had anticipated discussing the book(s) with others. For a visual comparison of these numbers, please see Figure 6.3 (below).

and found it a series of revealing anecdotes. I much preferred [David K.] Shipler’s *The Working Poor* [2005].”
The fact that the number of readers reporting this social use/gratification of the book(s) increased can be interpreted in a few ways. Some readers might have realized the books’ relevance to current social and political issues only after reading them. Another possible explanation is that readers did not anticipate that they would be inclined to discuss the books with others. Regardless of the reason(s) for the greater
number of readers who reported using the books in social situations than had expected
to do so, the increase illustrates that some aspect of the books affected certain readers
to such a degree that they were able to retain information and bring it up in
conversation with others.

The Nickel and Dimed Focus Group (2007) participants spoke specifically
about the impact of *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) on their social
consciousness, and on the political beliefs of their friends and relatives as well. Andrea
said that she believed literary journalism books had the potential to convert “people
who are going through their lives apolitically” or who are “in the middle of the
[political] polar spectrum” to believers in particular social or political causes, because
they could hasten a moment or period of social “awakening.” This type of
“awakening” or self-realization was described as an individual change, but one with
significant social ramifications. Andrea recounted the experience her mother had had
reading *Nickel and Dimed*:

> It was the first time she was like, “Oh, wow. Maybe it sucks for the
> woman who comes to our house, you know, once a month or whatever,
> maybe this is something I should be thinking about. Maybe my ultra-
> liberal kids have a little point.”

Self-reflection and a reevaluation of social status was indeed a common
consequence of learning new information through *Nickel and Dimed*. Some readers
reflected on the prominence and popularity of *Nickel and Dimed* and similar literary
journalism books in teenagers’ and young adults’ educational settings. Individuals who
are still trying to find their identities and roles in society might be especially apt to experience the books as triggers for “awakening” moments, as Mandi and Sophia’s comments suggest:

**Mandi:** The discussions that I remember my friends having were very personal discussions. It was less about Ehrenreich’s techniques, or you know, like her reporting style or the book itself. No, it was always about like, “Oh, gee, you know, when I think about my own life and all of the privileges and advantages that I have had…” Or, you know, “I think about my dad, working whatever job, that was so similar to, or different from, this book.” So it’s always this, a cause for self-reflection.

**Sophia:** I think this is why these books tend to be really popular amongst… I mean, like, this is really popular on college syllabuses now, it’s on my little sister’s for a Philosophy class she’s taking. I think it’s because it does really work well in that in-between phase. Despite all Snoop Dogg’s best efforts, last election showed that people in the 19-to-30 range don’t really have much of a view. So maybe academia will work. (Nickel and Dimed Focus Group, 2007)

As these reflections reveal, the gratifications delivered through gaining information and a new personal perspective are often social in nature. Acquiring knowledge through Kidder’s (2003) and Ehrenreich’s (2001) narratorial filters may thus translate to readers’ better understanding themselves in relation to others.

**Gratifications Evidenced by Behavioral Changes**

In assessing gratifications of the two literary journalism books, I was particularly interested in whether *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) or *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) had resulted in any significant changes in
readers’ lives, whether in their beliefs and values, or in their actions. I have already discussed many of the cognitive changes among readers as I reviewed vicarious, informational/educational and social gratifications. However, I found that a limited number of readers also made changes in their behavior (having been already influenced by the books to change or reinforce particular opinions or beliefs) after reading *Nickel and Dimed* and/or *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. Forty percent (38 of 95) of Literary Journalism Survey (2007) respondents said they made changes in their “political or social beliefs or actions” after having read either *Nickel and Dimed* or *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, and 43 chose to answer a question about the ways in which they changed after having read the books (refer back to Table 6.4). Of those 43 respondents, 35 percent (15) said they “bought or chose not to buy a certain product because of information I learned from the book(s).” Twenty percent (9) said they “donated money or volunteered for a charitable organization related to an issue I read about in the book(s).” Five said they “voted (in a political election) differently than I originally might have,” while two said they “signed a petition on an issue I read about in the book(s).”

In addition to selecting these options from among a list of indicators of active lifestyle “changes,” six readers listed the differences in their lives under the “other” option. All six are important to note and are listed below (in the order in which they were received):
(1) I give bigger tips and speak more respectfully about different jobs.

(2) (already participate in most of above activities before reading but continued to do so)

(3) I tip service-people as well as I can afford to (in cash) and I NEVER shop at Wal-Mart.

(4) It interested me so much that I read more books about social issues which helps me to feel more educated and knowledgeable about what goes on in the world.

(5) Went to see the play, Nickel and Dimed

(6) I will act more sympathetically toward low-wage workers, i.e., give waitress more tips. (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)

These comments are interesting because they indicate very specific and personalized behavioral changes (with the exception of the second respondent, who simply reinforced already-existing behavioral patterns). The fact that these six respondents chose to put these actions in their own words, despite the fact that they might have easily qualified their behaviors with already-listed options like “I just thought about things from a new or different perspective,” indicates that they possess a sense of pride and purpose in their actions. These write-in results verify that readers actively use the literary journalism books to obtain specific gratifications.

The fact that three respondents shared their more frequent and generous acts of tipping suggests that *Nickel and Dimed*’s (Ehrenreich, 2001) focus on low-wage workers (and particularly on waitresses and maids) provoked sentimental and sympathetic responses among readers. The sixth respondent even qualifies giving more
tips as a way to “act more sympathetically toward low-wage workers,” indicating that although the individual did not initially identify with this group of people, he or she now has a reason to do so. In addition, the third respondent’s comment about never shopping at Wal-Mart suggests that Nickel and Dimed has justified this personal boycott.

The reader who went to see the play adaptation of Nickel and Dimed is also significant because he or she testifies to the power and appeal of the story and content in the book. I find it incredibly interesting that the book was adapted for the stage in productions around the country (Noveck, 2006), and even more so that readers of Nickel and Dimed attended the play (yet, perhaps the intended audience of the Nickel and Dimed play was readers of the original book). In any rate, the act of attending the play indicates that the reader valued the message and content of the book so much that he or she wanted to support it in other media forms—an indication of an even greater personal interest (and potential cognitive change or reinforcement) spurred by the book.

Two readers (the first and fourth on the list) are notable for discussing changes in their personal values. As some focus group participants revealed, socially and politically relevant literary journalism books like Nickel and Dimed and Mountains Beyond Mountains often change or reinforce individuals’ beliefs before they prompt significant change in actions. For Kim, for instance, the wealth of new information and
perspectives in the literary journalism book *Fast Food Nation* (Schlosser, 2001) was what finally convinced her to change her eating habits and social behavior:

**Kim:** *Fast Food Nation* wasn’t the first thing I read about the food industry, but it definitely solidified my beliefs about it, and it definitely was the catalyst that made me start completely changing my purchasing habits. Like, I literally eat vegetarian out now. Unless it’s organic or free-range or something like that.

**Katie Aberbach:** So it was really after you read that book that—

**Kim:** Yeah. And I mean, I’d done a bunch [of research, prior to reading the book]. There was a *New York Times* article before *Fast Food Nation* that was probably more meaningful to me. But like, yeah. And I mean, like… the “buy local” stuff, I do all of that too, and I feel like that kind of came along later, so I can’t really say that did it but you know. Yeah. And I’ll join food co-ops if they’re available… *Fast Food Nation* definitely was like a point for me, where it changed how I did things. (Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007)

More than simply altering her “purchasing habits,” Kim changed her “eating out” habits—a social and behavioral change that also contributed later to even more behavioral and social changes: she strengthened connections to her community by joining food co-ops and buying local food. Although this anecdotal testament to the potential of literary journalism books to prompt or reinforce individuals’ decisions to change does not involve the two books I am focusing on, *Fast Food Nation* matches up with *Mountains Beyond Mountains* and *Nickel and Dimed* in terms of its social and political relevance and first-person narratorial style. Kim’s account of cognitive and
behavioral change is particularly significant, even if not representative of a majority of literary journalism readers.

Through individual comments, stories and thoughts, as well as quantitative data, literary journalism book readers have shared the ways in which they have used (or, in some cases, refused to use) *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) (among others) to shape or bolster their social and political consciousness. Close studies of the uses and gratifications of Ehrenreich’s (2001) and Kidder’s (2003) books among a generally young, educated and white population reveal that socially and politically relevant literary journalism books are used for and typically deliver gratifications of information/education, social awareness and connection, and vicarious, voyeuristic experiences, among other factors.

The next chapter compares readers’ uses and gratifications of *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* with those of print news media, to assess whether the books are perceived and used in the same way as other forms of mainstream print news.
Chapter 7. Comparing Uses and Gratifications of Mainstream Print News with Literary Journalism Books

While the previous chapter focused mainly on a specific group of readers’ uses and gratifications of *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003), this chapter will consider a broader population: approximately 275 individuals (more than 260 survey respondents and the same 15 focus group participants I wrote about in Chapter Six\(^\text{18}\)) who answered questions about their use of mainstream print news (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007; Nickel and Dimed Focus Group, 2007; Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007). As I consider the opinions of this group, I will show that the uses and gratifications of socially and politically relevant literary journalism books generally match those of mainstream print news, providing support for my hypothesis (H\(_{1b}\)) that, *readers turn to literary journalism books like Nickel and Dimed and Mountains Beyond Mountains for many of the same uses and gratifications that they look for and obtain from mainstream print news media.*

As in the previous chapter, I will focus upon the following uses and gratifications: “informational/educational” (in which readers use the books as an

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\(^{18}\) Although I might have been able to refer to previous studies to learn about uses and gratifications of mainstream print news, I chose to gather my own information for this chapter of the thesis. I believe this technique has enabled me to make a more adept comparison between literary journalism books and mainstream print news, and has resulted in information and analysis that is consistent and relevant for my particular sample population.
opportunity to learn new information or gain new perspectives), “social” (through which readers use the books or the books’ content as a tool with which to communicate with others or communicate messages about themselves to others), and a third, broader group of motivations that include behavioral reinforcement or changes prompted by certain gratifications. Finally, as I compare vicarious, escapist gratifications of the media forms, I will look closely at individuals’ opinions about the role of authorial voice and first-person perspective in the literary journalism books and mainstream print media, in order to explore the ways in which gratifications of the books might differ from—or even be more valuable, powerful or long-lasting than—those of mainstream print media.

**Identifying “Mainstream Print News”**

Before assessing the uses and gratifications of mainstream print news, it is important to identify which forms qualify as “mainstream print news” for the population surveyed. My online survey asked respondents to “rank the three forms of print and online (print-based) media” that they “most commonly use to get news and political information.” The following pie chart reveals the frequencies with which respondents chose certain types of print-based news media:
As the results demonstrate, the two most common forms of mainstream “print” news among these readers are actually digital (yet still print-based) media: online newspapers, chosen by 35 percent (94 of 266) of respondents; and web sites for
domestic mainstream media outlets like CNN.com and MSNBC.com, chosen by 20 percent (50 of 266) of respondents (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007). The third most popular is the type of news media that perhaps most frequently comes to mind when Americans discuss traditional journalism (and, ironically, the form for which the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2006) foresaw an impending demise when they asked whether 2005 would be remembered as “the year when journalism in print began to die” (p. 4)): newspapers, chosen by 19 percent of respondents (50 of 266). The remainder of questions in the Literary Journalism Survey (2007) asked respondents for information about their three most-commonly used forms of print media, thus assuring that my analysis of their answers to these questions is relevant for print and online newspapers and domestic news web sites. Most focus group participants concentrated on print-based online news and newspapers when they spoke about mainstream print media, as well (Nickel and Dimed Focus Group, 2007; Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007).

Uses of Mainstream Print News

The quantitative information I will analyze in this section comes primarily from the following chart of survey respondents’ “expectations,” or uses, of print and online newspapers and domestic news web sites. The table contains readers’ responses to the prompt, “Think about the three forms of print/online news media you selected above.
What are your expectations of these forms of news?” As in the last chapter, I am presenting the data in this table according to the major types of uses and gratifications delivered (“informational/educational,” “vicarious, escapist,” “social,” and “other” types); however, in the actual survey, readers were asked to select these uses and gratifications from a randomly ordered list.
Table 7.1: Individuals’ uses, or “expectations,” of mainstream print media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uses/Gratifications</th>
<th>Response Total</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help me to interpret important events</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help me to solve problems</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide true, factual information</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach me something new</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They let me feel as though I am taking part in others’ lives without actually being there</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help me get away from daily worries</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring some excitement to my life</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give me something to talk about with others</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertaining</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist’s views on the subject matter are consistent with my own views</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change my political views</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total respondents</td>
<td>267</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)
Informational and Educational Uses

The most strongly represented uses of mainstream print news were those that satisfied informational and educational needs. Eighty-one percent of respondents (216 of 267) said they expect print news to teach them “something new;” for Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) and Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003), a similar proportion of readers (85 percent) had expected this informational use and gratification. Sixty-four percent of respondents (172 of 267) said they expect the news to provide “true, factual information,” a percentage that also roughly corresponds with the 69 percent of respondents who had expected the literary journalism books to satisfy this need.

In contrast to the two informational and educational expectations that appear remarkably similar for mainstream print news and literary journalism books, however, one expectation of this type was considerably more popular for mainstream print news than it was for the literary journalism books: helping readers to “interpret important events.” Barely more than half of Nickel and Dimed and Mountains Beyond Mountains readers (52 percent, or 12 of 23 respondents) said they expected the books to “help me to interpret important events,” but 72 percent of respondents (193 of 267) said they hold this expectation of mainstream print media (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007).

This divergence from the otherwise strong correlations between informational/educational uses of print media and literary journalism books is likely
explained by the degree of recency and broad relevance of the news and information presented in the two forms. While print-based online news may be updated and accessed almost immediately, and newspapers are distributed with fresh information daily (or in some cases, at least weekly), \textit{Nickel and Dimed} and \textit{Mountains Beyond Mountains} only exist as singular media forms. They were both published more than four years ago, and their content will likely never be updated (unless new editions include updated or additional introductions or epilogues). The books may help readers to interpret a fixed number of important events (namely, those related to welfare, poverty and low-wage jobs (in the case of \textit{Nickel and Dimed}); and global poverty, international disease and health initiatives (in the case of \textit{Mountains Beyond Mountains})). But unlike mainstream print news, the books cannot be used to shed light on a wide and ever-changing range of current events, and are therefore less likely to be used by readers in this manner. As focus group participant Andrea said, a literary journalism book “isn’t a headline. There’s no peg, there’s no compelling why-are-we-telling-it-now” element within (Nickel and Dimed Focus Group, 2007).

A number of Literary Journalism Survey (2007) respondents echoed the expectation of using mainstream print media to satisfy educational and informational needs, in the open-ended “other” answer to the question about expectations. Some examples of responses to “What are your expectations of [mainstream print media]?” are listed below:
Let me know what is going on in the world.

Make me aware of events occurring around me even though I live in the “bubble” of grad school.

They provide complex information that, in aggregate, inch[es] closer to truth.

Stay informed about current events.

Provide insight into existing knowledge on events and involved parties’ opinions on a topic.

Keep me informed…

They provide details. (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)

The notion that these forms of media relay information about a broader world than individuals’ small “bubbles,” and keep readers up-to-date by offering “details,” “complex information” and “involved parties’ opinions” on current events and topics clearly speaks to the informational and educational nature of expectations. Using these forms of media for surveillance (alluded to by the concept of monitoring or “staying informed”) is also apparent in some of these comments, particularly for those who suggest that they use mainstream print news to gain information that they would not normally come across.

Focus group participants’ comments also highlighted this need for mainstream news to educate them about international current events. For instance, Mandi said: “I have always had the sense that news has to be whatever is very current. It’s what is happening today, and it’s what is happening with people who are far more important
than I am” (Nickel and Dimed Focus Group, 2007). Likewise, Seth said, “when you read the newspaper or a magazine, you’re reading … for information.” He continued to explain this idea later in the session:

I think it’s the whole system of journalism itself that’s been institutionalized. If you’re going back, like if you ever watch those old movies from the 40s, the black-and-whites, with the reporter? You know the reporter’s always the good guy, going on the beat or whatever, trying to write a story…and then, it’s kind of inculcated in us that they’re out to tell us the truth. So when you read the newspaper… I think it’s kind of recent that we’ve become more skeptical…. So then some people are like, “We read this to tell us the truth, we trust them to report the news…” (Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007)

Seth’s comments reflect not only this informational use of mainstream journalism, but also a sense of cynicism toward and frustration with mainstream media that had been discussed frequently throughout the Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group (2007). His thoughts about “old” “black-and-whites” likely refer to such classic movies as *The Front Page* (Milestone, 1931), *His Girl Friday* (Hawks, 1940) and *Call Northside 777* (Hathaway, 1948), in which journalists were portrayed as heroes for their unswerving commitment to uncover and then relay truth to the masses. Seth’s admission, then, of himself and others becoming “more skeptical” of the news suggests that journalists and journalism have failed to live up to these expectations when they do not seem to inform or educate.  

Skepticism of the mainstream media—and using

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19 This reference to American popular culture’s strong influence on individuals’ expectations and understandings of journalism fits well with the ideas of University of Southern California journalism professor Joe Saltzman (2005), who argues that Hollywood’s depictions of journalists “have an enormous influence on how the public perceives and judges the news media,” and consequently also
mainstream media itself to reinforce feelings of skepticism and distrust—will be addressed shortly.

**Social Uses**

Another important use that mainstream print media is utilized for more commonly than literary journalism books is as a tool or point of reference for social contact and interpersonal relationships. While 70 percent of Literary Journalism Survey (2007) respondents (188 of 267) said that they expect the mainstream mass media to give them “something to talk about with others,” only 52 percent of respondents who had read one or both of the literary journalism books said they also had expected this social use of the books. Perhaps because much of mainstream mass media’s social uses are not commonly discussed or acknowledged, no focus group participants or survey respondents voiced clear opinions (in their own words) about how they expect to use the news in relating to or communicating with others.

Impact “the public’s support of the effectiveness and freedom of the news media” (p. 1). In the 1930s and 1940s, Saltzman notes, “practically every popular actor eventually played a journalist,” a trend that encouraged audiences to identify and sympathize with journalists. In recent decades, however, journalists more often appear on-screen as the ones that “audiences root against” (p. 30).
**Vicarious Uses**

While informational/educational and social uses appear to be frequently expected of mainstream print news, the percentages of survey respondents who said they expect vicarious or escapist gratifications from mainstream print news were significantly fewer. Only 14 percent of respondents (36 of 267) said they expect mainstream print news to let them feel like they are “taking part in others’ lives without actually being there,” and focus group participants’ comments did not address this expectation, either. For literary journalism book readers, however, this use (and gratification) was more strongly represented in both the survey and focus groups; 27 percent of readers said they anticipated feeling that they were in another person’s world, before reading *Nickel and Dimed* and/or *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007). In addition, as I discussed previously, focus group participants frequently expressed this sentiment of expecting vicarious, escapist and voyeuristic uses of the books (Nickel and Dimed Focus Group, 2007; Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007).

**Other Uses: Value Confirmation (or Rejection) and Political Identification**

Some additional uses that were evidenced by individuals’ own thoughts and statements include value confirmation (or rejection) and political identification. As I noted in Chapter Six, a number of focus group participants shared the opinion that
most book consumers would not choose to read socially- or politically-oriented literary journalism books with which they disagreed; rather, they believed, most individuals are inclined to pick up books about which they have no strong opinions, or with which they believe they already agree, in order to reinforce or shape pre-existing beliefs and values. The notion that mainstream print news could be used to confirm values was also raised in focus group discussions. Shannon’s comment about literary journalism books’ uses also exemplifies one way in which the use of mainstream mass media for “value confirmation” was expressed:

I think anything like this [Mountains Beyond Mountains], whether it’s fiction or nonfiction, I mean, you read it to either affirm or contradict your world view. Like, even when we read the news, we’re biased readers. And I don’t think we’re always, you know, critical biased readers, we just kind of read to understand what we already know or to make a judgment about something we don’t. (Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007)

Despite Shannon’s statement that using mainstream print news to affirm or contradict views is not always a “critical” act, a number of readers of mainstream print news do seek to reinforce or maintain critical perspectives on the news. Focus group and survey participants revealed varying levels of skepticism of American mainstream mass media, as they reflected on popular forms of print and online news (this theme was also raised earlier by Seth’s allusion to expecting—yet not always receiving—truthful information from mainstream journalism). It might seem particularly unlikely that individuals would continue to read (and indeed, to essentially support, by virtue of
subscribing to or frequently accessing) mainstream news media with which they are frustrated and cynical. However, Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group (2007) participants Lia and Kim revealed that they often reinforce political views and values by confirming their skepticism or distrust of particular media forms:

**Kim:** There’s a point where you’re just kind of seeking out your own viewpoints and saying, ‘Oh, Okay, I can now... yes, I was right, and I justified this now... and there are the people who are like… I don’t know, I have a friend who is like a true blue liberal but she loves to watch Fox News because it makes her angry, there are people who go and seek out the counter viewpoint. And I have a thing: I don’t read books by people like Rush Limbaugh, but I love going to their web sites. Like, absolutely love to see what they talk about online. And how their sentence structure [looks] and stuff like that. So, you have moments I think where you look for the enemy but...

**Lia:** But something else... See I always sometimes listen to the *O’Reilly Factor*, because I always say it’s like, you know, watch out for the enemy.

For these two focus group participants (as well as for Kim’s friend), “knowing the enemy” effectively translates into expecting particular news media formats or programs to be inadequate—at the same time as it creates patterns of regular consumption of news media.

When Lia later expressed a distrust of mainstream print news again, she linked world events and their impact on her political view to her daily news-reading habits. Underlying her comment seemed to be a sentiment of distrust, not only for individual media outlets, but also for the entire institution of mainstream American journalism:

I feel like maybe this is an age thing, potentially, or maybe it’s 9/11 but I feel like after 9/11, I’m so much more skeptical about the news and
more invested in finding other countries’ news. And I wrote a paper for [a] critical theory class on post-9/11 news reporting, and that was, doing research for that also sort of… seeing ideological state apparatus. Media at work. Sort of revealing. And it sort of makes me skeptical. But not as skeptical as I feel like I should be. I’ll still read things in the Washington Post, and be like, “Okay, now I can move on with my life.”

During Lia’s comment, a number of other participants nodded their heads in agreement, and a few mentioned “alternative” sources of print news they had begun to seek out in the past few years, including international news web sites like BBC.com (Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007). What is perhaps most intriguing and relevant to this thesis from Lia’s statement, however, is her contradictory stance on mainstream print news sources like the Washington Post. While she is quick to speak about her no-longer-high level of trust for mainstream news after witnessing important political events in recent years, and conducting her own research into the relationship between news and society, Lia admits that she still reads these same forms of media, and trusts them more than she believes she should. Her opinion that she is “not as skeptical as I feel like I should be” indicates notable ambivalence about mainstream print news. This practice of using media forms to both gain information—an act that requires a certain level of trust—and to simultaneously reinforce political and ideological perspectives that undermine that trust, helps to explain why those skeptical of certain media forms still might use them to obtain particular gratifications. Trust, it seems, is not always an essential prerequisite for patterns of media use, expectations or gratifications.
A significant level of skepticism and media use for reinforcement of anti-mainstream media values was also evident among the 42 open-ended “Other” responses to the Literary Journalism Survey (2007) question: “What are your expectations of [the three forms of print/online news media you use most commonly]?” Among these 42, at least 10 reflect varying degrees of skepticism and distrust of mainstream print news and journalists. Examples of such responses are included below:

- They push news at me that someone else considers of value.
- They show me HOW facts are being presented. Not necessarily what the facts are.
- To monitor their validity.
- They help me question the validity of what the media provides and what they hide.
- I expect there to [be] bias on occasion.
- The[y] are a broad overview of current events, but can be biased if not thoroughly examined.

In these examples, notions like “validity” of news sources (as, perhaps, factual and accurate) are apparent. These readers do not hide their beliefs and expectations that the news may be “biased on occasion.” The fact that readers believe in this possibility of bias or non-”validity” of mainstream print news so strongly that they chose to express these ideas in their own words (even in response to a multiple choice question) implies
that the opposite values might more normally be expected. In other words, “validity” and non-biased, objective news—traditional ideals and expectations of American print media that date back to the time of the penny press in the early 1800s—might be so obviously missing from modern-day mainstream news read by these respondents that they felt the need to point it out.

Yet, despite the segment of survey and focus group participants who revealed that they were skeptical or distrustful of their news because it failed to live up to their initial or traditional expectations, another portion of respondents seemed to lack cynicism for the mainstream print news they read regularly. In fact, many of these respondents held expectations of their news that echoed the traditional ideals and historical definitions of American print journalism that skeptical respondents had lost hope of finding. A few Literary Journalism Survey (2007) respondents shared these sorts of idealistic views in their open-ended responses to the question about “expectations” of print media. “They are fair and accurately reported, not editorialized,” one person wrote. Another wrote, “They provide important insight to current events that stimulate provocative thought,” while another said, “they help inform me to create my own decisions.” Jamie, a Nickel and Dimed Focus Group (2007) participant (who interestingly, also spoke at length about her experiences as a former journalist), held a rather idealistic view of news. Her explanation of why she sees Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) as a “viable news option” highlights her
belief in the objective appearance and informative nature of mainstream print news (despite her acknowledgement that unbiased accounts of news are impossible to achieve):

I see *Nickel and Dimed* as being a viable news option, because when you write a news story, if you don’t put that word “I,” in it, you still saw that fire... You still have that observational, witnessing account. You just don’t use “I saw him do this.” And then you take yourself out of the story because it doesn’t work on the front page of any newspaper. Yes in the editorial and op-ed pages, but not anywhere else in the paper. But in a book, you’re allowed to be first-person. And so it’s still news, it’s still presenting whatever facts you get from whatever sources, and doing all your interviewing and your observation and your calling, doing phone calls, doing all the interviews, doing all that good stuff, it is journalism.

Jamie’s comment alludes to expectations of mainstream print news as being objective by virtue of being produced through the practices of “strategic rituals” (Tuchman, 1972) of news-gathering, such as “tak[ing] yourself [the reporter] out of the story,” gathering facts by observing relevant events and interviewing important individuals, and presenting that information in an accessible manner to others. Her comment might be representative of a broader population of readers that *does* still hold mainstream news up to traditional standards, underlining, among other concepts, that objectivity remains an important tenet of news for the public, as well as journalists.
Gratifications of Mainstream Print News

The quantitative information I will analyze in this section comes primarily from the following chart of Literary Journalism Survey (2007) respondents’ characterizations of typical experiences reading mainstream print and online newspapers and media web sites—in other words, the gratifications obtained from the most popular forms of print news among respondents. The table below contains readers’ responses to the question “Still thinking about the three forms of print/online news media you most commonly use, how would you characterize typical examples of these forms of news?”

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20 This question, intended to elicit readers’ gratifications of mainstream print news, was not necessarily clearly worded to reveal my intention, but I believe doing so (asking a question like “After you read mainstream print news, what do you think of it?”) might have been too confusing for readers who “use” the media forms on a regular basis and probably rarely think about their uses and gratifications of these media in a “before” and “after” sense.
Table 7.2: Individuals’ gratifications or “characterizations” of their experiences reading mainstream print news

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uses/Gratifications</th>
<th>Response Total</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informational/Educational uses/Gratifications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help me to interpret important events</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help me to solve problems</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide true, factual information</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach me something new</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicarious, escapist uses/Gratifications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They let me feel as though I am taking part in others’ lives without actually being there</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help me get away from daily worries</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring some excitement to my life</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social use/Gratification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give me something to talk about with others</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other uses/Gratifications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertaining</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist’s views on the subject matter are consistent with my own views</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change my political views</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have no impact on me whatsoever</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total respondents</td>
<td>261</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)
**Informational and Educational Gratifications**

According to Literary Journalism Survey (2007) data, the percentages of individuals’ obtaining informational and educational gratifications of mainstream print news generally declined from original expectations.\(^{21}\) While 64 percent of respondents said they expect their news to provide “true, factual information,” only 51 percent (133 of 261) of respondents said they find this need is gratified. And while 72 percent of survey respondents said they expect news to help them interpret important events, only 66 percent (172 of 261 respondents) said they could typically characterize the news in this way. Please refer to Figure 7.2 (below) for a visual comparison.

\(^{21}\) The only measure of information and educational uses and gratifications that did not significantly decline was use of news to teach “something new.” Eighty percent of survey respondents said that they generally anticipate that the news will teach them “something new,” and 77 percent (201 of 261) of respondents said they obtain this gratification.
Figure 7.2: Informational/educational uses and gratifications of mainstream print news compared

The drops in readers’ confidence in mainstream media’s ability to provide informational uses and gratifications might reflect a sense of skepticism—already discussed earlier in this chapter—in the news’ ability to provide what individuals expect from it. Compared to the informational/educational uses and gratifications of Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) and Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001), however, these discrepancies between gratifications expected and obtained are

(Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)
quite consistent. As I noted in Chapter Six, there were similar drops between the informational/educational uses and gratifications of the two literary journalism books. For *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003), as well, readers’ skepticism of the veracity and accuracy of the authors’ accounts was the factor I identified as most likely responsible for the discrepancies. In both cases, it seems—and perhaps for an even broader range of printed media in general—individuals approach certain forms of news with idealistic expectations that can turn out to be too high for at least a few.

Interestingly, however, when Literary Journalism Survey (2007) respondents were asked, “After reading your favorite forms of print news, do you typically gain any knowledge?” nearly all said “Yes.” In fact, of 267 total respondents, 257 said “Yes;” eight answered “Not sure,” and only two said “No.” Please see Figure 7.3 for a visual comparison of these answers.
Figure 7.3: Informational gratifications (evidenced by knowledge gained) of mainstream print news

(Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)

A similar phenomenon occurred with the literary journalism books’ informational/educational gratifications. When the same question about “gaining knowledge” was asked, 86 percent of readers said they had gained knowledge from *Nickel and Dimed* and/or *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. It seems that the ways in which readers’ opinions about gaining knowledge were solicited (through direct or
indirect questioning in the survey) impacted the overall number of respondents who said they obtained informational and educational gratifications from the media forms. Regardless of the reasons for these discrepancies, however, it is legitimate to conclude that both mainstream print news and literary journalism books share similar patterns of informational and education uses and gratifications among their readers.

**Social Gratifications**

The percentage of survey respondents obtaining social gratifications remained fairly consistent with the percentage that had reported expecting social uses. Seventy percent of survey respondents said they expect the news to give them “something to talk about with others,” and 67 percent (176 of 261) said the news typically *does* give them something to talk about with others. As I mentioned when looking at social uses of mainstream print news, few survey respondents or focus group participants reflected on these social uses in their own words. One individual used an open-ended response to a question about the ways in which he or she “changes” beliefs or actions after reading mainstream print news, to note that he or she typically “discussed new information with friends, relatives.” However, this person was rare—he or she was, in fact, the only one to raise this point about mainstream print news’ social gratifications in his or her own words, compared with the number of respondents and focus group participants that spoke at length about literary journalism books’ social uses and
gratifications (I quoted eight of these in Chapter Six)—despite the fact that social uses and gratifications of *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* were cited by fewer respondents (only 52 percent had expected, and 60 percent obtained, this sort of social gratification) (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007).

One explanation for this drop in the discrepancies between the number of respondents acknowledging social uses and gratifications of mainstream news and literary journalism books might be the manner in which I prompted discussion about the topic. While I tried to foster extensive discussion in focus groups about whether and how the literary journalism books impact individuals’ social lives, I did not make as much of an effort to learn about this aspect of mainstream print news’ uses and gratifications. Likewise, participants did not raise this topic on their own.

Another explanation for the lack of qualitative data to support the quantitative findings of social gratifications of news might be simply that individuals’ use of mainstream media like newspapers and news web sites is so regular that its uses and gratifications are taken for granted and not typically remarked on (unless individuals are asked directly whether they obtain such gratifications from them as “something to talk about with others,” as they were by the survey). This taken-for-granted nature of social uses and gratifications of mainstream print news in fact underlies many focus group participants’ comments about the news. Shannon (unconsciously) demonstrated how the content of mainstream print news is used in social interactions, as she
compared literary journalism to mainstream news reporting. She began one statement with: “I don’t know if any of you read the article on Walter Reed [Army Medical Center] that was in the Washington Post…” (Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007). Additional topics referenced and used as social bridges during focus groups were mainstream news media coverage of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (raised by Mandi), and Washington Post stories about minimum wage increases (raised by Jamie) (Nickel and Dimed Focus Group, 2007; Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007). In all three cases, the topics and the media organizations or formats in which the news was raised were only incidentally referenced, but still served as tools or techniques for shared frames of reference, with which to connect others to discussions. In most cases, when this social use occurred, it was evident through other participants’ acknowledgements (nodding their heads, murmuring agreement, etc.) that social gratifications were indeed obtained.

Gratifications Evidenced by Behavioral Changes

In the last chapter, I wrote about a number of significant behavioral changes that evidenced literary journalism books’ influence on readers’ social or political lives, such as prompting individuals to change their purchasing or eating patterns. A high percentage of Literary Journalism Survey (2007) participants said mainstream print news had also triggered these sorts of ideological and behavioral changes. In response
to the question, “Have these [three most commonly used] forms of print news ever led you to make any changes in your political or social beliefs or actions?” 70 percent (189 of 266) of respondents answered, “Yes.” In a follow-up question, respondents were asked to identify the ways in which they changed their habits or beliefs. The answers to this question are shown in the chart below.

**Figure 7.4: Behavioral and cognitive “changes” prompted by, or gratifications obtained from, print news media**

(Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)
Besides the most frequently selected response to the question (84 percent (162 of 192) of respondents said they obtained the cognitive gratification of “just thinking about things from a new or different perspective”), the most common change in social or political behavior by mainstream news readers was in purchasing patterns: buying—or choosing not to buy—certain products. More than 65 percent (126 of 192) of respondents said they were inspired to boycott or selectively purchase certain products because of information they read in mainstream print news (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007). The act of boycotting or buying particular products for ethical or political reasons is often of political significance, as Dietlind Stolle and Marc Hooghe (2005) suggest. The fact that mainstream print news prompts readers to make changes in their purchasing habits indicates that the media forms have a strong impact on individuals’ civic engagement. Other popular political or social actions taken by survey respondents after reading mainstream print news include signing petitions (completed by more than 36 percent (70 of 192) of respondents), donating money or volunteering for charitable organizations (an action taken by almost 40 percent (76 of 192) of respondents), and voting in a political election differently than originally planned (completed by nearly 34 percent (65 of 192) of respondents).

Comparing these levels of civic engagement via the impetus of mainstream print news with those prompted by literary journalism books, it seems clear that print
news media more strongly impacts readers’ social and political values and beliefs. The most popular behavioral change completed by readers of both mainstream print news and literary journalism books was buying or choosing not to buy certain products, yet only approximately 35 percent of literary journalism book readers said they underwent this behavioral change (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007).

Despite these quantitative summaries of media-inspired civic engagement, it is important to note that neither focus group participants nor survey respondents revealed any stories of dramatic change as a result of reading mainstream print news. In contrast, a number of individuals provided anecdotal evidence that reading literary journalism books like *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) may prompt transformations in political or social perspectives or even daily habits. Based on these observations, then, it seems that socially and politically relevant literary journalism books provide a strong impetus for change that is not noticed or accepted by all readers, but is incredibly powerful—and perhaps even stronger than mainstream print news—for a certain group of individuals. This impetus for change likely lies in the characteristics that distinguish mainstream print news from literary journalism books. As a number of scholars have already highlighted, one of the most prominent differences between mainstream print news and literary journalism is the role of authorial voice and perspective in reporting and storytelling. Is the first-person voice and perspective of authors in books like *Nickel
and Dimed and Mountains Beyond Mountains an element that results in more personalized and dramatic (if, perhaps, less common) behavioral gratifications? This topic may be intertwined with the vicarious, escapist gratifications (or lack thereof) that were noted for mainstream print news, and therefore I will address the two topics together.

Vicarious Gratifications and the Role of Authorial Perspective

Though making readers feel as though they are “taking part in others’ lives without actually being there” was frequently cited as both a use and gratification of Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) and Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2001), this motivation or need was not nearly as frequently expected or obtained from mainstream print news. Only 14 percent of survey respondents (36 of 267) had cited this vicarious use of mainstream print news, and 11 percent (28 of 261) said they typically obtain this gratification—a significant difference from the nearly 50 percent of survey respondents who said they obtained vicarious gratifications from Nickel and Dimed and Mountains Beyond Mountains (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007). As I (and anonymous survey and focus group participants) hypothesized in Chapter Six, the first-person perspective presented in the two literary journalism books likely makes readers connect deeply with other individuals and issues, and feel as though they are participating in others’ worlds. The converse of this statement might be true for
mainstream print news: the lack of first-person perspective in most mainstream news accounts detracts from readers’ sense of participating in others’ lives. Indeed, it may detract from individuals’ likelihood of being prompted to make significant behavioral or cognitive changes based on the content and information at all—helping to explain why dramatic anecdotal tales of lifestyle change only came from literary journalism readers.

To explore this concept more thoroughly, however, I wanted to examine readers’ opinions about authorial presence and voice in mainstream print news and literary journalism books. The forms’ approaches to authorial presence and voice (mainstream print news’ “objective,” third-person perspectives, compared to Nickel and Dimed’s (Ehrenreich, 2001) and Mountains Beyond Mountains’ (Kidder, 2003) embrace of subjectivity), appear to impact readers’ expectations of and levels of trust for the information presented. Literary Journalism Survey (2007) data supports this claim. Respondents were asked to consider the subjectivities of the authors of Nickel and Dimed and Mountains Beyond Mountains, and to then reflect on the role of authors’ or journalists’ “first-person perspective” in the books’ “power and importance as nonfiction.” They were given the following choices to gauge their opinions: the first-person perspective “enhances,” “detracts from,” or “makes no difference in” journalistic content. A visual comparison of responses for the question are shown below, in Figure 7.5 (below).
As we can see, respondents were typically more accepting of subjective, first-person perspectives in the literary journalism books—the media form in which subjectivity has historically been incorporated—than in mainstream print news. Eighty-two percent of respondents who had read one or both literary journalism books (Literary Journalism Survey, 2007)
(94 of 115) said they believe the authors’ first-person perspectives “enhance” the books’ power and importance as nonfiction. In contrast, 48 percent of respondents (130 of 273) said that the first-person perspective in print news “detract[s] from the news’ importance and power as nonfiction,” 19 percent (52 of 273) said it “makes no difference,” and 33 percent (91 of 273) thought that the first-person perspective “enhances” the news. Survey respondents were clearly more willing to accept subjectivity in literary journalism books than in traditionally-assumed-to-be-objective mainstream print media.

This relaxed attitude toward the journalistic standard of objectivity in literary journalism books was also apparent in focus group discussions. When individuals compared their conceptions of mainstream print news with Nickel and Dimed’s (Ehrenreich, 2001) personalized account of newsworthy information, for instance, some suggested that the subjectivities in the books provided vicarious gratifications in a way that mainstream news would or could not. Natalie’s and Mandi’s conversation exemplifies this sentiment.

**Mandi:** I have always had the sense that news has to be whatever is very current. It’s what is happening today, and it’s what is happening with people who are far more important than I am. And I think that this kind of creative nonfiction plays with that idea of what counts as noteworthy. And thinking about what is news in your everyday realm… or like… I don’t know. I’m reading a book right now that’s about New Orleans and it’s by Chris Rose, who’s a journalist for the Times-Picayune, and the book is called 1 Dead in Attic. And it’s about his essays that he wrote in the four months after Hurricane Katrina. And one of the things he says is he sees news crews all over the city and
they’re always saying things like, “Today from Louisiana, we have…” and they talk about the mayor, and they talk about how there’s still no power, and they talk about the number of people who’ve fled, and using these overarching statistical things, and he said, “If you ask me what was news in New Orleans that day, I would have said a traffic light worked. One traffic light, down on, you know, whatever street, and that was important because it was part of what would be notable to the ordinary, everyday person. Not what would be notable to some great sense of structure.” It’s also a way of combining the local story and the national or broader.

**Natalie:** Yeah, I think it’s like a microcosm. When you read the statistics and stuff like that, and we talked at length about putting it on a personal level, and I think *Nickel and Dimed* even does so more than if she went to those locations and interviewed those people more as a journalist would, instead of living it with them, and stuff. I think living with them has more validity, and when I first came in, I was unsure whether it was a valid form of news, but I think I’m becoming convinced that it is.

**Mandi:** I was trying to think like, what is news? And it seems to me news has something to do with threat, like a sense of threat and then there’s this kind of work, [which] seems to translate that threat down to the personal level, like, how does that sense of threat affect you or affect an ordinary person. (Nickel and Dimed Focus Group, 2007)

Natalie and Mandi’s thoughts on the importance of journalists’ “translating” information “down to the personal level,” in contrast to mainstream news’ impersonal, “overarching statistics,” underscore the relationship of first-person literary journalism books to mainstream mass media. In their minds, it seems, literary journalism books relay the same type of socially and politically relevant information. Mainstream news (of any sort) too often gives broad, detached and objective reports, while literary journalism book authors have more flexibility in their writing and reporting styles. This
extra leeway and looser standards (afforded by the form of the literary journalism book) enables authors to engage individuals who might otherwise have no sense of connection to particular news topics or issues (as Mandi suggested she has often felt). Natalie echoed the concept that wide-reaching, personalized news-as-a-book might be more powerful or effective in informing a wide public than current forms of mainstream news, when she later noted that these books might “capture a much larger audience,” beyond either regular nonfiction book readers or mainstream news consumers. If we connect Natalie’s and Mandi’s beliefs about the power of subjectivity over objectivity in news to Schudson’s (1978) and others’ scholarship about American journalism’s historical function of educating a broad public, it seems that literary journalism books like *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) not only fulfill uses and gratifications of mainstream print news, but also are potentially effective forms of *mass* media.

Participants in the Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group (2007) spent significantly more time than those in the Nickel and Dimed Focus Group (2007) explaining their skepticism of the news media for such perceived failures as not providing objective, unbiased accounts of current events (as I detailed earlier in this chapter). Consequently, it seemed that many of the participants in the group held no qualms about accepting socially and politically relevant literary journalism books like *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) as forms of news media, despite the
authors’ clear subjectivities. After all, as a number of individuals suggested, if the mainstream news reports were already biased and lacked objectivity, and yet were still perceived as valid news sources, why couldn’t first-person literary journalism books also be seen in the same way? The following conversation demonstrates the various ways in which this perspective was expressed:

**Ryan:** I don’t see very much of a real way you can delineate between this *Mountains Beyond Mountains* and a feature-length article in the newspaper. I mean, it’s going to be practically the same … This might be written in a way that’s more palatable, because there’s more time invested in it, and it’s maybe a more cohesive work and has a depth, but it’s not like the news media is completely objective on high. I mean, the only thing that I see different, that’s different from, say a newspaper article in an everyday newspaper, is the way that it’s written is sometimes more stilted and it’s sometimes less interesting because it’s done on deadline. And uh—

**Shannon:** Which also varies from like, the News section to the Features and Style section. Because this would fit exactly into a Style section.

**Kim:** But also, you could say that a lead in a newspaper article, or the way that a documentary will—and newspapers too—they’ll use one person’s life story to then branch into the actual issue that’s going on, and then roll out to, you know, the final closing bits. I mean, that… there are a lot of similarities in that to what they do here, where you’re following one doctor and using the doctor’s story to do it. It just spans more pages.

**Shannon:** I don’t know if any of you read the article on Walter Reed [Army Medical Center], that was in the *Washington Post*? That’s very similar to this. And when you see an article like that, I completely agree with Ryan that there is very little difference. And that was one that was actually written over a large period of time… And you can even tell, in the way it’s written, it really reads like, I mean, literary journalism, rather than sort of, adjust the facts, kind of news.
Ryan: I would just say, like, in terms of fiction and nonfiction, it’s like that delineation is kind of like, if you think about it, there is fiction and nonfiction. There’s truth in fiction. And it’s just like that’s—you’re discovering a lot of different things, within any of those forms. … I guess it’s like [if] you define this as journalism, I just wonder what the usefulness is of… I mean, I guess nonfiction versus fiction is kind of important, but, how many fictional stories are based exactly on what’s happened to somebody with different names?

Shannon: … I think it’s easy to get stuck on the word, “journalism,” because journalism is hard, fast news, [but] it’s also editorial. … You know, when you listen to NPR [National Public Radio], NPR’s supposed to be the news. But then, you have a news report about something, and then you have an 18-year-old from American Youth Radio talking about, like the use of the N-word, among young African Americans, and so. And it’s done from a first-person, narrative, this-is-my-emotion, this-is-how-I-feel-type piece—

Kim: And it even comes in newspapers.

Shannon: Yeah.

Kim: And a lot of newspaper, magazine, any of those articles, a lot of them, will have the reporter talking to you, and telling you their experience and taking you through their experience, and there’ll be very much in the style, just in a shorter page count. And that’s called journalism in those cases. (Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group, 2007)

Ryan, Shannon and Kim’s inability to differentiate between fiction and nonfiction, or between Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) and “a feature-length article” in a features section of a newspaper, testifies to their rejection or
skepticism of true objectivity in journalism (as well as, more broadly, to the fluidity and slipperiness of modern-day definitions of “news” and “journalism”). Each individual named a variety of other media forms and organizations in which writing and reporting like that of Kidder’s in *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003) already has appeared or could appear (such as National Public Radio and *The Washington Post*)—supporting the notion that subjectivities are accepted and even embraced by readers of literary journalism (despite the fact that they spurn subjectivity in mainstream print news). Finally, the authors’ personalization of news and information in literary journalism books—mainly accomplished by using the first-person perspective and incorporating original, authorial voice and opinions into their writing—is what makes their books stand out as powerful, provocative and essentially, trust-worthy, media forms, according to the participants.

Despite readers’ differing expectations of and levels of trust for the first-person perspective in reporting (depending primarily on media form), the uses and gratifications of mainstream print news generally match those of *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003). By examining the ways in which mainstream print news is used for and gratifies needs of information/education, social contact, behavioral changes or reinforcements and others—the same needs that were highlighted by readers of literary journalism books in Chapter Six—this chapter has demonstrated that two examples of socially and
politically relevant literary journalism books can be and are often used for the same motivations as mainstream print news.

It seems, however, that readers are more open-minded in their expectations and uses of (subjective) literary journalism books than of mainstream print news, and are willing to accept the books as news media sources, regardless of (or maybe because of) this key difference in authorial presence and perspective. As a number of focus group participants suggested, the authors of socially and politically relevant literary journalism books like *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) make no pretense of being objective, and thus, become more trustworthy because they are honest about how they present information. Unlike mainstream journalists, who are largely still expected to deliver objective, unbiased and accurate news (indirectly evidenced by both focus group and survey participants’ skepticism of mainstream news), literary journalists’ viewpoints are regarded as valuable to their books—indeed, they are often perceived to enhance the value of the content they relay in their books. It seems, then, that literary journalism books that deal with current social or political issues function as an especially powerful media form, particularly for those who have little confidence in other, more common types of print news.
Chapter 8. Conclusion

Whereas journalists once felt humbled by the novel, we now live in an age in which the novelist lives in a state of anxiety about nonfiction. –Michael Lewis (Boynton, 2005, p. xii)

We’ve passed through this spasm of people feeling that print is dead. The curiosity about the world, and the appetite for books that explore it in a literary way, is stronger than ever. –Susan Orlean (Boynton, 2005, p. 291)

In a decade in which socially and politically relevant literary journalism books like Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenreich, 2001) and Mountains Beyond Mountains (Kidder, 2003) have consistently topped national bestseller lists, it is difficult to understate the importance of literary journalism books. Viewing them from a communications and media studies perspective—rather than through the literary lens by which they have traditionally been examined—leads to a new understanding of the ways in which mass media forms, conventions, uses and gratifications can impact individuals’ lives.

I had originally gained inspiration to conduct this research as I analyzed the Project for Excellence in Journalism’s 2006 “State of the News Media” report. Only months after having read Tracy Kidder’s Mountains Beyond Mountains (2003) and feeling as though the book had profoundly deepened my awareness of such social and political issues as poverty and health care in developing countries (in a way that no news form had ever before impacted me) I had found myself analyzing the report that bemoaned the withering state of print journalism in America (Project for Excellence in
Journalism, 2006). I looked for the category of “literary journalism books” or “creative nonfiction” in this report, confident that *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) and other books like it would be exceptions to the rule, and might be the sole print media forms that were gaining popularity. I was hoping to see some sort of acknowledgment that creatively written nonfiction books are currently dominating the print media landscape, as literary journalists Michael Lewis and Susan Orlean both articulate in the opening quotes of this chapter (Boynton, 2005, pp. xii, 291). But the category of “literary journalism books”—or even any acknowledgement of books in the “alternative” news category—was missing. Why had the organization failed to notice the impact of literary journalism books like *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) on citizens’ political and social awareness or engagement, or even their surging popularity as mass media forms? As I researched the topic, I realized that an even better question might be: *Why are literary journalism books typically excluded from consideration as American print news media?*

This thesis has been concerned not with uncovering why literary journalism books have been left out of modern-day “comprehensive” studies of news media, however (although I believe I have struck upon some answers: namely, as I wrote in Chapter Two, I would answer that question by referencing the fact that scholars cannot agree upon a name for, much less characteristics of, the genre). Instead, I have used this thesis as an opportunity to contemplate a question that has stimulated my
intellectual curiosity for the better part of a year: *In what ways can we view and better understand literary journalism books as forms of news media?*

To this end, I have considered the history of both American print news and literary journalism books, and shown how we might fit socially and politically relevant literary journalism books like *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003) into an historical framework of American news media. Indeed, the books borrow such elements from journalism history as muckraking and immersive reporting sensibilities, and “yellow” and “New” journalistic emphasis on attention-grabbing detail. In addition, through a close reading of the textual components of excerpts from the two books, I have demonstrated that these sorts of literary journalism books share such characteristics with mainstream and traditional forms of print news as relevance to readers’ lives and current events, and a commitment to fact-based reporting. The books’ histories of publication and distribution are additional indicators of their status as *mass* media forms—and, consequently, indicate that the books are important tools of communication and information for a broad population.

By applying the theoretical framework of uses and gratifications to original survey data and focus group participants’ statements about literary journalism books and mainstream print news, I found ample support for my hypotheses about the power and relevance of socially and politically oriented literary journalism books as news.
The qualitative and quantitative data I gathered about uses and gratifications of both mainstream print media and literary journalism books indicate that the books are used for, and satisfy, many of the same needs as mainstream print and online newspapers and domestic media web sites. And, as my findings about the role and perceptions of authorial presence and voice in the media forms suggest, literary journalism books like *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* are not viewed as any less valuable or valid as nonfiction for their lack of objectivity; rather, the authors’ very subjectivities engage certain readers more emotionally and cognitively with the books’ subjects than mainstream print news. In the population I studied, mainstream print news prompted more behavioral and psychological changes, yet the most dramatic changes in individuals’ daily lives were actually influenced by literary journalism books. This finding might testify to the unique and underestimated power of the first-person perspective in the books.

At this point, I would like to revisit the list of definitions and elements of socially relevant literary journalism that I laid out in the Introduction. While I am retaining all of the defining characteristics I had initially highlighted, the various approaches to examining and comparing *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* to mainstream print news that I used throughout this thesis have enabled me to supplement my table. These new attributes are indicated in boldface text, at the top left of the table. Although terminology is important in future examinations of these
sorts of books, I have chosen to continue to use the fairly precise (if long-winded) phrase “socially and politically relevant literary journalism” to describe books like *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003). I believe that contributing another more pithy, yet less descriptive, moniker would only add to the chaotic and confusing mess of terms currently in use.
Table 8.1: Revised characteristics of socially and politically relevant literary journalism books

“Socially and Politically Relevant Literary Journalism Books”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uses and gratifications include: informational/educational, social, vicarious, behavioral and others; and are remarkably similar to those of mainstream print news (e.g., newspapers and online news outlets)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected to a history of immersive, investigative reporting (such as muckraking) and attention-grabbing storytelling (such as “yellow” and “New” journalism)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popularity among readers is evidenced by time on national bestseller lists and in social reading programs and contexts</td>
<td>Limited readership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deals with, or is related to, issues of social or political relevance</td>
<td>Deals mainly with history or personal stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposes/examines something not commonly noticed or known</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employs one or more literary techniques (such as prose, first-person perspective, plot, setting, detail, voice)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Includes information that is as accurate as possible</td>
<td>Includes fictional, embellished or inaccurate elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on information that the author spent significant time/effort to learn and report</td>
<td>Based on author’s own memories, musings, political beliefs/agenda, jokes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author’s priority is educating or informing</td>
<td>Author’s priority is entertaining</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nickel and Dimed (Barbara Ehrenreich, 2001), Mountains Beyond Mountains (Tracy Kidder, 2003), Fast Food Nation (Eric Schlosser, 2001), There Are No Children Here (Alex Kotlowitz, 1991)</td>
<td>A Million Little Pieces (James Frey, 2005), Dreams from My Father (Barack Obama, 2004), The Glass Castle (Jeannette Walls, 2006), Marley and Me (John Grogan, 2005)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a great deal more to study concerning the use of socially and politically relevant literary journalism books as news, and I believe that my thesis has only skimmed the surface. I would have liked to analyze a larger range of pages (or
perhaps even the entirety) of both *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003), and it would have been valuable to analyze an even broader set of literary journalism books. Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation* (2001) was the most commonly read literary journalism book of this type among my survey participants, and I believe it may be valuable to analyze Schlosser’s book in the same way that I did Ehrenreich’s (2001) and Kidder’s (2003) books. It might also be interesting to look at the books through additional theoretical communications approaches (such as, for instance, examining how they “frame” particular issues) and to compare them to the techniques and impacts of mainstream media. Another fruitful avenue of research might be to examine how and why literary journalism books like these have been so popular (and lucrative!) recently in American society. Are literary journalism books’ popularity due to generational urges to read news in the form of books, or dependent on the political climate? In what ways are literary journalism books like these are linked to the rise in popularity of documentary films and reality television?

It is clear that socially and politically relevant literary journalism books currently hold an important place in American culture, society and politics. This thesis has demonstrated that communications scholars cannot and should not underestimate the importance of books like *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003). Historical analysis, close readings and comparisons
and theoretical uses and gratifications studies of *Nickel and Dimed* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* and mainstream print news all suggest that socially and politically relevant literary journalism books constitute an important form of modern-day print news media. Given these findings, it seems clear that in the pages of literary journalism books, print news is hardly a “dying” art at all. In fact, it is flourishing.
Appendix A. Focus Groups

To solicit participants for the Nickel and Dimed Focus Group (2007), I sent variations of the following email to current students in Georgetown University’s Communication, Culture and Technology program, and personal friends and acquaintances.

Date: Jan. 31, 2007

Subject: Calling All Bookworms

Hi CCTers,

I’m conducting a focus group about creative nonfiction books and American media for my thesis and I need your help. You share your thoughts and opinions about creative nonfiction books and other forms of print media, and I give you free pizza for lunch. Sound like a deal?

The focus group will be held on Thursday, Feb. 8 at 12:30 pm in the CCT conference room (Car Barn 311). It will last no longer than an hour and a half. And I promise it will be an interesting and lively conversation!

If you’d like to participate or have any questions, please email me back at kea22 @ georgetown.edu .

Also, if you’ve read “Nickel and Dimed” by Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) or “Mountains Beyond Mountains” by Tracy Kidder (2003), please let me know (the focus group will address one or both of these books, but if you haven’t read either you can still participate).

Thanks so much!

Katie Aberbach
Because many more individuals were interested in participating than I had anticipated, I organized a second focus group: the Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group (2007) and invited those who could not attend the first focus group, via individual emails. The Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group was held on Feb. 21, 2007, at 6:15 p.m. in room 316 of the Car Barn building at Georgetown University. Participants were also offered free pizza.

Both focus groups lasted for approximately an hour and a half. Participants were asked to first sign Informed Consent forms, and to then complete a brief survey about their demographic information and literary journalism reading habits. The results of the surveys are below:

From the Nickel and Dimed Focus Group (2007):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. When did you last read a literary journalism/creative nonfiction book of this sort?</th>
<th>2. What was the last literary journalism/creative nonfiction book (of this sort) you read?</th>
<th>3. How many literary journalism/creative nonfiction books (of this sort) have you read in the past year?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 month ago</td>
<td><em>Country of My Skull</em> by Antjie Krog</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 months ago</td>
<td><em>In Cold Blood</em> by Truman Capote</td>
<td>2 or 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 year ago</td>
<td><em>The Control of Nature</em> by John McPhee</td>
<td>2 entire books; approx. 12 excerpts or articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 month ago</td>
<td><em>Fast Food Nation</em> by Eric Schlosser</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 months ago</td>
<td><em>Assassin’s Gate</em> by George Packer</td>
<td>6 to 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td><em>Nickel and Dimed</em> by Barbara Ehrenreich</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 months ago</td>
<td>Stupid White Men</td>
<td>Michael Moore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 months ago</td>
<td>The Devil in the White City</td>
<td>Erik Larson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>Nickel and Dimed</td>
<td>Barbara Ehrenreich</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4. Do you consider literary journalism/creative nonfiction books of this sort to be a form of news media?</th>
<th>5. Have you ever read Barbara Ehrenreich’s book Nickel and Dimed (2001)?</th>
<th>6. If “Yes,” why did you read it?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes: all of it</td>
<td>It was recommended by a friend/family member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes: some of it</td>
<td>It was a school assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Yes: some of it</td>
<td>It was a school assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes: all of it</td>
<td>It was recommended by a friend/family member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes: all of it</td>
<td>It was recommended by a friend/family member</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>7. Age</th>
<th>8. Gender</th>
<th>9. Current educational standing</th>
<th>10. Major(s)</th>
<th>11. What do you consider to be your race or ethnicity?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>English, Justice &amp; Peace Studies</td>
<td>white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>CCT</td>
<td>white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>English and Education</td>
<td>white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>CCT</td>
<td>white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Media and Politics (CCT)</td>
<td>white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>CCT</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

192
From the Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group (2007):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. When did you last read a literary journalism/creative nonfiction book of this sort?</th>
<th>2. What was the last literary journalism/creative nonfiction book (of this sort) you read?</th>
<th>3. How many literary journalism/creative nonfiction books (of this sort) have you read in the past year?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 months ago</td>
<td><em>Emergence</em> by Steven Johnson</td>
<td>4 to 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 months ago</td>
<td><em>The Dancing Girls of Lahore</em> by Louise Brown</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 month ago</td>
<td><em>An African in Greenland</em> by Tete-Michel Kpomassie, James Kirkup, and A. Alvarez</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 month ago</td>
<td><em>The Culture Code</em> by Clotaire Rapaille</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 months ago</td>
<td><em>Bunny Tales</em> by Isabella St. James</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 months ago</td>
<td><em>Under the Banner of Heaven</em> by Jon Krakauer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4. Do you consider literary journalism/creative nonfiction books of this sort to be a form of news media?</th>
<th>5. Have you ever read Tracy Kidder's book <em>Mountains Beyond Mountains</em> (2003)?</th>
<th>6. If “Yes,” why did you read it?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes: all of it</td>
<td>It was recommended by a friend/family member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>7. Age</th>
<th>8. Gender</th>
<th>9. Current educational standing</th>
<th>10. Major(s)</th>
<th>11. What do you consider to be your race or ethnicity?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>CCT</td>
<td>white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because focus group participants completed these surveys, they were asked to refrain from participating in the Literary Journalism Survey (2007). After completing the surveys, participants at the Nickel and Dimed Focus Group (2007) were asked to read a brief excerpt from *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001): pp. 1-21. Participants at the Mountains Beyond Mountains Focus Group (2007) were asked to read a brief excerpt from *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003): pp. 33-44. I began the discussion approximately 15 minutes after the official start of both focus groups.

Both focus group sessions were videotaped, and I transcribed the entirety of the discussions.

Because focus group participants were promised anonymity, their names were changed in the thesis. I replaced their original names with names that had similar origins, using the web site Behind the Name ([http://www.behindthename.com](http://www.behindthename.com)). For instance, the name “Ryan” was substituted for a male participant with a name of Irish origin. After creating a new list of names, I randomly assigned them to participants (I maintained participants’ gender identities, however).
Appendix B. Literary Journalism Survey

The Literary Journalism Survey (2007) was hosted by Surveymonkey.com, and was publicly accessible between February 16 and March 2, 2007.

I invited a convenience sample of friends, family, acquaintances and current and past Georgetown students from the Communication, Culture and Technology program to participate in the survey by circulating variations of the following email:

Date: March 15, 2007
Subject: Please help: Thesis research

Dear fellow CCTers,

I’m conducting a survey as part of my thesis, and I’d really appreciate your help. My thesis is about literary journalism/creative nonfiction books, and their impact on readers’ political and social consciousness. I’m also interested in whether these sorts of books have any relationship to traditional news media, such as newspapers and magazines. I’m trying to gather information directly from readers of books and consumers of news... and I have a feeling that many of you probably fit into that category.

The survey will only take 10 or 15 minutes, and it’s colorful and fun!

Here’s the link: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=72333217552

Thanks so much for your help. Let me know if I can return the favor and take a survey for you :)

And please feel free to pass this along to anyone you think might be interested!
Katie Aberbach
kea22 @ georgetown.edu

I also solicited survey participants from friends (and mutual friends) through the Facebook.com social networking service. I invited all of my Facebook.com “friends” to join a public group called “Living a Masters thesis experience vicariously through Katie,” and posted the link to the survey on the group’s main page. More than 90 individuals joined this group.

The survey results are included in the following pages.
1. Welcome to my survey about literary journalism and American news media. There are seven (short) pages of questions, and the survey should take 10-15 minutes to complete. All answers will be aggregated and will remain confidential. The data will be used as part of my Masters thesis in Communication, Culture and Technology at Georgetown University. Thank you for your participation!
Katie Aberbach kaa22@georgetown.edu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I agree to take this survey and understand that my participation is completely voluntary.</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>403</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents: 403
(skipped this question) 0

2. Taking the above description into consideration, when did you last read this type of literary journalism book?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Response Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Within the last month</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within the last three months</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within the last six months</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within the last year</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within the last two years</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than two years ago</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t think I’ve ever read one</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents: 275
(skipped this question) 128

3. What was the last literary journalism book (of this type) you read? (please name author as well, if possible)

Total Respondents: 223
(skipped this question) 180

4. How many literary journalism books (of this type) have you read in the past year?

Total Respondents: 275
(skipped this question) 128

5. Do you consider this type of literary journalism book to be a form of news media?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>50.9%</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents 275
(skipped this question) 128

7. If “Yes,” why did you read “Nickel and Dimed”?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A school assignment</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A book club pick</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A friend or family member recommended it</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I found it in the bookstore or library</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned about it on my own</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents 86
(skipped this question) 317

8. Before you began to read “Nickel and Dimed,” what were you expecting from it? (please check all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That it would be entertaining</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. In “Nickel and Dimed,” the author goes “undercover” as a low-wage worker, and then writes about her experiences by incorporating her own thoughts and opinions into the book. With which of the following statements do you agree?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The author’s first-person perspective enhances the book’s power and importance as nonfiction.</td>
<td>84.6%</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author’s first-person perspective makes no difference in the book’s power and importance as nonfiction.</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author’s first-person perspective detracts from the book’s power and importance as nonfiction.</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10. How would you characterize your experience reading "Nickel and Dimed"? (please check all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It was entertaining.</td>
<td>62.4%</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It taught me something new.</td>
<td>78.8%</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It helped me to interpret important events.</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It helped me to solve problems.</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It gave me something to talk about with others.</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt as though I were taking part in others lives without actually being there.</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author’s views on the subject matter were consistent with my own views on the subject matter.</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The book changed my political views.</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It provided true, factual information.</td>
<td>54.1%</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It helped me get away from daily worries.</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It brought some excitement to my life.</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents 91
(skipped this question) 312

11. Have you ever read Tracy Kidder’s book "Mountains Beyond Mountains" (2003)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>91.5%</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not Sure (If you answered 'No' or 'Not Sure,' please 0.7% 2
12. If “Yes,” why did you read “Mountains Beyond Mountains”?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A school assignment</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A book club pick</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A friend or family member recommended it</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I found it in the bookstore or library</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I heard about it on my own</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Respondents</strong></td>
<td><strong>22</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13. Before you began reading “Mountains Beyond Mountains,” what were you expecting from it? (please check all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That it would be entertaining</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That it would teach me something new</td>
<td>95.7%</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That it would help me to interpret important events</td>
<td>52.2%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That it would help me to solve problems</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That it would give me something to talk about with others</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That I would feel as through I am taking part in others lives without actually being there</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That the author’s views on the subject matter would be consistent with my own views or the subject matter</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That the book might change my political views</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
14. The author of "Mountains Beyond Mountains" writes himself into the story; he is as much a character as any other person in the book and states his own thoughts and opinions with readers. With which of these statements do you agree:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The author's first-person perspective detracts from the book's power and importance as nonfiction.</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author's first-person perspective makes no difference in the book's power and importance as nonfiction.</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author's first-person perspective enhances the book's power and importance as nonfiction.</td>
<td>70.8%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents: 24
(Skipped this question: 379)

15. How would you characterize your experience reading "Mountains Beyond Mountains"? (Please check all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It was entertaining.</td>
<td>65.2%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It taught me something new.</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It helped me to interpret important events.</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It helped me to solve problems.</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It gave me something to talk about with others.</td>
<td>69.6%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I felt as though I were taking part in others' lives without actually being there. | 52.2% | 12
The author’s views on the subject matter were consistent with my own views on the subject matter. | 30.4% | 7
The book changed my political views. | 8.7% | 2
It provided true, factual information. | 26.5% | 13
It helped me get away from daily worries | 17.4% | 4
It brought some excitement to my life. | 21.7% | 5
Other (please specify) | 13% | 3

Total Respondents | 23
(skipped this question) | 380

16. After reading either "Nickel and Dimed" or "Mountains Beyond Mountains," did you gain any knowledge?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>85.9%</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents | 99
(skipped this question) | 304

17. If "Yes," briefly describe what you learned.

Total Respondents | 82
(skipped this question) | 321

18. After reading either "Nickel and Dimed" or "Mountains Beyond Mountains," did you make any changes in your political or social beliefs or actions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>54.7%</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


19. If you answered "Yes," in what ways did you change? (please check all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I voted (in a political election) differently than I originally might have.</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I donated money or volunteered for a charitable organization related to an issue I read about in the book(s).</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I contacted or visited a public official (at any level of government) to express my opinion on an issue I read about in the book(s).</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wrote to a newspaper or magazine to express my opinion on an issue I read about in the book(s).</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I took part in a protest or march related to an issue I read about in the book(s).</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I signed a petition on an issue I read about in the book(s).</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I bought—or chose not to buy—a certain product because of information I learned from the book(s).</td>
<td>34.9%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I just thought about things from a new or different perspective.</td>
<td>90.7%</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents: 95
Total Responses: 308

20. Please rank the three forms of print and online (print-based) media that you most commonly use to get news and political information:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Type</th>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
<th>3rd</th>
<th>Response Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper (print)</td>
<td>37% (50)</td>
<td>36% (48)</td>
<td>27% (37)</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper (online)</td>
<td>47% (94)</td>
<td>32% (64)</td>
<td>20% (40)</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Type</td>
<td>Print Magazine</td>
<td>Website for domestic mainstream media outlet (ex. CNN.com, MSNBC.com)</td>
<td>Website for international mainstream media outlet (ex. BBCnews.com)</td>
<td>Online news aggregator (ex. Google News)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>16% (16)</td>
<td>38% (53)</td>
<td>21% (14)</td>
<td>32% (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Percent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

21. Think about the three forms of print/online news media you selected above. What are your expectations of these forms of news?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They are entertaining</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They teach me something new</td>
<td>80.9%</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They help me interpret important events</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They help me to solve problems</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They give me something to talk about with others</td>
<td>70.6%</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They let me feel as though I am taking part in others' lives without actually being there</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The journalist's views on the subject matter are consistent with my own views on the subject matter</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They might change my political views</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They provide true, factual information</td>
<td>64.4%</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They help me get away from daily worries</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They bring some excitement to my life</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
22. Still thinking about those three forms of print media, how do you feel about the journalist sharing his/her opinions and/or including him/herself in the story?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The journalist's first-person perspective detracts from the news' importance and power as nonfiction.</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Response Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>49.2%</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The journalist's first-person perspective makes no difference in the news' importance and power as nonfiction.</td>
<td></td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The journalist's first-person perspective enhances the news' power and importance as nonfiction.</td>
<td></td>
<td>34.5%</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents: 264 (skipped this question: 139)

23. Still thinking about the three forms of print/online news media you most commonly use, how would you characterize typical examples of these forms of news?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>They are entertaining</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Response Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They teach me something new</td>
<td></td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They help me to interpret important events</td>
<td></td>
<td>65.9%</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They help me to solve problems</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They give me something to talk about with others</td>
<td></td>
<td>67.4%</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They let me feel as though I am taking part in others' lives without actually being there</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The journalist's views on the subject matter are consistent with my own views on the subject matter</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They might change my political views</td>
<td></td>
<td>24.9%</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents: 267 (skipped this question: 136)
### Question 24: After reading your favorite forms of print news, do you typically gain any knowledge?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>96.3%</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Respondents:** 267

**Skipped this question:** 136

### Question 25: Have these forms of print news ever led you to make any changes in your political or social beliefs or actions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sure</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Respondents:** 266

**Skipped this question:** 137

### Question 26: If you answered "Yes," in what ways did you change? (please check all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I voted (in a political election) differently than I originally might have.</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I donated money or volunteered for a charitable organization related an issue</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
27. What is your gender?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents 267
(skipped this question) 136

28. What is your age?

Total Respondents 268
(skipped this question) 135

29. What do you consider to be your race or ethnicity?

Total Respondents 262
(skipped this question) 141
30. What is the last grade, class or year that you have completed in school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some post-graduate</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-graduate degree</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't know</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I choose not to answer</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Respondents</strong></td>
<td><strong>267</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(skipped this question)</strong></td>
<td><strong>136</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

31. I may want to conduct follow-up interviews after this survey is completed. All interviews will be confidential and no identifying information will be published. Would you be interested in being contacted for this purpose? If so, please enter your email address below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Respondents</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>123</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(skipped this question)</strong></td>
<td><strong>280</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C. Copyright Permission

I incorporated Denis McQuail’s (2005b) chart of “Three audience research traditions compared” into the text on page 45. I contacted the publisher of the material and sought permission to reprint the material in the following email.

Dear Ms. Erzinger,

Thank you very much for the password I requested to access the material on the McQuail reader companion website (http://www.sagepub.co.uk/mcquail5/).

I am now writing to request permission to reprint the following material from the website:

Author/Title: Denis McQuail/Mass Communication Theory, 5th edition (Companion website: http://www.sagepub.co.uk/mcquail5/)

Date of Publication: 2005

Specific content: The chart entitled “Figure 15.1: Three audience research traditions compared” on the Chapter15.ppt file, obtained from “Part VI: Audiences” in the “Key Diagrams and Tables” section.

This material will appear in the thesis I am preparing as part of the requirements for a Master’s degree from Georgetown University:


I am requesting nonexclusive English-language world rights. My thesis will be submitted electronically and made available on the Digital Georgetown website. Because of the educational nature of this use, I request that any fee will be waived.
If you are the copyright-holder, please return a copy of this email with acknowledgment that I may reprint the material cited above. Unless you indicate otherwise, I will include the usual scholarly form of acknowledgment. If permission is granted under any additional conditions, please state them below. Finally, if you are not the copyright-holder, please provide the name and address of the person to whom I should apply for permission.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Katherine Aberbach

The above request is hereby approved on the understanding that full credit will be given to the source.

Date: ___________________  Approved by: ______________________________

Permission to use the material was given in an April 23, 2007 email response from Amberlyn Erzinger at SAGE Publications:

Hi Katie,

Thanks for your email. You’re welcome to use the information as you’ve described.

Best,
Amber
Works Cited


Works Consulted


Johnson, M. L. (1971). The New Journalism: The Underground Press, the Artists of


Chicago: Chicago Review Press.


