Section Three: Introduction

Journalism, Media, and Democracy

Nico Carpentier

Nordenstreng's (1995) description of the journalist as 'a walking paradox' already shows the difficulty that any attempt towards defining journalism has to face. A nevertheless comfortable starting point is McNair's (1998: 4) definition in *The Sociology of Journalism*.

> *Any authored text, in written, audio or visual form, which claims to be (i.e. is presented to its audience as) a truthful statement about, or record of, some hitherto unknown (new) feature of the actual, social world.*

Journalistic practices are embedded in a wide range of discourses. Journalistic ethics and ritualistic procedures (Tuchman, 1972) that try to convert these discourses into materialized practices are necessary guarantees for the integrity, reliability, and status of journalists as 'truth speakers' (by analogy with Foucault, 1978) or 'truth-reporters'. McNair (1998: 13) refers to a system of professional ethics, aesthetic codes, and routine practices that orient the journalist's work. Oledzki (1998: 286–288) calls this entanglement the 'triad of professionalism', in which next to technical skills, also relevant knowledge and ethics/deontology figure.

Furthermore, journalists are also embedded in organizational structures that are often commercial entities. Despite the seperatist tendencies, they can rarely be detached from the organization in which they operate and in which they are often (under different statutes) employed. These media organizations also form important frames of reference for journalists. Not only do they receive (as beginning staff members) an 'on the job training' (or socialization) (McQuail, 1994: 200) in this organization, which makes them accustomed to the current practices and teaches them the necessary skills and capabilities; at the same time these environments form micro-biotopes of peers ('a private world' as Burns already remarked in 1969). Or as Schlesinger (1987: 107) puts it, 'to over-simplify a little, the argument goes that journalists write for other journalists, their bosses, their sources, or highly interested audiences.'

A number of core concepts structure the identity of journalists. At the level of identity formation, these identity components can be attributed hegemonic ambitions, as they are considered to be so crucial to the journalist's identity that it is difficult to see beyond their taken-for-grantedness. Lichtenberg (1996: 225) has called objectivity 'a cornerstone of the professional ideology of journalists in liberal democracies'. Westerståhl's model of objectivity (1983) links a wide set of concepts – factuality, relevance, truth(fullness), impartiality, balance, and

neutrality – to this key notion of objectivity. Especially factual accuracy is considered vital to the journalist's professional activity, as it is with 'no doubt the most sacred belief held among journalists worldwide' (Norderstreng, 1995: 115). Another set of elements is linked to the notions of autonomy and independence, or the need to resist different forms of (internal and external) pressures. Being part of the traditional paradoxes, which characterize capitalist (media) economies, this is combined with the need for professional employment, which necessitates different protective strategies to negotiate the employer – employee relationship and to prevent infringements on journalistic autonomies. A third group of concepts that structure the journalistic identity are responsibility, property, and management (Carpentier, 2005). Journalists are responsible within their organization for the professional production of specific media products. From this position, they can exert forms of psychological property (Wilpert, 1991) and act as managers of a diversity of resources – from technology via content to people – to realize these professional goals. Consequently, the relationships with the non-professional 'other' needs to be regulated, and notions as respect, confidentiality, privacy, consent, taste, and decency (see Campbell, 2004: 132–141) thus become integrated within these identity discourses.

The more traditional models attempting to explain the media–democracy relationship stress the crucial importance of the journalist's role in distributing information that enables citizens to exercise formal (through elections) and informal (through 'public opinion') control over the state. In this line of thought, journalists also fulfil a controlling function by taking on the role of watchdog or the fourth estate, bringing the dysfunctions of state and market to the attention of the citizenry. More critical approaches have emphasized the role of ideology in these representational practices that sometimes renders the watchdog into a lapdog or even a guard dog (protecting vested interests) (Watson, 2003: 105).

The main argument here is that journalists and media organizations are not situated outside ideology and will influence and be influenced by the ideologies, which circulate in society at a given time and space. Hall (1973) here distinguishes between the formal and the ideological level of news value, the latter belonging to the moral-political discourse in society. He refers to a 'double articulation' that 'binds the inner discourse of the newspaper to the ideological universe of the society […] Events enter the domain of ideology as soon as they become visible to the news-making process.' Similar support for this line of thought can be found in Westerståhl and Johansson's (1994) model of news factors in foreign news, where ideology is placed at the very core of the model.

These critiques launched at the traditional approach towards journalism and at its minimalist attitude towards the journalist's democratic 'functions' have also generated a number of journalistic reform projects. These reform projects

emphasize that journalism has more than one democratically valuable role to play and use a more maximalist perspective on the media–democracy relationship. This also implies that they aim to rearticulate (some of) the earlier mentioned key concepts that structure the hegemonic journalistic identity.

Both development [1] and emancipatory journalism and public journalism have reacted against a too absolutist interpretation of neutrality. In development and emancipatory journalism, it is explicitly stated that neutrality does not apply when universal values – such as peace, democracy, human rights, (gender and racial) equality, (social) progress, and national liberation – are at stake. The US-based public journalism-tradition takes a similar position in their plea for reviving the public debate, for centralizing democracy as a universalized value and for a tighter link between community and journalism – the so-called 'community connectedness'. The critique aimed at the traditional articulation of impartiality and the resulting 'detachment from the community', does not mean that any other form of objectivity should be rejected. In his book *Doing Public Journalism* Charity (1995: 144) summarizes this pithily, 'journalism should advocate democracy without advocating particular solutions'. The area of tension between involvement and neutrality, and the new interpretation that the concept of neutrality consequently receives, is captured by Manca's (1989: 170–171) concept of 'pluralist objectivity'.

Traditions like new journalism and human-interest journalism have pleaded for the centralizing of subjectivity (instead of objectivity). Especially in new journalism – developed in the United States during the 1960s – the undermining of the principle of objectivity is an explicit goal. On the one hand this applies to the subjectivity of the journalist, who now participates in the events, '[the new journalists] developed the habit of staying with the people they were writing about for days at a time, weeks in same cases' (Wolfe, 1973: 38). The literary techniques used in new journalism are in many cases functional towards the outlining of the personality (or otherwise put, the exposing of the identity) of the 'characters' that appear in the pieces. Human-interest journalism will – together with what Campbell (2004) calls entertainment journalism and lifestyle journalism – build on this tradition by putting the accent on soft news and authenticity and by resisting the neutrality, impersonality, and factuality of 'traditional' journalism. Narrative aspects of the news also become more important in the human-interest (news) tradition; Schudson (1978) refers in this regard to 'story journalism'. The emphasis on narration turns the media professional more into a storyteller than into an 'authorized truthteller' or a 'licensed relayer of facts' (McNair, 1998: 65), as he/she is called in 'traditional' journalism. Though widely used, human-interest journalism, thus, still remains distinct from (and contested by) 'traditional' journalism, as for instance Meijer (2001: 193) puts it, 'the conventional view [still highlights] rationality, conflict, and content rather than emotionality, dialogue and impact'.

Finally, also in the alternative media models that explicitly foreground participation, heavy critique on the hegemonic articulation of the professional identity can be found. In contrast, two-way communication and the right to communicate figure prominently in these models. Seen by Jacobson (1998: 135) as a human right of the third generation, connected to the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) movement, the right to communicate transcends the traditional Western right to be informed; 'communication is […] seen as a two way process, in which the partners - individual and collective- carry on a democratic and balanced dialogue' (MacBride, 1980: 172). These alternative models support in other words the democratization of communication, in which the receiver is seen as point of departure and in which is pleaded for increasing participation and for making media more accessible to non-professionals from different positions and backgrounds. This of course also pressurizes the privileged position of the 'traditional' male/white journalist, who is seen as part of the (media) elite. One of the basic starting points of, for example, the community media movement is precisely the idea that journalistic tasks must not (and should not) be taken on exclusively by media professionals, but that members of the community – within which such media are active – can also take this role on them. The resistance against the professionalized media is seen as one of the reasons for the origin and existence of the community media in which an anti-elitist discourse is to be considered crucial (Girard, 1992; McQuail, 1994: 131).

In offering both alternative identities and practices, these journalistic reform projects show that it is possible to resist the hegemonic articulation of the journalist's identity. Their existence illustrates that journalism is a house with many rooms or, to put it less metaphorically, there is not just one journalism but a diversity of journalisms. This diversity of journalistic identities and practices also leads to a diversity of positions towards our western democracies, some of which will be more maximalist, whilst others will remain to be more minimalist. Especially these maximalist approaches will allow journalists to be more than gatekeepers and to act as 'gate-openers' (Manca, 1989).

Notes for Section Three: Introduction

[1]   Development journalism is the older and more common name for this tradition. Emancipatory journalism has been developed as a model by Shah (1996) later on, and puts more stress on the role of journalists within new social movements.

References for Section Three: Introduction

Campbell, V. (2004), *Information Age Journalism. Journalism in an International Context*, New York: Arnold.

Carpentier, N. (2005), 'Identity, Contingency and Rigidity. The (Counter-) Hegemonic Constructions of the Identity of the Media Professional', *Journalism*, 6: 2, pp. 199–219.

Charity, A. (1995), *Doing Public Journalism*, New York: Guildford.

Foucault, M. (1978), *History of Sexuality, Part 1: An Introduction*, New York: Pantheon.

Girard, B. (1992), *A Passion for Radio*, Montréal: Black Rose Books.

Hall, S. (1973), 'The Determination of News Photographs', in S. Cohen and J. Young (eds.), *The Manufacture of News: Social Problems*, *Deviance and the Mass Media*, London: Constable, pp. 226–43.

Jacobson, T. L. (1998), 'Discourse Ethics and the Right to Communicate', *Gazette*, 60: 5, pp. 395–413.

Lichtenberg, J. (1996), 'In Defence of Objectivity Revisited', in J. Curran and Michael Gurevitch (eds.), *Mass Media and Society*, London, New York, Sydney, Auckland: Arnold, pp. 225–42.

MacBride, S. (1980), *Many Voices, One World. Report by the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems*, Paris and London: Unesco & Kogan Page.

Manca, L. (1989), 'Journalism, Advocacy, and a Communication Model for Democracy', in M. Raboy and P. Bruck (eds.), *Communication for and Against Democracy*, Montréal – New York: Black Rose Books, pp. 163–73.

McNair, B. (1998), *The Sociology of Journalism*, London, New York, Sydney, Auckland: Arnold.

McQuail, D. (1994), *Mass Communication Theory. An Introduction*, London: Sage.

Meijer, I. C. (2001), 'The Public Quality of Popular Journalism: Developing a Normative Framework', *Journalism Studies*, 2: 2, pp. 189–205.

Nordenstreng, K. (1995), 'The Journalist: a Walking Paradox', in P. Lee (ed.), *The Democratization of Communication*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, pp. 114–29.

Oledzki, J. (1998), 'Polish Journalists: Professionals or Not?', in D. H. Weaver (ed.), *The Global Journalist. News People Around the World*, Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton press, pp. 277–97.

Schlesinger, P. (1987), *Putting 'Reality' Together*, London and New York: Methuen.

Schudson, M. (1978), *Discovering the News*, New York: Basic Books.

Shah, H. (1996), 'Modernization, Marginalization, and Emancipation, Toward a Normative Model of Journalism and National Development', *Communication Theory*, 6: 2, pp. 143–66.

Tuchman, G. (1972), 'Objectivity as a Strategic Ritual: an Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity', *American Journal of Sociology*, 77, pp. 660–79.

Watson, J. (2003), *Media Communication: An Introduction to Theory and Process*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Westerståhl, J. (1983), 'Objective News Reporting', *Communication Research*, 10, pp. 403–24.

Westerståhl, J., Johansson, F. (1994), 'Foreign News: News Values and Ideologies', *European Journal of Communication*, 9: 1, pp. 71–89.

Wilpert, B. (1991), 'Property, Ownership, and Participation: on the Growing Contradictions Between Legal and Psychological Concepts', in R. Russell and V. Rus (eds.), *International Handbook of Participation in Organisations (ii.), Ownership and Participation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 149–64.

Wolfe, T. (1973), *The New Journalism*, New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row.