

EASA Media Anthropology Network
E-Seminars Series
<http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm>
26th E-Seminar Discussion

**"Independence, Autonomy and Recursivity
in a Journalistic Field"**

by
Dr. Jay Gabriel

Discussant
Dr. Per Ståhlberg, University of Stockholm
February 16 – March 3 2009

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Mon Feb 16 23:29:10 PST 2009

Dear all,

Today starts our 26th e-seminar! We will discuss Dr. Jay Gabriel's paper titled "Independence, Autonomy and Recursivity in a Journalistic Field."

The working paper is available at:
<http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm>

How it works:

Discussant is Dr. Per Ståhlberg. He will post his comments to the list this evening (Tuesday) or tomorrow (Wednesday).

Jay Gabriel will then respond to Ståhlberg's comments.

After their response I will invite further postings from the floor.

Please have in mind that these sessions can only work if we have wide and sustained participation, so all contributions are very welcome (short/long comments, short/long questions etc.).

Further information about Gabriel and Ståhlberg:

Dr. Jay Gabriel is an American cultural anthropologist who has conducted ethnographic research on journalists and news production in North America. His doctoral research (2008) was a study of journalistic objectivity as a communication strategy. His current research interests include media anthropology, globalization of news and media, and media representation of "traditional" anthropological subjects.

Dr. Per Ståhlberg is a Swedish social anthropologist who has done research on mass media in India. His doctoral thesis was a study of Hindi language journalists working with mainstream newspapers (2002). Currently Per is working on a study about the new image of India as a rising superpower, particularly how "visions of the future" are being constructed in popular culture and influencing Indian society in various ways.

The seminar closes March 3.

All the best, Sigurjon.

Per Ståhlberg [per.stahlberg at socant.su.se](mailto:per.stahlberg@socant.su.se)

Tue Feb 17 05:43:23 PST 2009

Comments on Jay Gabriel's Getting Involved: Independence and Recursivity in the Journalistic Field.

By Per Ståhlberg, Department of Social Anthropology Stockholm University

Dear List

First, thanks to Jay for a stimulating and interesting paper, which I enjoyed very much reading. My appreciation of this paper is, of course, influenced by my own background, so I should start by introducing myself briefly. Just like Jay, I have written a dissertation on journalism, based on participant observation in an editorial office as well as among reporters on the beat. My study was conducted in the late 1990's and the location of my ethnography was a Hindi language newspaper in Lucknow, a north Indian city. Despite the fact that Jay's "journalistic field" in the US is rather far from my field experience - - geographically as well as culturally -- it is amazing how similar journalists' professional values seem to be. I can easily relate to several of the issues that Jay is occupied with. If you ask the Hindi language reporters what they consider to be "the most important values of journalism", the answers are not much different from how Jay's informants express themselves. The key symbol of Jay's US journalists, "the big guy vs. the little guy", would be perfectly well understood in Hindi.

Jay's material does also agree well with older studies of journalist's perception of their occupational role. Indeed, quite a lot has been written about media professionalism at least since the 1970's, a few of these studies are also briefly referred to by Jay. It is a bit surprising, though, that Jay make so little of what media scholars have

said about how journalists think about their profession. He mentions the work of Schudson, Soloski, Tuchman and Weaver et al, but only in passing, despite the fact that these scholars (as well as others not mentioned) have discussed very similar topics. Neither does he relate to the more general sociology of professionalism or, for that matter, to the growing anthropological literature on media production. The explanation is probably that this paper is originally a chapter in Jay's dissertation and that those references are made elsewhere.

Anyhow, it is no news that journalists often nurse high ideals and consider their occupation to be a central one in a democratic society (in Europe and the US at least, we know considerable less about journalists in other parts of the world). Journalists often find it to be their obligation to serve "the common man" by telling the truth. In that role they should be free from economic constraints and from loyalties to particular individuals or organizations. Jay's interviews clearly confirm that this self esteem of journalism, as an exceptional profession with particular obligations to society, is very much alive.

With this I do not mean that everything is already said about journalist's professionalism. I think it is still a subject that deserves scholarly attention, not least because journalism continues to have a great impact on all of us. Still, most of our knowledge about society and the world are filtered through media professionals and public debates around journalist's biases and their ability to "get their stories rights" have not diminished. It also makes sense to study the contemporary values of journalism, because the social and technological context in which journalists work has changed dramatically in a few decades. (In their introduction to a special issue of *Ethnography*, "Worlds of journalism", Dominic Boyer and Ulf Hannerz, 2006, make a case for the anthropological studies of contemporary journalism).

In my opinion, the originality of Jay's paper lies more in his analyses than in the material he presents. In the sociology of journalism it is rather common to highlight tensions or value conflicts that seem to be inbuilt in the profession. Some values that journalists nurse even appear to be logically antithetical. The tension between "straight" versus "committed" style of reporting is for example well documented. The straight reporters think that they serve society best by being efficient but neutral ("objective") fact collectors; the committed reporters, on the other hand, believe it is their duty to analyze and reflect on information and make judgments on behalf of the reader. For example, Renate Kösher (1986) has, in a study of journalists in Western European countries, termed these contrasting professional roles as the "bloodhound" versus the "missionary". To some extent journalists in different countries seem to prefer one of these models (German journalists tend to favor the "missionary" and British journalists prefer the "bloodhound"), but, according to Kösher, it is more significant that individual journalists somehow manage to combine elements of both these contrasting roles. (If I am not mistaken, a similar conclusion has been drawn concerning US journalists).

When I came across this oscillation between commitment and objectivity (or between involvement and non-involvement in Jay's terminology) among Indian journalists I thought it could be explained in a rather trivial way. It was a matter of differentiating between professionalism as

"norms for occupational practice" and as "ideas about the occupation's role in society". In the first sense journalistic professionalism is guiding work routines; this is what Kaniss (1991) in a study of local journalists in the US has termed "standard operational procedures". In the other sense professionalism refers to ideas about why the journalists write news, and for whom. I thought a journalist might easily switch between non-involvement and involvement (between the bloodhound and the missionary) when the subject of discussion moved from practical predicaments of work to more abstract ideas about journalism. An Indian journalist could claim that he (most reporters were male) was absolutely neutral and extremely careful with facts when telling me about a particular story he had written; when, a few minutes later, discussing journalism in general terms, the same reporter could claim that his role models were the committed freedom fighter that had fought against British colonialism.

Jay's analysis is more elegant. He claims that ideals of journalism are at work in different domains and on different levels, and that distinctions in one domain are mirrored on other levels. This is what he calls "fractal recursivity", with a concept borrowed from linguistics. I like it. With this theoretical exercise Jay is able to add new insights to an old discussion. The concept of "fractal recursivity" makes it possible to consider relations and parallels of different "scales" in a way I think could be useful in many other contexts.

Jay focuses on the journalistic ideal of "independence" and shows how it may acquire different meaning when transferred between domains. Thus, in the most general domain, journalism is conceptualized as an institution that should be autonomous from other institutions in society in order to be a "watchdog", a pillar of power distinct from other such entities. In the newsroom, on a lower domain, this autonomy is conceptualized as editorial independence which becomes manifest, for example, as a "great wall" between the editorial and advertising. The third domain is the reporter who as an individual is struggling to separate private values from the professional work. In the beginning of the paper, Jay is citing Eugene, an investigating reporter, who claims that he is constantly battling with his own ego, because it may interrupt with the truth. If I understand the argument correctly, this is an example of "fractal recursivity": the general distinction between journalism and other powerful institutions in society is mirrored in the individual as a distinction between the private self and the professional reporter.

Part of the story is that journalism is a profession that promotes individualism. A news organization has to rely on the creativeness of their reporters in finding news sources and in writing the stories. And much of the credit for a news story goes to the name in the by-line. It would not be far fetched to guess that a strong motivation for a reporter is the publicness of the occupation: the efforts of a good day's work are displayed to a wide audience. This is a predicament of work that no doubt often boosts the ego. As Jay states, the work of a journalist is an example of "extreme public individualism". It is of course easy to see a tension here between altruism and individualism in the journalist's profession. Just as it is easy to sense a conflict between engagement and objectivity, or between ideals of independence and the fact that most journalists work for particular news

organizations that want to make a profit.

However, I wonder to what extent these tensions and conflicts are also manifest in practice? Jay builds his argument around interviews that are very straight to the point. He asks the journalists to describe the "values and functions of journalism". I think this is a method that brings up tensions and conflicts that are not really so much on the agenda for the reporter on the beat. Jay may have more material from practical work situations in his other chapters of the dissertation, but, standing for itself I think this lack of insights from participant observation make the paper somewhat weak. It would be interesting to know about specific situations in which one could see how "fractal recursivity" works in practice.

Finally, in this age of many voices, fragmented audiences and diminishing certainty I would have thought that journalists in the US had reformulated their professional ideals somewhat. I am struck by the very familiar way in which Jay's informants talk about journalism. It is not clear when Jay conducted his interviews but I suppose that they are quite recent. Journalists of this millennium seem to express themselves in a manner very similar to how their colleagues would have done thirty years ago, or more? For example, the key symbol of "the big guy vs. the little guy" sounds rather one-dimensional, if not anachronistic, in our present time. After all, journalists do not have that kind of "exceptional" status in society that they once enjoyed. The traditional news media is heavily challenged by other means of distributing news and information. And compared to all bloggers or facebook members, reporters are not very extreme in their "public individualism" any longer. Have not the technological developments of later decades, and new phenomenon of mass communication, had any influence on how journalists perceive their role in society? I am not saying that important aspects of how journalists talk about their occupation have been left out by Jay. Rather, I think this striking continuity in professional ideals needs to be commented upon. It is indeed strange.

References:

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Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Tue Feb 17 07:12:03 PST 2009

Dear all,

Thanks to Per for his quick response!!!

Its over to Jay now!!

All the best, Sigurjon.

Jay Gabriel [jgabri01 at temple.edu](mailto:jgabri01@temple.edu)

Wed Feb 18 20:40:17 PST 2009

Dear Per and Medianthro List,

I would like to thank Per Ståhlberg for his thoughtful and helpful comments on this draft that I continue to edit and improve.

In his response, Per provided great opportunities for dialogue. My efforts at this have been made with some haste, but in the interest of timely communication, here they are:

1. On my non-inclusion of sociology of journalism and studies of professionalism:

[It is a bit surprising, though, that Jay make so little of what media scholars have said about how journalists think about their profession. He mentions the work of Schudson, Soloski, Tuchman and Weaver et al, but only in passing, despite the fact that that these scholars (as well as others not mentioned) have discussed very similar topics. Neither does he relate to the more general sociology of professionalism or, for that matter, to the growing anthropological literature on media production. The explanation is probably that this paper is originally a chapter in Jay's dissertation and that those references are made elsewhere.]

Yes, I did write in other chapters about the work of sociologists who have studied journalists, especially with regard to the notion of "objectivity".

As far as professionalism is concerned, it does deserve more attention in this paper. Certainly parts of this literature shaped my interpretation of what these journalists were telling me. Professionalism is a way in which scholars such as Soloski (1997) have conceptualized the link between the values of an organization and the internalized values that individuals within them develop. So this is of obvious relevance to the paired concepts of journalistic autonomy and independence.

2. On the congruence of journalistic values across space:

[Despite the fact that Jay's "journalistic field" in the US is rather far from my field experience -- geographically as well as culturally -- it is amazing how similar journalists' professional values seem to be. I can easily relate to several of the issues that Jay is occupied with. If you ask the Hindi language reporters what they consider to be "the most important values of journalism", the answers are not much different from how Jay's informants express themselves. The key symbol of Jay's US journalists, "the big guy vs. the little guy", would be perfectly well understood in Hindi.]

I have a few scattered thoughts on this that I will collect as coherently as possible.

One is a question really: To what degree is this similarity a product of (very different) colonial experiences? That is, in producing the "newspaper" or "doing journalism," are journalists in Seattle, Philadelphia or Lucknow reproducing ideas about individuality, inquiry, and democracy that originate, at least to some degree, in the same intellectual tradition by way of colonial contact? (Please note that I do not make any claim that "Westerners" invented such things. I am noting rather that both populations of journalists draw their concepts of journalism from the same discursive sphere--though to what differing extent, I am unsure.)

I do not have my library at hand, but I recall that in Hasty's *The Press and Political Culture in Ghana* (2005), journalists expressed belief in these values and made claims to representation of the "little guy" or common person. This despite the fact that one major axis of Ghanaian journalism is state-sponsored reporting versus the oppositional, private press. Many of the state-supported journalists wrote about officials and official utterances in a way that would be labeled press release in the US. Yet these same journalists professed a belief in an independent, "objective" journalism that would have fit comfortably in the mouths of most of my informants or interviewees. Hasty pays special attention where global influences on journalism interact with the local, even going so far as to link state-sponsored journalism to the courtly traditions of pre-British Ghana, in which chieftains made pronouncements through a court speaker.

Nonetheless Hasty found that the independence of the press was a substantial ideal for Ghanaian journalists. Is independence for some reason always a necessity of performing journalism or can we identify forms of reporting that do not prioritize independence or the individuality that Per mentions? I have not developed this line of inquiry myself. Some of the work I did, however, have caused me to reflect on it. In recruiting interviewees, I met a woman from the country of Georgia who had come to the US after receiving a grant from a group whose aim it is to promote Western-democratic values to journalists in emerging democracies and "developing countries." In discussing Georgian journalism, she invoked the "big guy/little guy" as well, but for different reasons than a daily reporter in the US might. She saw the nascent projects of Georgian journalism and Georgian democracy as closely related, and she spoke a great deal about divestment of journalistic agency from the state. In an immediate sense, this meant to her putting an end to grenade attacks on journalists' homes or intimidating visits from state security. She also described the current state of Georgian journalism, I think, as

unsustainable. Many Georgian journalists, she said, are 20-something post-grads in need of an entry-level job to start their careers and earn as little as US \$100/month. Many are unwilling to play the role of crusader or defender of democratic tradition, however one might define that. My point here, before I get too lost in the weeds, is that the "big guys" and "little guys" in Georgian journalism certainly exist but they come from different histories. The conceptions of state and free markets to which these symbols refer have different positions within that journalistic field.

(Looking into this later, I found that at least one big media corporation, News Corp (owner of Fox News among many other holdings), saw the country as an emerging market opportunity and had developed an ownership arrangement with a leading opposition station, Imedi television. Some Georgians arguing for media reform see movement toward a free market news media as necessary for a properly functioning democracy, which might make for a great study of journalism and neoliberal projects in Georgia, if someone hasn't already done this.)

Finally, a likely critique of the idea of the key symbol or orienting symbol

(Ortner [2002]1973) is that it essentializes or reduces "cultural qualities" to a neat little package, such as "cattle" for the Dinka. I think it is possible to avoid this and make more productive use of the concept by making clear that such key symbols have a specific historical context.

3. Needs more use of participant observation:

[...I think this lack of insights from participant observation make the paper somewhat weak. It would be interesting to know about specific situations in which one could see how "fractal recursivity" works in practice.]

I realize I should have said more about my methods. For about seven months in 2003-2004, I worked as an intern at an alternative weekly, where I fact-checked copy, sorted mail, made copies, and wrote a few short articles, two of which made it to press. I agree that more of this experience needs to be in this paper, but will have to beg more time to think how best to do this.

I supplemented this fieldwork with 15 interviews, most which were conducted in 2007 in Philadelphia and Seattle (I had a success rate of about 25% at convincing journalists whom I cold-called without prior introduction to participate). Among those I interviewed were daily reporters, columnists at daily papers and at a weekly, alt weekly writers and editors, and two people who taught journalism as adjuncts and freelanced.

4. On the old-school feel of responses:

[Finally, in this age of many voices, fragmented audiences and diminishing certainty I would have thought that journalists in the US had reformulated their professional ideals somewhat. I am struck by the very familiar way in which Jay's informants talk about journalism. It

is not clear when Jay conducted his interviews but I suppose that they are quite recent. Journalists of this millennium seem to express themselves in a manner very similar to how their colleagues would have done thirty years ago, or more?]

These interviews were conducted mostly in 2007, so they are quite recent. This anachronistic quality that Per mentions could be an artifact of the interview structure and the questions I asked. I wanted them to articulate their basic, Journalism-101 beliefs about their work so I could go on to complicate that with an analysis linking their ideology to historical and cultural circumstances (this eventually led to my use of recursivity and the framing of individuals, newsrooms and fields as scales at the prompting of a committee member, a linguistic anthropologist).

I was explicitly concerned, however, with outdated ideas of journalism that seemed to recall the "good old days" of journalism, specifically objectivity, about which I also asked questions in interviews. Here's what I wrote in my dissertation intro chapter:

The main question I am addressing is why objectivity continues to hold sway in the field; one answer that I propose is that objectivity is useful for journalists in distinguishing themselves as exceptional in a marketplace of speakers, and maintaining control over their independence from coercive forces.

That said, it has been made clear repeatedly to me that many journalists consider "objectivity" debates sophomoric, as do scholars of journalism. I wanted nonetheless to find something original in the subject of objectivity. It occurred to me, especially after fieldwork and interviews, that for all the dismissiveness, the journalists I knew still talked about objective (or they used words like objective: fair, disinterested, straight, etc.) journalism for some reason. In particular, the writers I knew at the alternative weekly dismissed questions about objectivity as simplistic—they were writers and investigative reporters for whom the objective paradigm was woefully insufficient for furthering the sort of social progressivism that is the traditional viewpoint of the alt weekly. As many US readers probably know, the alt weekly originated as an independent alternative to the "straight journalism" of the 60s and 70s. While the objectivity debates may be old, objective/non-objectivity constitutes an axis (like that of state/opposition press in Ghana) that continues to shape journalistic discourse in the US.

Just yesterday, a writer for the alt-weekly The Stranger (Seattle) posted this on the paper's blog (Slog):

"I'm on my way in a few moments to the University of Washington, where Seattle Times reporter Warren Cornwall has asked me to speak to his journalism class about objective journalism vs. non-objective journalism. For this lesson, Cornwall and I are each supposed to prepare brief "opening statements" in favor of our publications' respective practices. So, he's making a statement about Times-style objective journalism and I'm making one about Stranger-style non-objective journalism.

"Earlier this morning we shared our prepared statements with each other, and, well, it was somewhat amusing. Cornwall's begins:

"There is no such thing as objective journalism.

"Mine begins:

"There is no truly objective journalism.

"Don't know how much of a debate this will end up being, but seems interesting already."

http://slog.thestranger.com/slog/archives/2009/02/17/no_objections

Skip to the fourth comment down:

"Eli, both statements are Journalism 101 or even Communications 201

It's not like you've stumbled upon some brilliant coincidence."

See, but I think it has to be significant that this question—and response—is so perennial. The idea I latched onto (again, more so in the dissertation) was that "objectivity" is really a way of talking about independence and autonomy and even individuality, an enduring concern.

A final, incomplete thought here: In my recollection of her book, Hasty's Ghanaian informants equated professionalism with "objective journalism," a phrase that appears several times. Clearly the version of objectivity that we read about in Schudson (1978, 1990) and Mindich (1998) cannot be the same as the Ghanaian version; in their accounts, objectivity is bound to American institutions and history. Yet we see objectivity as an ideal in at least one other national tradition of journalism. The Ghanaian journalists' reasons for invoking it seem to center most often on a defense of their autonomy as journalists.

5. On technology, and toward a more participatory journalism?

[For example, the key symbol of "the big guy vs. the little guy" sounds rather one-dimensional, if not anachronistic, in our present time. After all, journalists do not have that kind of "exceptional" status in society that they once enjoyed. The traditional news media is heavily challenged by other means of distributing news and information. And compared to all bloggers or facebook members, reporters are not very extreme in their "public individualism" any longer. Have not the technological developments of later decades, and new phenomenon of mass communication, had any influence on how journalists perceive their role in society?]

One observation I've made is that journalists at daily papers, at least judging by the ones I encountered, have become entrenched in their sense of journalistic exceptionalism as these challenges have emerged. One columnist I interviewed lamented the fact that his paper 'gives news away for free' online and was dismissive of online, non-professional journalism as the amateurish work of "bloggers." The idea that professionalism makes for a privileged position that no amount of Internet access should usurp was quite prevalent among my informants. Oddly (or not), it might have been the columnists I interviewed who

were the loudest about this. But I can't claim my interviewees and informants were representative of all journalists.

The social media sites, unsurprisingly, reveal something different. Twitter in particular seems enormously popular with the journalistic community. A fieldsite of sorts that I have frequented recently is the collective Twitter communications of journalists, citizen/public journalists, and scholars who are responding to the current major economic restructuring of US print journalism. My impression there has been of a refrain, "Journalism needs to change."

With that, I turn it over to all of you. Thanks for reading.

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Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Wed Feb 18 22:59:07 PST 2009

Dear all,

Thanks to Jay for his response.

The floor is now open for all to post their questions and/or comments.

All the best, Sigurjon.

Postill, John J. [Postill at shu.ac.uk](mailto:j.postill@shu.ac.uk)

Fri Feb 20 12:08:38 PST 2009

Jay

You say at some point in your paper that you will not be discussing Bourdieu's notion of field autonomy but rather the sense of autonomy and independence reported by individual journalists. But is it possible to understand one without the other? For example, wouldn't you say that a journalist who works for a sector of the journalistic field that is under severe governmental scrutiny and pressure is likely to be, both objectively and subjectively (Bourdieu), less autonomous when it comes to writing about the business of government than a journalist in a less pressurised sector of the field?

John

Dr John Postill
Senior Lecturer in Media
Sheffield Hallam University
[j.postill at shu.ac.uk](mailto:j.postill@shu.ac.uk)

Zeynep Gürsel [zgursel at umich.edu](mailto:zgursel@umich.edu)

Sat Feb 21 14:18:33 PST 2009

Dear Jay,

Thank you for this interesting paper.

I am new to the list and this is my first time commenting so please forgive me if I don't know the format but I was wondering if you might want to clarify your intended end product? I feel that would allow me to be most constructive in my commentary. I think stand alone articles and book chapters function very differently. I too think it is very important for journalism to get anthropological attention at this moment and think that your work contributes something interesting and agree with Per that the elegance of your analysis lies in how you bring in questions around domains and fractal recursivity. However, how much context the paper needs does depend greatly on whether you are working on this as a chapter or a stand alone journal article.

From your answer to Per's comments my sense is that you are revising this as part of a book manuscript in which case would it be possible for you to send us the table of contents so that we might have a sense of what the whole is that contextualizes this chapter?

I myself am working on a manuscript about the labor processes behind photojournalism and therefore the issues you raise are of primary interest to me. One of the ways however in which my work is quite different is that unlike text journalists, photojournalists often do not get credited by name or if they do the average reader does not necessarily see the photograph as authored by a particular individual. In that sense the visibility of their individualism is

more complicated. (Obviously there are certain big name photographers who get highlighted but the average photo credit is what I am referencing here.)

That said on a larger theoretical level I wanted to endorse Angela's call for attention to the work of journalists and their practices vs relying solely on their self-representations. I feel this is critical. For example on page 9 you really seem to take Gina's word and her narration of "censorship" at face value. Do you have the editor's perspective on the event? My experience is that writers rarely agree with their editor's decision about not publishing their piece or demoting it but they might change their mind over time and their perception of the editor's rationale, the editor's stated rationale, and the editor's actual rationale may or may not be the same. Even if you can't triangulate with what the editor said etc I think the key here is in how you present what Gina says. Maybe the cheeky way to pose this would be have you perhaps "gone a little native?" The moments where you are sharing journalists comments are potentially extremely rich and I believe they merit more analytic engagement on your part.

Let me try to give a concrete example:

On pg. 10 there is an interesting moment when you say "It is unjournalistic to print a story that is critical if it is otherwise relevant, fair, and accurate." I would have appreciated more analysis of these three concepts because editorial decisions based on relevance are a classic example of where editors and journalists might disagree and the journalist might interpret the decision as pertaining to the piece's critical nature where the editor might make an argument about relevance. I am not trying to say journalists don't take criticism well nor am I saying that one party distorts the truth etc but rather to suggest that what I see as problematic in the way the piece is currently written is its over reliance on the journalist's self representation.

In general I would have liked more analysis of the journalists' comments. Eugene's comments on p. 11 merit a lot more analysis I believe. What do you make of the fact that he picks up interview techniques from police interrogators, private investigators and lawyers? Or what does it mean for him to teach journalists how to "organize [informants'] brain so that information that is scattered about in there is accessible." Or on p. 10 and 12 there seems to a gap or contradiction in Amy's claim that she doesn't take sides and her admission that she is more or less expected to not take sides against her neighbors. These are just two moments where I feel there is room for more of your analysis. In some ways depending on how much context you have I think Eugene alone could be a good section of this chapter.

On a different note: It is not clear to me why we get the information we get about the journalists. Obviously it seems to be important (if I understand correctly from your response) to differentiate between alternate weekly journalists and daily reporters for metropolitan dailies even though even this differentiation could be fleshed out a bit. But I think particularly given the context of influence isn't it perhaps worth thinking about freelancers vs staff writers? Also your comments seem to be making some comments about continuity over

generations and also a nostalgia for a golden age of journalism. Are you then giving us journalists' ages as background information or as something you use to comment on generational differences and similarities. Also, is what matters how old these people are or how many years they have been in journalism? Or perhaps whether they came to journalism from a different career path or were always journalists. Might it be worth asking if professional identity functions differently for people who are lifelong journalists? My experience is that photojournalists have radically different work processes and experiences depending on whether they had to transition to digital technologies or came from a film background and this often inflects their ideas about their role in a publication. (For example, digital photographers are the first editors of their work whereas this used to be one way in which writers and photographers had different labor processes)

To comment on something you raised in your response to Per: It is not my area of expertise but perhaps citizen journalism is one model where independence or individuality is not prioritized the way it is here.

Finally I really agree with Angela that cross-cultural comparisons of journalism are thorny. Not only do big guys and little guys not always signify the same things but they can also map on to good guys and bad guys very differently. Furthermore, the idea that nonpartisanship is a virtue in journalism clearly indicated in your piece is not universal by any means. Journalists in many countries write for papers that clearly identify with the left or right and yet they do not necessarily see that as compromising the accuracy or independence of their journalism. Therefore while it is interesting that there are similarities I think historical context is very important.

Thanks again for sharing this work.

Best,
Zeynep

Zeynep Devrim Gürsel
Michigan Society of Fellows

Assistant Professor
Department of Anthropology
University of Michigan
101 C. West Hall
1085 S. University
Ann Arbor, MI 48109 - 1107

(734) 764 2156

Stephen Lyon [s.m.lyon at durham.ac.uk](mailto:s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk)

Fri Feb 20 17:35:32 PST 2009

Dear Jay,

Thanks for an interesting paper. I have two points/questions that occurred to me in reading the paper and in Per's helpful discussant' comments.

1. I wonder how sincere some journalists are in their expressions of exposing truth in the grand battle between big and little people. I don't often read the red top tabloids in Britain, but when I do I must admit that I have a hard time taking the expressions of defending the little guy very seriously. And it doesn't appear to be only at the level of the editors since some journalists seem to make a career out of the most appallingly crass and grotesque parodies of journalistic investigation (think Geraldo Rivera, though I realise he's television and perhaps you want to make a distinction there). My question, therefore, is going to be poorly formed (for which I apologise) and possibly reveal my snobbism (for which I don't apologise)-- to what extent might the almost archetypal relationships invoked by the big guy/little guy opposition simply be a sort of professional code which reveal inclusion in the club, so to speak, rather than a reflection of any profoundly held view?

2. On the question of commonalities of journalistic expressions of the mission and goals of journalism across cultures. I'm sure many of you are familiar with Bishop's wonderful film on Carpenter entitled, 'Oh, What a Blow that Phantom Gave Me'. One of the things that Carpenter argues in the media itself imposes a certain kind of narrative logic on the user, regardless of culture. So in addition to the certainly valid points about colonial influence, is there any mileage in exploring journalism as a particular medium which might tend to impose common notions about exposing truth, uncovering wrong doing, righting wrongs and so on, all of which might drive journalists towards certain notions of the individual that, rather than being European or Western, are in fact the logical derivatives of those explicit goals of journalism?

Once again, thanks for an interesting paper and sorry for both my ignorance of the subject and any offense I may cause to readers of tabloids around the world!

Best,
Steve

Dr Stephen M. Lyon
Senior Lecturer in Anthropology
Department of Anthropology
Durham University
Dawson Building
South Road
Durham DH1 3LE
UK

angela dressler dressler at tugamail.com

Thu Feb 19 01:01:33 PST 2009

Dear Jay,

thank you so much for that thrilling paper, and all the extras information you have added.

I do work on these issues myself so I very much appreciate your focus on values and your elaborations.

Very generally I think comparing "Journalism" cross-culturally / internationally is quite a difficult thing to do. The term might be the same, whereas practice, morals and context arent, I guess. Like the Georgia-example you gave I could add some more that in detail show difference or even incoherency rather than common ground (see Dreßler 2008). In this sense - the vital thing in your case would be the ethnographic part. So like Per I would as well very much appreciate reading about those things going on behind the scenes. You agreed on that and begged more time to think things over. Nevertheless this draws on sth you wrote in your reply/ dissertation:

[...objectivity is useful for journalists in distinguishing themselves as exceptional in a marketplace of speakers, and maintaining control over their independence from coercive forces.]

To make it short, here goes a question of mine:

When it comes to exploring objectivity - I would be interested in your notions of the gap in-between- their talking and their work. Journalists most commonly are specialist in communication (see Peterson 2002:xv). They very smoothly take the lead and let you hear what they want to, this is their job. Have you paid any attention at their practice, done any kind of fact- and proof-checking their interviews (e.g. juxtaposing) in order to explore differences, inconsistencies or the gap in-between their words and deeds (practice) / maybe your role as well?

In this regard I was wondering how "doing objectivity" might look like.

Jay, could you briefly comment on that? Perhaps only sketch it?

Best,
Angela

ref. cited.

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Peterson, Mark Allan (2003). Anthropology and Mass Communication. Media and Myth in the New millenium. New York: Berghan Books.

Peterson, Mark Allen Dr. [petersm2 at muohio.edu](mailto:petersm2@muohio.edu)

Sun Feb 22 04:09:39 PST 2009

My discomfort with Steve Lyon's first question stems from a whole range of methodological and epistemological issues raised by the notion that the fieldworker is ever in a good position to judge "sincerity." I cannot imagine any way to assess this other than the "gut feeling" of the ethnographer, and at least for me, working with informants communicating in a range of Indian English, Hindi and Urdu, with varied paralinguistics, I do not trust my gut feelings and, frankly, I do not trust those of most other fieldworkers. I think Jay is going about this the right way, analyzing the common discursive patterns and locating the "fighting for the little guy" as one important pattern in the discursive matrix--and one that has consequences for practice.

This is not to say that the problem of "sincerity" is not relevant. I'd like to know if journalists question one another's sincerity as part of this discursive matrix. My experience in India is that my informants are themselves usually very concerned about whether or not a particular journalist, editor or newspaper is "sincere". And they have differing criteria for determining this.

Right now, for example, television journalism in India televises things that in most "Western" countries would be seen as absurd excesses (yes, Geraldo and his ilk notwithstanding). The other day, for example, one of the top rated TV news channels aired a man's sting operation on his wife to prove that she spoke to him abusively and inappropriately. They frequently go to air with what professional journalists elsewhere might consider insufficient information, Or pick up yesterday's speculations and treat them today as fact. Yet all the tv journalists I have interviewed, while acknowledging excesses, insist that it is justified because so much of what they do benefits the common man, the little guy. Most professional print journalists regard these TV journalists' claims as insincere. But many, many tv news viewers, including college educated viewers, regard them as sincere. Indeed, "sincerity" becomes a discursive claim by which journalists justify their practices, and news viewers and readers justify their practices of consumption.

On the other hand, in my earlier work with US journalists, I rarely found them questioning one another's sincerity but rather questioning one another's "objectivity." But my base of study was much smaller than Jay's.

On the second issue of cross-cultural commonalities, I think we must be very careful in assuming that "fighting for the little guy" means the same thing in different cultural contexts. I agree with Per Stahlberg that journalists in India (at least in Lucknow, where he and Ursula Rao did fieldwork, and Delhi, where I have done and am doing fieldwork) talk about "fighting for the little guy". And so do Ghanaian journalists, as Jay pointed out in his reply. But the thing is, they may mean different things by this. In the early 1990s, for example, when journalists in new Delhi talked about "fighting for the little guy" it was in the sense that they were trying to inform and educate the little guy as part of national development. Today, the newspapers cover much more crime, as well as corruption and abuse (police, bureaucratic)

cases, and they speak of specific help given to specific persons or groups of persons.

Mark Allen Peterson
Associate Professor
Anthropology Department & International Studies Program

Stephen Lyon [s.m.lyon at durham.ac.uk](mailto:s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk)

Sun Feb 22 05:09:58 PST 2009

I think Mark's point about measuring sincerity is a good one, and I agree that satisfactorily determining another person's sincerity is highly problematic at best. I think my real point, however, was more about this type of discourse being a boundary marker of inclusion and exclusion rather than a a common point of view of journalists. In other words, I think that what matters in this case is not that journalists believe in their expressions of fighting for the little guy, but rather that they SAY they believe in this and that they engage in this type of rhetorical persuasion. And I suppose what I am trying to suggest was that just as I would not assume insincerity, nor would I assume sincerity. I'm not sure that Jay is assuming sincerity, but at times I go that impression and that struck me as something that needed to be queried.

Best,
Steve

Michael Carrithers [m.b.carrithers at durham.ac.uk](mailto:m.b.carrithers@durham.ac.uk)

Mon Feb 23 02:50:02 PST 2009

I wonder if the particular self representation of reporters in the US is not enhanced, or exaggerated, by that countrywide competition, the Pulitzer prizes. That, plus a style of psychologistic talk which encourages self-examination, as in talk of 'ego', might in large part account for the peculiarities of US journalistic talk, as opposed to such talk elsewhere. To capture this in the idea of recursivity is a good one, especially since it can include the way people talk to themselves. Good idea, Jay.

Nevertheless Steve raises the possibility of a more general logic of journalism and journalists. I wonder if this logic is not captured to an extent by looking at what Wortham and Locher [Embedded metapragmatics and lying politicians, Language and Communication, Volume 19, Issue 2, April 1999, pages 109-125] identified as 'embedded metapragmatic statements', of the form 'politician A claimed that politician B was lying'. Metapragmatics is just a way of talking about talk, and here there are two metapragmatic statements, namely 'B was lying' and 'A claimed that ...'. Such reporting is usual during the campaign season, but can occur anytime in democratic polities, and not just when political struggle is the topic of reporting. The underlying point is put nicely by Wortham and Locher when they stress that supposedly 'objective' reporting is not what is going on here, at least

if 'objective' means 'without a viewpoint'. For the very act of the reporter, to publish such embedded metapragmatic statements, involves taking a stance toward the two politicians, not least by reporting, rather than ignoring, the accusation of lying.

It's this taking of a stance which is important, and I'm supposing this applies as much in India or Ghana as it does in the States. For in the very act of reporting there are suddenly called into being at least four distinct participants in the action: politician A, politician B, the reporter, and the putative readership. (In the case that Mark mentions, the equivalent would be the man, his abusive wife, the reporter and the viewing public.) This difference among perspectives is created by 1) the fact that 'news' is mostly news of conflict, or at least of interaction between some parties ('if it bleeds it leads'), and 2) that to speak, or in this case, to publish or broadcast, is always to take a stance. [Authority figure to quote: Bakhtin, just for starters.]

There might then be many different ways of conceiving the stance the reporter takes, as opposed to the stance of those reported about, and those reported to. We've so far had, more or less, 'big people vs. little people', 'objectivity', 'egolessness', and probably more. Perhaps the 'big people vs. little people' trope arises just because 'news' tends often to be about 'big people': 'little people' are much less newsworthy. And in any case the 'big people' are often the first two (e.g. politicians A and B) of the characters in the primal scenario of reporting, while the 'little people' are the readership / viewers.

How reporters present themselves, or agonize over their position, may differ from place to place. But the practice of 'publishing news' entails an underlying logic of stance-taking, and it is that underlying logic that allows us to compare forms of journalism in the first place. Or that's my theory this Monday morning.

Thanks to all for a very stimulating discussion!

Best

Michael
Professor Michael Carrithers
Public Culture in Theory and Practice Research Group
Anthropology Department
Durham University
43 Old Elvet
Durham DH1 3HN

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Mon Feb 23 06:10:27 PST 2009

Forwarded to the list from:

Katrien Pype, PhD
Newton International Fellow
Center of West African Studies
School of History and Cultures
University of Birmingham

Dear Jay and others on the list,

I have been enjoying the paper as well as the discussion. And, I would like to ask a few questions to Jay.

1. Jay uses the concept of a "key symbol". I really like this idea, and just like Daniel, I think this narrative needs more elaboration. While Daniel asked for a more historical context, maybe a genealogy of this key symbol in US journalism, I would like to read something more about the symbolic value or symbolic work of the key symbol. When reading his text, I think that Jay could even use the concept of "key scenario" - which is one of the two kinds of elaborating symbols that Sherry Ortner discerned. I think the "key scenario" in this context is very apt, since we could rephrase the "big guy vs. the little guy" opposition as a narrative: 'citizens are victims, and journalists are the only ones that care for "the people". Bringing out in the open certain abuses is how journalists save citizens.' Would Jay agree with me?

In addition, Sherry Ortner mentioned that those key scenarios often incorporate particular rituals. In my own research, for example, I described the Pentecostal apocalyptic narrative as a key scenario of Kinshasa's society. Key rituals in this narrative then are conversion, deliverance rituals and confessions. Would there be any kind of ritual that US journalists are performing that enables them to "stand up for the little guy" or that are part of the heroic act?

2. A second topic that crossed my mind when reading Jay's text is the notion of "taboo". I thought about it when Jay discussed the value of objectivity. We can think about taboos of US society, as well as taboos within the journalist world. Maybe this has been discussed in other parts of the dissertation, if so, I would still like to read something about it. First, did Jay discern intra-journalistic taboos? If so, what are they? And second, US journalists remain US people, enmeshed in US culture. How do they stand against certain issues which remain taboo in US society? In how far does the value of "objectivity" remain a key value when authors write about a taboo subject? Or, is do they perceive it as exactly part of their duty to deconstruct taboos?

These questions might seem somehow abstract, though I do hope that Jay can offer us some ethnographic material. Thanks again for an interesting paper!

Katrien

Katrien Pype, PhD
Newton International Fellow
Center of West African Studies
School of History and Cultures
University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2TT
United Kingdom
k.pype@bham.ac.uk

Jay Gabriel jgabri01@temple.edu

Mon Feb 23 08:52:48 PST 2009

Dear list,

Thank you kindly for your comments, questions, and critique thus far. I do intend to post a response soon.

Regards,
Jay

Jay Gabriel jgabri01@temple.edu

Tue Feb 24 06:56:12 PST 2009

Dear list:

Find pasted below my set of responses to the open floor. I have also included a PDF of these where everything is formatted and overall prettier. Instead of attaching it, I have uploaded the document to Scribd, where you may download it if you choose. See:

http://www.scribd.com/full/12783842?access_key=key-1de92fzdzhgj4bhp2k9x

I've responded directly to the first four commenters and will post further responses later this week. Thanks to all who have spoken for each of their valuable insights.

Regards,
Jay

Responses—February 24, 2009

Zeynep Devrim Gürsel:

Thanks for this set of critical, probing questions. They're certain to resemble those of future reviewers.

1. Regarding your question about the ultimate format of this piece: I'm not (yet) writing a book. This paper, which when finished I envision as a stand-alone article, began as a chapter in my dissertation. I'd like

to develop these ideas to their fullest within the confines of an article.

2. [...I wanted to endorse Angela's call for attention to the work of journalists and their practices vs relying solely on their self-representations. I feel this is critical.]

This may have been what Per was getting at as well, I think, with his recommendation to include more participant observation data. Anthropologists are especially interested in revealing tensions between belief and practice, for which participant observation is a vital tool. I've tried to address this somewhat in my responses to others.

3. [For example on page 9 you really seem to take Gina's word and her narration of "censorship" at face value. Do you have the editor's perspective on the event? My experience is that writers rarely agree with their editor's decision about not publishing their piece or demoting it but they might change their mind over time and their perception of the editor's rationale, the editor's stated rationale, and the editor's actual rationale may or may not be the same. Even if you can't triangulate with what the editor said etc I think the key here is in how you present what Gina says. Maybe the cheeky way to pose this would be have you perhaps "gone a little native?" The moments where you are sharing journalists comments are potentially extremely rich and I believe they merit more analytic engagement on your part.]

I agree with this, but let me qualify that a little. No, I don't have the editor's take on the incident. As an aside to your main point about identifying too strongly with our informants, it just so happened that I had some familiarity with the editorial process at the alt weekly to which she refers, and possibly could have contextualized it that way. But I was interested here in the way Gina talked about the incident, much more so in this particular case than a multiperspective on how it "actually" went down. As Mark Peterson put it in his response to Stephen Lyon, I was after an "[analysis of] the common discursive patterns."

That said, given that I am trying to understand the distinctions that journalists make between themselves and Others, I might have found something valuable by conducting a similar discourse analysis of the way in which the editor talked about this incident. Or at least situations like it—the need to protect interviewees' privacy might have precluded a too direct questioning. Practical considerations such as convincing the editor to meet with me to talk might have proved difficult as well—in fact, I did attempt to interview him in the early stages of my project and he asked me to speak to someone under him.

Despite the fact that they were more difficult to nab than reporters, I do have interviews with a few editors. I'm afraid my questions to them did not anticipate the desirability of triangulating key events such as story rejection/demotion from which we see these journalistic others emerge. There may be useful information in the transcripts nonetheless. I will have to check.

(Journalistic Others, I was arguing, might be audiences, officialdom, or editors. I say more about this below.)

4. [What do you make of the fact that he picks up interview techniques from police interrogators, private investigators and lawyers? Or what does it mean for him to teach journalists how to "organize [informants'] brain so that information that is scattered about in there is accessible."]

[Or on p. 10 and 12 there seems to a gap or contradiction in Amy's claim that she doesn't take sides and her admission that she is more or less expected to not take sides against her neighbors. These are just two moments where I feel there is room for more of your analysis.]

Here I was interested in developing the notion of the recursive journalist and the symmetries among:

- Journalism as a field and its autonomy from the state and from other fields; this invokes the field-level autonomy or heteronomy that Bourdieu talks about; a field is autonomous when as a system, it makes its own rules, sets its own credentialing process, exercises authority over its activities
- the independence that journalists identify as important and that I have argued is analogous to autonomy on the scale of the newsroom or publication
- ...and the individual journalist or the "prototypical social self" that Irvine and Gal (2000) speak of, who internalizes distinctions that exist as part of the social system of the field. In particular, I wanted to get at some ways in which the journalist embodies the occupation, and used the ideas of control and disinterestedness, between which there is a contradiction.

These two examples you mention are my illustration of the journalist-as-individual who directly acts to manipulate subjects or to uphold the interests of one "side" yet articulates a belief in not getting involved lest that violate basic journalistic values. What I wanted to explore is that perhaps the distinctions journalists make between themselves and their subjects are analogous to those they make between themselves and editors, or between themselves and the state.

Stephen Lyon:

I may owe Stephen an apology as my answers to his questions went a little long and perhaps off-topic. I did, however, find them thought-provoking.

1. [...to what extent might the almost archetypal relationships invoked by the big guy/little guy opposition simply be a sort of professional code which reveal inclusion in the club, so to speak, rather than a reflection of any profoundly held view?]

This is exactly what is going on, or at least one such thing, but I don't know that I'd describe it as simple. My view (not that this idea is my invention) is that the ideological basis of professional identity—or for that matter national identity or ethnicity, class, gender—is quite often a profound matter of "us vs. them," a deeply seated view that informants can consciously articulate, but that they also reveal in the use of symbols, the telling of myths, in everyday speech, and in unconscious habit. Or in their rituals and taboos, as list commenter Katrien Pype reminds us.

This rest of this response is going to pull overtime by responding to your comment and addressing the concern others raised about using more participant observational experience, so I hope it doesn't prove too off-topic from what you said.

When I was an intern, I tried to remain mindful of the process I was undergoing, in addition to paying attention to those around me. In earlier iterations of my project, especially in the proposal stage, I tried to make use of Lave and Wenger's community of practice approach (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). Lave and Wenger tell us that we become members of communities through immersive, largely informal socialization. We become full members of communities by engaging in their key practices and we are allowed fuller membership by gaining competency at tasks. I liked this because it seemed to apply well to the intern process. To become a professional journalist in the US, you must consistently write things (and consistently receive payment for them). All that the staff will tell you in intern orientation. But what they don't say, though they might if asked, is that prospective journalists have to master a way of writing and of structuring a story that is not just journalistic, but appropriate to the publication. (Alt weeklies and daily papers have very different concepts of narrative structure that have to do with the notion of objectivity I was writing about—more on this in response to Angela.)

Even deeper, there is the journalistic demeanor I felt compelled to adopt. These include a sense of the questions journalists ask or don't ask people they interview for stories. Or a conceptualization of audience and what they want to read. Journalists-in-training can acquire this news sense from fact-checking stories, if that is part of their routine. I did a lot of fact-checking and found myself poring over the details of many stories. Most of the "hard" stories were investigative pieces with a progressive political sensibility—addressing gun violence, racism, corruption, and so on. In checking these, I had to verify each fact I encountered and often this required a phone call to someone. So I reflected on the fact that judicious use of the paper's mantle of authority would produce a quick return call and elicit a willingness to talk.

So the two things I learned from fact checking were 1) the proper narrative qualities of alt weekly articles and 2) that used properly, my organizational identity had some power (or that journalism means being in an exclusive club). There was a third thing, too: 3) that there were consequences if through action or inaction, I allowed a demonstrable error to go to press, as I found on the occasions when I failed to fact check thoroughly and let slip a writer's error. The worst punishment was when an editor called me over, read to me my mistake and told me he'd received letters about it.

By the time I started pitching and writing my own articles, I'd internalized these rules. As a would-be alt weekly writer, I was supposed to prove that I could uncover and examine the dysfunction of organizations. I had to negotiate a few officialdoms to find my stories, which I did to some degree using my journalistic credentials. So there was that slew of big guy/little distinctions, me vs. audience and me vs. officialdom. At the same time, I had to work under the eye of the editorial regime, who rejected and approved stories I pitched,

or changed what I wrote, or even tossed out my finished articles.
(This happened once.)

It was through this experience and through a reading of Bourdieu that I developed a view of all these Others-by-way-of-distinction.

2. following Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me! [...is there any mileage in exploring journalism as a particular medium which might tend to impose common notions about exposing truth, uncovering wrong doing, righting wrongs and so on, all of which might drive journalists towards certain notions of the individual that, rather than being European or Western, are in fact the logical derivatives of those explicit goals of journalism?]

I wonder whether this is a McLuhanesque idea—the ‘retribalizing’ effects of audiovisual media is another example that comes to mind-- whose broadest implications anthropologists might contest (a bold prediction offered now that two on this list faster than I to respond have said as much, if I read them correctly). It is true that journalism has historically imposed its news cycles and selective pressures on public understanding of history. Benedict Anderson (1991) would probably be useful for discussing newspapers or other media, the creations of publics and their roles in the formation of national identities. Certainly it’s possible to argue convincingly that journalism has played a part in these processes. I can’t say for sure, but I imagine we could find forms of journalism whose explicit goals are to announce the views of the state, or to publicize the views of a particular political party. Contrast journalism in Ghana, the US and India with journalism with different histories of colonial contact, such as Soviet-era Georgia or other parts of the former Soviet sphere. Or Chinese or Cuban journalism.

I once went through the archives of the New York Times to get a sense of how they dealt with the concept of objectivity. One observation I made that probably deserved follow-up in the archives of other publications was that “objectivity,” “journalism” and “American/Western” all seemed to become conflated in some news articles by the onset of the Cold War. Here is a really long quote from my dissertation that for some reason contains no paragraph breaks. If you want to skip reading it, the gist is, “Journalists in the US have tended to believe that ‘real’ journalism—American journalism--is objective, questions the state and is a fundamentally democratic project”:

... a foreign correspondent recounts the regime of Francisco Franco objecting to his “objective reporting” of the government’s activities (1947) while another report the same year complained that Franco’s decision to bar a Times reporter from the country was tantamount to banning “‘objective’ journalism” (1947; scare quotes in original). In 1940, a correspondent in Japan was detained for 61 days; the Times described this as a measure to “check objective reporting offensive to nationalistic elements” (1940). Objectivity was often symbolic of the vast differences and conflicts between the United States and parts of the world it considered non-Western, illiberal or uncivilized—in short, all of the things the United States was not. Soon after World War II ended, the Soviet press system became a particular focus of this use of term objectivity. “Would Objective Reports

of Foreign Reaction to Moscow's Diplomacy Make Any Difference?" asked Edwin James in 1946, who argued that a Soviet-style state controlled press was diametrically opposed to an objective news media whose worth lay "not in their advocacy of this candidate or that ideology but rather in their presentation of the news as a mirror of human activity, as real current history" (James 1946). "Objective reporting is not on the cards in any Communist-controlled country," concluded an editorial piece four years later, adding that "In the Communist motherland the spectacle of a reporter, domestic or foreign, going freely about his business as he does in this and other civilized countries, would be considered scandalous" (1950). Post-war reconstruction efforts often emphasized the establishment of a "free press," one based on a market system and with no direct connections to the state, as a prerequisite for democracy. In 1946, the US occupation authority handed control of forty-one newspapers to a West German organization only after "breaking down the German tradition of discussive news writing and introducing objective reporting, [and] separating fact from opinion in the German press" (1946). In 1977, when the South African legislature moved to sharply curb the ability of the press to criticize the government, the Times summarized the South African government's position as denying that it was "suppressing objective journalism" (1977). The idea that the success of an objective, "free press," creates the groundwork for democracy is one that endures among members of the press (an idea, for instance, expressed by most of interviewees at the daily papers, who felt that a democratic society required a vigorous journalism), which is probably why the terms "objective reporting" and "objective journalism" make a reappearance in articles in the New York Times about the Soviet Union as the Cold War came to an end. (2008: 87-88)

While not talking about journalists specifically, Bourdieu said that "[t]o exist in a field... is to differentiate oneself," and that "he or she exists by virtue of a difference from other individuals" (2005:41-42). That thought is one that resonated for me.

John Postill

[You say at some point in your paper that you will not be discussing Bourdieu's notion of field autonomy but rather the sense of autonomy and independence reported by individual journalists. But is it possible to understand one without the other? For example, wouldn't you say that a journalist who works for a sector of the journalistic field that is under severe governmental scrutiny and pressure is likely to be, both objectively and subjectively (Bourdieu), less autonomous when it comes to writing about the business of government than a journalist in a less pressurised sector of the field?]

Looking through the draft I sent to the list, I don't think I meant to say I wouldn't discuss Bourdieu's notion of field, but rather that I meant to contextualize the "native" journalism concept of independence within Bourdieu's idea of autonomy. I suppose, however, that a thorough discussion of field on my part would entail more reflection on other fields as it is through the interaction of fields and their attendant power relations that Bourdieu's autonomy emerges.

One might make the case that it's hard for journalists not under government pressure to do their jobs because they are shut out. We can

find an example of this in Hasty's ethnography where the state journalists are allowed to attend press conferences, about which they write in the most uncritical terms, even going so far in one case as to revise a poorly given and off-topic presidential address. Journalists of the oppositional private press, under somewhat less scrutiny (despite undergoing shut-downs historically), are under no informal obligation to write pro-government articles, but at the same time are forced to acquire leads from disgruntled, unnamed insiders and to print rumors, which costs them in credibility.

This idea of "government pressure" on journalists is interesting to me though because it differs by local context and it is often more subtle than a gun to the head or smashing up the presses. Newspapers maintain many official and unofficial channels of communication with government. Where journalists are committed to printing "both sides of the story," this manifests as the press secretary or official spokesperson who can influence coverage through utterance. Some scholar of journalism—I cannot remember who, for which I apologize—has noted that journalists maintain "stables" of on-the-record and off-the-record contacts on the beats they cover and this provides multiple conduits of influence.

(For a different take on this question, I suggest the Michael Schudson chapter in Benson and Neveu volume on Bourdieu and journalism (2005). In it, Schudson poses the question of how much autonomy journalists should have, and suggests that in some ways heteronomy can be positive. See <http://tinyurl.com/bgumqj>)

To try to work in an example from my own experience: The paper I worked for as an intern had a close relationship with city government. I would sit in on editorial meetings each week to obtain a better idea of the paper's internal workings. The editor would formally assign stories or staff would pitch concepts and discuss upcoming events that they needed to cover. Then the mayoral election season began. The paper, by edict of the editor and consensus of the staff, unabashedly supported the Democratic incumbent. For an alternative weekly to do otherwise in a strongly Democratic city would be unlikely. Prior to the publication alt weekly's endorsement, representatives of the mayor's office paid a visit to the paper for one of the weekly meetings, for the purpose--though I may be mistaken--of explaining to the staff what their electoral strategy was and why the paper should endorse them. I was specifically forbidden to attend because the meetings were confidential, so I have only a general notion of what they discussed with the editorial staff. I believe such visits to newspapers by candidates for public office are common, though I am not sure the Republican candidate even bothered dropping by. But it seemed to me that the events of the meeting did not have a particularly strong relationship to the outcome.

Angela Dressler:

[Have you paid any attention at their practice, done any kind of fact- and proof-checking their interviews (e.g. juxtaposing) in order to explore differences, inconsistencies or the gap in-between their words and deeds (practice) / maybe your role as well?

In this regard I was wondering how "doing objectivity" might look like.]

I should make it clear that I worked at a "post-objective" publication, where the closest they got to the tenets of objectivity were fairness, accuracy and independence. Alternative weekly writers will often tell you that they're covering aspects of news that dailies ignore or can't cover.

Alt weeklies most often identify with younger readers and arise out of a progressive tradition that long ago became politically mainstreamed. So that gave them a license to dictate what I could write about and how I needed to write it. I knew they wouldn't print, for instance, a story strongly anti-union, pro-gun, or pro-war, and I wouldn't have pitched such a story. But they openly admitted that was their niche in the news market, so this isn't inconsistent.

A different tack on "doing objectivity": Besides the idea in my response to Stephen that journalists identified as objective in ways that went beyond journalism, I used the notion of the gift to look at objectivity. Gifts, as every anthropologist knows, lead to the formation of social ties and obligation. So it gave me a way to talk about objectivity as something that was bigger than newswork and newsrooms. Journalists here especially want to avoid the burdens of obligation because these can interview with their authority, so like everyone else they've come up with customs and beliefs that regulate gift-giving. But by no means is this cross-cultural, as Mark Pedelty found in El Salvador when discussing US reporters with a Latin American journalist who observed:

I have seen that they will not let sources pay when they take them to breakfast. They will not let them pay the check because they fear this will corrupt their sense of objectivity. To me, this seems somewhat stupid. I do not care who pays the bill. [Objectivity] is a principle that I do not respect.... To me, total objectivity is a lie. (1995:220)

When I interviewed people, I had the hardest time convincing them to let me buy them coffee. I eventually talked one guy into it.

I do know of journalists who did do favors for their informants that were necessary to nourish the relationship. Keeping this really general, one person I know had a high-level contact with a public profile who contracted a serious illness, something that was likely newsworthy, especially given that a scandal in this contact's place of work was breaking. The journalist, however, agreed to the contact's request not to report this and it was actually removed from an early draft. This probably falls more than anything into the "human decency" category, but it was inconsistent with objective, journalistic ideals.

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Ursula Rao [u.rao at unsw.edu.au](mailto:u.rao@unsw.edu.au)

Tue Feb 24 15:32:59 PST 2009

Dear Jay, dear list,

I waited with my comment for a while, because I was still trying to figure out what your paper is actually getting at. What is the relevance of your paper, why do we need it? I found your comments to Per's review particularly useful. At one place you wrote.

That said, it has been made clear repeatedly to me that many journalists consider "objectivity" debates sophomoric, as do scholars of journalism. I wanted nonetheless to find something original in the subject of objectivity. It occurred to me, especially after fieldwork and interviews, that for all the dismissiveness, the journalists I knew still talked about objective (or they used words like objective: fair, disinterested, straight, etc.) journalism for some reason. In particular, the writers I knew at the alternative weekly dismissed questions about objectivity as simplistic—they were writers and investigative reporters for whom the objective paradigm was woefully insufficient for furthering the sort of social progressivism that is the traditional viewpoint of the alt weekly. As many US readers probably know, the alt weekly originated as an independent alternative to the "straight journalism" of the 60s and 70s. While the objectivity debates may be old, objective/non-objectivity constitutes an axis (like that of state/opposition press in Ghana) that continues to shape journalistic discourse in the US.

I was indeed wondering why you would want to discuss notion's of objectivity in journalism and hope to come up with something new and surprising. In the discussion you provided a range of details that explain your topic, how the concept of objectivity sticks on while it is rejected. You also talk about the particular US way of conceiving journalism/journalistic ethics. To me it seems that you need to engage in reflections about your reasons for making journalists speak about objectivity in interviews. Which are the observations that triggered these interests and how do the answers relate to what you observed, learned during your internship. More engagement with context, method and reflections about your question would serve to explain the significance of your paper for understanding contemporary practices of US journalism.

Best

Ursula

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Fri Feb 27 03:01:44 PST 2009

Dear all,

We are discussing Jay Gabriel's paper "Getting involved: independence and recursivity in the journalistic field" which is available at:

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm>

There is still plenty of time for comments and/or questions.

The e-seminar ends next Tuesday, March 3rd.

All the best, Sigurjon

pedeltmh at umn.edu [pedeltmh at umn.edu](mailto:pedeltmh@umn.edu)

Sun Mar 1 13:50:42 PST 2009

Hi Jay,

Pardon me for waiting so long to comment on your paper. I have read the discussion with interest.

First, thank you for clear and informational writing. It was a pleasure to read.

Having conducted ethnographic research with journalists and, more recently, working in a Journalism school, your argument seems quite accurate to me. Journalists are indeed trained to resist influence. The codes and conventions of objective journalism also make them somewhat allergic to critical reflection (deny bias rather than explore it).

My main concern is that you might engage with more of the ethnographic

literature. A student in an ethnog grad sem recently complained about a scholar that seemed to get in 'on the end of the conversation' of several very deep academic dialogues rather than giving them serious attention. To your credit, you use theory and theorists as needed to explicate the case (radical idea), but there are a few more works that you might want to bring in as well, from Herbert Gans's study of newsrooms (with some very good insights regarding mindset and training), Mark Fishman's excellent and unfortunately ignored Manufacturing the News (news beats) and I strongly recommend Nina Grønlykke Møllerup's newly minted Master's Thesis, Part of the Story ninagmollerup@gmail.com. Just as Comm, Ed and other disciplines seem to want to use Anthropology like a drunk uses a lightpost (for support rather than illumination), sometimes the work of Mass Comm researchers is ignored by disciplines gaining greater interest in media matters.

I am somewhat unclear on the difference between autonomy and agency in Weaver's definition (p.2). That seems to be key to your critique, so you might want to discuss agency a bit.

Not so sure that journalists are as wary of corporate influence as you claim at the outset, even in defensive rhetoric (first paragraph in subsection starting on p. 8 seems key to me). Their world is set up to feel like they are independent of government, but often to sublimate corporate routines and discourses. They mainly work for them after all. While it might seem vulgar to make that claim, too much of a propaganda model, I am still not sure by what alchemy people working for corporations could be expected to do anything less. We anthropologists have been very comfortable asserting that people representing tribal, feudal, colonial and other systems in some way embody those institutions and that cultural worlds represent those logics, almost by definition. Not sure why we hesitate to make that claim with the dominant institution of our time.

Your work seems best fit to elite correspondents and freelancers as opposed to the great majority who work in less heady (and less autonomous) journalistic arenas.

Like others, I am interested in the fractal recursivity idea and would like to see more about it. It seems that journalists do indeed use external distinctions to organize their internal worlds. Take the example of ethnographers. You often hear the criticism that a work is too 'journalistic' meaning that it is not sufficiently scholarly (or too readable?). An external distinction used to order and discipline internal functions. Seems like a useful concept, please do write more about it.

Mythologies tend to legitimate systems, but can also keep alive unrealized ideals. You capture that sense of objective journalism very well. It is hard to be relativistic with that cultural world, and I failed in that regard in my first book, providing the criticism without the sense of what objective journalism, with all of its wrinkles, does in a positive, normative, moral sense. Your work captures that much better (e.g., p.13).

You might find Janet Malcolm's The Journalist and the Murderer

fascinating as an honest look at the conundrums of journalistic practice.

Your concluding statement regarding training is interesting. You might also think about the flip side of training: that which journalists are trained not to see, not to remember, and not to think about. Rhetorical statements regarding objectivity, independence, fairness, and so on are in many ways an autonomic response that seem relatively disconnected from practice once you hang out with them for long periods of time. From the first year student to seasoned pros, it seems that other professional exigencies 'most tending to support the market-based institutions they work for rule supreme and that the more theoretical arguments they learnt to describe practice are oddly disconnected from those practices. As one character said in *The Big Chill*: Rationalizations are more important than sex. How could you get through the day without one or two really good rationalizations'

Very interesting and useful work. Thanks for writing it.

Mark

Jay Gabriel [jgabri01 at temple.edu](mailto:jgabri01@temple.edu)

Mon Mar 2 13:04:34 PST 2009

Dear list,

Find below my latest round of comments. Apologies to those who have been waiting. As before, I have uploaded a PDF, if you would prefer that format. Or, you can scroll down to find them.

Regards,
Jay

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/12929727/Response-3>

Response 3—March 2, 2009

Mark Peterson: [I'd like to know if journalists question one another's sincerity as part of this discursive matrix. ...in my earlier work with US journalists, I rarely found them questioning one another's sincerity but rather questioning one another's "objectivity."]

I can think of a few instances where sincerity figured into my participants' behavior or responses. One that fits, perhaps: An editorial writer I interviewed was disparaging of a local blogger (who often assails her columns), and recounted an encounter at a party, where the blogger, she said, 'dismissed actual reporting.' By this she meant the blog was at best a pretend journalism. I also mentioned before the other writer, a columnist, who attacks bloggers in print and in my conversations with him. Perhaps new media vs. old media might be one field of sincerity battles, especially as reporters and bloggers encroach on the domains of the other. I wonder, too, how sincerity concerns might be shaped when local journalistic rhetorics

such as those we've discussed in this seminar that revolve around "democracy", "development" or "autonomy." Or even "market." This idea of sincerity is one I hadn't quite thought about, but it fits well with current ongoing changes to the structure of news media here in the US.

Thinking more about sincerity and medium, the Daily Show (for our global audience, a satirical US news program; not journalism, but critique of it) has presented many routines that call into question the sincerity of television journalists. One running gag is a montage of multiple journalists on various networks all repeating the same breathless cliché to describe a given news event, the idea being that they share a lack of originality and an orientation toward sensationalism.

Michael Carrithers: [But the practice of 'publishing news' entails an underlying logic of stance-taking, and it is that underlying logic that allows us to compare forms of journalism in the first place.]

With regard to metapragmatics (or "talking about talk"), most journalistic systems that I've seen in the ethnographic literature seem to work that way, so that's an interesting point. Even where you have state journalisms as in Ghana or partisan/party papers or television, journalists represent themselves as relays for the words or behavior of others. So maybe that is a sort of underlying structure—I'm not sure.

I'd caution, however, that these similarities could be the product of other pressures. Especially if we were to look at processes of development, I'd bet we'd find the influences of funding agencies, international organizations and large nation-states having some sort of effect on the practices of journalists worldwide. The woman I interviewed from Georgia I mentioned who'd received a training grant to work here, learn US-style reporting, and take those back to Georgia, is one such example of this.

Katrien Pype: [I really like this idea, and just like Daniel, I think this narrative needs more elaboration. While Daniel asked for a more historical context, maybe a genealogy of this key symbol in US journalism, I would like to read something more about the symbolic value or symbolic work of the key symbol. When reading his text, I think that Jay could even use the concept of "key scenario" - which is one of the two kinds of elaborating symbols that Sherry Ortner discerned.]

I might have missed an email, as I have nothing from Daniel. So apologies to Daniel if I have failed to address his questions.

I should confess that I was preparing for my dissertation defense when it occurred to me that I might make use of Ortner's ideas. I was looking for a way to talk about how journalistic work is linked to cultural narratives, as in the representation of journalists in popular culture. I remembered Ortner's work on this and it seemed to fit well.

I used the static key symbol because I thought perhaps that fit better across the recursive order of scales I was describing, but conceptualizing journalistic work as a key scenario instead is probably

a good idea. Ortner gives the example of Horatio Alger's "rags-to-respectability" stories (e.g., <http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/tomsawye/alger.html>), which imparted values and in so doing reinforced an American "common sense" of class structure and wealth distribution. The little guy/big guy dichotomy serves journalists similarly.

[I think the "key scenario" in this context is very apt, since we could rephrase the "big guy vs. the little guy" opposition as a narrative: 'citizens are victims, and journalists are the only ones that care for "the people". Bringing out in the open certain abuses is how journalists save citizens.' Would Jay agree with me?]

Yes... I think this is the basic narrative structure I've found in my work, though the phrasing of might be a populism with which not all journalists identify.

On the other hand, we might find that powerful events tend to evoke this narrative. I'm just thinking aloud (so to speak) here, but one example that epitomizes this particular story is that of Lasantha Wickramatunga, editor of the (Sri Lanka) Sunday Leader, who was often critical of the Sri Lankan president. For his outspokenness, he was shot to death back in January on his way to work (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/08/sri-lanka-lasantha-wickramatunga-editor>).

Following this, his paper published posthumously an editorial he had written, "And Then They Came For Me." It began:

No other profession calls on its practitioners to lay down their lives for their art save the armed forces and, in Sri Lanka, journalism. In the course of the past few years, the independent media have increasingly come under attack. Electronic and print-media institutions have been burnt, bombed, sealed and coerced. Countless journalists have been harassed, threatened and killed. It has been my honour to belong to all those categories and now especially the last.
(<http://www.thesundayleader.lk/20090111/editorial-.htm>; emphasis added)

I found some limited evidence in my work that US journalists see their work in terms of development/underdevelopment when asked to think of journalism globally. But journalist deaths are one area where US journalists have to look abroad for these highest examples of sacrifice and dedication to craft.

[Would there be any kind of ritual that US journalists are performing that enables them to "stand up for the little guy" or that are part of the heroic act?]

I like this a great deal and have been trying to come up with a worthwhile example. Just brainstorming here, but journalistic rituals might include:

- Interning is a ritual that creates the journalist as they internalize newsroom logic; it may be of indeterminate length and is not necessarily structured in the way we often think of rituals; I'm thinking Turner here, but the intern could be said to be in a liminal state prior to "proving" themselves to be journalists (duties and

obligation are numerous and not well defined, they are subject to certain formalized abuses that they must bear without complaint)

- Factchecking is a ritual of purifying copy for publication.
- Staff meetings
- The interview
- The publication cycle
- Awards/prizes (in the US, Polk, Pulitzer, etc.): these might be the most ritualistic in the Turnerian sense in that this ritual transforms and confers prestige for having performed the ideals of the journalistic community
- Conferences (side note: the American Society of Newspaper Editors [ASNE] cancelled its annual conference this year because of the economic crisis; the last time this happened was at the end of World War II)
- Gaye Tuchman wrote about objectivity as a "protective ritual" (1972) in her ethnographic work of the 1970s
- Going to jail to protect sources that a court has ordered a journalist to reveal might be a rite that confers prodigious credibility on someone who undergoes the ordeal.
- A journalist's death and the response to it is a ritual through which the community restates its values. See, for instance, the responses in the Western press to the death of Lasantha Wickramatunga and how they evoke not only solidarity and admiration but comments on "democracy" and the "free press":

o

http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/01/13/slain_sri_lankan_journalist_pens_final_column

o

<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/stevecoll/2009/01/letter-from-the.html>

On taboos: See below.

Mark Pedelty:

Thank you for the recommendations on ethnographies. Tying two of your points together, in fact, a discussion of Herbert Gans (1979) would have been useful for better contextualizing in my work journalists' perception of market forces and corporate influence.

Because my field was an alt weekly and not a daily, I have a better sense of how that newsroom was structured around the market.

[I am somewhat unclear on the difference between autonomy and agency in Weaver's definition (p.2). That seems to be key to your critique, so you might want to discuss agency a bit.]

I'm hoping to distinguish between a type of agency that journalists seem to talk about quite a bit and Bourdieu's notion of autonomy. David Weaver and colleagues (2007), journalistic scholars who conduct studies of journalist attitudes, refer to this desire for agency as "autonomy." I call it "independence" so as not to confuse it with Bourdieu's autonomy, which I've conceptualized as a higher level ordering of this desire for independence.

I'd also like to say things about the recursive linkage of independence and the autonomy of the entire journalistic field, showing, to borrow

your phrase, "that journalists do indeed use external distinctions to organize their internal worlds."

This elaboration of autonomy, to address some of Ursula Rao's comments as well, is one thing I'd hoped my work would add to the anthropology of journalism. I will take more care to be clear in doing so.

[You might also think about the flip side of training: that which journalists are trained not to see, not to remember, and not to think about.]

Mark Fishman, whom you mention, has a great chapter on this in the edited volume *Social Meanings of News* (1997) (<http://tinyurl.com/bsnjd4>).

I was also thinking of taboos, as per Katrien's comments. There must be taboos in journalism, but I didn't examine it through that lens. One example that might work, which even combines these notions of the heroic act and the taboo: A columnist I met was known for writing deeply personal columns for the weekly at which she worked. Weeklies are far more accepting of the "writerly voice" than dailies, but even so she pushed boundaries in taking such an autobiographical approach to her work. She had many fans and readers, but if I recall, she also received hate mail. Eventually, she wrote about a sexual attack against her years ago, and how that had changed her life. This column ran not only against of social prohibitions on speaking publicly of such violence, but against journalistic restrictions on being too personal (though less so than if, say, a daily reporter had written the piece).

For all the "public individualism" of bylines, journalists, especially reporters, often consider the personal transgressive, best avoided and they train not to see it or to include it in their work (this might address one of Mark Peldelty's questions as well).

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Jay Gabriel [jgabri01 at temple.edu](mailto:jgabri01@temple.edu)

Mon Mar 2 16:30:19 PST 2009

Dear list,

As the end of the seminar approaches, I'd just like to thank everyone who commented on and critiqued my drafts and responses: the fantastic respondent Per Ståhlberg (whose work I've greatly enjoyed reading), as well as commenters Angela Dreßler, John Postill, Stephen Lyon, Zeynep Devrim Gürsel (a newcomer to the list whose work on photojournalists I hope we'll hear more about), Katrien Pype, Michael Carrithers, Ursula Rao, Mark Allen Peterson and Mark Pedelty. I think I mentioned everyone and spelled your names correctly.

And special thanks to Sigurjon for encouraging me to submit this to the list seminar. When he asked me to participate, I told him I thought the paper was still a little rough. "That's why we call it the 'working papers series,'" he said. So here we are.

Regards,
Jay

Stephen Lyon [s.m.lyon at durham.ac.uk](mailto:s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk)

Mon Mar 2 16:41:10 PST 2009

And of course, I'd like to thank you Jay for providing us such a thought provoking paper.

Best,
Steve

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Mon Mar 2 23:33:11 PST 2009

Dear all,

The e-seminar is now closed!

I want to thank Jay Gabriel for submitting his paper, our discussant Per Ståhlberg and members of the list who shared their interesting thoughts, comments and criticism.

Transcript of the seminar will be available on our web site within few days.

All the best, Sigurjon.