

GETTING INVOLVED: INDEPENDENCE AND RECURSIVITY IN THE
JOURNALISTIC FIELD¹

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Abstract: Journalists in the United States, as elsewhere, train to resist influence. This interest is evident when they talk about their profession. This article concerns the relationship of journalistic ideals of independence to the broader autonomy of the journalistic field in the United States. It proposes a framework to understand the relevance of independence to autonomy that I have adapted from sociolinguistic studies. This work draws on participant observation and interviews with journalists in two U.S. cities.

Having earlier handed me a nine-page professional biography that listed among his accomplishments two Pulitzer Prizes and a book, Eugene, an investigative reporter for a major daily newspaper, spoke repeatedly of a self he needed to harness. As a good reporter, I'm always doing battle with myself, Eugene said, when I asked him to describe what it meant to practice "objective" journalism. "An *ego* can do all kinds of things when you're working on a story," he said, drawing from a popular sort of psychoanalysis to name this adversary-self. He leaned back. "You don't just want to cleanse yourself of your opinions when you're working on stuff. You also cleanse yourself of your ego so you're not interrupting the truth, because the ego causes you not to listen." This seemed to me to be a curious sort of self-effacement from a man who had gained much reputation from his work.

In the United States, journalism is a vocation to which individualism and individual effort is of no small importance. Although some scholars have characterized news work as repetitive and requiring high output (e.g., Tuchman 1973),¹ journalism is more akin to craft than assembly line. Journalists also retain an authorial identity, signing their articles and assuming some personal responsibility for their work. A failure to secure the story rebounds upon a journalist as loss of reputation, public disgrace and even legal sanctions. Success leads to the rewards of respect and reputation. A newspaper is

¹ This is adapted from a chapter of my 2008 dissertation *Objectivity and Autonomy in the Newsroom: A Field Approach*. It is currently undergoing revision for future submission and publication. Please do not circulate or cite without permission.

decidedly a group effort, as a team of specialist contributors overseeing particular tasks assembles statements, accounts, interviews and data into narrative. But much of the uncovering and transmutation of facts to news is the work of an individual, at least in terms of attribution, as audiences come to recognize a reporter's name and his or her work. This is an extremely public individualism.

This article describes how the journalists I met during the course of my doctoral research, all of them working in the United States, conceptualized their roles within an occupation that prizes independence and autonomy, even while actors in other institutions place many informal constraints on them. I found that these journalists have a preoccupation with self and independence that operates on multiple linguistic domains within the journalistic field. In this article, I will situate the various meanings of "independence" as they relate to the idea of a journalistic field.

Fields, according to Bourdieu, make their own rules to differing extents. Philosophy, poetry and mathematics are examples of fields he believes are in charge of their own affairs, for instance, developing their own standards of criticism or of accreditation. Other fields, such as politics, exist with a high degree of interconnectedness to one another, a state Bourdieu and others describe as heteronomy. Bourdieu argues that French media have a low degree of autonomy; journalism, which is "increasingly subject to the constraints of the economy and of politics, is more and more imposing its constraints on all other fields, particularly the fields of cultural production such as the field of the social sciences, philosophy, etc., and on the political field" (2005:41). For Bourdieu, the journalistic field has become more interdependent with economic and political fields.

Scholars use the term "autonomy" in at least two different and potentially confusing ways. In writing about autonomy, social scientists such as Bourdieu and others responding to him (e.g., Schudson 2005) use *autonomy* to mean the degree to which a field can dictate its own actions, uphold its own interests, define the major concepts and terms it uses, and otherwise play by its own rules (Hanks 2005). In journalist scholarship, by contrast, journalist-scholars such as Weaver et al. define autonomy as "the wide latitude a professional has in carrying out his or her occupational duties" (2007:70).² *Independence*, as I use the term in this essay, is more like this latter type of autonomy.

Autonomy, in the way Bourdieu uses the term, is a much broader concept and refers to the state of fields rather than the dispositions of people within them.

Throughout their course of training, whether in the classroom or in the newsroom, most American journalists learn a form of journalistic exceptionalism that emphasizes both the distinction of journalism from other professions and its centrality to civil society. There is the only profession mentioned in the constitution of the United States, which guarantees government non-interference with the press. Almost every journalistic code, from Walter Williams' "Journalist's Creed" to the founding charters of U.S. newspapers, emphasizes that the ability of the journalist to write stems directly from the freedom from influence, whether that of corporate or state. The purpose of journalism as a "fourth estate" (that is, a pillar of power in society that is distinct from other entities such as the state) has long lain in the capacity of "watchdog" or in "looking out for the little guy," as many of my informants and interview subjects phrased it.

I see two interrelated domains of "autonomy" at work here. The first is that of the journalist-as-worker in the newsroom who resents too much oversight on the part of management and desires what I refer to as *independence*. Second is that of the journalist representing an institution whose ability to mediate between the "little guy" and large, impersonal "big business" or "big government" or "city hall" is contingent on what I will call here the *autonomy* of journalism, the non-interdependence of the profession.

I propose that one way to understand an obvious yet unclear relationship between autonomy and independence is to treat it as a metaphorical transfer between domains. I suggest that a journalistic way of thinking (and therefore talking) about the profession has a relationship with the ways in which journalists understand (and therefore talk about) their role in the newsroom.

Fractal Recursivity and the Journalistic Field

To explore the relationship between the desire for independence that journalists in my study spoke of and the overall autonomy of the field, I turned to studies of linguistic and symbolic practices. In my project, I took the view that the newsroom mirrors to some extent the much larger and encompassing journalistic field. I have used a concept called *fractal recursivity* (Irvine and Gal 2000) to take a closer look at the relationship between

the autonomy of the field and how journalists talk about their editorial independence, as well as their individual role as journalists—three interrelated domains of journalism. Fractal recursivity, the projection of distinctions, usually oppositions, from one level of social interaction onto another, is a means by which differences between groups become a way to talk about distinctions within a group.³ I applied this concept to journalistic independence as a concern that manifests on multiple levels of journalism.

For journalists, ways of conceptualizing power and difference at the intergroup level, that is, between the journalistic field and other fields such as politics, are also relevant at the intragroup level. Journalists, especially in the area of investigative reporting, often perceive stark differences among the people they write for versus the individuals, organizations and social institutions that they write about, represented in terms of the “big guy vs. little guy,”⁴ a recurrent metaphor in journalism. *Big guys* are corporate entities and the government, bureaucratic collectives of state and corporate power whose influence the “fourth estate” seeks to check; the *little guy* is the “whistleblower” who speaks out against the “company,” the consumer who has been ripped off, the veteran who cannot collect benefits, protagonists whose personal problems are thrown into sharp relief with social issues in the articles journalists write about them.

I have touched on two domains, that of the profession as an abstract whole (the level of intergroup difference, on which journalists contrast themselves with non-journalists) and the newsroom (where intragroup distinctions among journalists occur), but what of the domain of the journalist as individual? Irvine and Gal provide for fractal recursivity on the individual level, but stipulate that when “such oppositions are reproduced within a single person, they do not concern contrasting identities so much as oppositions between activities or roles associated with prototypical social persons” (2000:38). In the case of individual journalists, a preoccupation with regulating the self is evident that manifests as separating facts from values, endeavoring not to engage in acts of explicit interpretation when writing articles, and of doing battle with the ego so that the facts are left intact. On the other hand, journalists have to act upon their subjects to elicit information, and openly admit that they do so. Journalistic training highlights the risk of imposing preconceptions on “the story,” though the journalists I spoke to see this as a problem of individual bias, and actively take steps to avoid “leading questions” or

incomplete accounts from any source (two examples that informants often cited). For many journalists, self-effacement is in frequent conflict with what Eugene called his ego.

Below, I discuss the ways in which journalists draw from these domains of individual, newsroom and field in talking about themselves and their work.

Values: Individualism and “Big Guys vs. Little Guys”

In interviews, I asked journalists to describe the values or functions of journalism. The following are representative answers:

Example 1: Francesca, 38, Staff Writer at Alternative Newsweekly

JFG: [As a journalist,] how do you see yourself functioning in society?

Francesca: I guess fighting the good fight, just trying to give the little guy an even break, trying to piss off the big guys who have all the money. In my own little way trying to correct the essential injustices of the system I suppose. I feel that way whether I’m writing about music or about politics.

JFG: What sort of decisions as a writer do you make to fulfill that role?

Francesca: I could have gone to law school and had some high power suit and tie job, living in the suburbs with 2.5 children but for some reason that never appealed to me. I wanted a career that was going to be somehow creative, that was going to have a certain measure of freedom and creativity, whether that was through art or through journalism. To me there’s a fine line between art and journalism.

JFG: What’s the difference between those two then, if any?

Francesca: I suppose there is. I suppose in the most reductive explanation, I suppose art is using a lie to tell the truth, and journalism is

using the truth to expose lies – or essential untruths, falsehoods that pass for fact.

Example 2: Lou, 64, Columnist at Daily Metropolitan

JFG: What biases do you come to your work with?

Lou: I hate hypocrites. [Journalism is about] looking out for small guy. I love stories about [people] getting screwed over by the system. I also like doing columns about anti-smoking laws, gun control and political correctness.

Example 3: Amy, 31, Freelance Writer and Adjunct Journalism Instructor

JFG: What are some of the most important values of journalism?

Amy: ...to respect the people that you interview or that you're writing about. I think sometimes there are people who do not respect them and as a result they don't really listen to what they're saying. There's a big difference between hearing someone and listening to them. I think that sometimes there are reporters who want to get good quotes and don't really care about the feelings of the people and I think that they undermine it too.

Example 4: Simon, 31, Staff Writer, Police and Crime Reporter, Northwest Herald Post

Simon: Journalists want to be an essential part of their community.

JFG: Do you think that's emphasized more at some papers than others?

Simon: Probably at the smaller papers. Though sometimes, people call us when they want a phone number, which may seem idiotic, but at the same time we are the newspaper and on some deeper level people like that are

calling the newspaper because they trust us, regardless of what it is and because there is that sense of community.

Example 5: Gina, 37, Freelance Investigative Reporter for Various Alternative Weeklies and Other Publications

JFG: So what are the most important values of journalism?

Gina: Well, when you're a reporter, doing what I'm doing, exposing wrongdoing in government, it's guaranteed that you're going to piss people off.

In these interview excerpts my informants, who included freelancers, columnists, weekly writers and a daily reporter, conceptualize their audiences and subjects as “people getting screwed over” or as individuals to be championed (‘heard, not just listened to’). Some members of the public trust newspapers enough that they call them for phone numbers, an error that Simon found both ridiculous and endearing. In short, journalism is “giv[ing] the little guy an even break, trying to piss off the big guys who have all the money.” The “big guys” are “government,” “hypocrites,” and “the system.”

Many fiction and non-fiction books and films valorize the journalistic struggle against power. Cultural studies and communication scholars have identified key myths of journalistic practice, including the “myth of the free press” (Bennett 2005 in Ehrlich 2006) that makers of movies about journalists find especially resonant. The “myth of the free press” consists of stories about good journalists who ‘look out for the common person,’ and keep a watchful eye on government. Even films about “bad journalists” manage to dwell on these qualities of journalism. Christopher Hanson argues that in films of the 1990s, Hollywood shifted to an examination of the “rogue” journalist (1996). These film portrayals of “bad journalists” who break rules may have actually “helped shore up the press’s preferred self-image, either by seeing through lies and pretense to the truth or by paying the price for not telling the truth” (Ehrlich 2006:501). Citing

Barsamian 1992, Ehrlich says that although they are portrayed as flawed, ‘Bad’ journalist characters flout professional rules and niceties, but do their part in perpetuating [these] myths. They keep alive the nostalgic image of the journalist as a rugged, anti-authoritarian individualist who sticks up for the common man and woman rather than being a stenographer to power. (2006:2)

While I was not seeking to understand “good” or “bad” journalism, in my interviews and fieldwork, I did uncover these ideas of individualism and heroism. The “big guy vs. the little guy” is a key symbol of the sort Sherry Ortner describes, an “elaborating symbol” that gives people “vehicles for sorting out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas, making them comprehensible to oneself, communicable to others, and translatable into orderly action” (2002 [1973]:161). For journalists, it becomes a means of linking the autonomy of their field and to concerns about their own agency. Key symbols are usually important enough that they take on relevance in many domains of social interaction. In interviews and conversations, I found that it was also an elaborating symbol of tensions in the newsroom.

Journalists and Independence in the Newsroom

Journalists with individualistic and even anti-authoritarian tendencies must come to accept that they are members of organizations, that these news organizations are privately owned in a market system in which the news is a commodity, and that news organizations are made up of hierarchies of management and labor, each level populated by individuals with a different relationship to the institution. Accordingly, reporters and editors have different desires and goals and see their work differently depending on their position within this organization.

At an alternative weekly⁵ that I observed over a period of months, an invisible line that divided the newsroom between editorial and advertising. The editor, who often invoked the metaphor of a “Great Wall,” made it clear that he considered advertising toxic when it was in proximity to reporting. Without advertising revenue, the paper could not exist, but the presence of the advertisers, or their necessity, was a source of constant

tension that most in editorial viewed in terms of contamination and containment. One case cited to me by an editor, which I describe here in nonspecific terms, was that of an enormous media conglomerate who made threats of pulling a sizeable account any time the paper published an article it perceived as unflattering to its public image. While the paper continued to print articles critical of this company, it did not do so often. The informant who had mentioned this to me bore no small measure of resentment, to the point that he joked about writing an expose once he “no longer need[ed] this job.” Overall, the editor saw the decision not to cover the media company as a failure to adhere to basic journalistic principles, a decision publishers and senior editors had made after considering the likely economic consequences should they offend an advertiser.

Much of the conflict that occurred between reporters and editors/publishers in my study had to do with what reporters thought should go to press versus what editors actually sent to press. In interviews, I learned that when an editor altered, cut, or obscured an article, writers often voiced discontent by raising questions (if only to themselves) about the independence of their bosses. Take, for instance, Gina’s account⁶ of how one of her stories, scheduled to be a cover story in a weekly, underwent demotion. She had written an investigative piece about a real estate developer’s involvement with polluted sites (“brownfields”) in a gentrifying neighborhood. Just before the paper went to the printer, the editor replaced a cover graphic of Gina’s story with an unrelated image. “I’m sure it’s because the paper was full of real estate ads,” she said. “So my story ran on the inside, and the paper came out, and I didn’t even know that was going to happen. I picked up the paper that morning, and I was like ‘What? Where’s my cover?’” The editor told her that they had decided that there was no good way to illustrate the story.

And I was just like, ‘Be honest with me. Tell me you didn’t because you were pressured. I’d have a lot more respect for you. Be honest. [The developer] came in here and threatened to pull his ads and you caved.’ But that’s not what he told me.

Amy, a free-lancer and journalism instructor, provided a hypothetical situation to make a similar point:

[M]ost of my writing is for a neighborhood paper, as I said, and I’m more

or less expected to take the viewpoint of the neighbors. I live in the same region and I see my neighbors every day and I talk with my neighbors everyday. So it's more or less expected that I'm not going to [take sides against them]. For example, I doubt very much that the newspaper I write for out here would [allow] a piece that totally condemned a particular business because that would hurt their ad revenue. So certainly your audience and publication is going to determine what type of articles you're going to write, unfortunately. That's not to say that an article that condemns a particular business wouldn't have an audience somewhere else with some publication, it's just saying that it wouldn't be in the best interest of the paper to publish it. It's going to hurt their ad revenue. It's a shame...

Journalists who resent infringements upon their authorial independence invoke the very ideological basis of journalism in condemning such encroachment. It is “unjournalistic” to not print a story that is critical if it is otherwise relevant, fair and accurate. Editors and publishers can decline to print articles, but not doing so because of the influence of outsiders is seldom acceptable to community standards. In each case, the journalists' complaints had to do with the fact that the editors' or publishers' interests were more aligned with those of the big guy than with those of the little guy, and by extension, the journalist.

The Journalist and the Ego

As I noted earlier, Irvine and Gal (2001) state that when oppositional categories on one level become significant at the individual level, they tend to involve the social roles of the “prototypical” social person. Here that is the journalist. As I have suggested, a tension between involvement and non-involvement exists in newswork at the individual level that mirrors the conflicts seen at the level of the newsroom and at the level of the journalistic field. Below I use two examples of journalists working in the “objective” tradition to illustrate what I mean by *involvement* and *non-involvement*.

Throughout his career, Eugene has systematized his interview techniques by

drawing on eclectic sources ranging from “eastern thought” to behavioral sciences such as psychology and criminology. Ego, as Eugene said, can lead journalists into error by leaving them unable to ‘hear the truth.’ Eugene said that one remedy he recommended to his protégés was a regimen of meditation and other mental practices to “cleanse” the mind prior to interviews. This, he said, was a way to prepare the mind to separate facts from values. Eugene also used questioning and interview techniques he had picked up from psychology texts, police interrogators, private investigators and lawyers. At journalism conferences, Eugene regularly gives workshops on his methods:

I teach how to approach someone, to get them to talk to you, how to organize their brain so that information that is scattered about in there is accessible. And then I teach how to crack open that brain so they tell you what they know. So it isn’t so much that I have a reputation that gets me in the door, it’s what I know how to do. I can turn people into jelly.

Although he cited a number of psychology texts he had read to obtain this knowledge, Eugene seemed to have no deep interest in the underlying theory, only the methods which could be quite powerful. Once, he said, he had even brought a woman he was interviewing to the brink of admitting to a series of nursing home murders. His techniques worked best through the subtle assertion of dominance:

You get people to talk about anything, and then you give them a simple task, and then you take them through things. You do this very politely, and there’s a lot of putting people at ease. However, at the same moment that you’re being put at ease, I am probably positioning you where I walk into the room in a manner and treat you in a manner in which I am taking control. But you don’t know it.

Eugene, in particular, had a way of speaking about his role and behavior as an investigative journalist that was quite fractured and even oppositional. He prefaced his tutorial on effective interrogation and how to effectively drain a source of every bit of useful information with a homily on the dangers of the ego. This opposition of involvement and control versus non-involvement and abandonment of ego, a relationship

that was as much about power as the relationship between the “big guys” and “little guys” or the publishers and journalists.

In example two, Amy, who freelanced and taught journalism courses as her primary source of income, recounted an example of the way in which she considered herself autonomous by linking autonomy to nonpartisanship:

JFG: So how about your politics?

Amy: Uh huh huh huh [nervous laughter]

JFG: Oh, you look uncomfortable with that. Did you vote in the last presidential election?

Amy: Yes, and I absolutely voted against President Bush. My politics as of right now are extreme left. Left, left, left.

Like all of my other informants, Amy was able and willing to describe her values. She believed, however, that it was important to keep these values separate from her work.

I think that if you read my articles you wouldn't be able to tell that, and that's my goal unless it's an opinion piece. I'll give you an example. I had to write this article [about a] church [whose] steeple collapsed. And I did a follow-up article to that because [...] their insurance company denied their claim. I write for a neighborhood paper, so more often than not I would be expected to take the side of the neighbors, you know? If I were to take sides, which I don't.

Here, Amy has described a “typical” narrative that she felt obligated to honor, in which a group of “little people” face abuse from a larger, more powerful corporate entity. She has also acknowledged the watchdog role of the journalist, who is “expected” to take the side of the “little guy.” At the same time, Amy argues, journalists have a particular obligation to *report* facts, not analyze them.

Anyway, I had to get the information about people who were affected by

this, [including] people in the congregation. I also had to talk to, of course, the insurance company and a geologist who was able to talk to me about the stone and the wear and tear and all types of things. And I think that if you read my article, you would not be able to tell whose side I took. Most people would have assumed that [...] I would have taken the side of the congregation because how can this big, bad corporate machine reject the claim against these poor people, etc., etc. In fact, I felt the congregation didn't maintain the building. That was my personal feeling. But if you read the article you wouldn't be able to tell that. And that was my goal. I don't want to say it was a challenge to write so that you couldn't tell my opinion, but I was very conscious of the fact that my opinion, that I had a definite opinion about whose fault it was and whether or not the insurance company should pay. I had to very consciously not include that opinion in the way I structured the article. And it's not easy sometimes.

In each of these examples, “objective journalism”⁷ serves as a strategy for journalists to achieve a balance between engagement and disengagement with audiences, sources, and publishers and editors. Eugene found it necessary to devise ways to prevent himself from contaminating the “truth” as he extracted it from his sources. In Amy’s account, she was subject to external pressures as well as her own sense of good reporting.

Conclusions

The early and ongoing socialization of journalists—the training, daily interaction and even popular media that describe ‘what a journalist is supposed to be’—emphasizes ideals of independence and individualism that inform the ways in which the journalists that I encountered see their work. Journalistic ideologies call for the disengagement of journalism from other fields of influence, but simultaneously permit a high degree of economic and political over the activities of journalists. Although the principles of ‘being a good journalist’ include disengagement, noninterference and independence, ultimately they also bolster heteronomy and interdependence.

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¹NOTES

¹ Sociologists studying journalists have focused on the extent to which the organization limits the full extent of the autonomy of the individuals within the newsroom. Some, such as Tuchman (1973), focus on routinization, arguing that newsrooms provide journalists a set of tools for dealing with unexpected occurrences and making their jobs more predictable so that they maintain greater control of outcomes in the face of unexpected or dangerous occurrences such as allegations of libel or a “bad” source who misinforms a journalist. Similarly, Soloski writes of professionalism and its various codes and conventions “as an efficient and economical method by which news organizations control the behavior of reporters and editors” (1997:139).

² Based on responses they received in 2002, Weaver et al. claim that journalists perceive four categories of limitation on their autonomy (2007:76):

1) Outside agents, usually sources, and even more specifically, government sources who stonewalled, restricted or withheld journalistic access to information

2) Journalistic ethics and other professional guidelines that journalists often view as necessary, not with resentment

3) Economic constraints, such as direct or indirect advertiser influence on news coverage

4) Organizational culture and other norms particular to a given news organization

Additionally, Weaver et al.’s findings indicate that differences in perceptions of autonomy are linked to the type of medium (print, television) and format (daily, weekly, magazine).

³ As an example of fractal recursivity, Irvine and Gal (2000) describe how indicators of status difference came to represent ethnic identity. During a period of social and linguistic contact between Khoi and Nguni peoples in southern Africa, Nguni populations began using the click sounds that occur as a regular part of Khoi phonologies. In intra-Nguni usage, the click consonants have come to denote social distance among individuals, which reflects the social distance on the level of inter-group relations between Khoi and Nguni. The symbols of social distance, in other words, were mapped from one level of social interaction external to the Nguni onto another level that was internal. Similarly, Bucholtz (2001) argues that linguistic markers of white-black racial difference (intragroup difference) in one high school that she studied were modeled into markers of status difference within the population of white students (intergroup difference), where “racialized” speech markers were associated with the “cool” white students, who often appropriated African American words, whereas “nerdy” white students strove for a “hyperwhite” form of speech.

⁴ While the term “guy” may be gender specific, and if literally read, exclusionary and sexist, I do not intend to deploy it here in a sexist manner. Rather, after considering the awkwardness of the phrase “big person, little person,” I have decided to retain “guy,” both because it is the term several of my informants used and because it is more recognizable as a common saying related to privilege and power.

⁵ For those unfamiliar with alternative newsweeklies, see <http://aan.org/alternative/Aan/ViewPage?oid=2086>

⁶ Although when I asked her how much independence she felt she had, her answer, which directly preceded the excerpted interview below, was, “Well, my experience has been a significant amount. The only—I have to tell you that there have been a couple of times I was writing an article [where I felt censored].”

⁷ “Objective journalism” was the focus of a chapter that preceded the one on which this article is based.