

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

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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 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 constrains 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.

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