

PROSPECTS FOR MEDIA MONITORING: MUCH OVERDUE, BUT NEVER TOO LATE!

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Media Monitoring: Why?

Two theses from the sociology of professions:

Thesis #1: Characteristic of a profession, like a guild in medieval and early modern times, is self-control, based on a contact with surrounding society, entitling the profession to set their own standards, to monitor their members, and to enforce them when necessary, including the use of reward and punishment.

Thesis # 2: The mechanisms of Thesis #1 do not work.

The reasons for the latter are obvious. What professions demand, and often get, is the same as what nations often demand: sovereignty, autonomy. But nations within a multi-national country can separate themselves from the other nations, drawing a territorial border around themselves, and become increasingly self-reliant, maybe even independent. A profession cannot do that; it depends on clients outside the profession for their livelihood (not like some psychoanalysts analysing each other).

The criteria of the surrounding inter-human society, and not only of the clients, will always play a role. A profession will never be permitted to be self-contained, being accountable only to itself. Actually, neither will nations: surrounding inter-nation society also imposes standards and demands accountability. And there will be paradigm shifts within the profession, pitting young generations with new standards against the interests of the older generation. In short: watchful eyes everywhere. Monitoring.

International journalism has recently shown its inadequacy in connection with two major conflicts in a way which should have led to major revolts and agonising reappraisals.

In the Second Gulf War, 17 January to 27 February 1991, the problem was not the infamous Pentagon pooling system, based on journalists they could trust, thereby engineering the outcome.¹ To blame a machine made for war "with all necessary means" (Security Council Resolution 678) for including manipulation of the news process among those means is like blaming a lion for not being

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vegetarian. The problem is the high level of acceptance among journalists, the low number who tried to obtain, often at considerable risk. **The independent** access to the events. And that acceptance seems to have run through the whole news chain, via agencies and editors to the end users. No massive refusal among journalists to use the pool system, no massive rejection of the highly orchestrated news conferences, no massive protests among readers/viewers/listeners have been reported. And this in presumably free societies! In countries occupied by Nazi-Germany during the Second World War there was at least massive scepticism of the official media, and in addition an alternative, illegal press assembled and distributed at even higher risks.

Whereas this was a clear case of the State manipulating what will reach Civil Society via the Media the Yugoslav War offers another, equally or more discomfoting picture of how Capital can manipulate. The classical techniques are obvious: buying space (or time) for the publicity, buying space for an article, buying a journalist, buying an editor, buying a paper, a radio or TV station, buying a whole news chain, buying a cartel of new chains.

But this time something else has entered the news chain: public relations agencies, with States as clients, constructing a virtual reality by systematically planting non-events as news, or changing focus and discourse in favour of their clients. This section of the Merlino-Harff interview should be printed or aired by all decent media for people to understand what is happening, not at the beginning of the news chain but toward the end.²

Question: What achievement were you most proud of?

Harff: To have managed to put Jewish opinion on our side.

Question: But when you did all this, you had no proof that what you said was true. You only had the article in *Newsday*!

Harff: Our work is not to verify information. We are not equipped for that. Our work is to accelerate the circulation of information favourable to us, to aim at judiciously chosen targets. We did not confirm the existence of death camps in Bosnia, we just made it known that *Newsday* affirmed it.

Question: Are you aware that you took on a grave responsibility?

Harff: We are professionals. We had a job to do and we did it. We are not paid to be moral.

The interests of the State (or states) are very clear.³ But there is a new element: privatisation of news manipulation. The Pentagon worked like a massive, heavy machine, something like the US Mail. The public relations firms use "a card file, a computer, and a fax," "at the right time with the right person," targeting actors that are not only newsmakers but event-makers, with the efficiency (and no doubt the fees) one would expect from Capital as opposed to State. The victims are in Civil Society, led by the nose into a virtual reality very remote from the empirical or conventional reality some of us still seem to prefer as basis for opinion-formation, individual and collective, not to mention as a basis for action. But there has been no massive protests or investigation. The system seems to have no steering, no negative feed-back.⁴ The media are, put simply, out of control.

Media Monitoring: What Does That Mean?

Monitoring goes beyond merely recording. To monitor is to characterise something according to a criterion. In other words, monitoring means evaluating. We are doing it all the time: mapping others, individuals or collectivities, media, sometimes ourselves, mapping events like meals, contexts like restaurants on dichotomies of good-bad or on more refined scales of judgement. We cannot live without it. And of course,

by definition, evaluation is judgmental. Equally obviously, the criteria chosen for the evaluation, the **value-dimensions**, are subjective, coming out of the attitudes/assumptions of some individual or collectivity. But given the value-dimensions the mapping may be consensual.

If we should monitor monitoring, would the term “objective” be useful? Maybe as a term, but then that term has to be understood properly: anchoring “objective” in what is **intersubjectively communicable and reproducible**. This means:

[1] **the value-dimensions used for evaluation must be explicit;**

[2] **the mapping process on the value-dimensions must be explicit.**

Only by making the whole process explicit, openly formulated and accessible, is communication among subjects possible, and only under that condition can other subjects, using the same definitions and the same procedures arrive at the same results, i.e., mappings on the value-dimensions, evaluations, monitoring.

But who are these subjects? Are they the media researchers supposedly doing the job of monitoring? They would definitely be among the subjects communicating criteria and mapping media, presumably being competent to do so. But the whole process is too important to be limited to researchers as a competence group.

Consequently, a third criterion could be added:

[3] **The value-dimensions should be meaningful for the news chain.**

In other words, not only researchers who have the news chain as their subject area but the subjects along the news chain, event-makers, news-makers and news-consumers (readers, listeners, viewers) should understand and preferably agree that the dimensions are not only meaningful but important. Of course, that does not mean that there will be consensus about the dimensions. The goal is not consensus but a fruitful dialogue among everybody concerned, adding and subtracting dimensions:

[4] **The goal is good dialogue, not consensus, about the criteria.**

A good example is the monitoring of “development” of countries. There is no consensus that “GNP per capita” is the only or the basic value-dimension. But by making this dimension explicit economists have done a great service to the debate: those who have read and understood the definition to the point of being able to carry out the operations agree at least on what they are talking about. Out of this fifty-year old debate has grown a vast range of additional value-dimensions, many of them reflected in the very interesting **Human Development Report** issued annually by the United Nations Development Program. But having said that the other side of the coin should also be mentioned: a dialogue focused on development indicators (another term for the more precise “value-dimension”) may become philosophically flat, losing the deeper aspects of what is being discussed. A definition in extension, listing many aspects of “developed countries,” “good media” can never fully substitute for a definition in intension, trying to get at the deeper meaning.

How do we realise these four criteria in practice?

Test [1] is easy at the first glance, but more problematic in the longer run. Listing the dimensions makes them explicit, and explicitness may then stimulate a usually very important dialogue about how the criteria, or the whole idea of good media, are to be understood. The demand for explicitness quickly leads to a demand for higher levels of precision. And one way of defining is through an operational definition, in other words by carrying out the evaluation, meaning Task [2] above. If the goal is inter-subjective communicability and reproducibility then any difference in interpretation, for instance due to vagueness, will quickly show up, whether the discrepancies are due to differences in interpretation, or in operation, or in both (there is also the interesting possibility that the criteria may be understood differently and the evaluation done differently, and the two differences may cancel each other.)⁵

Take a very well known case of monitoring: the *Guide Michelin* for restaurants. What is being monitored is the quality of the **cuisine**, as showing up in the **meals** offered. There are five values: *******, ******, *****, **no-star**, **no-mention**. But there is also an evaluation of the context, the **restaurant** itself, its **décor**, **ambience** on a similar seven-point scale, defining with precision the possibilities of splendid meals in plain restaurants and lousy meals in brilliant contexts. And both. And neither.

But the criteria are not made explicit. They are, of course, embedded in the vague (but open!) concept of "taste," **in casu** the taste of the tasters or testers, who travel all over and enter unannounced, presumably using all their senses to monitor.

Thus Task [2] can be fulfilled even if Task [1] is not, among other, reasons because the tasters/testers may share a culture within which their criteria are implicitly communicated. And Task [1] may be fulfilled and yet Task [2] not: researchers communicate very well to each other what they are looking for but are unable to translate it into operations such as content analysis with a high level of reliability (intersubjectivity).

That leaves us with Tasks [3] and [4]. Of course, nobody wants to leave out an analysis only meaningful to the specialists in communication research. However, for this to be useful there should be ample consultation along the news chain to ensure not only shared understanding, but also a sharing of interest; that it matters to people along the chain how the findings turn out. And the commonality of understanding should be sufficient for a fruitful dialogue about the relevance of the value-dimensions.

So, how do we define the process of monitoring media? By means of the four tasks defined: explicit value-dimensions, an explicit mapping process of media on those dimensions, by seeing to it that the dimensions are meaningful along the whole news chain, and by having a permanent dialogue about these dimensions. This differs from an angry person cancelling his subscription or switching the channel or frequency in anger: his reaction is subjective as opposed to explicit, and private as opposed to inter-subjective or public. Monitoring is a public process. And the purpose is, of course, to improve media performance: to serve as a feedback, and not necessarily negative. But whether it has or not is not a part of the definition, but of how it is done, and of the whole social context.

Monitoring Media: An Image of How

Imagine somewhere in the world there is a very big matrix recording the evaluation of m media on n value-dimensions; both m and n being very high. The media may operate with hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, annual or other frequencies, so each cell in the matrix accommodates evaluation on one value-dimension over time. In each cell there would be a curve with time on the horizontal and the value-dimension on the vertical axis. In principle there could be any possible curve shape: an optimistic upwards tilt, a downward trend, "the best/worst is behind us," no trend at all. A comparison can be made with charts for economic growth, trade balance, unemployment, or any economic indicator, or with human rights monitoring of all countries on all articles in the human rights declaration/conventions.

A nightmare? In terms of work input, yes. But also in terms of Big Brother alone having access to the matrix with the power to tilt all curves upward; his definition of the value-dimensions being the only one. Contrast this with organisations of voters in a democracy keeping track of the voting of their representatives in a number of issue areas. They would have no reason to keep their criteria and mappings for themselves, in fact, they want them to be public for the feedback mechanisms of democracy to function, **from below**. The organisation making those data easily available does democracy a favour. So would the organisation making that matrix available in an easily understandable form.

For what could be more important to mass society democracy than the media, presumably making State, Capital and Civil Society and their interrelations transparent?

Some words on the mass media. Some criteria are easily agreed on:

- all three media, papers/TV/radio should be monitored;
- those with the largest circulation/audience should be included;
- those usually considered elite/high quality should be included;
- media seen as competitors should be included, also to stimulate interest in the monitoring process;
- different civilisation areas should be included;
- from each area representative local media should be included.

Even to monitor one medium, like "the world's news leader" (by self-proclamation) might be interesting. Add to that another TV station from a different civilisation for contrast (like monitoring how major US and Japan TV channels report on the same US-Japan relations), and the process of monitoring becomes more than just a set of data. There is a story, even a drama unfolding, one more variation on the perennial theme nobody has presented more masterly than Kurosawa in *Rashomon*. Same story, but it is all in the eyes of the beholder... .⁶

To be fair to the media and to the users the definition of media should be kept open. Most studies are done of newspapers at the expense of magazines and journals, of newscasts less than of commentary, and the major source of information for most people, other people, in formal meetings as well as informal gossip, are usually left out (except in the very fruitful two-step flow of information tradition). This in line with the focus on literacy rather than orality and on picturacy rather than literacy. But studies should also be made to give people a voice as to their sources of information. There may be some surprises.

Some words on the n dimensions. A short catalogue:

I. The medium as organisation

- Ownership pattern
- Employee distribution on gender, race, nation
- Accounts: Break-down of the income on sources

II. The medium as form.

- How much of the space/time for news/comments?
- How much of the space/time content can actually be predicted knowing the general inclination (difficult)?
- How much of the space/time content of a news story is independent of what happened/could have been written back home?
- How much of the space/time is given to actors seeking the media as opposed to the media seeking the actors (difficult)?

III. The medium as content.⁷

Conflict: how much ability to report all sides?

Conflict: how much focus on solution, transformation?

Gender conflict: how much voice given to women?

Race conflict: how much voice given to non-dominant?

Nationalist conflict: how much voice given to "minorities"?

War/violence: how much focus on how it could have been avoided, on peace-making, on reconciliation etc.?

Development: how much focus on distribution (not only growth), on popular participation, and on alternatives?

Environment: how much focus on identity of polluter/depleter, on popular initiatives and alternatives?

Of course, these are very general dimensions. Particular issues would call for more specificity. But even so, this more general form of monitoring might be useful. Some retroactive monitoring back to earlier decades, even centuries, might also be interesting. Could there be an increasing tendency toward more concentrated ownership and source of income, towards more advertising and less interaction with the users, toward more partisan media, more sensationalism in general? Less focus on possible solutions, more on problems; less on resolutions, more on conflicts? We shall never know the extent of influence from outside the media. But we can know something about the result, the face showing to the public, the entry into public space.

Thus, monitoring should be done in such a way that it is comparative, and not only across media space today, but through time, diachronically as well as synchronically. Only in this way can certain tendencies be uncovered that would make monitoring not only useful but absolutely crucial. We may argue over how good or bad is the present situation, but agree on the need to do something should the tendencies continue in the same direction. And the same applies to space: if the patterns differ from one civilisation to the next, even among countries in the same civilisation, then monitoring may be an invitation not so much to social control as to social learning.

Will the media pay attention? Maybe not so much as the French chef reported to have committed suicide when his restaurant lost one star. But like most others, the media are interested in themselves. And even if they do not want to publish bad tidings about themselves, their competitors may ...

Finally, a word of warning. The purpose of this essay has only been to clarify some of the dimensions that would have to be taken into account in any effort to establish a system of media monitoring. It is written in an actor-oriented style: editors and journalists act, people monitor to register media behaviour. Writing this way by no means implies a general actor orientation in analysing media in particular and communication in general. Actors are free to act, but only up to a certain point. The rest is determined by structure and culture, and other factors. Not only event-makers, new-producers and news-consumers are influenced by deep structure and deep culture, by conflicting interests, profit motives, poor vs. rich discourses in the general culture, etc. So is the monitor; so is the author of these lines. Nobody is totally free, above such factors.

But the idea behind monitoring is not to theorise, but to provide data that may serve as raw material for such theories. More particularly, with rich material the analyst can use a very powerful method: differential analysis: why is Media A different from Media B, in countries C and D, but not in E and F; and why does that difference seem to increase over time? The richer the statistical material, the deeper findings can be extracted; and above some dimensions about the media rather than the items appearing have been indicated. Monitoring is much more than trend-watching: to monitor is to understand in order to act in an informed, well reasoned way. Monitoring is beyond mirroring what happens in the fourth pillar of society (in addition to State, Capital and Civil Society). To monitor the media is to make them transparent; a basic condition for democracy to function.

Notes:

1. Professor Wilhelm Kemp with a group of students at the University of Konstanz, Germany, has done very important work on this particular case; he is also a member of the big research group headed by Stig Arne Nohrstedt of the University of Örebro, Sweden to explore "Journalism in the New World Order."
2. Intelligence Digest, 4 February 1994.
3. Not only in the obvious sense of the client states, the customers, but also in the sense of, for

instance, the USA as the key power in the "New World Order." See Johan Carlisle, "Public Relationships: Hill and Knowlton, Robert Gray, and the CIA," *Covert Action*, Spring 1993.

4. Of course, there are critical voices inside media mainstream, such as the Columbia Journalism Review, trying "to assess the performance of journalism." But this kind of work is at best based on spot checks, not on systematic monitoring. Also see The St. Louis Journalism Review. The series CENSORED (1994 edition by Four Walls Eight Windows, New York) also performs a valuable service, but again there may be doubts about how systematic the work behind such efforts is.

5. See Johan Galtung, "An inquiry into the Concepts of 'Reliability', 'Intersubjectivity' and 'Constancy'," *Papers on Methodology*, Copenhagen: Ejlers, 1979, pp. 65-81.

6. For one example of monitoring see the work done in the United Nations to analyse the press coverage of the UN operations in Somalia and Cambodia based on 14,606 articles clipped during 1993, in Raquel Cohen-Orantes, "DPI's Analysis of Press Coverage," *Evaluation Bulletin*, Spring 1993, pp. 25ff, published semi-annually by the Central evaluation Unit, Department of Administration and Management, United Nations, New York.

7. For more dimensions along these lines, see Johan Galtung and Richard C. Vincent, *Global Glasnost: Toward a New World Information and Communication Order?*, NJ: Hampton Press, 1992, last four chapters before the epilogue.