CAN "OBJECTIVITY" SAVE THE AUTONOMY OF JOURNALISM? SOME CRITICAL REMARKS

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Who Owns the Public Sphere?

Old media are doomed in their present form while no one seems to foresee the full potentialities of the new media-technologies: in changing audience habits or in changing the repertoire of social actions available for the public. New media are introduced while old media change in ownership, organisation and structure we may ask who in the end is entitled to govern public discourse?

The question is intentionally provocative for those who like the author think that public discourse must remain public. The public sphere, like the air we breathe, is owned by nobody; it is a tradition built and maintained by innumerable contributors through time. The overarching problem is of course that when the opportunities to communicate, to organise and to socialise change these will have a profound impact on how public discourse is conducted. And so what are the legitimate demands if any on how media must perform to serve democracy?

Some issues have been strongly debated, especially those pertaining to public service broadcasting. Other questions concerning the future of journalism seem almost forgotten. What I have in mind especially is the autonomy of journalism as a cultural form within rapidly expanding media organisations.

In the following sections I shall address a number of contemporary changes which affect the position of journalism in Europe in terms of culture and public discourse. These are the breakdown of the party press in the post-socialistic countries and the growing international market for media ownership and take-overs. These two topics are interrelated by the same media companies which are now operating both in the West and in former East-Europe.

This discussion will serve as a backdrop to the more basic question: what is the normative and philosophical defence of journalism as an independent profession? Similarly, can journalism be unaffected by the structure of the media industry it belongs to? Some media scholars think that when journalism has become professionalised its autonomy has been secured. I am more pessimistic.

My concern is both how to defend the autonomy of journalism and who will feel entitled to defend it? The basic ambiguity in the liberalistic theory of the press between freedom of ownership turned into modern privileges and freedom of expression, given freely to all without relevant means to realise it is producing contradictions which threaten the very foundations of an open society.

Objectivity in Different Contexts

There seems to be an almost inborn conflict of values in our thinking of the social role of media: on the one hand there is the need for social commitments yet on the other it is a need for objective information. Traditionally "objectivity" has been foregrounded as the key value in the theories of professions.

According to Michael Schudson (1972; 1990) providing the public with raw and essential facts without interpretation in journalism was replaced by "objectivity" as the professional ideal in the in the 1920's. With an increasing number of Public Relations agents providing newspapers with ready made facts, journalists lost faith in "facts." Balanced information from a variety of contending sources was the new professional ideal of "objectivity." This also demanded disinterested journalists free of obligations to society but loyal to their media. Journalists as personalities and critical writers receded into the background to be replaced with accredited producers of newsworthy events that demonstrably had happened.

According to Hardt (1996) and Hardt and Brennen (1996), it was the publishers, not the journalists, who most eagerly defended this interpretation of professionalism in media. They did this on two grounds: first by binding journalism to established facts and opinions, and thus defusing any radical potentialities that social analysis could harbour, and second by infusing journalists with a bourgeois ideal of professionalism. Journalists do not readily identify themselves as "news workers" binding them in common interests with typographers and office workers in media. But without strong trade unions, journalists were unable to defend most routine journalism from being deskilled through industrialisation and bureaucratisation.

The value of "objectivity" in journalism has also been described as part of a market strategy, especially for the emerging news agencies at the end of the 19th century which served newspapers of many political persuasions. For successful newspapers, narrow political commitments eventually became a barrier to further expansions in the reader market. It was necessary to appear as neutral and "objective" in content to be more appealing to a heterogeneous audience of conflicting beliefs.

The ideal of "objectivity" as the key to professionalism has now been taken over without much doubt by journalists in post-socialistic countries. They know too well what the term "news workers" means; they toiled as servants for the communist party without ever being asked about their opinions on the trade. Soviet ideology gave media a central role in the advancement of a new society, and in the process incorporated media into the overall political framework with the Communist Party in the centre. Society, or the party, was an end in itself without which the individual had no mean-

ing. The press lost control over the tenets of its own activity: the evaluation and control of media performance was ultimately the privilege of the Party.

Western individuality, by contrast, emphasised self-realisation, while the constraints of community has been conceived of as a challenge to freedom. Part of the liberal philosophy is the independence of media from government or from any other authority outside the control of media itself. This, however, is not a two way street; media want government to depend on the fourth estate.

This sounds perfect for post-socialistic media, but may be challenged in many capitalistic countries where private ownership sometimes approaches monopoly control (Bagdikian 1983). The more far-reaching obligations of journalists to defend and maintain public discourse, is sometimes blurred by marketing strategies that split the public into consumer segments (Underwood 1993). And if the MBA's in the newsroom do not completely succeed in neutralising a sense of community in journalism, the use of the Internet may finally fragment public attention into special groups belonging nowhere and without any political leverage. Or in the words of Karol Jakubowicz (1995, 83):

> *Where the receivers do take advantage of the profusion of choice offered by the new media, they fragment the audience and promote non-communication among various groups which may live in diverse, self-contained symbolic universes.*

By all criteria, a liberalistic theory has now become vital as a defence for autonomy in the post-socialistic systems where many political leaders of the new-borne democracies do not readily accept critical media. The leaders want the press to share responsibility for democracy, and not solely blame the young and often insecure democratic regimes for neglect. In retribution politicians withhold information, introduce concealed regulations and many forms of hidden censorship. Journalists are sometimes arrested, they may be killed and newspapers bombed in extreme cases, by the Mafia or by diffuse centres of economic and political power or a combination of those.

When the wall fell down, Western media moguls were the first among capitalists to buy into the post-socialistic countries, sometimes preferring the more established party press which most people still read for the new papers of civic movements their motives apparently more pragmatic than idealistic. In the formative years following the mass demonstrations of 1988-89, there was a sense of urgency to restructure the media system almost ahead of the revolutionary changes in politics. Foreign investors were welcomed because according to Elemer Hankiss (1990) the national press at that time could not be worse, as was the case in Hungary. The mobile diplomacy of touring Western lecturers on professional journalism also contributed to such sentiments.

In these contexts, foreign capital was often the only capital available to import computers, printing presses, newsprint and other hardware necessary to break the party monopoly in production facilities and in distribution. The alternative to foreign ownership was that the old nomenclature continued to control the development of national journalism through their initial control of the tools of publishing.

Along with capital export some undisputed cultural export of journalistic models followed eastward. The more general question of how well this style of journalism matched the current needs of new democracies, trying to find connections to their past before communism, was apparently a dangerous issue, not to be taken seriously by editors desperately seeking to get out of the iron mold of controlled information.

The uncommitted and event-oriented Anglo-American news reporting may, how-

ever, be beneficial only if used with moderation and not as the sole definition of proper journalism. It must be supplemented by a journalism which allows journalists as well as outside contributors to serve in the role of intellectuals, authors, experts etc. defining important topics and issues through an ongoing and open ended media discourse. This evaluative and community oriented side of journalism may be an old fashioned continental European tradition of the press dating back before liberalism, and it will not always suit a mass marked well.

A historian twenty years from now contemplating what happened in the years following 1985-89-91 may well conclude that the main outcomes were some new very successful tabloids, yellow journalism, advertising, pornography, public relations, commercial radio and television and only a few broad sheet quality newspapers.

Two Contradictory Freedoms — One Model

Freedom of expression and of choosing information in the public sphere presupposes a variety of channels, a diversity of media, access to important information for journalists, a fairly independent journalistic community and a milieu of independent intellectuals outside media. Liberalism does not guarantee this.

Liberalism is process oriented and formalistic: if certain procedures, individual freedoms and human rights are guaranteed the doctrine takes it for granted that competition and diversity of expressed opinion follows. Moreover, liberalists presuppose that when every media feels free to express with decency whatever opinion it likes, competition will secure that truth survives in the free market of ideas. Liberalism do not prescribe any other form of social arrangements, or any value outside the democratic form of government.

Thus liberalism does not account for the transformation of individual rights into collectively organised and expressed opinions. Such transformation is the technique of modern public discourse. The problem is that rational political choices depends on a multitude of opinions expressed, while this multitude is hardly rational in economic terms. Democracy is wasteful in its demands for many alternatives and establishing new alternatives in the mass market becomes steadily more expensive.

Because fair competition is taken for granted, proponents of doctrinal purity do not tell us what to do when competition does not function. Liberalism, narrowly conceived, is unable to set a limit to the outcomes of free choice, be it increased concentration of commercial power, restriction of public debate or other deficiencies of tolerance. In the more developed of capitalistic markets it is often the interests of a majority that rule uninterrupted.

Originally the libertarian theory of the press presupposed easy access to the market for new publishers who could challenge any hegemony in the public sphere. As technology developed, and the media market matured, this has become increasingly unrealistic. In the more developed economies we see clear trends of increased domination in most industries by some few big companies. Today freedom of expression can only be realised on the social, communal or on the national level by aggregate economic and intellectual resources. The responsibility for guarding the rules of fairness in the public sphere now rests with a decreasing number of publishers and their editors and by extension, through shareholders, investors and bankers.

With a low threshold to the media market the potential conflict between freedom

of the press and freedom of expression is not visible. Originally freedom of the press was reserved for those groups of citizens which had a legitimate ability to express opinions on political issues licensed printers, the nobility and the rising bourgeoisie of the 17th century Europe. Through the American and French Revolutions these freedoms became universal and individual human rights. Universal human rights is most appropriately used to defend individuals against repressive regimes. It becomes much more problematic when universal rights are extended unconditionally to those who control the means of expression in complex capitalistic societies. In these instances individual rights must be balanced by the recognition of the needs of community, the right of citizens to be properly informed and eventually of access for certain minority groups to media discourse. The libertarian theory of the press, however, is "ahistorical" and without any obligations to the culture, the historical context or society in which public discourse is embedded. The promises of universal rights to speak and to be heard in the public arena became vain as soon as the same masses it appealed to were enfranchised. Not only was access to the public sphere difficult for the majority of the electorate, but the demands on public discourse presuppose a certain organisation, and some necessary editing to prevent chaos, or information over-load for the public. Suddenly only a minority of potential citizens could express what they wanted directly through the press. Public discourse lost its spontaneity, arguments were organised and prepared in parties, enlisted in ideologies and fought out ceremoniously on the battleground of the press.

In capitalist societies "freedom of the press" includes both business interests and freedom of expression. But when these two freedoms are in conflict, the right to own usually wins. When private property becomes the most essential of rights freedom of the press is turned into a principle of non-intervention by government in media affairs. This, in turn, has allowed for unrestrained market concentration and decreasing competition in many countries, as soon as advertisers became the main customers of media. This has resulted in consequences that could hardly have been foreseen by the 18th century founding fathers. The reason for their naiveté was that they did not see far enough beyond their own conditions where the roles of publishers, editors and authors were either combined or frequently interchanged, and when the turnover between old and new publications was fairly high.

Media Strategy and Public Service

Within every media organisation there is an uneasy balance between economic and altruistic values. The editor and the journalists by tradition represent the public service side of the media. Publishers are not welcome at editorial meetings, even if editors are invited to board meetings. However, relations between editors and publishers are often harmonious. A strong economy is helpful to cross-subsidise the less "profitable" services of the media, e.g. culture and political commentaries which give the paper status in influential circles. Publishers often feel a legitimate responsibility for budgeting what is called product development and long term planning. Publishers certainly hire and sometimes fire editors and other key personnel. In all these areas publishers can set certain limits, suggest priorities and influence career opportunities that in sum have a decisive impact on the content of media.

Strong journalistic traditions and determined editors have for a long time guarded the public role for most news media. This public role, however, depends on two inter-

related conditions. The first is that media address the problems, institutions and values of civil society. The second is that the audience for such messages is located in an institutional context where citizens can, at least in principle, contribute to the decision-making process.

But community borders and national borders are sometimes too narrow for media entrepreneurs. They must look far behind the limits of small communities to aggregate sufficient numbers of customers for their media products. And in order to make media products attractive to large masses of people, they have to de-emphasise conflict, special demands and the local character of their stories. Events must be located, of course, but the reason for media telling about them is not their local character but other qualities likely to raise widespread attention. Paradoxically, you are not regularly updated on local affairs in national media, and you are irregularly updated on national affairs in international publications and news services. The problems of the specific group or more limited community to which each of us belong will seem trivial by comparison with the more exotic international scene. In this situation, the vaguer consensus values which dominate in the globalised media will probably marginalise important minority groups and deviate opinions.

Professionalism, Commitment and "Objectivity"

Objectivity is a professional, not a liberalistic idea. Liberalism is concerned with free access to the market and with free competition. Liberals emphasise the freedom to express whatever view objective or not the publisher or his editors think is appropriate. "Objectivity", by contrast, is the product of a social process, beyond the control of a single professional. "Objectivity" is thus not an individualistic or a universal human right, like freedom of expression.

Traditionally professionals such as doctors have a personal responsibility to save life and secure health for their clients by applying a correct diagnosis and rules of treatment derived from scientific research and approved by colleagues. This has become the ideal towards which other vocations strive in their effort at becoming professional. Professionalism rests on systematically tested knowledge, on the one side, and on ethical obligations that bind every professional to a common practice, on the other.

The ethics of a profession also serve as promises given to "society" in return for professional autonomy and a monopoly to certify new members of the profession, which is needed when the professional community wishes to sanction deviances from its golden rules of professional conduct. Thus "objectivity" as a collective strategy keeps the profession outside the ordinary political conflicts and at the same time discipline conflicts within the profession.

From this point of view, the idea of "professionalism" for journalists is full of paradoxes: it is the publishers through appointments, not the professional organisation, which certify new members of the trade. Journalism cannot be pursued individually outside complex media organisations, the service news media give the public is derived from the expertise of other professions. Furthermore, journalism depends on the contributions from many other vocational groups within the media organisation so as to be operative. The personal responsibility of journalists is further fragmented by the division of labour in the editing process: a manuscript is read and changed by many sub-editors after leaving the hands of the reporter. Journalism is thus condi-

tioned by its organisational environment where allocations of resources are often made by economists rather than by editors and journalists.

The true expertise of journalists is their knowledge of where to find the relevant knowledge, mostly outside media, to be familiar with the needs of their audience and having writing or presentation abilities, which means insights in the methods by which the interests, attention and trust from the audience can be raised. Journalists are concerned with what moves the audience and they are concerned with the free floating informal communication that precedes and follows mass communication like a shadow and binds free societies together. By finding their role in this community of shared interests and destinies, journalists generate new communication. And this is where their professional role are so important.

Objective news is often information which is correct because it is confirmed by established sources. Applied to social analyses, "objectivity" neutralises information and may thus hide the underlying conflict of interests, of inequalities and of subjectively experienced injustice. For critical outsiders it seems that journalists easily become the prey of institutional and "established" sources of information. To a great extent they are bound to balance concerns and events produced by competing groups within the establishment. Objectivity thus easily becomes a concealed conservative value.

Increasingly, the most frequently consulted sources are putting up a defence against unwanted public attention. In Washington DC you will find three times as many PR-officers compared to the number of journalists. Hired public relations officers, often experienced journalists, guide the access to the corridors of power: they produce press releases and are interviewed instead of their employers who carry the real responsibility. Identifying with the company rather than with the community the PR-officers definitely have a limited responsibility. In this context of institutionalised retrieval of established facts and opinions, the limits and measures of "objectivity" are established more by outsiders than by journalists themselves.

Clever journalists are, of course, able to penetrate or circumvent these defensive tactics, but the costs of penetrating journalistic research is high, which makes it a question of investments within the media organisation, ultimately decided by the owners. To penetrate established truth and interests, moreover, you must have an idea of something else out there, a commitment to values that is not necessarily current, but of an overarching order in which contending interests can be measured.

If we accept this we have returned to a fundamental paradox for journalism and even for science and other professions the conflict between "objectivity" and "commitment." If "objectivity" is seen as a procedure, or as method only, without any purpose besides keeping you out of trouble (Tuchman 1972), commitment is easily perceived as a threat to harmony and the balanced view. I must admit that I have no ready formula for what shall be regarded as proper journalistic commitments. But such commitment must clearly go beyond current issues and conflict of interests and relate strongly to the proper functions of public discourse.

Epilogue

Despite their precarious position journalists form a strategic group in the defence of journalism as an autonomous culture. Apparently journalists and editors will always be posed between narrow professionalism and a wider commitment to commu-

nity values. I see my own ideal of a journalist as the free and to an extent irresponsible intellectual, who challenges established powers and truths, but who is also dedicated to the community, and yet is responsible to history more than to any figure of power. This is hardly a specialised professional. In addition we also need the detached, uncommited and partly cynical observer. We need of course many ideals in journalism.

But there are many reasons why objectivity as a professional value, narrowly conceived, is not sufficient as a defence against an increased domination of economic power in the media industry, or against the increasing irrelevancies of a uniforming rhetoric. If one journalist can report as objectively as another reporter, using the same professional methods, not only is empathy lost in journalism, but also the reason for having special privileges in the public sphere. In this article I have maintained that "objectivity" as a widely accepted value is a weak defence for journalistic autonomy and professional integrity on several grounds: "objectivity" is not a quality the media control alone, it is a procedure to retrieve information from sources outside media, a procedure that makes journalists anonymous in the text. The range and validity of "objectivity" is defined more by the activities of institutional and established sources of information than by media's overriding concern for public discourse of all relevant social issues.

"Objectivity" as a professional ideal encourages journalists to take the role of observers and thus it keeps journalists from actively committing themselves in community affairs. "Objectivity," as conceived by the media, keeps journalists responsible only for the selection and presentation of information, not for its content. The defence of journalism as a cultural form thus does not rest on any substantive social value, which is dangerous when the challenge to a free and community oriented journalism rises from within the media system itself.

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