

Reflections on journalism and objectivity: an episode, ideal or obstacle

Verica Rupar

The future of journalism has lately become subject to wide-ranging discussion. Scholars note the rapidly changing media landscape and ask for a rethinking of traditional journalistic forms in order to address the new revolution in delivery systems (Schlesinger 2006). Professionals link the issue of modern technologies to the more general question of the future of media in digital age (the theme of upcoming conference of Journalism Educators Associations of New Zealand and Australia), and relationship between the journalistic field and other surrounding fields such as science, economy, and politics (*The Economist* 2005), and the public expresses concern about the power and forum-creating capacity of the press (Quintos de Jesus 2002). Even Rupert Murdoch seems interested in addressing questions about the future of journalism, its relation to audience, and the credibility of the press. He told the American Society of Newspapers Editors that readers are not stupid and news providers such as his own organization "had better get web-savvy, stop lecturing their audiences, become places for conversation and destinations where bloggers and podcasters congregate to engage our reporters and editors in more extended discussions" (*The Economist* 2005).

The debate on the future of journalism flourishes around questions of growing economic pressures, the influence of technological changes on journalistic protocols, audience apathy, and the pessimism found among journalism professionals. The Report on the State of American Journalism highlights the blurring boundaries between journalists and readers:

As people "Google" for information, graze across an infinite array of outlets, read blogs or write them, they are becoming their own editors, researchers, and even correspondents. What was called journalism is only one part of the mix, and its role as intermediary and verifier, like the roles of other civic institutions, is weakening (PEJ 2006).

The question of 'what is going to happen to the news' recently got a valuable response in the *Political Communication Report* (henceforth *PCR*), a newsletter that serves the political communication division of the American Political Science Association and the International Communication Association. Several prominent American scholars wrote essays on the future of news in post-modern times, offering a wide variety of views on different issues, from the acknowledgment that journalism does not have the uncontested centrality in the public sphere it once had (Hallin 2006), to the judgment that "professional and high modern journalism can be considered to have been clinically dead for a long time – but it is unable to die" (Deuze 2006).

In the background to this discussion are some observations on the issue of journalistic objectivity that might be interesting to New Zealand scholars too. The objectivity norm, glorified and demonised in journalism studies, holds the key for addressing journalism as a cultural practice in historical context and it is included into current discussion of journalism and its future in the representation, interpretation, and construction of reality. I would like to make some brief

comments on three contributions to the *PCR* (2006) talk: Daniel Hallin's revision of the article on the end of 'high modernism' in American journalism, Jane Singer's suggestions about serious journalism, and Mark Deuze's sharp overview of the transformation of journalism from 'solid, via zombie, to liquid journalism'.

The decline of serious journalism

More than decade ago Hallin (1992) noted that the days of serious, professional journalism had largely passed as a result of a complex of interactions between political, economic, technological, and social factors. Looking back to this text for the readers of the *PCR*, Hallin (2006) says that the professional "high modernist" model of journalism was a short episode in journalism history, an episode based on very specific conditions which are now passing away: ideological consensus centred around corporatism, the welfare state, and Cold War policy. He stresses that the notion of "objective" reporting and "of the journalist standing above political divisions to serve a unitary public interest which transcended them was only plausible in a context where ideological diversity and contestation was limited" (Hallin 2006). In the '60s and '70s, when the prestige of public affairs declined and the challenges to professional authority expanded in many spheres including medicine, education, and city planning, journalism was not the only "profession to have its power and its claims of objectivity questioned".

In his revised essay for the *PCR*, Hallin expands his arguments on three points. Firstly, recent scandals, such as the *New York Times* Jason Blair's affair, to point out that it seems that ethical norms are still fairly held by journalists themselves: "Journalistic professionalism is not breaking down from the inside, by journalists becoming less committed to it; instead I think professionalism is being squeezed into increasingly smaller niches within the media field". Secondly, it became increasingly clear that re-emergence of partisan media (such as blogging, talkback, Fox news) is one of the most important forces straining the unity and identity of journalism. And thirdly, the changes in political culture and appearance of neoliberalism marginalize any notion about values that transcend market choices or particular interests. It makes little sense to be nostalgic for the good old times, but the author admits that it is true

"that the professional model of this period represented one plausible solution to a set of contradictions connected to the fact that the news media are simultaneously private businesses and institutions with important effects on society as a whole" (Hallin 2006). Hallin predicts that the questions about freedom and accountability of the press are likely to re-emerge in this century.

Singer (2006) uses journalists' strong commitments to ethical norms such as balance and fairness to forecast that such norms will continue to be vital for exercising journalism's sense-making role, and providing context for making well-informed decisions. Singer says that the journalist's role is becoming less about getting readers from point to point and more about explaining what is interesting, relevant, or useful about the points readers have reached. Journalists are not competing with 'citizen journalists' because "we will continue to need journalists to fulfil a watchdog role whose effectiveness rests on their reporting plus the power of their institutional clout" (Singer 2006).

Deuze (2006) does not see a place for old-fashioned journalism. He stresses that journalism has to

radically change if it wants to stay relevant and offers a whole list of professional faults: journalism fails to come to terms with the notion of volatile, uncertain global and local flux; it still depends on its established mode of production, through which it largely (and un-reflexively) reproduces the institutional contours of 'high' or 'solid' modernity; journalism makes a product without consumers, delivers news without effect, and claims social responsibility without constituency.

Three authors, three different views: Hallin relates 'serious journalism' to a past historical era, predicting that some of the questions such as freedom and accountability might re-emerge; Singer calls journalists to continue to exercise and strengthen the sense-making role in the evolving media environment, and Deuze, paraphrasing Bauman (2002), declares "we should embrace the uncertainty and complexity of the emerging new media ecology, and journalism that successfully engages this ecology will become fluid itself – a liquid journalism" (Deuze 2006).

Framework for discussion

Hallin's, Singer's, and Deuze's responses to the question of the future of news in American journalism triggers some questions that override national boundaries.

The first question that a non-American reader might ask in relation to the *PCR*'s discussion concerns the universality of highlighted trends. What might be the difference for the future of New Zealand, Japanese or Italian journalism? The position of journalists as public arbiters, for example, has a long tradition in European journalism (Hallin and Mancini 2004) and is a relatively recent practice in the American press (Entman 1981, Grossman and Kumar 1981, Cook 1998). The analysis of journalistic practice in New Zealand (Rupar 2006), a country that belongs to Anglo-American model of journalism, shows that journalists readily take the position of mediators in public disputes. Does this mean that in this country, the future of journalism - although worries about the economic pressures and fascination with new media technologies here are similar to those in the US - might be different from the future of journalism in the United States? The idea of the 'voice of the public' that Hallin (2006) links to the American journalism of the '60s is pretty much alive in New Zealand today. It is true that we can identify same trends in the news business all over the globe, but these global trends still get different responses in national markets (De Beer and Merrill 2004).

The second corpus of unanswered questions comes from the need to acknowledge the diversity of journalism production. The Internet excepted, none of the authors in the *PCR* round table pay much attention to the differences between print, television, and radio journalism or to differences between daily and weekly news production, political reporting and business and entertainment news. It might look marginal in relation to the wider issue of a multimedia news environment but it is extremely important in relation to future of journalism. One does not have to recall the image of a happy television reporter dressed as a Santa Claus in pre-Christmas *6 o'clock news* to admit that difference between journalism productions is significant. When it comes to television and newspaper journalism it almost resembles the division between the feature film and documentary. It is true that the news is the most prestigious of daily media genres, a status gained from "its role at the centre of the exercise of power in modern societies" (Garrett and Bell 1998: 4) but it is also true that the epistemology of news varies across media: while television sticks to the news as a form of knowledge (Ekstrom 2002), newspapers are moving back to the news as a form of

narrative; and the online media mix it all by blurring the division between producers and consumers of media.

When discussing the need to make a radical shift from traditional news production, Deuze (2006) points out there is another shift that should be taken into account, a global shift from so-called 'expert' systems – like journalism or academia – to a form of "collective intelligence", or the exchange of views between many rather than wisdom of few. True, but one might argue that the history of human civilization is a history of shifts in 'expert' systems: who were more respected as experts than the philosophers in the Ancient Greece? Who had more authority to declare right and wrong and make sense of world if not the Church in the Middle Ages, or political representatives in the last century? The status of 'experts', history shows, might change but the need for expertise does not.

The authority of journalists and their status as experts in mediating reality comes not only from the individual journalist's knowledge, wisdom, and creativity; it comes from the notion of objectivity, the cornerstone of journalism ideology (Deuze 2005). In the *PCR's* discussion on the future of news, Hallin calls the objectivity notion a brief episode in journalism history, Singer sees it as an ideal, and Deuze argues it is an obstacle to embrace liquid modernity but each of them drops the notion of objectivity as a less important detail in the story about the future of journalism.

Towards the new operational framework of objectivity

They might be wrong. Firstly, the journalistic norm of objectivity transcends the journalistic field. The production of definable, if not unquestionable, truth about issues in the public domain follows on from the idea of independence and detachment in relation to everyday interaction between journalists and agents in other social fields (Bourdieu 2005). As a concept that belongs to epistemological questions, objectivity is incorporated into the formation of news discourse in its most rudimentary form. The media coverage of any issue of public concern – whether it be the recent development of the CBC report on Bush's military service, the case of Milosevic's funeral in Danas or the controversy over the Louise Nicholas case in the Dominion Post – shows how the 'ongoing story' triggers interactions both outside and inside the journalistic field: What starts as an 'objective' method in gathering the facts and mediating the views expressed in the public response to the event, continues as a call for common sense in presenting the account of that event and ends as a belief that it is the 'objective' approach to reality that gives journalism authority to mediate in public affairs.

It is hard to ignore a further blurring of the "carefully cultivated dividing lines between professional and amateurs, and producers and consumers of media" (Deuze 2006), but it would be a mistake to think it dismisses journalists from the public scene. Journalism is not a static but flexible set of norms, principles and rules: nothing shows this better than notion of objectivity. Journalistic habitual reaction to events and the strong adherence to ethical norms such as objectivity (Tuchman 1972, Hallin 1986, Reese 1990, Donsbach and Klett 1993, Peterson and Donsbach 1996, Kovach and Rosenstail 1999, 2000, Schudson 2001, Lealand 2004) is historically and socially rooted. At one historical point (1920s) it has been defined mainly as a method and set of techniques; fifty years later it was discussed as an account; nowadays it is considered mainly as

an attitude.

Why is this method/account/attitude distinction relevant for the discussion about the future of journalism? It is important because it explains how idea goes beyond the mode of delivery. Let me take an imaginary example. An experienced journalist sent to write a report on peace demonstrations in Auckland, on the occasion of Tony Blair's visit, for instance, would undertake a set of routine steps to obtain information and organize her work: she would go to the demonstrations, observe the happening, write down the main slogans and messages, pay attention to communication between demonstrators and non-demonstrators (being citizens, police, representatives of institutions), take notes about the speeches delivered, consult the police and organizers to find out the number of demonstrators and check if there were any incidents; talk to participants, organizers, observers. and anyone else relevant for a description of their understanding of the event, depending on time and space constrains.

She would take the same steps as her colleague did five decades ago, when sent to report on the "Waterfront strike" (the five months long Trade Union struggle in New Zealand in 1951), although the changes in the 'newsroom' are significant: new transnational owners of the press, tape recorders instead of short-hand writing, computers instead of typewriters, internet instead of press clippings. One consequence of the changed newsroom environment is that the individual journalist has now less time to spend on obtaining facts for a single event (Hope 2004). The less available time for a single event, at the level of everyday practice, means that a journalist might observe the demonstration from a window (as some of the Press Gallery reporters do with demonstrations in front of the Parliament) instead of eye-witnessing the event right on the spot. She might, instead of talking to police and organizers, make some phone calls or use press releases and base a report on these conversations. This imagined journalist might write a shorter report than she intended, but the thing she certainly won't change is the principle of consulting 'both sides of the story', those who made the protest and those who the protest is aimed at. The same basic principle her colleague applied fifty years ago are still applied today.

All three scholars in the *PCR* debate acknowledge that despite all the differences, the myth of certain steps a journalist has to take to reach 'objectivity' stays alive. They differ in predicting for how long and for what extent. I think the question (of future of journalism) has to be turned around. The old question de Certeau asks might be useful here: how do the ways of operating intervene in the field that regulates them? (de Certeau 1984: 30). How does the practice of keeping alive the myth of objectivity intervene in the field of journalism? Does it make a shield or a sword for embracing the new media ecology? The modification of journalistic practice, an ongoing process since the early days of shipping news, both reflects and influences the interplay between the journalistic and other social fields, being politics, business or technology. The highlighted link between objectivity, as the most visible segment of journalism ideology and the journalistic field resembles the relation between ideology and field in any other social space. As a collection of schemes that allow agents to carry on their practices (Bourdieu 2002), professional ideology (Deuze 2005) is used to advertise journalism, to frame the role of journalists in society, and to conceptualize the field. Journalism ideology defines what is acceptable and what is not allowed in the profession. It makes connections between causes and consequences in everyday practice, such as in the instruction to have both sides of the story in order to get 'an objective story'.

To sum up

Norms, written or unwritten, are regulatory rules, but the norm of objectivity is more than a rule: it is the desired mode of a practice, a process, and an aspiration and in that sense both Hallin (2006) and Singer (2006) are right - as an attitude and ethical code it does not easily disappear. It is true that new media ecology forces journalists to make substantial changes in the way they gather and report the news (Deuze 2006) but it seems worthwhile to ask what exactly is, and should be, subject to change. An interactive and connective mode of production requires the development of journalistic techniques and changes in applying objectivity as a method. The strict distinction between fact and opinion has been dropped since the Hutchinson Report (1947) but, as the later history of journalism shows, never completely forgotten. From the emergence of the first person singular writing of the 'new journalism' to the most recent debates about the transparency of news reporting (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2004), journalistic account of reality trigger discussions. One might argue that it does so even more with the appearance of new media and the interactions between users and producers of new media. And when it comes to attitude, the objectivity norms will certainly determine the frame for investigating the ideology of journalism.

The operational framework for considering objectivity as a method, account and attitude, allows discussion of journalism as a text, as a field, and as a practice. Whether past, present or future. Seeing journalism as a complex phenomenon and not only an homogeneous institution or profession is important because journalists' criteria of cultural production go beyond simple economic, organizational or technological explanations. Taking the news story as both summarized reality and a self-sufficient form of communication (Matheson 2000), means looking at the discursive potential of the news text in all elements of its appearance, and not only at segments such as frequency of stated sources, or relationship to the new technologies.

Historically, journalists have implemented different professional routines to neutralize the complexity of a changing environment. The concept of 'liquid modernity' (Deuze 2006) is helpful to describe the density of modern times but its epistemological capacity is limited: although it shines, it hardly navigates. Yes, the Internet attacks the privileged, agenda-setting position of journalists in the public sphere (Fursich 2002: 58) but journalists do not simply transmit information, they establish and affirm the much desired 'golden mean' and middle road - the *modus operandi* of any social group. As long as they provide the 'common sense' reading of reality in any form there is no doubt that journalism will exist.

Bibliography

"Business: Yesterday's papers: The future of journalism" *The Economist* London 23 April 2005 Vol 375 72

Bourdieu P (2005) 'The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field' in Benson Rodney and Neveu Erik *Bourdieu and the journalistic field* Polity Press Cambridge 29-48

- Carey J (1996) 'Where Journalism Education Went Wrong' [<http://www.mtsu.edu/~masscomm/seig96/carey/carey.htm>]
- Deuze M (2005) 'What is Journalism: Professional Identity and Ideology of Journalism Reconsidered' *Journalism* Vol 6 (4) 442-464
- Deuze M (2006) 'Liquid Journalism' in *Political Communication Report* (PCR) Vol 16 No.1 available online at: http://www.mtsu.edu/~pcr/1601_2005_winter/roundtable_intro.htm
- Firsich E (2002) 'How can global journalists represent the "Other?"' *Journalism* Vol 3(1) 57-84
- Hallin Daniel (1992) "The Passing of the 'High Modernism' of American Journalism" *Journal of Communication* 42:3 14-25
- Hallin D and Mancini P (2004) *Comparing Media Systems: Three models of Media and Politics* Cambridge University Press Cambridge
- Hallin D (2006) 'The Passing of the 'High Modernism' of American Journalism Revisited' *Political Communication Report* Vol 16 No 1 available online at: http://www.mtsu.edu/~pcr/1601_2005_winter/roundtable_intro.htm
- Hope W (2004) 'Editorial: Corporate Media News' *Pacific Journalism Review* 10 (2) 5-8
- Project for Excellence in Journalism (2005) 'The State of the News Media Report' available online at www.stateofthenewsmedia.org
- Quintos de Jesus M (2002) 'Information Literacy and the Changing Role of the Press' available at www.nelis.gov/libinter/infolitconf&meet/papers/dejesus-fullpaper.pdf
- Schlesinger P (2006) 'Is there a crisis in British journalism?' *Media, Culture & Society* Vol 28 (2) 299-307
- Singer J (2006) 'Take a High Road – And Share It' in *Political Communication Report* (PCR) available online at: http://www.mtsu.edu/~pcr/1601_2005_winter/roundtable_intro.htm