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Journalists as Scientists
Notes Toward an Occupational Classification

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I

No one knows what journalism is, occupationally speaking. Journalists certainly do not. They do not spend much time pondering whether they are a profession, an applied science, an art, an entertainment, or an industrial bureaucracy. But every once in a while it becomes apparent that the question is important - even for journalists. When every fourth or fifth automobile in Israel sports a bumper sticker protesting that "the people are against hostile media," or when the president of the state strongly implies that television journalists are guilty of malpractice in their coverage of the Palestinian uprising, it is time to ask what they mean by journalism, and to point out what, if anything, is wrong with their definition.

There have been repeated attempts to fit journalism to the model of the liberal professions. Indeed, journalism does answer to some of the major criteria. It is an occupation based on the primacy of public service, first of all, even if most journalists work for privately owned newspapers. Studies of reasons for entering the profession (Johnstone, Slawski, & Bowman, 1976) strongly support the view that the wish to contribute to society is a major motivation. Benefit to the client is the defining characteristic of the professions (Blau & Scott, 1963). The authority of journalism, like that of the other professions, is anchored in rationality rather than tradition or charisma (Parsons, 1968).

Moreover, journalism as a profession may be said to be "looking for trouble," as are the other professions. Hughes (1964) has defined professionals as specialists in making routine of other people's emergencies. In her studies of the newsroom, Tuchman (1973) has shown how journalists go about this task of routinization. The theme of looking for trouble implies diagnosis, of course, and journalism qualifies on this score, too.

Journalists also share the norm of privileged communication. People who speak to journalists confidentially may expect their confidentiality to be respected both by the journalist and by the courts. It is considered appropriate, too, that complaints against journalists are dealt with by an institution designated to do so by the journalists themselves. There is a professional code of ethics, implicit or explicit, to guide the work. There is a definite implication here that journalism is in some ways self-governing.

But there are problems in fitting the professional model. Doctors or lawyers, for one thing, have clients, whereas journalists may be said to have clients only by stretching the point to define society as the client. Clergy and teachers may also be said to have society as their client, but their authority is strongly tempered by tradition and charisma. Unlike the other professions, the clients of journalism only rarely present themselves to the journalist or the newspaper for personal help. It is true that there is a large body of needs that journalism satisfies, but this process does not begin with a presentation of symptoms, a request for diagnosis, and certainly not for treatment. The journalists may be said to offer treatment only in the sense that the confrontation with information - sometimes "hostile" information - may

be considered therapeutic in itself. After all, psychoanalysts also believe in the therapeutic power of confronting information.

Also different from other professions is that journalism makes information public. Journalists, like other professionals, may receive privileged communications, but their true vocation is to publish. "Publish, and be damned," said Horace Greeley, regardless of the consequences. The idea that this will do good, perhaps, is rooted deep in the ideal of libertarian democracy.

That journalism goes on in an organization also departs from the doctor-lawyer model of professionalism. And last but not least, professionalism is anchored in an accumulated body of specialized knowledge and an intensive period of study that hardly holds for present-day journalism.

For all these reasons, journalism is not such a good fit to the professional model. But while we were looking elsewhere, all sorts of things have been happening in the sociology of the professions. The definition of professional has been modified and liberalized, for one thing. The other is that the ideal of the professional has been demoted somewhat, such that if journalism now may qualify on the first count, it may wish to be included out, on the second.

Thus professionals are all of gradually moving into organizations. The ideal of the lone professional – with all of his or her rights to independent judgments within the rules of ethics and the precincts of knowledge – is now being bureaucratized in hospitals, law offices, and so on, not to speak of social work agencies, schools, and the like that have always been bureaucratized.

Professional learning is being downgraded, too, as analysts distinguish between knowledge and the mystifications that professionals use to protect themselves from clients and others who might think less of them otherwise. There are great battles now in progress against the small print and unpronounceable words in legal contracts, and the Latin of the doctors. These are seen as conspiracies against the client and the public, and there is only little sympathy left these days for the possibility that some of this argot may serve as effective shortcuts for professional communication.

Related to mystification of language and autonomous authority is the current popularity of the malpractice suit. The public is refusing to accept either the authority of the professional or the disinterestedness of professional peers in deciding what is competent and ethical and what is not. Altogether, the altruism of the professionals is continually being challenged, and all that remains of the image of the self-sacrificing physician is nostalgia. If journalists qualify as professionals, they now find themselves in better-or should we say worse? – company. The professions are moving in the direction of journalism. The exclusivity of their learning is being challenged, their skills placed under outside surveillance, the primacy of their altruistic dedication called into question, their individual autonomy compromised by bureaucratic authority. It appears that "the people are also against hostile professions," but they are also well aware that there are no available alternatives to doctors and lawyers in sight. Journalists have a share in this process of degradation of the professions and may even take some comfort in it for themselves.

But the fit is still far from satisfactory. The fact remains that journalism has no body of knowledge on which it draws, or if it has, it is not explicitly aware of it. By the same token, it

has no licensing procedure, and, indeed, democratic norms make this undesirable. It has no identifiable client except perhaps society as a whole. Its aim is publicity, not secrecy.

II

A variant on the professional model is the model of the scientist, and a variant on that is the model of applied science. Strange as it may sound, I want to suggest that journalism answers to the model of applied science rather better, perhaps, than to the model of profession. Prima facie this sounds strange, not only for the obvious lack of the coherent body of knowledge required by science, but also for the absence of an organized set of propositions-a theory-and of a way of verifying testable derivations from the theory. Nevertheless, let us give it a try.

Following Epstein (1975), let us think of journalism as mapmaking. The world is divided into beats, where things of consequence are thought to be happening and bear watching. Sometimes these beats are actual places, such as Washington, New York, or Jerusalem. Sometimes they are institutions the foreign ministry, the army, the police, the universities, and the hospitals. Each beat has a population of actors, who are wielders of power –legitimate or not – and most of whom appear to specialize in conflict. Thus the daily news consists of indications of changes taking place in these foci of power, usually depicted in terms of events, and including assessments of why such change took place, who or what initiated it, whom it will affect, and whether it falls inside or outside agreed-on social norms (Alexander, 1982). From time to time, journalists are forced to redo the map itself as new places and new conflicts demand attention.

In other words, journalism is, first of all, an agenda-setter, telling us where, what, and who are worth observing. It is also a barometer for indicating changes, usually defined as interruptive events-sometimes positive (medical breakthrough) but mostly negative (riot, death, famine, tax). Less apparent, but nonetheless present, is the role of journalism in defining and labeling deviance. By calling public attention to departures from norms, political actors are forced to respond, either by punishing the deviation or changing the norm (Alexander, 1982). Journalism also gives voice to other sides to a conflict, sometimes giving "equal time" to establishment spokesmen and to dissident minorities. It is in relationship to conflict and deviation that journalism is sometimes implicated in social change.

If this is a fair definition of what journalists do, then journalism may be something like meteorology; it tells about departures from the normal and threats to societal well-being, what Lasswell (1948) called "surveillance." Meteorologists scout the physical climate; journalists scout the social, economic, and political climate for deviations from the normal and the expected. Society is the client, diagnosis is the key, and treatment is generally not involved. In this sense, perhaps, journalism may be usefully thought of as a science, or, better, as an applied science, like meteorology.

There is another sense in which journalism mirrors science, and that is in the delicate balance between cooperation and competition within the occupational community. There is much cooperation – too much, say some people (Noelle-Neumann, 1982) – among ostensibly competing journalists who share observations, debate interpretations, and compare notes in many different ways. There is also the scoop – the race to be the first on an important story –

which causes journalists, and scientists, to rush into print as soon as they can, often too soon, say their colleagues and critics.

But what body of knowledge is applied, what observational methods are involved, how are observations verified? We are back to the gnawing problems of theory, methods, and experimental research. It would be absurd to insist that journalists have abstract and codified theories, reliable methods, and a procedure for testing the validity of propositions derived from the theory. Still, there is something to be said for journalism even in these domains.

I believe that journalists may be said to hold "theories" about people and society – indeed, all of us have theories about people and society – but they are latent, unformulated, and uncodified. Even if they may be shown to be pervasive – as I believe they are – it is still fair to ask: What kind of a science is this? Surprisingly, there is a saving answer from the state of theory in art, and even in the physical sciences. Theories of art and music *follow* musical practice by many years; they are the inferences made by theories from the work of the composers and artists in the field. Something of the same, I understand, can be said about the philosophy of science that recodifies what scientists think they have been doing. It is true, I suppose, that composers and physicists have much more articulate knowledge and theory than have journalists. Without exonerating journalism for its delinquency, let us not rule it out altogether. I would not even rule out the possibility that journalists make derivations from their theories and put these to empirical test.

Let me give some examples of theories that I believe to be implicit in current journalistic practice:

1. Journalists may be said to hold a voluntaristic theory of action, for example. Unlike social scientists and historians who look to situational constraints and determinisms of various kinds, journalists give far more credit to self-propelled human action. The idea that great men, like Sadat, may retreat into the desert, emerge with a decision, and act upon it, is on view in the daily newspapers, usually on a minor scale, and is equally true of the bad guys as of the good guys. Here, however, we might make room for the distinction that is the focus of attribution theory in social psychology which suggests that everyday observers, like ourselves, attribute "dispositional" motives to the good actions of the good guys and "situational" motives to the bad actions of the good guys and vice versa for the bad guys. One wonders whether journalists make this amendment in their observations. It would be of interest to compare journalists' theories of motivation and action to those of lawyers, for example.

2. Journalists believe that social change consists not only in personalities but in discreet events, in what Turner (1977) calls social dramas, involving outbursts of conflict and their resolution. Events, as it happens, are anathema to most sciences; events are unpredictable disruptions and science seeks for regularity and predictability. There are critical events in fields such as psychoanalysis, for example, that have been routinized and regularized by theory. Other sciences – meteorology, perhaps – are rather less prepared for the unexpected.

3. But journalists, too, are more than casually prepared for the unexpected. They have theories about types of events and even about their periodicity; they can even predict the duration of certain kinds of events (Tuchman, 1973). They know which events will "bump" other events off the public agenda. There is a marked regularity in the organization of the front page of the morning newspaper or the lineup of the nightly TV news: the war, the riot,

the natural disaster, the strike, the sports contest, the fashion show, and so on (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). This, too, is a theory of society, whoever is its prime mover.

4. Journalists also have theories of the dynamics of events, as I have said, and they predict what will happen next. For example, I believe that journalists "expected" civil unrest in the territories occupied by Israel and this may explain their "exaggerated" attention to burning tires on the West Bank long before the *intifada* began.

Even if it is granted that journalists draw upon such latent theories of social motivation and action in the construction and diagnosis of their "reality," the quasi-scientific analogy requires that we ask two further questions, namely, (1) Does journalism also contribute, cumulatively, to knowledge in these areas? and (2) Are these theories subject to challenge and correction?

To the first of these questions, I wish to suggest that the process of ferreting out the latent theories of journalists may also show that such theory is a continuous grappling with the dynamics of social conflict. I would not rule out the possibility that there may be a certain unspoken accumulation of wisdom on the subject that deserves codification.

But, obviously, because both the theory and its possible development are all so unformulated, not much can be said about it or for it. University programs in journalism would do well to make these latent theories manifest and to hold them up to the challenge of current theories in social psychology and sociology. There is no reason why journalists should not be informed of the goings-on in attribution theory or of the debate, among sociologists, between functionalist and conflict theories. I dare suggest that it is also possible that professional social scientists have something to learn from the journalistic exploration of these elementary processes - certainly, from the point of view of data (about journalists as observers and the observations of journalists), but also, just possibly, from the changing trends in (latent) journalistic theory (about which I am only surmising).

III

Do journalists have anything that might be called a method? Ostensibly, the answer, once more, must be negative. Journalists cannot be said to have systematic means for unearthing truth. They do not have the diagnostic tools of the doctor, the rhetorical tools of the lawyer, and certainly not the instrumentation and methodologies of the scientist, even the (empirical) social scientist. I will offend the qualitative human sciences such as anthropology or clinical psychology if I even hint that there is any similarity.

But journalists do have methods that are thought to produce truth. The interview is, perhaps, the primary method; and lately - in the wake of Watergate-various more stringent requirements are demanded by the profession (and its legal advisers) before facts based on single interviews are accepted as evidence. Some journalists also know how to read economic and social indicators, and the more use is made of such methodologies, the more emphasis will shift from personalities and events to trends, as they have in economic or health reporting.

Again, one would expect that academic students of journalism – especially those in the professional schools of communication - would introduce the journalist to what social scientists know about, say, the interview or the psychology of witnessing or the tracking of

social trends. Much work has been done in these areas (e.g., Trope, 1982), and one wonders why there is so little confrontation between them and the traditional methods of gathering truth in journalism.

IV

I hope that these notes on the fit between journalism and the professions and journalism and science - however unpolished - illustrate the usefulness of this kind of exercise. It is not, however, just an exercise for its own sake rather, it implies a curriculum of theory and method for university teaching and research in journalism and communication.

The worth of the approach, perhaps, can be illustrated by reference to Epstein's (1975) discouraging and disparaging summary of the essential incompatibility between journalism and truth. If our own summary is of any value, it offers a basis for refuting Epstein.

Thus Epstein asserts that journalism is *unable* to tell the truth. Take a flu epidemic, for example, says Epstein. Unlike the doctor, the journalist is unable to diagnose the disease firsthand; he must rely on someone else's testimony. This might not be so bad, continues Epstein, if the journalist had the ability to cross-examine his source; but no, he must take the source's word for it, because he is unable even to ask good questions for fear of alienating the source or because the deadline is pressing. Nor can he check his story against his colleagues' reports for fear of losing a scoop.

Implicit in Epstein's account, of course, is an idealization of the professions and of science. Doctors, too, are often incompetent to make diagnoses without the aid of informed colleagues; they are often as pressured by time and by scooping their colleagues as are journalists. Indeed, the sense of urgency is one of the characteristics of the professional culture, and the scoop is one of the defining characteristics of the culture of science. If Epstein overstates the doctor, he understates the journalist. It is true, of course, that journalists need an expert to tell them that there is a flu epidemic, but journalists may be quite adequate – if they are on the spot – to see for themselves that there is an *intifada.* There are many things that journalists can see for themselves – even though one must grant the typical inadequacy of their specialized knowledge.

Even if we assume that Epstein is correct in asserting that journalists only report what their establishment sources tell them - or, if they are investigative journalists, that they report what their subversive sources tell them – we should not be so quick to dismiss this part of the journalists' job. If a man in a three-piece suit gets up on a podium and says, "I declare war," the job of the journalist is to report this performative statement, perhaps to comment on the spokesman's right to say so, and to observe the consequences. Part of the journalist's job is, indeed, to report what elites are saying, and to comment upon it. The idea that truth may reside in professional attention to relevant statements - independent of the truth of the statements themselves – eludes Epstein. There are words and deeds that constitute data that journalists are charged with collecting and communicating. The journalist's ability to cross-examine sources is also understated by Epstein. It is true that journalists are often dependent on their sources, but the reciprocal is also true. In recent years, we have seen a great spurt in the public cross-examination of sources in live interviews on radio and

television. It is ironic, perhaps, that such cross-examination may be more characteristic of electronic journalism than print, perhaps because of the irresistibility of appearing on TV.

Epstein says that the consensual validation and independent confirmation that characterizes the professions is not present in journalism. How then explain writers like Noelle-Neumann (1982) who complain about journalists that they are too closely tied together in a monolithic interpretive community that sees things in the same way? There is *too much* sharing, she claims, implicitly questioning Epstein's image of the lone journalist racing against time and the competition.

We should consider not only consensual validation, which is appropriate to individual scientists, but institutional validation, which is appropriate to the professions. In the end, it may be the hospital – with its division of labor and its checks and balances – and the adversary system, not just individual
lawyers, that are able to get at the truth. It is the organization (as in a hospital or scientific laboratory) or the system (as in a court of law) that approaches truth, better than the private practitioner or individual scientist. The same thing might be said of journalism. It is the newspaper that is the instrument of truth-telling rather than the individual story or the individual journalist. Returning to the model of the professions, we might say that just as society is the collective "client," the newspaper or news program is the collective "practitioner."