

# Encircling the Power of Journalism

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## Abstract

The power of journalism is decisive in the exercise of power and democracy in modern societies. This article emphasizes the impact of a journalistic logic and the matter of “thinking journalistically” among social actors. Hardly any modern institution or social actor is untouched by the prevailing media logic. The professional ideology of journalism, the dramaturgical power of journalism and the particular role of modern popular journalism are considered.

**Key Words:** journalism, power, journalistic logic, popular journalism, professional ideology, dramaturgical power

## Introduction

The power of journalism should be regarded as a particularly important and interesting kind of power in modern societies<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, an adequate understanding of society and a relevant theory of power should be able to account for the role of journalism. Journalism deserves a prominent place on the agenda for discussions of power and democracy. In my view, this mission cannot be properly accomplished unless we take popular journalism seriously.

Within modern social theory, society is frequently conceived of as being constituted by different sections or fields, diverse systems or networks with reciprocal relations and floating boundaries. Communication and dissemination between the different fields or systems should be decisive in such an approach – and the role of journalism should call for considerable awareness.

Furthermore, in modern social theory, power is frequently conceptualised as a relational phenomenon. Power is not a capacity that is possessed by an agent once and for all. Neither is it permanently anchored in certain social structures. Power appears in multiple and floating ways and typically displays itself through discourses and prevailing logic. Accordingly, journalism and the impact of journalistic logic on social actors’ courses of action should be of central interest in an updated social theory of power.

Questions concerning journalism and power address important dimensions in the general debate on power in the social sciences (cf. Lukes 1974, Petersson 1989). Firstly, journalism is of paramount importance to agenda-setting power. Secondly, journalism is of relevance for the power implied in non-decisions and issues that never reaches a public agenda. Thirdly, journalism is decisive in questions concerning ideology, hegemony and symbolic power. In short: None of these three dimensions of power can be properly understood if the role of journalism is neglected.

## **Structures and Shifts**

Traditionally, political scientists have told us that there were two channels for political influence, namely the election and the organization channels. “Votes count, but resources decide”, the formula went (Rokkan 1966). Today, it is beyond doubt that the mass media have established themselves as a new a channel— a third channel for political influence – and in many aspects also as an independent power broker.

Journalism is a creative endeavour within an industry-like framework. The power of journalism, consequently, cannot be properly grasped through agent-oriented models of power alone. An intriguing interplay of material, institutional and symbolic relationships must be accounted for. In Graham Murdock’s words: “The trick we need to learn is how to keep these two faces of communications – the material and the symbolic – in play at the same time and to explore their interplay without collapsing either one into the other” (1991:54). And as he further emphasizes: This ambition confronts us precisely with “the central theoretical dilemma of the human sciences – how to conceptualize the relations between social structures, cultural formations, and situated action” (1991:54).

Through conceiving of structures both as medium for and a result of action (cf. Giddens 1984), and viewing structures as potentially both constraining and enabling, we are approaching an adequate understanding of journalism’s social role, and we are doing so without ruling out the individual actors who make a difference. Journalistic power is not a matter of mechanics, and the journalist is no robot. We are encountering the enigma of human agency, the classical issue of “shaping of action by structure and transforming of structure by action” (Abrams (1982:3). And we are addressing processes of social change.

The first national project to study power relations in a Norwegian context in the early 1980s concluded that power had moved away from the parliamentary arena and toward the corporative system. Power had moved from the election channel toward the organization channel (NOU 1982; 3). A second national project of the same kind recently concluded that to a larger extent power has now moved toward the market and the law or judicial system (NOU 2003; 19). Journalism has accompanied these movements of power: Firstly, through a more comprehensive coverage of public administration. Secondly, through a heavier coverage of economic issues. Thirdly, through a kind of journalism that emphasizes people’s rights in different capacities – especially as consumers but also as citizens. And fourthly, journalism’s relation to the market has become more manifest through a general popularization process.

## **Journalistic Logic and the Exercise of Power**

Of equally importance is a fifth feature of the relationship between power and journalism, namely the fact that journalism has become an intimate and imperative part of the exercise of power. A journalistic logic has come to be an indispensable requirement for any social actor who wants to achieve something in this world. It is a matter of thinking journalistically in order to be successful, and this competence is no longer reserved for journalists. In a way, every social institution is today a media institution.

Hardly any modern institution or social actor is untouched by the prevailing media logic, existing media conventions or journalistic modes of operation. Accomplishing a goal is more and more a matter of adapting to and taking advantage of media logic. The logic of journalism is expanding, and journalistic power is mobilized by any agent with the slightest ambition in the political field as well as other social arenas. The competence

of thinking journalistically and acting in compliance with prevailing media logic is as common outside the mass media as within them. This omnipresence of media logic originates a particular implicit kind of power, which is a more indirect and concealed kind of power than the more salient agenda-setting capacity of modern journalism. Journalistic power is a matter of managing the logic of journalism.

Today this logic seems to be superior to the political position of the individual journalist. Journalism has a professional bias, more so than a political bias in any traditional sense. It is a fact that journalists usually vote for leftist political parties to a larger extent than the average voter does. However, this accounts for less of the journalistic power than the fact that all journalists subscribe to a journalistic logic and a certain professional ideology. Journalism has become an ideology in itself. And journalistic influence on power relations has been conceptualized through a model of “chaotic flow”. Journalists have become “agents of instability rather than of control,” British media sociologist Brian McNair states (1998:165). It is important to understand the destabilizing capacity of modern journalism, but I doubt that “chaotic flow” is the most fruitful concept to use in understanding the actual power of journalism.

### **A Professional Ideology**

Journalism as an ideology is based on a very simple cosmology, on a rather simplistic image of society. The construction of journalistic ideology starts from the premise that on the one side of society there are the powerful, while on the other side we find the common people. In between there are journalists, located in the region between those in power and the people. The journalists’ job is to serve the people and challenge the powerful (Petersson & Carlberg 1990, Petersson 1994).

In journalism’s professional ideology, society is constituted of three groups of actors: power brokers, ordinary people and journalists – in other words sources, audiences and newsrooms. Consequently, all sources that do not belong to the people are considered power brokers. And the worst case scenario, in the journalistic view, is if the powerful are allowed to address the innocent people directly, without any journalistic intervention. Journalists are crucial intermediators and interpreters between the mighty and the people, according to the professional ideology of journalism. Viewing the journalist not as an independent critic of power, but as a part of power, would be regarded by the community of professional journalists as an unfair allegation.

Journalism as ideology frequently emerges in the form of a particular blend of populism and elitism (Petersson & Carlberg, 1990). On the one hand, the audience is flattered and popular commitment is celebrated. On the other hand, it is emphasized that a turning point always emerges when the journalist takes charge. It is the media’s actions that really matter.

A central element in the current expression of this ideology is the conception of the journalist as an advocate for his or her audience. In the representative plot here, the journalist appears as the fearless knight, who seems to bring about a solution and happy ending on behalf of the audience member. While the journalist is either the hero or the Good Samaritan, the role of the antagonist is played by, for instance, the civil servant, the bureaucrat or the representative of the health care system.

## Newspaper Schizophrenia

In the Norwegian context, the popular press has led the fashion in pursuing this modern journalism ideology. It is also in the popular press where we have witnessed the most enduring efforts in investigative journalism. Consequently, the actual quality of popular journalism deserves mention here. Newspaper schizophrenia is thus a catchword.<sup>2</sup> The following diagnosis is probably valid not only for Norway but for all the Scandinavian countries.

A schizophrenic popular newspaper has more to offer than daily melodramas, entertainment and guidance for everyday life. Its dealings with matters of importance for the political discourse often bear the signs of quality journalism. Unlike the situation in Britain, for instance, where the popular press is clearly distinct from the quality press, the leading Norwegian popular newspapers also constitute major arenas in the public sphere. They do so through their characteristic ambiguity, by balancing traditional and popular press ideologies, by being schizophrenic newspapers.

Norwegian democracy and the Norwegian public sphere are marked by this state of the art in Norwegian popular journalism. Public life is deeply related to the particular combination of quality and sensation – the particular mixture of hard news and soft entertainment – provided by the popular press.

Tabloid journalism is often understood in terms of its preoccupation with moral disorder and threats to everyday life. But there is more to modern popular journalism than this. Besides threats to everyday life, it addresses the joy of everyday life and provides guidance in conducting a good life. This attitude runs contrary to the often-emphasized negativism and sensationalism of tabloid journalism.

A shift of focus might contribute to a better explanation of the popular fascination of the popular press. Meeting the challenge of understanding the popularity of tabloid journalism might also enable a more competent and interesting critique of it if we grasp how it “connects to the real practical conditions of life of its audiences” (Knight, 1989:125).

Furthermore, analysis of *different kinds of* popular newspapers will help us question traditional views concerning the obsession with crime in popular journalism. In the case of Norwegian popular journalism, it is obvious that an important aspect of its commercial success has been its conscious *combination* of hard crime news and a softer and gentler journalism – for instance in the realm of service journalism of different kinds. It has been an editorial concern to balance the blood dripping stories with softer and more joyful articles. Readers have been offered tragedies that have turned into tears of joy, not to mention the tons of cheerful curiosities they have been presented.

This kind of ‘combination strategy’ is strikingly different from the ‘either-or strategies’ adopted in popular journalism elsewhere.

The concept of tabloid journalism is not necessarily helpful in these circumstances. The concept itself, derived from the format of the newspaper, can be misleading. Norwegian press structure offers illumination, with the majority of Norwegian newspapers now being printed in tabloid format while the vast majority of them are sold mainly through subscription, and only a handful of them conduct a kind of journalism that resembles what is traditionally labelled ‘tabloid journalism’ (Høst, 1993). In my view, it is important to keep in mind that it is the *combination* of format and sales form – in this case tabloid and daily sale – that *can*, but not necessarily *does*, enable certain varieties of popular journalism.

## History and Context

A historical approach might prove helpful in providing the necessary nuances, since a proper historical understanding will have to look for both the particular and the general. The differences are severe, between a tabloid paper of the kind that is not a *newspaper* at all, but an entertainment medium – on the one hand. And on the other hand: a tabloid newspaper that still provides news in a traditional sense, and still conveys political information – also in a traditional sense. A historical perspective is definitely required in understanding schizophrenic newspapers – in this area.

Neither of the two major national Norwegian popular dailies (*Dagbladet* and *VG*) was originally established as a popular paper. They were both rooted in projects to enlighten the public from above, and later underwent decisive processes of popularization. Throughout these processes, the schizophrenia emerged from efforts to serve different markets at the same time. The Norwegian newspaper market as a whole was, and still is, too small for one-sided cultivations of either an elite or a popular market.

Changes in the nature of political journalism should be understood against this background. The first point to be made is thus that political news is no longer attributed a privileged status. Political coverage in the popular press is, however, still extensive and rather serious, compared to what is elsewhere called tabloid journalism. The Parliament is still an important news beat and the official agenda is still reflected, but the living room and private sphere are of equal importance in generating top stories.

A second point is an expansion of a kind of service journalism into the domain of political journalism. The journalistic assessment is clear and simple: In the domain of politics as well, the reader is in need of guidance and clarity, of political consumer information, to be able to pursue his or her interests. The cultivated conception of the role of journalism is that the journalist is on your side, pushing the politicians to come up with clear arguments and effective solutions.

The subject that service journalism interpellates is a hybrid figure – part citizen, part consumer and part client. Moreover, service journalism lends itself to collective, political action inasmuch as it shares common ground – the problematization of the everyday life-world – with the social movements and advocacy-activism groups that are the motivating force of subpolitics (Eide & Knight 1999).

A third point is that political journalism is characterized by the generally prevailing melodramatic framework of the popular press and its emphasis on drama, conflict, personalities and emotions. Political journalism is also endowed with a quest for the human touch. Politicians become human beings in a way, while the voters become customers.

## Melodramas and Everyday Life

Political journalism is subject to what Richard Sennett (1976) has called 'the tyranny of intimacy'. When these symbolic forms succeed to the extent that they do, it must be due to factors other than speculation on the poor taste of readers. There must be a certain *social* sounding board for this kind of dissemination of politics. When commercial successful modes of address are directed towards consumers, clients and private persons, one reason for this popular success can be that the readers' role as citizens is undermined. It doesn't matter much whether or not they are politically active. Readers, who experience a lack of power, can be offered politics as human drama. Moreover, political parties tend to converge ideologically; hence the personal capacities of individual politicians become more important in the political process. Furthermore, melo-

dramatic political journalism can be conceived of as a popular protest against an abstract and theoretical understanding of society (Gripsrud, 1992).

Although such factors can account for the breakthrough of this kind of popular journalism, they cannot justify the same journalism. A melodramatic understanding of politics is bound to be a misunderstanding (Gripsrud, 1992). Journalism that consistently offers “the experiences of the individual as the direct and unmediated key to the understanding of the social totality” (Sparks, 1992:41) fails to offer a proper understanding of politics and society.

The orientation towards everyday life and the disembedding from traditional news beats and news conventions contributes to a new kind of journalistic self-confidence. Journalism constitutes its own expert system, a knowledge regime in its own right. Journalistic power gains new and different ground – a new foundation – throughout the process of popularization.

### **A Cult of Independence**

For many decades, the most popular slogan in the journalistic community has been that of ‘independence’. Independence from political parties was the first matter of concern in the professional armament of modern journalism. Later, this was followed by a slogan of independence from sources and a struggle against what has been labelled ‘the tyranny of the sources’. The problem here is that the relationship between journalists and sources is defined as first and foremost a power struggle. It is problematic when the proclaimed independence from sources is given superiority to the knowledge demanded to investigate a case. It is problematic if professional independence is reduced to a superficial posture (cf. Eide 1998).

It is also problematic when journalistic creativity is mobilised first and foremost in the dramaturgical arrangement of news, at the expense of investigative creativity and serious efforts to learn how the world is put together. It is important – for the journalist as well as the public – to question the prevailing media logic. Since power is so closely related to media logic and media dramaturgy, it is crucial to understand and criticise the dramaturgical work conducted by journalists – the staging of issues and events – the endeavour that definitely turns the journalist into a key actor in the modern public sphere.

### **Dramaturgical Power**

From rhetoric as well as dramatic art, we know that tension is created by contradictions and conflicts (cf. Eide & Hernes 1987). On the one hand we have the protagonist, and against him the antagonist, former actions or external circumstances outside his control. The protagonist’s own mistakes can cause defeat. Or the opposite: A strike of luck can turn the situation, or an act of rescue can bring salvation and a happy ending.

It is not the events themselves but the presentations – the ways the story and actors are directed and arranged – that are crucial. This arrangement is most efficient when it is conducive to excitement, surprises, controversies and reconciliation, when the previous events and actions constitute preconditions for what is happening at the moment.

In a play this is accomplished through the dramatic construction – the succession of scenes and acts. In the mass media the same effect can appear through serial-like pres-

entations of the development in a case. The audience is kept in suspense with efficient cliff-hangers. This technique is by no means reserved for fictive TV serials.

The test of a good piece of drama is how well the processing of events and the portrayals of actors are interwoven – how the personalities of the principal characters constitute choices that create new situations that in their turn give birth to new choices or change their qualifications. And the actions must stem from their interests and feelings, their ideals and their fear.

The reservoir of dramatic archetypes is probably relatively restricted in modern journalism. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to claim that certain mass media specialize in certain archetypes or classes of principal characters.

At any rate, the journalist usually has the upper hand in the dramaturgical arrangement of public issues. The journalist possesses a privilege in confronting other social actors and setting up confrontations between public figures. The journalist exercises his or her dramaturgical and narrative power through an ability to provoke reactions among social actors and institutions.

### **“Custodians of Conscience”**

In addition to this substantial dramaturgical power, the journalist can also act as a *reviewer*, as a *critic* of the play conducted by the sources or actors in the media drama. For the participants in a media event, the rule of the game is not only to act in order to get the most favourable publicity through the event itself. It is as important to get a good review, to be proclaimed the winner of a public confrontation or at least to gain sympathy and support through the journalistic interpretation of appearances on the media stage.

Occasionally there is more at stake. The media appearance can be a disclosure, even a scandal. In such a circumstance the journalistic dramaturgy is of particularly severe importance. Armed with a heavy load of moral pathos the journalists then act as custodians of conscience, to use a phrase coined by James Ettema and Ted Glasser (1998). Or to put it another way, the journalists act as a modern priesthood. However, they have no salvation to offer unfortunate participants in a media scandal or drama of destiny. The significance of scandals is considerable in “a world where visibility has been transformed by the media and where power and reputation go hand in hand” (Thompson 2000: xi). Scandals matter. And journalists are the masters of the moment.

But their superiority will always be challenged by other media strategists and sources with knowledge of the rules of the game. As indicated, journalists are not the only masters of media logic. Competence in media logic abounds in a modern media society.

### **Media Mechanics**

The thesis of the omnipresence of media logic might seem to run contrary to another current proposition, namely the claim that journalism is dead. In the age of Internet it is often argued that it is now possible for an individual to be his or her own journalist, his or her own editor. But the claim that journalism had passed away was posited before the arrival of Internet. The foundation of this contention was precisely an observation of the obvious mastery of media logic among journalists. We live in a postjournalistic age, proclaimed American media scholars Robert Snow and David Altheide (1991). Journalism is dead; it is no longer among us. What we have is not journalism but media

mechanics. The journalist has become a media mechanic – a superficial master of pre-ailing media stereotypes and conventions.

There might be a great deal in a diagnosis of journalists as media mechanics. However, I assert that the rumour of the death of journalism is overstated. In this age of multimedia journalism, in which journalistic messages are processed and adapted for dissemination through a wide range of different communication platforms, the pressure is increasing to turn journalism into media mechanics and packaging. The journalist being transformed into a communication technician is as critical as if he or she is reduced to an impresario of media dramas and media scandals. Journalism owes more to society than this. Journalism's democratic obligations must be maintained.

The ambition of this chapter has been to address questions of media power, with a focus on journalism and qualitative aspects of modern popular journalism of a certain kind. Hopefully, the reflections and observations on media logic, journalism, power and democracy have substantiated the main underlying proposition: The power of journalism is a particularly important and interesting kind of power in modern societies.

## Notes

1. The core argument of this article draws on my introduction to the book *Til dagsorden! Journalistikk, makt og demokrati* (A point of order! Journalism, Power and Democracy) (Eide, ed. 2001).
2. The following points on newspaper schizophrenia draw on Eide 1997.

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