

# Access, Dialogue, Deliberation

## *Experimenting with Three Concepts of Journalism Criticism*

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Journalism critics tend to complain that journalists often refuse to discuss journalism in general and conceptual terms which complicates discussion between the critics and journalists. Critics themselves, however, often suffer from conceptual vagueness. They tend to be ‘reductionists’ in the sense that they view – and argue about – journalism within their own and sometimes rather narrow conceptual framework. This often frustrates even the critics discussing among themselves.

This article attempts to tackle both these flaws of discussion. In order to contribute to a more diverse and clarified vocabulary for talking about the problems of journalism we discuss three concepts used in journalism criticism. They all provide different answers to what we see as crucial questions about journalism: what does journalism represent, and how to make journalism more public?

- (i) *Access* leads one to ask: who is qualified to be (re)presented in journalism, in what capacity, or position? What restricts journalists in their pursuit for information?
- (ii) *Dialogue* allows one to ask: how does dialogue work as a method of representing social realities, and to what extent does journalism generate dialogue?
- (iii) *Deliberation* makes one ask: what kind of reflection and action is journalism a catalyst for, and does it enhance participation in the processes of problem definition and decision-making?

Each concept is quite widely referred to in journalism criticism. As ideas, if not as explicit terms, they are also familiar to journalists and readers in general. The problems with connecting these concepts to each other are obvious, though. Each of them relates to different traditions of thought. ‘Ac-

cess’ is an important concept in media sociology and in normative theories of the press. ‘Dialogue’ has a prominent place in epistemology and cultural studies, whereas ‘deliberation’ emerges mainly from political philosophy.

### **Representation(s) in Journalism**

Representation as a concept is very complicated and difficult to come to terms with, and perhaps fortunately so. Its various dimensions allow us to see how the epistemological, political, aesthetical etc. facets of journalism (and western culture) overlap. However, some sort of analytical grasp is needed.<sup>1</sup> Roughly speaking, there seem to be two somewhat different aspects to representation. It means either that (i) something ‘stands for’ something else, or that (ii) someone ‘acts for’ someone else (cf. Pitkin 1967).

(i) It probably goes without saying that news by definition re-present events and speech acts. News texts claim to ‘stand for’ the elements of which the news stories are composed of. The news never correspond to reality as such, they can only make themselves seem plausible. The ‘tricks of the trade’ to insure this credibility are often technical, even if not consciously executed (cf. Manoff 1986; Kunelius 1996).

Of course, journalism does not re-present like a mirror. Instead it uses the linguistic, cultural, and professional conventions available. Acknowledging the semiotic nature of journalism leads us to think that journalism ‘makes news’ instead of merely reporting them. In this respect representation as ‘standing for’ is always problematic. It is especially problematic for journalism, because the illusion of correspondence is the cornerstone of news. From a semiotic point of view we can analyse the qualities of journalism’s ‘demimonde’ (Ekecrantz

1996) and compare it to other semiotic worlds, but we cannot compare it to any authentic reality.

(ii) Representation is also political in the sense that those who are represented allow their representatives to 'act for' them. This aspect is taken seriously in the designs of political institutions that seek appropriate procedures for electing representatives and then holding them accountable for their deeds. Journalism pretends that this aspect of representation is absent from it: modern journalism is supposedly unpolitical and independent, and unlike politicians, journalists cannot be elected or shifted down from their posts.

This simplistic view is equally problematic as the idea of journalistic texts 'standing for' reality. Even if journalism does not openly 'act for' anyone as political institutions do, it still participates in the production and reproduction of power relations in several ways. Power resides in language in general and in the selection of news topics, frames, and sources. This critical view on journalism is not without problems either, because it easily claims that journalism can represent nothing but power and the reigning ideologies. Paradoxically enough, this view holds that journalism corresponds to something 'out there'. The active role of the conventions of journalistic representations themselves is largely ignored.<sup>2</sup>

Be it self-serving rhetorics or not, journalists often claim to 'act for' the public. This does not merely refer to 'their right to know', or to the pressure of the assumed public opinion, but also to the interest of the public.<sup>3</sup> When maintaining this position, journalism acts politically, not entirely unlike the so called proper political actors.

These problems of representation cannot ever be genuinely solved. Journalism as any representative institution, has to live with them. For journalists as 'professional communicators' (Carey 1969) a more or less workable solution is to 'play innocent'. Journalists lean on other representative apparatuses in society (politics, culture, science, even sports) and represent their voices, actions, and viewpoints. Thus, journalism is supposed to represent through mediating the actions of other representative institutions. Whether the words of these institutions really 'stand for' reality is of less concern because their actions (including their words) take place in the name of the public.

Because making something 'stand for' something else is an act in itself, the semiotic and political aspects of journalism are unseparable. This tension is evident throughout the following conceptual journey.

## Access

The image of the professional journalist is strongly interlocked with the idea of access. Firstly, there is the question of access *for journalists*. Do journalists get in touch with the sources of information? Journalists try to invade all sorts of places: hidden archives, cabinets of the powerful, or the chambers of princesses. The 'stand ups' by TV journalists from the corridors of the parliament building make this attempt visible.

This journalistic pursuit in fact actualises journalism as political representation. In a word, the 'stand ups' are really 'stand fors'. The journalist 'acts for' the public when s/he pursues the information and tries to break the news even if the established sources wish him/her to turn elsewhere. The image of the investigative journalist high on the ladder of professional hierarchy and the joy felt by journalists in the moments of exposure illustrate the significance of this idea. It may be that huge revelations are often due less to journalistic vigilance than to leaks within the establishment, but the space and air time given to these events prove their symbolic (and not only that) value to journalists and the media.

Secondly, journalists line up to protect the public domain. They are responsible for its purity, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. In parallel with the journalists' attempt to access the corridors of power, the powerful, in turn, try to make their way into journalism. It is, then, the duty of journalists to keep the public domain free from particular interests, sheer manipulation, and bad taste. From this viewpoint, another aspect of access is disclosed, namely *access to journalism*.

Media sociologists show the imperfection of journalism's everyday performance in both these respects. Instead of running after secret facts, journalism systematically listens to certain institutions or beats. This 'systemic bias' is explained by organisational constraints (Gieber 1964; Epstein 1973), the label of credibility or factuality stamped on the elite groups (Tuchman 1978), their usefulness (Gans 1980), or their effectiveness in economic terms (Fishman 1980; McManus 1994). By focusing on elites journalism permits a limited number of voices to work as 'primary definers' (Hall et al. 1978) of reality, either directly (Glasgow Media Group 1976) or indirectly (Ericson et al. 1989).

This criticism, based on organisational and ideological underpinnings has itself been questioned (Schlesinger 1990; Miller 1993). Despite that,

the basic question of journalism criticism, remains more or less intact: who has the upper hand in the relationship between journalism and influential sources? Do journalists direct politics or vice versa? Who controls the public domain? These debates reflect the practices and pressures that have made journalism a realm for specific actors and these practices also constitute the fundamental questions of journalism critics.

A slightly different variant of access criticism intensified during the early 1970's. The idea was actually clear and simple. Democracy requires open access to public institutions and resources for knowledge. This holds for journalism too, for it is a public institution regardless of its ownership. Therefore, access to journalism should be open to all citizens (cf. Jankowski 1995). The variety of voices in journalism is thus the measure of its 'publicness'.

When these criteria are applied in journalism research, the results are not too comforting. For instance the proportion of women among the sources of journalism is quite regularly no more than 15-20 per cent (cf. Kivikuru et al. 1997). The access provided to ethnic minorities also turns out to be limited. And in cases where they are given access, they are usually represented as objects for interpretation by majorities (cf. van Dijk 1991, 151-160). In the latter case, access is not merely about who gets in, but also about what properties and qualities their voices have in relation to other voices.

Metaphorically, both aspects of access portray journalism as a *cafeteria* and professional journalists as its doormen or 'bouncers'. The most interesting question is not what the cafeteria is like (what is on the menu, etc.), but who gets in. It seems that the doormen only permit regular customers to get in, while others have to gaze in through windows.

The criticism initiated by access critics is undoubtedly important. Not the least because it challenges journalism on its own terms. On the one hand, it asks how well journalism can supply us with valid information (and resist inaccuracy and trivialities). On the other hand, it demands the doormen of journalism to distribute their publicness fairly between various social groups. This means that access critique formulates the classical problem of representation much in the same vein as professional journalism does. Therefore, journalism is able to circumvent the criticism to a great extent.

Roughly speaking, the answer of professional journalism to access criticism takes the following

form. There is nothing wrong with journalism, if either

- (i) those representative apparatuses that are given access to journalism are genuinely representative, or
- (ii) if the actions and decisions made by those apparatuses unquestionably affect people's lives, whether the apparatuses are genuinely representative or not.

Even though the first condition is easily challenged, the second one is not. The fact that the privileged actors do effect our lives helps journalism to survive the criticism. If critics suggest that journalism should replace the elite sources with 'average citizens', journalists can in response express their regret that 'average citizens' do not have bearing in our system, but elites do. 'Average citizens' are turned down as sources because their viewpoints are private and of no general importance. When 'unorganised' citizens want their views represented, they are told that they are not representative.

Another limitation of access critique is its implicit desire for journalism without journalists (cf. Prehn 1992, 258 quoted in Jankowski 1995, 11). If the selections and editing made by journalists are at the core of the problem, let us erase the profession!<sup>4</sup> This idea simply does not work. The distribution of shared publicness always requires editing and selection. As some have argued, publicness without editors might favour exactly the same sources of information and even more so (Schudson 1995).<sup>5</sup> Besides, it is not very constructive to start journalism criticism by arguing that journalists are not needed.

When one tries summarise this, it is easy to see how different aspects of representation overlap in journalism. Firstly, the fact that journalism quite genuinely keeps its eye on the elite groups and investigates their actions tells us that journalism does it on our behalf. It 'acts for' us. Secondly, the privileges of access given to the elite groups seems justified because news journalism is supposed to mediate meaningful events for us. Journalism thus 'stands for' those meaningful events and speech acts. This leads us to see that access is ultimately grounded in exchange: if one lets journalism to get into one's domain, one gets into journalism in return.

The critical potential in all this lies in pointing out that those who seem not to have anything to offer to journalism do not receive the return gift ei-

ther. Access *for* is the precondition for access *to*. Of course, those who remain outside this symbiosis may still get into journalism, but in a different position. After all, average citizens and minorities are presented in journalism, but because they do not represent ‘the general’ or the ‘important’ they serve as symbols for perceived trends or deviations from them.<sup>6</sup> What ‘unorganised’ people are very rarely allowed to do is to explain their experiences in their own terms.

When we discuss the problems and possibilities of news journalism, the concepts of access has both strengths and shortcomings. It is strong in sharing a common ground with journalists and in addressing our common sense definition of the public as a ‘pure’ domain. Its deficiencies are due to its strengths, though. Demands for increasing access are too easily invalidated by referring to the hard realities of society, and hard realities are often quite paralysing. The inability of journalism research to really challenge practices of news journalism (despite the cumulative evidence of media sociology) is, in a sense, evidence of this.

## Dialogue

As a term, dialogue is familiar enough to journalists albeit, compared to the most sacred words in the vocabulary of professional journalism – say ‘facts’ – its ranking is considerably lower. As a concept, dialogue has many uses and dimensions. To begin with, it is useful to make one distinction. We feel that distinguishing (i) dialogue *in* journalism from (ii) dialogue *between* journalism and its readers helps to clarify our thinking.<sup>7</sup>

*Dialogue in journalism.* For journalists, the notion of dialogue usually refers to the idea of discussion, debate, or conversation taking place inside the space created by journalism. There are two noteworthy aspects to this figure of speech.

Firstly, journalists are presumed to open a forum for public dialogue. Their job is to bring various viewpoints and voices that exist ‘out there’ into this public space, and to represent them as faithfully as possible. Dialogue, in this sense, is supposed to reflect all existing relevant opinions in a given matter. Secondly, dialogue – using often conflicting voices and perspectives as the raw material journalistic texts – is considered to be the best method available for bringing out the truth. Say, for example, that we are writing about abortion. Dialogue in journalism leads us to consider: have we presented all the existing views, have we done our

best to make the conflicting viewpoints encounter each other and ‘fight it all out’?

What connects these two aspects is the idea that the measure of a good dialogue lies outside the dialogue itself. A good dialogue helps journalism to represent what is ‘out there’, either in ‘reality’ or in the realm of ‘truth’. The task of journalism, then, is to create a situation or sphere where opinions and perspectives confront each other, and to make sure that no evasions take place (that questions are genuinely answered, etc).

For professional journalism, dialogue is either something that supposedly takes place ‘out there’ and is represented in journalism, or something that takes place within journalism (ultimately, in the texts produced by journalists). In both cases, the actions of journalists are neutral to the outcome of the dialogue. Public dialogue goes on without any active part played by the journalists. Parallely, in our everyday vocabulary we often refer to ‘public discussion’ not as participants in the dialogue, but rather as spectators. In short, we view public discussion as members of the *audience*, not of the *public* that is discussing.

Despite its limitations, this definition ‘dialogue’ takes us a step further from ‘access’ in articulating criteria for journalism. At least two broad and useful questions arise. Firstly, we can pay attention to what kind of voices are allowed to take part in a discussion; and at which point of the debate; and in what role. A number of critical writers have called for a more ‘multiperspectival’ journalism (cf. Gans 1980, 313ff, Schudson 1995) or criticised the eagerness of journalism to polarise issues as conflicts between two (instead of many) opposing camps (Nohrstedt & Ekström 1994). Editor Cole Campbell, one of the proponents of ‘public journalism’, describes a similar tendency in saying that if people’s opinions could be situated on a scale from one to ten, reporters would try to find representatives of the numbers nine and two. The problem is, says Campbell, that most readers and citizens find themselves between four and seven. (Campbell 1997, 10; see also Fallows 1996, 246)

Secondly, by focusing on the dialogue *in* journalism it is possible to challenge contemporary journalistic practices by asking how well the voices in different debates actually encounter each other. There are different ways of operationalising this idea. It is important to ask, for instance, what kind of dialogue is going on when the prime minister and ‘ordinary people’ are talking about the same social problem in the newspaper, but one is al-

lowed to speak in the front page whereas the others get to have their say in the lower corner of the 'letters to the editor'. The generic order of journalism (cf. Kunelius 1996; Ridell 1994) often works as a mechanism that damps the dialogic aspect of journalism.

Journalism has its own 'order of things' which designates a place, role, and competence for its actors according to their status: when the official sources (or 'primary definers') talk about facts, trends, and future plans, the 'ordinary people' have their say about their own (unique and particular) experiences, and feelings and about events that took place just recently. In the eyes of journalism our competence to address common problems differs.

An extreme version of measuring the performance of journalism against the ideal of open encounter or maximal interaction is the work of Pietilä & Sondermann (1994). Contrasted to their ideal, the 'society in the newspaper' (one issue of *Helsingin Sanomat*) proves to be only half a society. The actions of the newspaper itself do not provoke further action but instead the paper more often kills or dampens the initiatives of public discussion. Reporters make poor use of journalism's potential for stirring up dialogue inside the paper.

Criticising journalism for missed opportunities for more lively public discussion partly overlaps with the questions posed by the access perspective (cf. Hall et al. 1978, Ericson et al. 1987, van Dijk 1996). In a word, critics claim that the dialogue inside journalism is in fact a pseudo-dialogue in terms of both what sort of voices are allowed to take part and whose words are taken into consideration, and by whom. To elaborate on the cafeteria metaphor presented above: journalism is not only an unfair doorman (problems of access), it also acts as a slightly elitist head-waiter who tells people where to sit. Some tables are better situated than others: near the window, the powerful big shots have their important debates, and beside the kitchen door, the less powerful grumble among themselves. A professional head-waiter protects the more distinguished guests from 'unnecessary disturbance'.

Criticising the quality of dialogue abandons the technical and neutral view of the language of journalists (as something that merely sets the stage for others to perform on). It also points to the crucial importance of discourses in the construction of our social reality. At the same time, however, it also leads to very tricky and difficult questions. One concrete example of these problems is the difficulty

of weighing the contribution of Jürgen Habermas' theoretisations about the public sphere and communicative action. Some critics argue that Habermas sets worthwhile ideals and useful goal for the development of public life (cf. Baynes 1994). Others argue that the whole idea of the public sphere as a possible forum for free communication is ideological (cf. Koivisto & Väliverronen 1996).<sup>8</sup>

It is not easy to make up one's mind in a issue like this. There are strong reasons for abandoning the ideal of a free and maximally interactive journalistic public sphere. One of these is the fact that this ideal (in its vulgar and unproblematised form) is often used in legitimising the very same practices that are criticised with the ideal. It is perhaps in vain to try and take the debate about journalism into a conceptual terrain where journalists can say: "But we *do* try to let everyone have their say, we *do not* emphasize this or that perspective, etc." A concept is sometimes easily redefined within the professional discourse of journalists and then used not as a tool for criticism but as a tool for silencing criticism. This, again, is another form of reductionism, refusal to see the unused potential in an idea. Almost eternal problems around the notion of 'objectivity' should be a good lesson for this. When a concept is so deeply rooted in the self-understanding of the professional practice of journalism (as objectivity is), it is of little use to try and change its definition and function in that discourse.

However, abandoning the ideal means moving into at least as difficult a territory. Firstly, one is in danger of losing all criteria for evaluating the performance of journalism. If there is no basis for fairly evaluating the interdiscursive operations of journalism (how it constructs dialogue in its texts), what sense is there in journalism criticism? Why on earth should journalists and their institutions take such criticism seriously! Secondly, there is the problem of suggesting something that has not yet done: the classical critical perspective that calls for an alternative vision is easily paralysed by its inability to show concretely what it really means.

*Dialogue between journalism and the community of readers.* A completely different way of operationalising the notion of dialogue in relation to journalism would be to ask whether journalism is not able to resonate reactions in its readers, whether it can activate readers to think, rethink, interpret, and discuss the representations of journalism, maybe even act on the issues and questions represented. From this point of view, one does not ask whether there is a dialogue going on inside journalism, but instead, how much and what sort of

dialogue is stirred up by journalism. The quality of journalism, then, can be defined the quality of the relationship between journalism and its readers (or community).

This idea too is familiar enough in professional discourses. Journalists feel that one of their functions is to start public debates and discussion. However, this task is clearly subordinate to the mission of informing: if and when journalism lifts new issues on the public agenda it does so by offering some new, interesting, and relevant information. To borrow James Carey's (1987) formulation, 'journalism of information' is taken as the foundation for 'journalism of conversation'. In other words, access is a precondition for dialogue.<sup>9</sup>

There are two separate strands of thinking about the dialogic relationship between journalism and its readers. On the one hand, the tradition launched by writers like Voloshinov (1990) and Bakhtin (1984a & b) situates the 'dialogic' in communication mostly within the act of reading, in the moment of interpretation (although the argument – especially for Bakhtin – stretches to the idea that conventional readings, in the long run, shape the text genres themselves). In this tradition, the meaning of a given sign or text is situated between the readers and the text. Meaning owes to the tension between the sign and the reader, between the accents of the producer of the sign and the consumer of the sign.

On the other hand, the pragmatist tradition measures journalism by trying to see how much 'real' conversation, debate, and discussion is raised in the communities that journalism addresses. Standard references in this line of argument are Dewey (1927) and Park (1923, 1941) whose definition of the 'public' is worth mentioning. For Park, a public is a "group of strangers who gather to discuss the news" (Carey 1987, 10). This nicely underscores what the pragmatist tradition can bring to theorising journalism. The public is not primarily a 'sphere' or a 'space' in which public discussion takes place or into which 'access passes' are granted. A public is the result of publishing, of constant public action. It is something to be actively created time and time again, not something to be guarded by a particular group of professionals. From this perspective journalism that does not create discussion and does not react to that discussion is by definition not public at all.

Let us tackle these strands one by one. There is a rather well cultivated argument according to which forms of popular journalism are more dialogical than the more 'serious' and 'quality'

forms of news. At least textually, it is possible to argue that popular journalism offers more room for the readers' own accents and interpretations, which connect the consumption of journalism to their own everyday experiences. The 'textual poorness' and lack of closure, the playfulness and excessiveness, the more or less open use of the potential of social embarrassment, etc. practically demand the reader to become more active in the process of signification than does the factual, ready-made, thoroughly explained and institutionally legitimised information of serious journalism. Perhaps the most eager proponent of this view is John Fiske (1989, 1992) who argues that the success of tabloid-journalism is evidence of its ability to offer people opportunities of articulating their 'own' meanings while reading. Thus, popular journalism would give a 'voice' to those who cannot be concretely heard in the actual texts of journalism.

This line of thought offers both important lessons and severe problems for journalism critique.

One of the lessons is a reminder: if people increasingly opt for the apparently non-political and trivial form of journalism, it is a clear indication of the failure of mainstream serious journalism to address the experiences of people in a meaningful way. The consumer of journalism might not benefit much from moments of more or less silent and private 'semiotic resistance'. Yet, these moments can be seen more empowering experiences (even being very aware of the limits of the empowerment, as we are sure people are) than getting to learn by heart some of the serious heavy-weight rhetorics of the day.

When a popular evening paper in Finland publishes pictures of a former ski jumping hero, now turned into a strip-tease artist, and when the 'hot line for readers' is blocked by a massive reaction of pity, shame, and support from the readers, it is all too easy to say that this is an example of how people are lured into trivialities and are not really interested in the important common challenges and problems we face. It would be worthwhile to stop and think that maybe the massive reaction has more to do with the dialogic conventions of reading: the story about the fate of a former national hero is easily connected to questions of gender and power, the fear of being cast out and losing one's social respectability, etc.

Be that as it may, those who celebrate the multiaccultural potential of popular journalism demonstrate, at least, that our tendency to evaluate cultural products (both in journalism and in journalism research) often reflects other cultural hier-

archies. Our ‘taste’ for a particular kind of journalism might prevent us from learning about the dialogic uses of different kinds of journalism.

The problems inherent in celebrating the popular are not to be overlooked. We should not forget that even if it were true that popular journalism is of a carnevalistic nature, the carnival is just precisely that: a brief moment of exception to the hard realities and routine power relations of everyday life. The pleasures and resistant interpretations provoked by the unruly readership while reading popular journalism are in their very production framed as separate from the important social realities. In a sense, then, they are more private or less public, because there is nothing in terms of common action that is suggested by these readings. The social function of the carnival might very well be that, by inverting some of our key hierarchies for a moment, it actually strengthens those very same hierarchies.

There is also a serious rhetorical flaw in praising the possibilities of the popular. However sophisticated the argument is, it can be turned against all forms of journalism criticism. If meanings are created by the readers (representation is act by the readers themselves), journalism is ultimately not responsible for the representations. This is, of course, a grotesque misinterpretation of what is meant by the potential multiaccentuality of signs and texts. But it may remind us how easily (again) the critical vocabulary of journalism criticism can be turned against its purposes. For if readers make their meanings, then even the claims for more fair access are at risk of losing their strength.

The other strand of emphasising dialogue between journalism and the readers is partly connected to the idea of news stirring up multiple interpretations. As Park (1940, 130) once wrote, it is precisely because news can be read in different ways that we debate about them. But the pragmatist tradition may help us to circumvent some of the flaws noted above.

The foundations of this tradition were laid by Dewey in the debates of the 1920’s when he formulated the idea that the only true medium for genuine communication in society is vivid face-to-face interaction and discussion. Thus, the local community or the ‘public’, in Park’s terms, are the true media of social intelligence (cf. Dewey 1927, 219). This theoretical point has survived through the century mainly as a theoretical point. Recently, however, various attempts have been made to figure out its more practical implications for journalism, for instance by Anderson et al. (1994), Killenberg &

Dardenne (1997) and Christians et al. (1993). These writers take us a step closer to the idea of public deliberation. For the moment, however, let us see how they help us to clarify a more challenging definition of dialogic journalism. Anderson et al. (1994, 140-141) offer a clear and condensed list of qualities for such a practice of journalism. It should:

- give readers reasonable access to the ideas covered i.e. journalists should listen carefully to what their sources say and try to mediate
- provide enough context for readers to be able to discuss what was suggested
- allow comparisons to other relevant perspectives on the same issue
- acknowledge the effect of the presence of the journalist
- invite those who are silent to react and speak further
- encourage and start more conversation.

Journalism, based on the notion of dialogue, might turn out to look somewhat different from journalism starting from the notion of access. In any case, journalism critique might make use of the idea of dialogue as the most fundamental aspect of good journalism. If one tries to use at least the greater part of the potential the notion holds, one should, we believe, be aware of the difference between arguing for dialogue *in* journalism and arguing for dialogue *between* journalism and its readerships. It is one thing to see dialogue as a method of finding out or reflecting the variety of opinions, and almost quite another thing to view dialogue as a process, a thing valuable in itself, independently of the outcomes of the dialogue. It is in this sense that Dewey writes in the last pages of *The Public and Its Problems*: “Ideas which are not communicated, shared and reborn in expression are but soliloquy, and soliloquy is but broken and imperfect thought”. (Dewey 1927, 218). In short, all the ‘results’ produced by dialogue are in vain, if journalism is not dialogic in the process-oriented sense

If we take the more process-oriented dialogic role of journalism seriously, two practical requirements surface. Journalism must openly encourage different readings (and search for new modes of stories that do so) and it must commit itself to task of making these different readings and interpretations public. The challenge is to make the accents and articulations heard, to give them the power and

position they need to argue on particular problems and to make them the objects and starting points for new emerging public situations and conversations.

## Deliberation

From the three concepts chosen here deliberation is rarely explicitly used in discussions of journalism. However, the meanings of the concept of deliberation cover a wide range of familiar aspects. In describing these meanings it is helpful to distinguish between the ‘narrow’ and ‘deep’ uses of the word.

(i) The ‘narrow’ meaning of deliberation comes close to the regular dictionary definition. Deliberation is more or less the same as careful consideration, discussion of all sides of a question, and putting serious thought into one’s decision or action. In this sense, deliberation is by no means alien to journalism. The professional judgment in choosing what is newsworthy is one form of ‘careful consideration’. To some extent this ‘deliberation’ is visible in journalistic texts, especially in editorials and signed columns. In the same vein, journalists also expect the readers to deliberate on which issues they might form an opinion on, and what that opinion would be.

In the narrow definition of deliberation it is assumed that the topics are separate from the minds that deliberate on them. The ‘reality’ is ‘out there’ and we can think whatever we like about it. Deliberation is a private activity. Each of us is responsible for our own deliberation, and for that only.

This idea makes sense within our tradition of liberalism and its sacred ideas of individual liberties. As free persons we are presumed to process information individually and to form opinions that are genuinely our individual opinions. This idea fits perfectly into the professional thinking of journalists, because it releases them from any responsibility in relation to the consequences of their stories. Journalism is supposed to cater facts, events, and interpretations which the readers may use however they like. The question of whether or not the public deliberate is not a concern of journalism. If it were, journalism would have to violate individual liberties.

(ii) The ‘deep’ definition of deliberation is a more demanding one. For a thinking process to be deliberative, at least three inter-related criteria should be met. Contrasted to what was said above, deliberation refers to a *public* process, which is oriented to *solving common problems* and in which the participants go through a *transformation*.

Benjamin Barber (1984, 136-137) illustrates this nicely by imagining a group of people in a cafeteria trying to agree on what they might order as a group. The group may solve their dilemma either by *choosing*<sup>10</sup> or *participating*. *Choosing* would mean that the group compromises on an order (from an existing menu) that would not violate their individual tastes. *Participating* would mean that the group starts to contrive new menus, invent new recipes, and experiment with new diets in an effort to create a common taste they all share and that will supersede the conflicting private tastes about which they once tried to strike bargains.

The choosers would most likely find a provisional compromise, probably the least opposed meal on the menu. However, the personal tastes would be left intact and unviolated. Therefore, choosers would end up in a similar dispute next time. The participators would not reach a genuine consensus either. However, in the process of re-designing menus the object of bargaining would transform, and along with that change – so Barber argues – the members of the group would change as well.

Deliberation as a public process suggests a public is not just ‘groups of strangers’ discussing this or that, but a group of people, who share a common problem. A deliberative public works for solving that problem. This process in itself presupposes transformations: the problems must be redefined and so must the participants’ relations to each other and to the problem. It is obvious that there can be no deliberation without dialogue. But every imaginable dialogue such a group may have is not deliberation, not even dialogue as a process, unless some kinds of transformations take place.

The ‘deep’ definition of deliberation starts from an idea that when values have been named, issues identified, agendas set, and options delineated, most of what is meaningful in politics has already taken place (ibid. 157). Tackling this problem connects to a number of recent theoretical and practical projects: communitarian criticism of liberalism (Sandel 1982), discourse ethics (cf. Cohen & Arato 1992), and theories of participatory democracy (cf. Barber 1984). In a more practical vein, the challenge has been addressed, for example, in tele-democracy (Connell 1996), and in the attempts to develop the methodologies for polling (Yankelovich 1991; Fishkin 1994). In journalism these ideas – both in theory and practice – have been an inspiration to so called public journalism (cf. Rosen & Merritt 1995).

Discussions around the ‘deeper’ meaning of deliberation tend to be philosophical, because they challenge the cornerstones of liberal thought. And dissenting with liberalism is quite a deep-going project. More specifically and in relation to journalism, this challenge can be seen on three fronts. We need to rethink journalism’s relationship to representative democracy, the idea of expert knowledge, and the notion of reason.

*Representative democracy* presupposes that a legitimate representation is based on verifiable institutional public support (through political parties, elections, referenda, polls, etc.). Similarly, as decisions are made according to the will of the majority, voices in journalism get presented in proportion to their assumed public support. Instead of such verifications, deliberative journalism would underscore the variety of ways to frame an issue. It would assume that opinions – not to mention majorities and minorities – do not precede public deliberation, that thoughts and opinions do not precede their articulation in public, but that they start to emerge when the frames are publicly shared. This ‘epistemological shift’ is well formulated by Michael Sandel (1982, 183): we can know good in common that we cannot know alone (cf. Glasser 1991).

In the news, opinions are usually deemed ‘representative’ when they either correspond to the assumed public opinion or when those who express opinions are seen as appropriate miniatures of the society and its functions. It is not easy to be heard in the news if you talk radically for animal rights, because this view is considered marginal. If you make your argument public through action – say, demonstrations or attacks on fur farmers – your action will be presented as deviance from the normal social order and interpreted accordingly by the appropriate institutions, say, the police or the compulsory public intellectuals.

Contrary to this, if one thought that opinions were created in social relationships only, one would try to see such a conflict as a site or an opportunity for formulating a new kind of understanding concerning the ethics of using animals. Evaluating different voices would, then, be based on an assessment on how they contribute to new emerging definitions for a problem. The value of public actors would be measured against the process of deliberation and not against their status or statistical representativeness.

In a deliberative situation *expert knowledge* has no privileged position. All the participants are experts in the ways in which the common problem

touches their everyday lives. Thus, opinions and knowledge expressed in deliberation articulate the experiences of the participants.

The predominant ideas about expertise incorporated in journalistic practices can often be seen as obstacles for deliberation. The routinely accessed and privileged experts are not assumed to derive their knowledge and opinions from social experience, but rather independently from it. Experts frame problems differently from citizens. Therefore, experts – be they philosophers, sociologists, engineers etc. – almost by definition alienate themselves from the practices of everyday life (cf. Dewey 1927, 206-209).

Some recent empirical studies stress the differences between the established frames of experts and those of ‘ordinary people’.<sup>11</sup> While institutionalised expertise is based on demarcations and analytical distinctions, ordinary people tend to ground their observations in connections and coherence (cf. Harwood Group 1993; Huxman & Iorio 1996). These studies insist that commonplace experience should have its place in defining, discussing, and solving public problems. This does not mean, however, that deliberative journalism should reduce all discussion to common sense. Rather, the perspectives ‘ordinary people’ should be allowed to transform the analytical distinctions of established experts as well as define new questions.

Besides being at a distance from everyday experiences, experts tend to conceive *reason* instrumentally. This means that experts frame problems that they find solvable.<sup>12</sup> The attempt to make problems manageable often means shutting out alternative frames, particularly those which relate to commonplace experiences. An example is found in discussions about (un)employment policies.

The problem of unemployment seems manageable only if it is framed with short term goals. One such goal is to cut the number of unemployed persons through favouring short term jobs and more flexibility with wages. This may alleviate the problem statistically and also bring jobs to those who now seem permanently unemployed. Framing the problem from the perspective of everyday life, however, might show that the actual problems do not disappear: the uncertainty about the future, the inability to control one’s own life etc. are overrun by the more manageable definition of the unemployment problem.

In addition to avoiding the tendency to find only manageable and solvable problems, deliberation emphasises the value of participation in itself. Participation in issues that ‘ring true’ to one’s own life

can bring *public happiness* that one can acquire nowhere else (Arendt [1963] 1990, 119). Public happiness is different from private enjoyment achieved, for instance, in reading multiaccidental tabloids. Public happiness is born only if one has an opportunity to act and make one's accents public. Whether one's actions have the desired effect is less important. One can feel public happiness in participating even though the problems do not necessarily disappear.

The most prominent effort to take advantage of the deep meaning of deliberation are the recent experiments under the title of 'public journalism'. From the beginning of the 1990's this movement – comprising more than 200 projects – has tried to redesign journalistic conventions to resonate better with the citizens' definitions of problems and to contribute to their participation.<sup>13</sup> Special projects have focused on political events like elections, or on specific problems such as crime, unemployment, race relations etc. There have also been efforts to create new sustainable practices for newsrooms. In order to illustrate some aspects of more deliberative journalism we shall conclude with a brief discussion of some of these experiments (for a more full description, see Charity 1995; Lambeth & Craig 1995).

The election projects can be seen as reactions to the excesses of political campaigning in the United States. Instead of been submitting to the agenda of spin doctors, public journalists try to construct – and commit to – the 'citizens' agenda' in their election reporting. Here the conceptual depth of the movement is often also seriously compromised. While the theory suggests that the 'citizens' agenda' may only be created in a slow public process, many election projects take the short cut to locating the agenda, through polling, as if the citizens' agenda were 'out there' waiting to be discovered. Despite that, new kinds of encounters between the citizens and candidates have been developed successfully in these election projects (cf. Schaffer & Miller 1995). The projects focusing on social problems underscore more clearly that agendas, definitions and solutions cannot be merely discovered, but instead they have to be worked through. In attempts to redesign journalistic routines the emphasis is usually on the means of information gathering. The point is that journalism not merely retrieves and mediates information, but it also helps to produce it. The production of information normally takes place in discussion groups that are used practically in all public journalism projects.

The significance of discussion groups becomes obvious when we compare them to more traditional routines of journalism. While journalism conventionally favours established sources and experts that provide generalised, unlocalised, presumably 'value-free' and thus supposedly representative information, discussion groups anchor their views on concrete conditions. Consequently, the focus groups produce local knowledge that is essential for more deliberative journalism. Such journalism can also appreciate the chance to come up with surprising and insightful knowledge.

Building journalism on the notion of deliberation has some noteworthy problems. One of these problems is its intimate connection to the idea of community. It is uncertain to what extent any amount of deliberation is able to create a public community not reducible to some existing idea of a community. Paradoxically enough, the danger of reductionism reappears in the thought that is supposed to be utterly antireductionist. It is particularly important to spot this risk, when we remember that deliberation often means commitment to particular solutions to our common problems. Public participation requires certain cultural and social competences that are not evenly distributed in societies. It may be that criteria set for what is reasonable and constructive discussion suit the educated, and relatively well paid journalists and their peers, but probably not all the citizens.

How does deliberation, then, help us to think about journalistic representation? Mainly by arguing that journalism should be representative and responsive to the everyday experiences of its readers and to their framing of common problems. In addition, deliberation sets out give a different answer to the question what is the meaning of public discussion. The meaning is not so much in the quest for truth, private pleasures of reception, or in dialogue as such. More than those, public discussion should be about transformations of public definitions and opinions concerning common problems. There are obvious problems with deliberation relating to the risks included in the notions of community, participation, and cultural competence. However, for truly deliberative journalism, these risks would appear as common problems around which genuine publics could emerge.

## Discussion

It is against the spirit of this text to write anything "conclusive". For instead of ending anything, this paper is an attempt to map parts of journalism

criticism in a slightly new and different way. Whether our map is useful at all will hopefully be proven by future discussions and experiments. Instead of a proper conclusion, then, we want to offer some points that still trouble us about the project.

We feel that it is necessary to try and develop, clarify and rethink the vocabulary with which we make sense of journalism. There are powerful 'external' reasons for this. The common 'public sphere' created largely by mainstream news journalism during this century faces severe economic, cultural, technological, and political challenges. The great audiences are fragmented by market needs and technology. The economic base of 'Enlightenment journalism' is in question. The ever more visible and meaningful differences of identities and discourses question the position of journalists as the 'translators' of symbols. The new network environment opens by-passes around the editing monopoly of journalists. The representative credibility of journalism seems to be eroding. The list could be longer and more elaborated, but the crucial lesson is this: it is not a bad time to rethink. The future may not be altogether open, and it is certainly not determined by the perspectives that journalism research takes, but still, new insights are needed to anticipate the problems of the future.

We feel it is especially important that journalism research makes an attempt to question the monopoly of journalists to define the vocabulary with which journalism can and should be evaluated. It is, of course, only a small addition to the publicness of journalism that researchers ask new kinds of questions from journalists. It also remains unclear to what extent it will be possible to diversify the perspectives even further to include other stakeholders of journalism: readers, civic activists, news sources etc. The public itself would be the most important participant in this discussion, but as long as we view the audience as the 'spectators' of public discussion or as those who do not have access, development in this direction is highly unlikely.<sup>14</sup>

One difficult question in our project is to what extent it is at all possible to develop a vocabulary of journalism criticism that would allow different stakeholders of journalism to discuss journalism in a way that would challenge the participants' own perspectives and still remain intelligible. After all, meanings are, in the end practical, matters, and the tendency to reduce terms and notions to one's own practice is a serious obstacle in these debates (as we have pointed out in various points above). It should be admitted that no-one is innocent of the sin of reductionism.

Given these unsolved problems, we have, in this paper, focused mainly on the relationship between journalism and journalism criticism.<sup>15</sup> We have tried to work with concepts that seem to be at least familiar (at least to begin with) both to the critical research traditions of communication studies and to the professional discourse of journalism. From this perspective, our three concepts arranged themselves during our work into the order in which we presented them.

The concept of access is closest to the core of the discourse of professional journalism. This helps us to understand some of the problems that the notion brings with it to journalism critique. Especially for the public at large and for the 'ordinary people', access is treacherous territory. When access, in the end, turns out to be a relation of bilateral exchange, the 'ordinary people' simply do not have hard enough currency to offer in exchange for permission into journalism. Journalism of access is more interested in factual information (and its institutional guarantees) and representative sources than what kind of contributions any one of us could offer on a given subject. Within this notion, journalism is about who is saying, rather than about what is said.

Dialogue is a helpful notion precisely because it allows us to shift the emphasis away from the problems of access. If journalists were to choose voices in the public discussions more in terms of the content of what is said of than who happens to be uttering the content, the institutional factors and resources might carry less weight. From the perspective of dialogue we can also criticise the ways in which journalism administers the discussion between the voices that are accessed. And this perspective becomes even more challenging when we suggest that journalism should take seriously its roles both as the initiator and facilitator of public discussion, and that it should also commit more resources into being able to cover (!) the ongoing results of the dialogue it has set in motion. As we can see, the more seriously we take the notion of dialogue, the further we are drifting from the legitimate core of journalism as 'mediating' the facts.

Deliberation is (in relation to contemporary professional journalism) the most demanding notion of our notions. If deliberation is considered a public activity, it requires some sort of basic dialogic conditions.<sup>16</sup> There are two fundamental points that encourage us to take deliberation as a working concept of journalism criticism. First of all, it underscores the competence and potential of all members of the public. People are experts in their own lives,

and thus they possess valuable knowledge for solving and redefining public problems. They are also capable of this kind of constructive discussion. This perspective helps us to counter and question the intimate links between journalism and the structures of knowledge in society that form the core of access discourse. Secondly, deliberation emphasises the idea that public opinions and solutions are created in the process of deliberation. Thus, the challenge for journalism is not only to think about, who can participate, but also about,

what sort of situations are created for participation and deliberation.

One way of saying what the public journalism experiments are all about is that they are an attempt to invest to the readers, to take them seriously and to create practices and situations in which the people are able to formulate views and ideas worth publicising. This effort is a fundamental challenge not only to ideas about journalism, but to the routines of journalism, and to practices of government in general.

## Notes

1. Our viewpoint in relation to representation is by no means exhaustive. We stress two dualisms in the concept by referring to two different analytical distinctions: 'semiotic vs. political' (Williams 1983) and 'standing for' vs. 'acting for' (Pitkin 1967). For recent treatments of representation see e.g. Peters (1997); Hall (1997).
2. This is a perfect example of how journalism is reduced to just one of its significant aspects by critics. For an illustrative example of this see Herman & Chomsky (1988).
3. Self-promotional declarations are by no means rare. The editor-in-chief of *Helsingin Sanomat* Janne Virkkunen was exceptionally candid in this respect a week before the Finnish EU referendum: "Helsingin Sanomat is aligned neither with the government, interest groups, political parties or faceless forces of market economy. It is committed to its readers." (HS, October 9, 1996).
4. This idea is common when discussing the new communication technologies. The notion of 'disintermediation' - the disappearance of the mediator - seems to capture this idea. However, the latest developments on the internet seem to contradict rather than corroborate it.
5. The historical and empirical 'verification' of the nature of such unedited journalism can be found in Ekecrantz & Olsson (1994, 100-131).
6. The 'symbol persons' have become common in the news. According to one analysis during a four day period TV news presented 34 'legitimate sources' and no less than 19 symbol persons. Not surprisingly foreign symbol persons depicted wars and conflicts, whereas all(!) Finns (8) were used as signs of a brighter future and recovery from economic recession. (Ampuja 1997).
7. While finishing this text, Schudson's (1997) recent contribution to the discussion about the meaning of conversation in democracy came to our attention. He suggests some interesting distinctions (conversation oriented to sociability vs. conversation oriented towards problem-solving) that partly overlap with our themes here. Anyone seriously interested in this theme should take his points into consideration (as we hope to do in forthcoming texts).
8. These points are not, of course, totally mutually exclusive. Their difference reflects partly the question of whether 'normative' discourses in general are useful compared to more 'analytical' grasp of things. However, one might suggest that the argument for a more 'analytical' approach (which e.g. Koivisto & Välliveronen argue for) is at least implicitly based on normative goals.
9. This marching order is in some ways a peculiar one, given the often noted fact that it is precisely the opinion pages - such as the letters to the editor - that interest people and make them talk either to each other or back to journalism. Whereas the harder and more factual 'news' tend not to create that much discussion and debate. As Berelson (1949) pointed out a long time ago, one of the essential uses of journalism (or a newspaper) is that it offers material for face-to-face interaction. It might very well be that talking about other people's opinions or views fits better to these situations than talking about the 'facts'. After all, a fact is a given, isn't it?
10. Barber (1984, 136) uses the word voting instead of choosing. The referent of the idea is broader, though. Not only in elections, but in social life in general, we find ourselves in situations where we may quite freely choose what to think, but we have much less say about the alternatives between which we make choices.
11. The pros and cons of expert knowledge were disputed already by Lippmann ([1922] 1963) and Dewey (1927). The contemporary discussion is very much indebted to them (Carey 1989; Rosen 1994; Peters 1997).
12. Karl Popper (1966) is probably the most influential theorist in this field. Even though he is perhaps not so familiar to journalists, his idea of critical rationalism resonates nicely with journalists. According to Popper one should take a rational, critical, and realistic atti-

tude towards society. Being rational means that one should look for facts. Being critical means that facts always turn false. Being a realist means that, due to errors in our thinking, one should only take small steps, not to think revolutionally about anything.

13. Public journalism has also been harshly criticised. Especially the big metropolitan papers have considered public journalism as fraud, dishonest, and an ultimately anti-democratic idea. Some scholars have been suspicious about the economic underpinnings of projects that have been funded partly by publishers and supported heavily by philanthropic foundations (Hardt 1997). Hardt also criticises public journalism's rhetoric of lack of historicity. Public journalism's proponents tend to overlook the economic conditions in which journalism works and the constraints of social structures in general. Whereas the criticism from metropolitan papers seems to serve their own status and interests, the latter critique is more accurate, albeit ultimately rather dismissive of all reforms in journalism.
14. Seija Ridell (1998, forthcoming) challenges the notion of the 'audience' precisely from this perspective. She also has plans to take the conceptual challenge to the level of practical experiments.
15. This is not to say that there would not be a lot of work to be done on other fronts as well. For instance, Jan Ekecrantz (1997, see also Ekecrantz & Olsson 1994) makes a good case for arguing that better academic journalism criticism and research need a more multidisciplinary base to begin with.
16. Although e.g. Thompson (1995, 255-258) seems to think otherwise.

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