

The Validity of TV Journalism

Theoretical Starting Points for Critical Journalism Research

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This article¹ discusses some theoretical fundaments for empirical research in television news and current affairs journalism with respect to what I have chosen to call its "validity". The concept of "validity" relates to the essential legitimacy of journalism and the claims journalists and news institutions make regarding the truth and truthfulness of their reports as well as to the credibility accorded television journalism by viewers.

In countries like Sweden television output has undergone major changes in recent years. The addition of commercially financed channels and channels distributed via satellite has meant that the menu presented to TV viewers today is enormously different from that of less than ten years ago. New kinds of programmes have appeared, and "old" ones have metamorphosed. Not least the news has changed. One significant change is that new kinds of current affairs programmes occupy a growing share of total air time (Ekström & Eriksson 1996). "Current affairs programmes" signifies programmes that deal with events and conditions that are real (not fictional) and of topical interest, but do so in a way that is different from conventional newscasts. These include talk shows and forum-format debates, documentaries and 'true-life stories' (docudramas, i.e., dramatizations which reconstruct real events, primarily crimes and accidents).

Mass media research has largely focused on two kinds of television production, news and fiction.² But many of the programmes that fill contemporary programme tableaux are neither news nor fiction. Journalism research tends to equate 'journalism' with news journalism. In the light of recent trends in television journalism, this is sadly misleading.

As Rolness (1992:17) observes, news constitutes "the hard core of mass media and the basis for journalists' self-understanding and professional pride". The news are of critical importance to the legitimacy of journalism. At the same time it is news journalism which has drawn most fire in recent years. In discussions of the ethics and morality of journalism, news journalists are the ones whose behaviour is scrutinized most critically. Implicit in much of the criticism raised to date are expectations which describe a form of journalism quite different, in terms of both the conditions of production and forms of presentation, from dominant conventions. Critics call, for example, for more investigative journalism, which clearly would demand radical changes in the organization and routines which apply in news desks today (Nohrstedt & Ekström 1994). Others have argued that editors and journalists should tone down their claims to 'truth', that they should become less conformist and authoritarian and instead leave room for different readings

and interpretations. Furthermore, they should offer material of greater relevance to viewers in their everyday lives, topics that arouse debate.

Among the various kinds of current affairs programmes that exist today there are examples of styles of journalism that at least claim to represent the kind of journalism critics have called for. There are programmes which specialize in investigative reporting, programmes which deal with current affairs in a light, entertaining fashion, debate fora which include 'the man on the street'. Television of today offers a variety of different kinds of current affairs programmes which afford researchers ample opportunities to compare and contrast both genres and styles of journalism.

Whereas the public debate and opinion polls show a decline in public confidence in journalism, the profession and its institutions exert decisive influence in society, an influence which is wielded with a high degree of legitimacy and autonomy. Journalistic descriptions of reality are generally highly credited in both day-to-day conversation and public debates. Within the profession, journalists have elaborated a professional ethical code which expresses the ideals and norms members of the corps profess to follow, and which they often used to shield themselves against criticism (Tuchman 1972; Nohrstedt & Ekström 1994). These ideals are in turn expressions of broader ideologies, which accord journalism a central role in the function of democracies: to scrutinize holders of power, to communicate factual and accurate information, to defend freedom of opinion formation, etc. Their control over the media give journalism considerable opportunities to legitimize its activities. In programme upon programme journalism appears before its audiences and tells its own story. The legitimacy or validity the audience may accord

journalism may in turn be assumed to be decisive for how viewers interpret what they see and hear in news and current affairs programmes.

In the following I shall argue in favour of research on the validity of journalism based on, and guided by, two theoretical starting points. *First*, the question of validity should be approached via an examination of the relationships between (1) institutional conditions, professional practices and the production processes behind what we see on our screens, including the judgments made and priorities assigned in relation to the manifest ideals of, and claims to validity made by the profession; (2) the claims to validity expressed in different kinds of news and current affairs programmes, including the ways journalism presents itself and tells its own story; (3) how the audience relates to the programmes and such manifest claims and, indirectly, to the journalism, institutions and ideology which underlie them.

Secondly, I shall present a theoretical and normative approach, primarily inspired by Jürgen Habermas' theory of speech acts and the basic assumption of the potential for rationality in modern society to which it is related. This approach is developed partly as a critical response to certain tendencies in constructivist and postmodernist-influenced media research.

In past decades the manifest ideals and claims of journalism have been studied in numerous respects and a variety of perspectives. To simplify somewhat, we can distinguish between two essentially different approaches. First, a considerable body of research, taking its point of departure in the manifest ideals and ideology of journalism, studies such things as the extent to which the audience feels these ideals have been fulfilled, journalists' own judgements in this regard, the relative priorities accorded

various ideals, possible conflicts between ideals. Or, it tries to determine the extent to which the news is factual, accurate, balanced and neutral or sensational, selective and biased (cf. i.a. McQuail 1987; Rolness 1992; Westerståhl 1983; Weibull 1991). Established media ideology – and perhaps above all the ideology of public service broadcasting – has been the prime normative point of departure for this research. The problem with these studies is that they do not permit any more fundamental problematization of the ideology and legitimacy of journalism.

It is precisely the ambition to contribute to a more fundamental problematization which characterizes a second set of empirical studies and theoretical works (cf. i.a. Dahlgren 1993; Ekecrantz & Olsson 1994; Rolness 1992; Fiske 1989). Constructivism and postmodern theory have been a major influence in these studies.³ Thus, the claim of journalism to produce and impart true and objective news reports has been challenged within the framework of relativist and constructivist epistemologies. The normative fundamentals of the profession (perhaps above all the public service ideology) are associated with the modern project's exaggerated faith in enlightenment, information, rational and well-founded knowledge, and a rigid division of labour between those who enlighten and those who, in order to be good citizens, need to be enlightened.

Constructivism and postmodernism have most assuredly exerted vital influence on journalism research, as they have made vital contributions to our understanding of media society today.⁴ Nonetheless, I find that this body of theory has serious limitations and, to some extent, has tended to lead journalism research into fruitless cul-de-sac.

The remainder of the article is arranged as follows: First, three sections examine and criticize central aspects of the constructivism and postmodernism as they have influenced journalism research. Thereafter, an alternative approach, based primarily on Habermas' theories, is presented. In the concluding section I raise some critical questions regarding the applicability of Habermas' theory in empirical studies of the validity of news and current affairs journalism.

Constructivism in Journalism Research

Research on news journalism is one of many areas in which it has become increasingly common to speak of "the social construction of ..." (cf. Brante 1993). Often in polemics with the mirror metaphor, many scholars have pointed out that the news are created or constructed by the institutions or practices of journalism. Not only do news desks choose to publish some items and leave out others, as the gatekeeper metaphor suggests, but journalism creates meaning by composing the news according to certain conventions and narrative techniques. Constructivism is nothing new in journalism research. Many of the studies which are frequently cited in this context, whether or not they explicitly adopt a constructivist perspective, were done or published in the 1970s (cf. Epstein 1973; Gans 1979; Molotch & Lester 1974; Schlesinger 1987; Schudson 1991; Tuchman 1978, i.a.). These and other studies have contributed to our knowledge of how the forms and content of television newscasts are created through social practices within the framework of specific organizational contexts, economic-political structures and cultural values.

Gaye Tuchman's *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* has become a classic example of the constructivist approach (cf. Eide 1992; Schudson 1991, i.a.). Tuchman's is a phenomenological approach, in which a fundamental question is how people in their everyday lives create "the social world and its institutions as shared and constructed phenomena" (Tuchman 1978:182). Journalistic practices are seen to be constructive in a dual sense: they fill the social institution, the norms, routines and community of values of the profession with meaning, as they give the reality they describe meaning. From this constructivist vantage point, Tuchman describes the ideal of objectivity in terms of a set of strategic rituals, i.e., routines created within the framework of the work of journalism. They are 'rituals' in the sense that they have relatively little bearing on the objectivity of the news per se, and they are 'strategic' in that they are developed and applied as a defence against possible criticism. In the phenomenological approach, features of reality are what they seem to us to be, or what they become when we use them.⁵ In accordance with this principle, the ideal of objectivity is understood in terms of the meaning the ideal assumes when it is used in specific social practices.

In the field of journalism research, constructivism has been applied not only in the form of social constructivism but also in a rhetorical form, related to the concept of discourse, for example. An article by Rolness (1992) casts light on the distinction. That news media are commonly criticized for being fragmentary, selective or inaccurate, writes Rolness, has to do with the ideal of public enlightenment, i.e., the notion that readers by reading about the facts of reality will acquire the knowledge they need in order to act rationally and to participate in democratic processes. In line with

this thinking, the media are expected to be reliable and objective. Researchers' criticisms are, according to Rolness, based on the naive and untenable notion that it is possible to distinguish between true reality and the image of reality the media produce. Such critics presume to have the truth on their side without examining the assumptions underlying their normative critique. Rolness (1992:18) would seem to be saying that science, like journalism, constructs reality within the framework of social discourses or language practices, and there are no rational reasons why the scientific discourse, or any discourse for that matter, should take precedence over others:

Thus, the media are neither good nor poor communicators of facts, but contribute to determining what we perceive to be reality. More than reflect events, they define them. And the same is true of all other agents of reality production – the social sciences included. Through different kinds of formalized [instituted] formulations reality takes form – phenomena are selected, put in order, interpreted.

Postmodernism – Four Essential Themes

In the following I shall briefly present four essential themes or emphases in postmodernist theory, all of which have strongly influenced media and journalism research of the past decade. Within the framework of these themes the legitimacy of journalism – but also the research which has taken the ideals and claims of journalism seriously and on that basis judged journalistic performance in relation to the media's roles in democratic society – has been seriously called into question.

A first common theme in much postmodern theory is what Lash (1990) calls *de-*

differentiation. The processes of rationalization and secularization associated with modernism are outgrowths of a differentiation between different spheres, rationalities and modes of behaviour.⁶ Much modern social theory presumes that ethics, aesthetics and theoretical knowledge reside in different spheres. Postmodernism problematizes the boundaries between these spheres. Instead of trying to specify the inner logic of each sphere, postmodernism emphasizes the tendencies toward dissolution and merger which are apparent in contemporary society. In analyses of the media and journalism this emphasis is expressed in the questioning of genre definitions which presuppose a distinction between the rationalities of aesthetics and theoretical knowledge. It is most clearly expressed in Baudrillard's theories of how the boundaries between information and entertainment, between fact and fiction, between the real and the unreal dissolve in the media culture of the postmodern age. Baudrillard uses the concept *implosion* to describe this trend. Referring to Baudrillard, Best and Kellner (1991:120), write:

In the postmodern mediascape, boundaries between information and entertainment, images and politics, implode. As many commentators have pointed out, TV news and documentary assume more and more the form of entertainment, using dramatic and melodramatic codes to frame their stories.

Relatively few students of the media and journalism appear to share Baudrillard's radical perspective. Rather many more have questioned the boundaries between different genres, between fact and fiction, between information and entertainment, on which the claims to legitimacy of current affairs and news journalism have been founded.

Bird (1990) is one of many who have argued that all journalism is "storytelling" (see also Fiske 1987). What we perceive as serious news journalism, says Bird (1990: 386), is more like tabloid journalism than we commonly assume. Both occupy positions on "the same storytelling continuum". Both make use of the same narrative techniques, refer to facts and factual statements, and use sources that confer credibility. Trying to make simple distinctions between fact and fiction or between information and entertainment is, moreover, equally problematic, regardless of what kind of journalism we are talking about. Dahlgren (1992: 14) argues that the conventional distinctions between information and entertainment, and between different kinds of journalism, which have been fundamental to the self-understanding and legitimacy of the profession, are dubious – both in light of the different ways in which audiences relate to the media and due to the ambiguity of the texts.

If the meaning in a text is indeed indeterminable to some extent and if people have considerable degrees of interpretive freedom, this no doubt raises profound problems for journalism. This line of reasoning, if taken seriously, signifies a crisis for journalism's most cherished foundations. Not only can people make different sense of journalistic texts and use them for a variety of purposes, but the meaning of the texts themselves cannot be assumed to be 'stable'. In effect, the central distinctions between journalism and non-journalism, or good journalism and bad journalism – the boundaries so characteristic of journalism's self-legitimizing discourses – become fluid.

We find another expression of this de-differentiation in Foucault's theories, in which power and knowledge tend to blend into

one another.⁷ The discourse organizes thought and knowledge, and this organization is power in its essential form. Power is relative strength, a field of power-relations through which ideas and knowledge are produced (cf. Foucault 1980a, 1980b). The power struggle is ultimately a question of establishing discursive knowledge as true knowledge. Truth claims can never be justified by referring to a form of rationality inherent in knowledge. Truth claims are an expression of an exercise of power. Fiske (1989) is among those who have been strongly influenced by this school of thought when he observes that the ideals of truth and objectivity in news journalism and media researchers' demand for more truth are both expressions of a totalitarian strategy in an ongoing power struggle. Fiske (1989:176f) writes:

Arguments that news should be more accurate or objective are actually arguments in favour of news' authority, and seek to increase its control under the guise of improving its quality. News, of course, can never give a full, accurate, objective picture of reality, nor should it attempt to, for such an enterprise can serve only to increase its authority and decrease people's opportunity to 'argue' with it, to negotiate with it.

This leads us to the second common theme in postmodern theory, viz., its *relativist epistemology*. Postmodernism is highly critical of the notion that we can *grasp* reality as it is, that it is possible to acquire objective and true knowledge of reality.⁸ Lyotard, for example, observes that there are any number of discourses or language games having internal criteria of validity in society, which lack common points of reference. No knowledge of reality subsumes them. Lyotard looks upon notions of knowledge as being a more or less true represen-

tation of reality as making virtually totalitarian claims, or "the terror of representation, the sign and the notion of truth" (Wellmer 1986:137; cf. also Lyotard 1992). The totalitarian aspect resides not least in the striving to find a universal basis for knowledge. This "terror of the notion of truth" is a terror which is associated with the claims to truth and uniformity which characterize modernism.

Within the realm of media and journalism research the metaphor of the mirror and the notion of objective journalism have been seriously questioned. Like the postmodern theoreticians, journalism researchers have mainly criticized naive realism's conception of truth. Fiske (1989:149), for example, writes: "But knowledge is never neutral, it never exists in an empiricist, objective relationship to the real." This empiricism has in turn been associated with the tradition of the Enlightenment, which seems to have inspired what Dahlgren (1992:9) calls "the dominant discourses of journalism":

In the dominant discourses of journalism, as in the texts of neoMarxism, the rationality of the Enlightenment figures prominently. We find such familiar bedrock premises as the notion of reason's capacity to provide *secure knowledge* about the *world*, the possibility of *unproblematical representation* of such knowledge, the belief in the integrated autonomous subject, and the tendency to neat dualisms and polarities such as rational/irrational, mind/matter and logical/mythical (emphasis added).

The empiricist philosophy, Dahlgren observes, has helped legitimize an ideology of journalism built up around ideals like objectivity and factuality.

A third common theme in postmodern theory is what we might call a critique of

the normative fundaments of "the modernist project". The ethical ideals and ideology of news journalism are closely integrated in what is often referred to as "the modernist project" (a concept which is somewhat misleading in that it gives the impression that it is a question of one project). Ideals like objectivity, factuality, critical scrutiny and independent opinion formation presume that news journalism at least has the *potential* to be a vital institution in a society which is striving toward broadened democracy, in which the belief in reason, enlightenment and critical rational debate are important ideals. Postmodern theory questions this potential. Denzin (1993:27) characterizes the theory as "a critique of scientific knowledge and realism coupled with a profound distrust of reason and science as forces which will produce a utopian society based on consensus, rational communicative action and human freedom". Under postmodern influences, journalism researchers have also rejected established media ideologies (e.g., public service ideology). This (together with commercial and global media trends) has again broached the question of what constitutes good or bad journalism, the answers to which have become less conclusive than they once were (Dahlgren 1993). To answer this question requires some form of normative standpoint if we are not to accept the nihilism which characterizes some postmodernist works (Best & Kellner 1991).

One consistent feature of postmodernist journalism research is its sharp criticism of the normative ideals that relate to modernism, whilst refraining from developing any systematic alternative normative reference points for a critical analysis of the media and journalism. Nonetheless, postmodern criticism is predicated on normative ideals. Resistance to the discipline, norms and power relationships of modern society itself is

assigned value, for example. On the basis of this ideal, postmodernist reception researchers extol the potentiality of the audience to resist dominant discourses, to use the media to create meanings, identities and popular cultures. Authoritarian journalism, with its normative ideal of objectivity, is seen to induce passivity in an audience of 'consumers'. 'Good' journalism in this view is journalism which questions all manner of claims to truth, its own included, and opens up possibilities for new interpretations by stimulating involvement and provoking reactions, and by emphasizing the multifaceted and ambiguous rather than constructing seemingly unequivocal narrations (Livingstone & Lunt 1994; Fiske 1989).

Now, to a fourth common theme in postmodernism. Postmodern society is characterized as being a symbol-producing society, in which images and symbols abound. The meaning of these images and symbols has become increasingly fluid, and their relation to what we call reality is anything but simple or unequivocal. One of the characteristics of postmodernism, Featherstone (1994:31) posits, is "the conversion of reality to images". (See also Best & Kellner 1991; Denzin 1993). Since we are living in what we call a 'media society' and 'media culture', it is not surprising or even remarkable that social theorists have focused not only on the media in general, but on aesthetic and semiotic dimensions of the media in particular. Much of the literature, however, especially that on television, has tended toward a relatively one-eyed view of television as a "medium of images" (cf. Corner 1995), whereas the practices that produce these 'images' have received less attention. In analyses influenced by postmodernist doctrine there is a pronounced tendency to consider images and symbols relatively independent of social institutions and practices. The latter arises out of

postmodernist theory's rejection of all analyses which claim to identify underlying social structures (Best & Kellner 1991; Denzin 1993).

In Baudrillard's more radical view, post-modern society differs from previous societies in that the symbols that surround us no longer have a real or meaningful referent. In this view, the mass media produce meaningless simulations which are consumed, but do not impart values or a basis for rational action (Baudrillard 1982; Denzin 1993). Most likely rather few researchers are willing to go as far as Baudrillard, but in the field of media research there has in practice been a strong tendency among analysts of both text and reception to treat aesthetic and semiotic dimensions relatively independent of the media institutions and the practices behind the texts.⁹

Four Objections to Constructivist and Postmodernist Journalism Research

Before I propose my own starting points for critical journalism research, I should like to summarize my principal objections to constructivism and postmodernism in the following four points:

1.

We find many examples of diffuse borders between fact and fiction, between news and entertainment in media output of today. Many of the non-news current affairs programmes in programme tableaux are more or less hybrid forms (Bondebjerg 1995). The lines of demarcation between what is art and aesthetics and what is factual depiction of reality are hardly clear when even newscasts contain items which are composed according to dramaturgical rules bor-

rowed from narrative fiction. This might be taken as confirmation of a fading differentiation between spheres and therefore cause to abandon the concepts of rationality which are based in such differentiation. But, I say we should do more or less the opposite. To my way of thinking, Habermas (1984, 1988) has shown quite convincingly that the differentiation between spheres is inherent in rational use of language, in the fundamental rules of linguistic pragmatics which we constantly apply and take for granted, not least in everyday conversation. These rules are also a virtually self-evident fundament of journalism and its legitimacy. The tacit contracts between journalism and the public are based on either that the profession's claims to truth, truthfulness and normative rightness are foregone conclusions or that they can be redeemed with reference to the inherent logic of the sphere in question. If journalism is criticized for producing incorrect information about an event or situation, it is expected that this criticism will lead to a correction or justification in relation to an epistemological discourse. That journalism in practice has considerable power to legitimate its activities by one or another strategy, without having to live up to its stated claims is another story. A school of thought like postmodernism, which takes signs of dissolution as grounds for abandoning rationality as a basis for critical analysis of the media, may no more than legitimize a current media trend which is driven by powerful commercial forces.

2.

Postmodernism and constructivism represent a radical strain of relativism which was largely formulated in polemics with naive realism or objectivism. Many media researchers have been influenced by this school of thought, with the result that an at-

tack has been mounted on an epistemology which in many respects is already passed, even in journalism (Dahlgren 1992; Fiske 1989; Rolness 1992). While it is true that such naive realism, the notion that the news represents unquestionably true presentations of fact, does support the legitimacy of journalism, the prevailing epistemology in journalism today is nonetheless considerably more multifaceted (cf. Ekström & Nohrstedt 1996). The question of what claims to truth today's anything-but-uniform television journalism actually makes has hardly been addressed.

Dahlgren (1989:7) points out that the main contribution of constructivism to journalism research is not to lead into "the morass of relativism, but to be more sensitive to how 'the construction of reality' takes place". Dahlgren is not alone in this view (cf. Schudson 1991:141, i.a.). But it seems that many journalism researchers stop at this reservation and fail to go on to develop a perspective that might transcend the contradiction between the relativism to which constructivism indirectly contributes and the naive realism which is often the object of their polemic attacks. The concept of 'social constructivism' often either tends to express trivialities or tends toward a position, the consequences of which are untenable (cf. Brante 1993). An example of triviality pertaining to news journalism is the proposition that the news is produced in social contexts by individuals whose actions are purposive and create meaning. All human actions are, after all, conscious, reflective, intentional and social. An example of an untenable position is the proposition that the news is nothing more than social constructions, that it in no way represents a reality which exists, independent of the journalist and his/her reports.

The postmodern critique is, of course, important in view of the fact that much

journalism claims to present an absolutely truthful rendering of reality, this in an age in which we have come to learn that knowledge is anything but certain and the notion of certain and objective bases for knowledge has become less tenable than ever. But postmodernism hardly offers a fruitful point of departure for critical analysis inasmuch as its only alternative to naive realism is radical relativism. A media critic who sees total relativism as the only alternative would seem, once again, only to legitimize certain trends within journalism, in which journalism uses its power (without actually relinquishing its claim to truth) to justify gross simplifications, dramatizations and partisan descriptions of reality on the grounds that, after all, there is no such thing as objective truth. The attempts to transcend the dualism between realism/objectivism and relativism which have been made in recent decades (e.g. Bernstein 1987; Sayer 1992) seem to have passed most journalism researchers by unnoticed. Habermas is one of those who has developed a third perspective which renders the claim to truth susceptible to criticism without presuming the existence of objectively true knowledge (a subject to which we shall return).

There is, Dahlgren (1989:6) asserts, no "external social reality that is not somehow comprehended in our consciousness and use of language and symbols". This rather common viewpoint is, of course, in at least one sense true: when we use the words 'social reality', we have specified a reality of language and symbols. But in another sense, as I see it, the proposition does not hold. There is a reality outside specific knowledge processes. Just as physical reality exists beyond our sensory experience, a social reality exists beyond our comprehension. This becomes apparent when physical and social reality protests, disallowing cer-

tain experience or contradicting certain descriptions and conceptualizations (Sayer 1992).

Journalism is comprised of relatively specific knowledge-producing organizations which describe a reality which actually exists, partly independent of the specific descriptions of reality which are put forward. I am further of the opinion that we can and should relate journalistic descriptions of this reality not to an absolutely true description of reality, but to a more intersubjective, and probably less fallible, description. With the help of experience, critical reflection and communicative rationality we can assess the truth of various descriptions of reality. We can also problematize the often highly routinized work and standardized narrative forms which prevail in journalism against the background of ideas concerning the fundamental ideals and principles of the generation of knowledge. According to the school of critical realism, there can be no incontrovertibly true propositions about reality (ignoring for the moment trivial statements of fact, such as that Olof Palme once was Prime Minister of Sweden). All knowledge is more or less fallible (Sayer 1992). Language and narrative forms give us the structures which make it possible to describe something with a measure of truth, but they can also help create contexts of meaning which cast events into a distorting or misleading light. The circumstance that all descriptions of reality are social and rhetorical constructions does not mean that all such constructions are equally true.

3.

Postmodernism has mounted a forceful attack on the rationalism and ideal of enlightenment which form the basis of dominant normative media ideologies, but it has not

offered much in the way of alternative normative starting points for critical journalism research. Attempts have been made, as I briefly indicated above, taking their point of departure in the public's active interpretations and possibilities to resist intended meanings. Fiske (1989), for example – clearly inspired by Foucault and perhaps even more so Nietzsche – has elaborated theories of receivers' resistance and creativity. Resistance is seen not least as an aesthetic force, which denies the totalitarian claims of science and reason. Nietzsche's philosophy is reflected in Fiske in a kind of romantic populism, whereby all manner of resistance is accorded value, regardless of what is resisted and what versions of reality the receivers elaborate for themselves (Kellner 1995). Habermas (1988:68) formulates the problem with Nietzsche's theories as follows, and I find it equally applicable to, for example, Fiske:

But when thought no longer can move about in the element of truth, of validity claims, opposition and criticism lose their meaning. Opposition, saying No, in that case is reduced to more than '*a desire to be different*'¹⁰

To be able to evaluate such resistance requires a more universal normative theory, which in turn is based on some form of rationalism, i.e., precisely what postmodern theory rejects. Further on, I shall argue that Habermas' theory of the fundamental requisites for rational communication offer such a normative starting point.

4.

To my way of thinking, postmodern theory has contributed to a one-sided focus on media in terms of text, symbols, and images. It is at least as important to consider media as speech. In news and current affairs pro-

grammes on TV, journalists and others address the viewing audience, either directly or indirectly. The programmes are predicated on a communicative relationship between the viewer and those who appear in the programmes. Viewers' interpretations of what is said on television depend on their a priori conceptions of the person speaking, his or her intentions, and/or the institution he or she represents (see, for example, Scannell 1994). Therefore, it is vital that analyses not only employ semiotic models, discourse analyses, etc., but also theories of the pragmatic dimension of language.

Many tendencies in contemporary media society contribute to concealing the practices underlying what we see on television. We are constantly being influenced by images and descriptions of reality from unknown sources, the identities of which are furthermore difficult to ascertain. Commercial production of images and texts has become increasingly global. This circumstance hardly makes it less important to be observant about who is using the medium to speak to the public (directly or indirectly), as well as what institutions instigate programme production. Postmodern media analysis, *however*, tends to consider texts and images as 'givens' rather than as products.

Communicative Rationality – Starting Points for Critical Journalism Research

In relation to postmodernism and what we, for the sake of simplicity, might call the concept of modernity in the classic philosophy of enlightenment, Habermas occupies a third position (Carleheden 1996). Instead of rejecting modernity, Habermas seeks to establish the preconditions for realizing its

inherent potential. He seeks this potential above all in a rationality inherent in communication. In this endeavour he elaborates a theory of communicative rationality which is ultimately rooted in how we use language. Rational communication which can lead to deeper knowledge and understanding presumes that we follow not only semantic rules, but also rules pertaining to the pragmatic aspects of language, i.e., speech acts. Since these rules are assumed to be universal, the theory has been called a universal pragmatics (Habermas 1984, 1988; McCarthy 1988).¹¹

When language is used, when we speak to someone, we always relate our speech acts to an external reality (a reality which we can describe in a true or untrue fashion), an inner reality (a person's intentions, which may be characterized as truthful/honest or dishonest), and a reality of shared norms and values which may be perceived as normatively right or wrong. In addition to comprehensibility, each speech act expresses claims to validity, truth, truthfulness and normative rightness. The universal preconditions for using language rationally are thus: (1) that we can use the language representationally to distinguish what is from what merely appears to be; (2) that we can use the language expressively to distinguish between what a person is and what he/she purports to be; and (3) that we can use the language to generate common values and to distinguish between what is and what should be (cf. McCarthy 1988:272ff).

Validity claims can either be accepted or challenged. That the claims are open to criticism is fundamental to rational communication; so is the demand that he/she who expresses such claims is willing to fulfill them. In the context of rational communication a challenge means that he/she who has expressed a claim is expected to seek to justify the claim through reference to expe-

riences which support the claim to truth, e.g., through honest behaviour, or by referring to norms and values. The essential differentiation means that the claims to validity in rational communication are justified according to different rationalities and in relation to fundamentally different discourses. Rationality also presupposes that the parties can change their positions and admit that the claims may be unjustified. The fact that the other party does not explicitly challenge a claim need not mean that it is truly a rational dialogue inasmuch as seeming consensus may also be achieved through manipulation and power-play, i.e., through strategic action. Acceptance is a sign of rationality only if it is the outcome of communication that conforms as nearly to the ideal dialogue as possible, i.e., a dialogue oriented toward genuine understanding rather than various forms of dominance.

Claims to validity are not equally relevant in all kinds of communication. Above all, there are speech acts which do not make claims to truth in the sense of truthful representations of external reality. These are what Habermas refers to as *symbolic action*, such as theatre or dance. Habermas also makes a distinction between understanding-oriented *communicative action* and *strategic action*, whereby the latter is characterized by an orientation toward success, i.e., the individual (or institution) exercises his/her/its powers to persuade, manipulate and mislead, all in order to influence others in a given direction (Aune 1979).

Characteristic of news and current affairs journalism is that it claims to be, and is largely perceived as being, understanding-oriented communication. Obviously, journalism is characterized by a more strategic rationality, as well. Nonetheless, it is precisely the claims to comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness, and normative rightness

which makes news and current affairs journalism what it is – from the point of view of the profession and the public alike. These claims influence how the audience perceives what journalism tells them. Things said given a manifest claim to give a true rendering of something real and important are interpreted quite differently from what is said in jest or as an thrilling, but clearly fictional story. The claim to validity calls attention to an implicit contract between journalism and its audiences (cf. Bondebjerg 1994; Scannell 1994).

Taking our point of departure in the claims to validity outlined by Habermas, we gain a partly new understanding of the ethical principles and ideology of journalism. The claims to truth, normative rightness and truthfulness are expressed in the profession's ethical code, but they are also reflected in journalism's mode of addressing its audience and in how individual reports are presented. On a fundamental level, the claims to validity are crucial to the legitimacy of journalism as a central institution of democratic society.

In my opinion, the important question for critical media analysis in this connection is not to try to decide which claim is most important to which form of journalism, which genre or which programme. That some programmes emphasize dramatic qualities in order to serve their audience 'good stories' with a simple, straightforward message at the expense of nuance, factuality and a 'balanced view' is not a problem per se. The problem arises if and when journalistic practice deviates significantly from the claims journalism makes in various contexts and from the conceptions underlying viewers' viewing and interpretations of what they see and hear. A central question of overarching importance for critical analyses of news and current affairs journalism is thus: What is

the nature of the relationships between the manifest ideals and claims of journalism, the practices of journalism (including the structures and mechanisms which impinge on those practices), and viewers' perceptions and expectations?

Let us now examine some ideals, claims and practices of journalism in the light of Habermas' theory concerning the fundamental validity claims inherent in communication.

Comprehensibility

Basic to all journalism is the ambition to be comprehensible, to get one's message across. With this goal in mind, certain forms of presentation, rhetorical techniques and narrative structures take priority. News desks' evaluations of yesterday's newscast or paper often revolve around these aspects. They are decisive with regard to whether or not a news item is considered good or bad – particularly in broadcasting. A news item is good if it has a clear-cut angle that gets across to the audience, and bad if the message is diffuse or the item contains too many aspects and reservations. An item is considered good if the journalist manages to make a good story out of scanty raw material (Nohrstedt & Ekström 1994).

Characteristic of many current affairs telecasts today is a penchant for sensationalism. Items emphasize astonishing or shocking aspects of the story, exaggerate and dramatize. The main motive for doing so is most likely the desire to get across to the viewer, the ambition to make the story easy to understand.

It is reasonable to assume that this ambition to be explicit, to be easy-to-understand, assumes higher priority as competition for viewers' attention becomes increasingly acute. Catching the viewer's eye and keeping their attention so that they stay

tuned becomes more and more imperative. This may mean that in practice news desks tend to give somewhat less priority to the accuracy and veracity of the reports.¹²

Truthfulness

At base the legitimacy of journalism is dependent on whether or not the public considers it truthful, honest and straightforward. In part it is a question of the overall credibility of the media and journalism as institutions. Despite recurrent criticism, these institutions have managed, by means of various legitimizing mechanisms, to maintain a basic credibility. The public service ideology and the idea of journalism as a responsible institution in the service of the public has played an important role in this regard. But truthfulness is also a matter of how journalism presents itself to the public on a day-to-day basis. In the new situation in Swedish television, with sharpening inter-channel competition, expressiveness has become a competitive technique, and truthfulness is ever at risk in an increasingly personal relation with the viewer. One expression of this trend is the salience of the role and style of the programme host. Some news programmes seek to develop a distinctive profile on the basis of the anchorperson's personal style of presentation. That is to say, he or she appears not as a neutral presenter of the news, but as a 'personality'. A special kind of truthfulness assumes importance: viz., authenticity (Hjarvard 1994). The trend is even more pronounced in other kinds of current affairs programmes. In some cases the name of the programme host is the name of the programme (Ekström & Eriksson 1996)

The power of journalism can only be fully understood if we take account of its power to organize and orchestrate its own appearance, i.e., the prerogative of telling

its own story day after day. The expressive aspect is included in judgements made on a routine basis, or more reflectively or strategically in all journalistic practice. Angles are selected partly to give the viewer a certain impression of the work of the team; one speaks of 'exposing' whether or not the news was in any way concealed; reports are presented so as to show the reporter on the scene, preferably at the very centre of the event at hand; the anchorperson's appearance and body language are self-consciously stylized, etc. As competition sharpens we may expect expressiveness to be given greater priority over the work involved in getting and double-checking the facts of the story.

Truth

The claim to truth is central to the journalistic ethic which has conferred legitimacy on journalism as an influential and relatively autonomous conveyor of knowledge in contemporary society. Journalists' professional code of ethics deals with the claim in terms of factuality, accuracy and impartiality.¹³ Journalism also has the ambition to scrutinize. Through critical scrutiny the press is assumed to reveal hidden and inaccessible truths to the public. Television news and current affairs journalism frequently aims high in this respect, sometimes even aspiring to telling the Truth with a capital 'T'. The news is presented in a self-assured and authoritative manner with an unequivocalness that suggests that it is an absolutely true account of reality. Programmes which specialize in investigative journalism claim to be able to present the real truth concealed behind façades and manipulated versions of reality. At the same time, journalists commonly elect not to specify their sources or otherwise give in-

formation in support of their statements of fact (Ekström & Eriksson 1996).

In the practice of news journalism, epistemological problems are generally reduced to simple routines. News reporters, for example, have little opportunity to gather reliable information by which to judge the truth of statements and policy initiatives. All they know is that someone has said this or that, not whether it is true. In practice, therefore, truth boils down to 'correct facts', i.e. that a specified person actually said this or that. Internal norms indicate what is to be regarded as relatively incontrovertible fact. In his or her daily work the reporter makes use of a well-established network of sources who provide what Ettema & Glasser (1985:344) have called "pre-justified accounts of what is", i.e., facts, the truth or objectivity of which the journalist need not investigate or assess (see also Tuchman 1978; Nohrstedt & Ekström 1994). Investigative journalists apply a somewhat different epistemology and take upon themselves a greater responsibility to corroborate and verify the information they disclose and publicize. This has to do with the fact that the investigative journalist is presenting a story of his/her own which has moral implications and may have serious consequences for the person(s) who figure in the story (Ettema & Glasser 1985).

Although the question of journalism's far-reaching claims to truth is a recurrent theme, not least in postmodernist criticism, as yet few studies have really examined the epistemologies applied in the widely varied practices of journalism today or the epistemological discourses which journalists use when they defend their claims to truth, both within the organization and vis-à-vis the public.

Normative Rightness

News journalism has been characterized as a knowledge-conveying institution, with objectivity and neutrality its highest ideals (Nerman 1989; Nohrstedt & Ekström 1994). And such ideals do prevail within the profession. It is also common in, for example, debates on the role of journalism for managing editors and others to profess these ideals to people outside the branch. These professions are, however, in another sense, somewhat misleading. Not only do journalists constantly make normative judgements (deliberately or unconsciously) in their everyday work, but the legitimacy of journalism is also based in normative claims on a higher plane, in norms concerning the role of the profession in democratic society. The ethical code of journalism require journalists to respect the integrity of individuals, while they should also scrutinize and inform the public in matters relating to the public interest.

Current events television programmes express normative claims of another kind. These programmes have the ambition to deal with subjects that are important in one or another moral aspect. It may be the criminal neglect of children in Rumanian or Chinese orphanages, the problem of domestic brutality, mothers keeping children from their fathers after divorce, consultants who counsel in tax evasion, etc. Not least, the manner of presentation stresses the aspect of a moral 'mission'. In most cases the coverage is more or less overtly partisan. In the case of talk shows, for example, programme hosts frequently declare their personal point of view in questions having obvious moral implications.

The legitimacy of investigative journalism is bound up with its claim to expose conditions that need to be exposed, to tell stories that need to be told. And it is pre-

cisely this 'mission' that allows investigative journalists on occasion to violate targeted individuals' personal integrity. Fundamental to the normative claims of journalism is appearing *to help those in need*, be they individuals or the public at large. Let us consider a couple of examples. In the Swedish talk show, *Mänskligt*,¹⁴ people in distress tell their stories with much show of emotion. The programme host sometimes assumes the role of therapist, sometimes that of an understanding friend, 'a shoulder to cry on'. She invites the participants to tell their stories and get, if not comfort, at least moral support. In *Efterlyst* [Wanted], a programme inspired by BBC's *Crimewatch* UK, journalists appear shoulder-to-shoulder with the police, taking up arms against ruthless criminals and protecting or avenging the innocent and vulnerable – "It could be you or me".

Much of the public discussion of journalism and journalists' practices in recent years has had a strongly moral tenor. One such issue concerns the use of pictures. Many critics have urged greater restrictivity in the use of stills and footage of the victims of war and natural catastrophes and, more generally, of people in distress or in mourning. Others have responded that such pictures are a vital part of journalism, which has a moral duty to focus public attention on social crises and injustices.

Television as Communicative Practice: The Claim to Validity and Viewers' Interpretations

Television is not only a "medium of images", it is also a "medium of speech" (Corner 1995), a medium through which journalists and others more or less regularly address a conceived audience, directly or indirectly. These speech acts are organized

and staged through television programmes. Each such act expresses claims to validity within the framework of what Dahlgren (1988) terms the "prime narrator", i.e., a newsdesk or the programme as a whole. Especially through the symbolic language used in the opening of the programme, the signature music and the presentation of the content the prime narrator signals what kind of programme it is and the kinds of claims associated with it.

Like all communication, televised speech is a kind of intentional speech act (cf. Scannell 1994). That is, it has a purpose; the actions are adapted to increase the likelihood that what is said will be perceived and interpreted in a given manner. As viewers of television, on the other hand, we have enough cultural competence to allow us to interpret these intentions, and thus the meaning of what is said, in an essentially consensual manner. Intentionality is, as Scannell points out, a common precondition for all kinds of social interaction. Thus, TV production and reception are mutually dependent. Television programmes must be produced in a certain way in order for the public to perceive the news as credible information, entertainment as entertainment, satire as satire, etc. The audience, in turn, is assumed to take it for granted that there is meaning in the specific characteristics of the programme and the way journalists address their viewers.

The intentionality of the communication makes use of common cultural codes and conventions relating to specific communicative acts, genres or kinds of television programmes. The habitual way in which a given programme opens – the music and a specific manner of address – together with recurrent signals and expressions that more or less implicitly comment on or annotate what we see, as well as who is speaking to us, are decisive for how we interpret the

various communicative acts which make up the programme (Bondebjerg 1994; Scannell 1994).

The research which primarily focuses on analyses of culturally and socially defined conventions, rules and mutual agreements which are developed in relation to given communicative practices relate to what might be called *conventionalistic pragmatism*. 'Pragmatism' signifies a perspective which conceives of communication and language as speech act and interaction; "conventionalism" emphasizes contextuality, i.e., the codes and conventions pertaining to given communicative practices.

The conventionalistic perspective tends to confine the focus to an analysis of conventions, which producers and audience (sender and receiver) are presumed to share. Even though we may reject a consensus perspective, the theory largely focuses on the preconditions for mutual understanding, which puts a number of important issues aside: To what extent do viewers assume a critical position so that they reject the contract which producers offer them? Under what conditions can viewers question the news as news and challenge facts as facts.

Conventionalism offers no real guidance for analyses which seek to examine how susceptible to criticism the producers/journalists' intentions, and the claims related to them, may be. On this point conventionalistic pragmatism and postmodernism – as formulated by Lyotard, for example – suffer the same limitation. In both cases the constitutive preconditions of communicative practices are reduced to conventions and internal criteria of validity which derive from specific contexts.

Critical analyses of news and current affairs journalism should not, in my opinion, be confined to analyses of situation-dependent communicative practices or to the

conventions that are developed within the framework of a given social and cultural context. Only when communicative practices are discussed in relation to a fixed position – an idea of what the communication might be – can they be problematized in terms of, say, relations of dominance or power. And it is only by assuming the possibility of criticizing the practices on the basis of a more universal potentiality, a communicative rationality, that we can grasp the preconditions for television viewing which accepts, but also challenges manifest intentions and claims.

In this connection I again see a fruitful starting point for critical media analysis in Habermas' universal pragmatics. In consonance with Habermas' theory of communication, we regard communicative practices as partly situation-dependent, but also partly related to more universal preconditions for rational communication (cf. Holub 1991).¹⁵ In Habermas' view, the preconditions for rational communication are inherent in our way of using language in speech acts, and it is these preconditions which allow us to challenge and relativize established conventions. This is not antagonistic to the tenet that concrete communication is largely based on mutual agreements or contracts that are attached to a specific discourse, genre, language game, etc. The theory does, however, challenge the tendency of conventionalism to regard speech acts exclusively in relation to specific, context-dependent rules, contracts and criteria of validity.

Within reception research, which has developed within the last two decades, researchers have devoted considerable attention to receivers' potential for actively reading texts (including TV programmes) and generating resistance to what is perceived as the dominant meanings or ideological message in the text. Stuart Hall, one

of the principal theoreticians of reception, has developed a widely used conceptualization – including the well-known distinction between dominant, negotiating and oppositional readings (cf. Morley 1992, i.a.). These concepts have mainly been applied in analyses of how audiences interpret messages and meanings in different descriptions of reality. I find it perhaps equally important to analyze how viewers relate to those who appear and speak on television as well as to the claims to validity expressed in those speech acts. In this connection I see the possibility of applying Hall's distinction in a somewhat different manner, inspired by Habermas' theory of communication. In the manifest claims to validity journalism makes and the way journalism presents itself to the public we clearly confront something akin to what Hall calls the "preferred reading" inasmuch as journalism has the privilege of being able to stage and organize its appearance before the public. The question is, then, to what extent the claims to truthfulness, truth and normative rightness which various news and current affairs programmes make are fully accepted, accepted in part, or rejected out of hand.

Can Habermas' Theory Be Applied in Empirical Studies of Journalism and Mass Communication?

Whereas Habermas' studies of 'bourgeois *Öffentlichkeit*' have been widely discussed and cited by media researchers, his communication theory has only sporadically influenced theoretical and empirical work on journalism and mass communication. As Mral (1994) points out, this may be because the theory is so abstract and fundamental as to be difficult to apply in con-

crete studies; another reason might be that it treats interpersonal communication rather than mass communication. In this article I have tried to show how Habermas' theory can be a fruitful starting point for studies of news and current affairs journalism and other communicative practices relating to television. There are, of course, a number of reservations about using the theory as I propose. Let us now consider four such reservations, which I shall try to rebut. But, first, a comment of a more general nature.

Within the social sciences a relatively strict division of labour has prevailed between those who elaborate more general, abstract theories (and their prophets) and those who perform analyses in concrete research areas. A gap exists between abstract theorizing and concrete analysis, and I feel some attempt should be made to close it. Concrete research has much to gain by the guidance general theories can provide (Layder 1993). Whether or not researchers apply a theory's concepts strictly as intended by the theoretician is not so important. What is important is that the concepts can be useful as guides and frames of reference for interpretation in concrete analyses.¹⁶

Reservation 1

Habermas' formal pragmatics is a theory of the fundamentals of understanding-oriented interpersonal communication, communication face-to-face, in an intersubjective relation or dialogue. Claims to validity are made when someone speaks about something to someone else. The rationality in the communication presumes that the claims to validity can be justified discursively within the framework of a dialogue on the basis of certain principles. These principles, which constitute what Habermas (1984) calls 'the ideal speech situation' are, for example,

that all parties should have the same access to participation in the dialogue and that all parties are accorded the same status. The latter means that all have the right to make claims (to truth, truthfulness, and normative rightness) and that all claims are evaluated on the basis of the validity of the arguments put forward. Persuasion, manipulation or exploitation of power are not compatible with rational dialogue.

Since mediated mass communication differs qualitatively from interpersonal dialogue, some may argue that Habermas' theory is not applicable to analyses of mass communication (Garnham 1992; Warner 1992). Furthermore, one might argue that the power of media institutions to orchestrate and stage speech on television, as well as the character of public debates in the media, mean that mediated mass communication deviates fundamentally from the basic principles of the 'ideal speech situation'.

In response to these reservations I put forward the following: The basic rules for speech acts set forth in Habermas' formal pragmatics are, as I see it, immanent in all understanding-oriented communicative acts. Each time we speak, we make a claim to validity which is expected to be justifiable. Formal pragmatics is a way to identify in language the basic prerequisites for all social interaction. The claims are justified in practice within different discourses and institutions. The ideal speech situation specifies the principles of rational communicative action. These principles, which are expressed in various concrete discourses and institutions, represent the ideal situation on the basis of which concrete institutional arrangements can be evaluated, i.e. be subjected to criticism (Garnham 1990; Habermas 1992; Lee 1992). Formal pragmatics makes it possible, for example, to speak of "systematically distorted communication", i.e. communication where

strategic action dominates over understanding-oriented action (Habermas 1984;332).¹⁷

In view of the claims journalism makes, and considering the importance of this institution in public debate, it is natural to subject it to scrutiny on the basis of the basic principles of ideal rational communication. The extensive opportunities journalism has to legitimize its own claims through strategic action hardly makes such a critique less important. At the same time, it would be misleading to characterize journalism as purely strategic action. Habermas (1992) points out that each time we use language to communicate something with the expectation of being comprehended, we intuitively presume certain basic ideas which are formalized in formal pragmatics. As I see it, this applies equally to journalism. If not, the journalist would hardly start speaking, nor would the audience tune in. The journalist always addresses someone, albeit not necessarily a concrete person; meanwhile, the audience interprets what is said on the assumption that *someone* has said it.

Scannell (1994) has argued convincingly that the relation between televised speech and viewers' interpretations of it are much more similar to non-mediated social relations than we tend to think. When we as viewers interpret what is said on television, we do so largely on the basis of our personal experience of everyday communication. Other researchers, too, have found it fruitful to analyze mediated communication on the basis of theories of speech acts in somewhat other respects (cf., for example, Bondebjerg, 1994, who takes his point of departure in Searle). Much of the understanding-oriented communication in contemporary society is mediated. Reserving the theories of speech acts to analysis of face-to-face communication would restrict its use radically.

Reservation 2

An immediate reservation concerning the application of Habermas' theory of speech acts I propose is that the claims to validity made in speech acts have no decisive influence on viewers' interpretations. One may argue that these interpretations primarily relate to genre-specific conventions and perceptions of the institution the journalist represents. Consequently, the analysis should be performed on these levels rather than on the level of claims to validity.

The analysis of viewers' interpretations of speech acts on television should, of course, be combined with analyses of viewers' interpretations in relation to their pre-understanding of different genres, to the programme as a whole, to what Dahlgren refers to as the prime narrator, and to journalism as an institution. At the same time, it is reasonable to assume that speech acts are the prime vehicle through which the prime narrator and the institution make themselves known to the public.

Reservation 3

A more fundamental reservation is the argument that the communicative processes that take place in television programmes and other kinds of texts are not primarily a question of purposive speech acts, but are more related to comprehensive linguistic and semiotic structures (cf., for example, Lee, 1992, who in turn refers to Derrida). The specific characteristic of texts, and especially texts circulated via mass communication, are that they are comprehensible despite their having neither known sender nor specified receiver. An analysis which ignores the semiotic and linguistic dimensions of a text cannot produce an adequate understanding of the processes underlying

viewers' interpretation of TV programmes (Lee 1992:412f).

An analysis of television programmes should hardly reduce the communication to purposive speech acts, but it would be at least as stunting to reduce the study of media to analyses of signs and linguistic structures, thereby masking the social relations and practices *in* which the signs are embedded.¹⁸ Of course, the nature of the communication, the specific texts in question, are important. When it comes to viewers' interpretations of what is seen in news and current affairs telecasts, the intentionality of the speech acts most likely plays a major role. Other important factors are whether or not the speaker is expected to follow the rules inherent in understanding-oriented action, and the viewers' perceptions as to how well claims to validity are redeemed. Since the power and legitimacy of journalism largely has to do with the validity of what is said and otherwise put forward, critical journalism research must take the claims to validity seriously and study the practices by which the claims are justified or for which they may be challenged.

Reservation 4

The fourth and final reservation may be summarized as follows: Habermas' communication theory implies a rationalism which, if applied to the present material, would impose severe limits on our understanding of the practices of journalism, the programme content, and the meanings represented in viewing. A focus on communicative rationality excludes analyses of a good share of television production, fiction and entertainment, and dictates an emphasis on news and current affairs programmes (cf. Garnham 1992). But one can also argue that it would limit our understanding of these categories, as well. Many current af-

fairs programmes are hybrids, mixtures of fact and fiction, of information and entertainment (Bondebjerg 1995). From the viewers' standpoint, even the news has meanings which hardly lend themselves to analysis on the basis of formal pragmatics. The act of viewing may be understood as ritual, as relaxation and diversion, or in terms of what Fiske (1989) terms "popular pleasure".

Such reservations are highly relevant, of course. They demarcate the bounds for the application of the theoretical perspective which I, inspired by Habermas, have outlined here. The perspective is only applicable to analyses of understanding-oriented acts which express the specified claims to validity, that is to say, not to analyses of what Habermas terms symbolic acts, and thus not to analyses of televised fiction. What this implies with regard to analyses of television journalism where the boundaries between understanding-oriented acts and fiction are quite fluid is a discussion unto itself. Suffice it to say here that the perspective is not universally applicable and needs to be supplemented with other perspectives. Still, it would appear to be highly fruitful inasmuch as a good share of television journalism today consists of understanding-oriented speech acts. It seems a reasonable hypothesis that both the legitimacy of journalism and viewers' interpretations and attitudes are closely related to the conditions inherent in communicative rationality.

A Final Comment

Much research on and discussion of the ethical ideals and claims of journalism has taken these self-professed ideals and claims at face value, without problematizing the ideology of which they are a part. One of the chief contributions of postmodernism

as it has influenced journalism research is that it has problematized that ideology. I have in the preceding pages challenged postmodernist views on several counts. I have furthermore argued for critical approach to the validity of journalism, whereby its ideals and claims are related to both features of journalistic practice (including

institutional and organizational conditions) and the reception of the audience. On the basis of Habermas' theories of the fundamentals of communicative rationality, combined with a critical realism, I have also argued for a critical analysis of the media on the basis of a normative theory and epistemology.

Notes

1. The article is part of a research project by the same name, which has been financed through a grant from the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences.
2. There are, of course, notable exceptions, e.g., Livingstone & Lunt 1994; Morley 1980; Schlesinger & Thumber 1993.
3. I have chosen to use the term 'postmodern theory' without further distinction, fully mindful of how imprecise and equivocal it may be. Postmodernism is hardly a coherent school of thought, but rather a term describing theories which have certain common traits, but are quite disparate in other respects (cf. Best & Kellner 1991, i.a.). Neither is it absolutely clear what postmodern theory includes or excludes. Some use the term quite broadly to denote anything that considers modernity from a critical standpoint so as to cast light on its implicit premises, dilemmas and contradictions (cf. i.a. Bauman 1993:272). Other theorists, who have truly made such reflections do not wish to be associated with postmodernism.
4. One excellent example of a critical, yet constructive application of postmodern theory in analyses of contemporary media culture is D Kellner's recent work, *Media Culture* (1995).
5. Phenomenology has many exponents and encompasses a broad range of work (cf. Bengtsson 1988, i.a.). Here I am oversimplifying in a way I find relevant, but which some readers doubtless will find provocative.
6. This is most clearly expressed in the work of such exponents of modernism as Marx, Weber and Habermas, but can be traced back to Antiquity in, for example, the distinction between *mythos* and *logos*.
7. One may well ask to what extent Foucault is to be regarded a postmodernist, but I am not alone in doing so (cf. Best & Kellner 1991).
8. This criticism is hardly unique in the history of ideas (cf. Bernstein 1987; Feyerabend 1980 i.a.).
9. Research on reception has to some extent related the meanings conveyed by television to viewing as a social practice. But only occasionally have viewers' relationships with the media been related to the practices involved in television production or to the figures who address the audience (directly or indirectly) on television.
10. Translated from the German: "Wenn sich aber das Denken nicht mehr im Element der Wahrheit, der Geltungsansprüche überhaupt bewegen kann, verlieren Widerspruch und Kritik ihren Sinn. Widersprechen, Neinsagen behält nurmehr den Sinn von 'anders sein wollen'." In "Die verschlingung von Mythos und Aufklärung: Horkheimer und Adorno", Kap. 5 in *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985.
11. In later works Habermas uses the term 'formal pragmatics' instead of 'universal pragmatics'.
12. In the perspective of postmodernists (e.g. Lyotard) the relationship between the claim to truth and the ambition to be understood presents no problem since the differentiation between the two is in the process

- of dissolving. Lyotard (1992) questions the conception of knowledge which requires that knowledge not only should be comprehensible but should be relatable to shared perceptions of reality.
13. "Rules for press, radio and television" published by Pressens Samarbetsnämnd, (The Joint Committee of Press Associations) 1994.
 14. Mänskligt means 'human' and as a programme title might be "Humanity", but the word is much more mundane than the English.
 15. The notion of such universal preconditions has been the subject of heated and recurrent debate, the details of which I shall leave aside here. For an exposé of this debate see, for example, Benhabib (1992) and Holub (1991).
 16. This is hardly to say that concepts can be used as one pleases, but it is important that we do not get stuck in a kind of exegesis, boring into the meaning and derivation of concepts, particularly when we are dealing with theoreticians who constantly both generate and modify their theories. It should also be noted that I have only discussed portions of Habermas' communication theory; other parts of this theory might equally be applied in the type of analyses I propose.
 17. The normative aspects of the theory render power-play and manipulation susceptible to criticism. This is one of the prime advantages vis-à-vis postmodernism and Foucault's constructivism.
 18. See my critique of postmodernism above.
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