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What is This?

Critical realism and news production

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In recent years, critical realism[1] has risen to prominence. It has been fruitfully applied to various social sciences (Sayer, 2000). This represents a welcome development, challenging the postmodernist de-totalizing and depoliticized climate of the past two decades, which as Curran (1990a) notes, has also affected mass communication research, 'for better or worse'. This article endeavours to show that critical realism provides a fresh viewpoint on several well-researched aspects of the fundamental issue of news production.

The first section examines the prevailing typology in the sociology of news production, arguing that it is bedevilled by some inconsistencies. An alternative supplementary categorization is proposed, distinguishing factors that impact on news production and that shape the news product into two types: factors extraneous to journalists and internal factors deriving from journalists themselves within journalistic autonomy. In the existing literature, approaches highlighting extraneous factors are all implicitly realist; the social constructionist school that focuses on the internal factors of routine journalistic practices is explicitly anti-realist; while the epistemological nature of news values, which constitute internal factors, is left unexamined. As a result, there is an ever-present danger that the concept of journalistic autonomy leads to anti-realist conclusions, especially in the current postmodernist climate. Hence the need to provide realist accounts of the concepts of news values and routine journalistic practices.

The second section establishes the realist epistemological nature of news values by means of the critical realist concepts of the three domains of reality and the stratification of reality. Social constructionists see news as a purely constructed discursive reality deriving solely from routine journalistic practices, and these practices as objectivations or externalizations[2] of

journalists' self-deriving meanings. The third section shows that the social constructionist view of news is self-invalidating, and the fourth provides a realist account of routine journalistic practices.

The fifth section discusses some implications of our realist analysis. One crucial issue concerns whether the various factors seen to distort the representation of reality in news can be removed. It will be shown why, from a critical realist view, some internal factors can never conceivably be removed, and what the implications of that are. The various schools in the prevailing typology have functioned like Kuhnian paradigms. Without intending to replace them, our analysis does enable a unified realist approach to news production premised on the critical realist concepts of open system and multiple causal powers, according to which news is an overdetermined product. Such a conception enables the understanding of any divergence between news and underlying reality on a realist, instead of anti-realist, basis.

The sociology of news production revisited

In the sociology of news production, three approaches are generally distinguished: the politico-economic, the organizational and the culturalist (McNair, 1994; Schudson, 1989, 1996), on the basis of the different factors that shape the news product. This is clearly a useful typology, but it does have some problems. First, where does the concept of news values fit in it? Schudson problematically[3] puts it under the culturalist approach. McNair mentions the value of frequency only, putting it under the organizational approach. Clearly, it seems difficult to accommodate the concept in the prevailing typology.

Second, there is some ambiguity as to what exactly constitutes the culturalist approach. Schudson refers to diverse studies under this category, some of which (e.g. R.D. Laing's Freudian account of sensational news) appear to stretch the sense of culturalist too far. McNair mentions Hall et al.'s (1978) work and subsequent developments deriving from it only, stating that it 'actively seeks to integrate' the politico-economic and organizational approaches. However, none of the factors considered in Hall et al.'s study comes from the politico-economic view, as Curran (1990b) observes in relation to the culturalist perspective generally.

In view of the above, as a supplement to the prevailing typology, an alternative categorization is to distinguish factors that impact on news production into factors *extraneous* to journalists[4] and factors *internal* to them. Thus, factors such as ownership, government regulations, technical and logistical factors, newspaper size and the like constitute extraneous factors. Factors such as professional journalistic practices, and ideologies

and values held by journalists constitute internal factors deriving from journalists themselves.[5] Extraneous factors act as *constraints* on journalists, whereas internal factors exercise their effects within journalistic *autonomy*. This autonomy is not, of course, an unpredictable quality, but patterned precisely by the internal factors.

Our distinction highlights another problem of the prevailing typology. Schudson (1989, 1996) cites Epstein (1973) on the one hand, and on the other scholars such as Fishman (1997), Molotch and Lester (1974) and Tuchman (1978) as belonging to the organizational approach. However, Epstein's (1973: xiv, 25, 29) study is based upon organizational theory, according to which he sees news organizations as business organizations with 'internal needs', and 'members of such organizations eventually modif[ying] their own personal values in accordance with the requisites of the organization'. He specifically counterposes these 'internal needs' to journalistic autonomy, which he describes as 'standards that lie outside the organization'. Hence Epstein's 'internal needs' act as *extraneous constraints* on journalists. In direct contrast, Fishman and others do not think in terms of extraneous constraints, organizational or otherwise, at all, but focus instead on journalists' professional practices, which constitute *autonomous internal* factors. Like Schudson, McNair (1994: 47) seems untroubled by this contradiction. On the one hand, he references Rock (1981) who, echoing Epstein, speaks of 'institutional imperatives'. On the other, referencing Tuchman, he states that 'A variant of the "organizational" approach explains journalistic output in relation to . . . "routine professional practices"'.

Schudson does note that Epstein's study is based on organizational theory and mentions Tuchman's and others' social constructionism.[6] However, he amazingly claims that these two '*theoretical* source[s]' are 'complementary' (1996: 149, emphasis added). There is indeed some *topical* overlap between them, for example concerning journalists' dependence on sources. However, the social constructionist interpretation of source dependence sees it as being 'justified by a *professionally shared* notion of news' (Tuchman, 1978: 23, emphasis added). In contrast, the organizational-theoretic argument is that as a result of the *extraneous* 'timetabling demands of a newspaper organization', 'journalists position themselves so that they have ready access to institutions which generate a useful volume of reportable activity at useful intervals' (Rock, 1981: 68–9).

This brings us to a crucial theoretical point that our distinction between extraneous and internal factors highlights. Approaches that focus on extraneous factors are implicitly realist in a double ontological sense. First, these factors exist objectively. Second, whereas news does not accurately reflect reality as in the mirror metaphor, it does derive from an objective reality. Thus, in Epstein's view, to cite one of his many illustrations,

network news is skewed toward events occurring in geographical areas such as New York and Washington for budgetary reasons. Both the events in these over-represented areas and the budgetary reasons exist objectively. With regard to dependence on sources: organizational deadlines and timetabling imperatives are objective factors, while events conveyed by sources exist objectively.

In contrast, the philosophical underpinnings of approaches that focus (partly or wholly) on internal factors are varied. With regard to the internal factors of society-wide ideologies and values shared by journalists, the situation is unproblematic. People holding certain ideologies and values have skewed perspectives on reality, which nonetheless derive from an objective reality.

The situation with routine journalistic practices is radically different. Social constructionist scholars who focus on these practices take an explicit anti-realist position. As the fourth section of this article shows, these practices are seen as objectivations of journalists' self-deriving meanings. News is seen as neither reflecting nor distorting any objective reality, but as a purely constructed discursive reality reflecting only routine practices. Surprisingly, since this view was first formulated in the 1970s, it has never been explicitly challenged for its anti-realist position. Instead, as noted, it has been taken as 'theoretically complementary' to the various implicitly realist approaches.

As observed, the concept of news values does not sit comfortably with the prevailing typology. In our distinction, however, news values clearly constitute internal factors. What is the epistemological nature of news values? For instance, are news values objectivations of journalists' self-deriving meanings? Or are they premised upon an objective ontological basis? These evidently crucial questions have never been raised before, resulting in news values being potentially seen as *arbitrary* features of journalism.

With the routine practices interpreted in social constructionist terms and the epistemological nature of news values left unexamined, the upshot is that when the focus is on journalistic autonomy, despite the implicit realism of the culturalist argument of journalists sharing society-wide ideologies and values, an anti-realist view of news often results. Thus Thompson (1995: 117, emphasis added) states: 'the media shape, influence . . . and, indeed, *create* events that would not have existed in their absence'. Even Bourdieu (1996: 22), often considered to be a disguised economic determinist, states: 'television, which claims to record reality, creates it instead'. Such anti-realist conclusions are especially prone to be made in the current postmodernist climate. Thus, it is important to provide realist accounts of the internal factors of both news values and routine journalistic practices.

A realist account of news values

Galtung and Ruge (1965) argue that various factors (henceforth known as news values) determine how some events, and not others, become news. Their implicit *ontological* position is realist: events are objective. But our concern is rather with the *epistemological* nature of news values, that is, what underpins them as a form of consciousness. Since the various news values are well known, let's simply list them: frequency, amplitude, clarity–ambiguity, meaningfulness (cultural proximity and relevance), consonance, unexpectedness and rarity within the meaningful and the consonant, thematicity (something that's been defined as news continues to be news), composition, elite-centeredness (both with respect to nations and people), personalization, and consequential negativity.[7] Subsequent research has added eventalization and conflict-bias (conflicts being favoured over consensus) (Allan, 1999).

The most-critiqued news values are personalization, eventalization and clarity–ambiguity (in relation to issue avoidance). Gitlin's (1980: 28) view is typical: 'news concerns the *event*, not the underlying condition; the *person*, not the group . . . the fact that "*advances the story*", not the one that explains it'. Eventalization and personalization (or its more general form, individualization) are opposed to issue orientation. As Tiffen (1989: 178–81) puts it, Three Mile Island (an individual event) was news, years of warning against nuclear power previously (an issue) was not. One news analysis programme producer states: 'We never have . . . talk [sic] about Education in Crisis. But if we found one school that seemed to represent all that's good and bad about Australian education then we could focus on that one school' (cited in Tiffen, 1989: 194).

What underpins the above values? In Bhaskar's (1997: 36) view, post-Cartesian Western philosophy has fallen into an 'epistemic fallacy', the 'idea that being [ontology] can always be analyzed in terms of our knowledge [epistemology] of being'. This is why Hume argues that because we have no way of *knowing* natural necessity from sensory observation (in his view, the sole basis of knowledge), there *is* no natural necessity. To counteract this, Bhaskar restores ontology to science by posing the question: what must the world (ontology) be like for science (epistemology) to be possible at all? Thinking along this line, in order to ascertain what underpins news values (i.e. to ascertain their epistemological nature), it is necessary to begin with what reality is like.

Bhaskar distinguishes between three domains of reality: domain of the real (Dr), domain of the actual (Da) and domain of the empirical (De). Da is the domain of events, De the domain of perceived events. Perception may, however, be out of phase with events due to unperceived events (e.g. a layman being unable to recognize what's happening in the brain from a CT scan) or misperceived events (e.g. the sun 'rises'). Given a specific

state of knowledge, some events will remain unperceiv*able*, but disregard-ing them, for Da to equate to De, scientific training and (often) the use of scientific equipment are required. Dr consists of active things (complex and pre-formed structures such as the chemical composition of material objects and magnetic fields) and structures of active things. It is unavailable to direct sensory inspection or immediate intuition. Both active things and structures possess causal generative mechanisms or powers to cause change in themselves or other things and structures. Such changes constitute events at the level of Da. Since the world is an open system, events are, to use an Althusserian term, overdetermined by more than one generative mechan-ism. To isolate a particular mechanism or causal law, experimental clos-ure is required, that is, Dr equates to Da only under experimental conditions. Note that Dr, Da and De are all part of reality. In open systems, it is rare that Dr = Da = De. Further, reality is stratified. Thus, the biological stratum is premised upon, though not wholly reducible to, the chemical stratum, and so on. Each stratum has its own irreducible generative mechanisms in its Dr.

   At the stratum of the social world, Dr consists of social structure. A social structure is an ensemble of (relatively) enduring relations between 'points' in the 'position–practice system' occupied by individuals and groups, and 'relations between such relations (and between such relations and nature and the product of such relations)' (Bhaskar, 1998: 28–9). Though relations in general do not exist *apart from* their relata, their reality and causal powers are independent of, irreducible to and hence cannot be explained in terms of the relata.[8] Similarly, social structure does not exist apart from social agents and their self-conceptualized practices, but its reality and causal powers are independent of, irreducible to, and thus cannot be explained in terms of, these agents and their self-conceptualized practices. Existing at Dr, social structure is not directly perceivable. Moreover, because experiments cannot be performed on the social world, it is impossible to empirically make manifest social structure's generative mechanisms, as can be done in some natural sciences. Hence these mechanisms can only be identified theoretically while, given the openness of social reality, empirical checking of their effects is always imperfect. As Bhaskar (1997: 195) says, social structure 'can only be known, not shown, to exist'. Finally, social reality comprises social structure, social agents and their self-conceptualized practices. Social structure exists at Dr, the rest at Da and De.

   Given the ontological nature of social reality, the epistemological nature of news values becomes evident. News *necessarily* eventalizes and person-alizes because people are not spontaneously social scientists.[9] Social structure cannot be perceived. What can be perceived are people and changes occurring to them in the flux of their self-conceptualized activities. Even collectivities or groups (perhaps with the exception of units such as

the family) are not directly perceivable, but can only be *conceived* of by means of mediated thought. In sum, people spontaneously cognize[10] reality at De in terms of *events* concerning (changes occurring to) *people* (in the flux of action).[11]

Like ordinary people, journalists spontaneously remain at De. News eventalizes and personalizes because these are features of the spontaneous everyday cognition of social reality. Not that news cannot handle mediated thought – it certainly can and does, just as ordinary people can and do. But there are evidently limits to the degree of mediation attainable in everyday cognition.

In this connection, Eliasoph's (1997: 250–1) report on her experience of working in an oppositional radio station operated by left-wing political activists and funded by politically oriented listeners is instructive: 'Even [the station's] audience, probably some of the most politically concerned in the United States . . . is more interested in the daily diet of facts than the longer analytical pieces.' Thus, even analytically minded news consumers do not take an analytical attitude toward the bulk of what happens around them. There is no reason why the same should not apply to journalists.

From this view, the abstractness and ambiguity of issues actually boil down to the involvement of mediated thought rising above spontaneous everyday cognition of social reality. Journalists have specific professional reasons to avoid abstractness and ambiguity in connection with some of their values-practices, which will be examined later, but underpinning that are these spontaneous cognitive features they share with ordinary people.

In sum, eventalization, personalization and issue avoidance are spontaneous everyday cognitive features transposed to news production. Galtung and Ruge argue that the frequency factor underpins the focus of the news on short-term events. Most analysts seem to agree. Hall (1981: 154) states: 'I have been told that this kind of "background piece" would be provided by the longer reports at the weekend.' But longer, less frequent pieces may nevertheless remain entirely at De. For instance, most annual review trend analyses are limited to an extended charting of *events*. In fact, one veteran journalist informed this author that when she wrote longer reports for an American-managed news weekly, personalization figured even more prominently than in daily reporting, a point corroborated by the Australian news analysis programme producer's remark cited earlier.

Galtung and Ruge attribute news values to commonsense perception psychology, as do contemporary followers such as Westerstahl and Johansson (1994). The importance of this point has generally been missed. We have provided an account of eventalization, personalization and issue avoidance in cognitive (epistemological) terms, but Galtung and Ruge's psychological account of *selective* perception does apply well to most of the other news values.[12] Thus, the relationship between amplitude and noticeability, as a 'fundamental idea in the psychology of perception', can

hardly be disputed. That people are more prone to perceive what they can relate to or identify with (meaningfulness), tend to attend to the anticipated and the wished for (which underpins consonance), and are more easily attracted to the unexpected and the rare within the meaningful and the consonant, all follow from 'fairly simple [perception psychological] reasoning'.

To conclude, news presents a specific representation of reality based upon certain news values; however, this is not due to some non-reality-based arbitrary features, but because these values are basically spontaneous everyday cognitive (confinement to De) and selective perceptive (within De) features transposed to news production.[13] News construction in this respect does no 'violence' to reality (in relation to people's indirect experience) that people do not themselves do (in relation to their direct experience).

Does news record anything out there?

Since social constructionism is based upon Alfred Schutz's social phenomenology, hereinafter we refer to it as phenomenological social constructionism (PSC). It will be useful to briefly review PSC as stated by its founders. Berger and Luckmann (1967: 104, 58) state: 'As man externalizes himself, he constructs the world into which he externalizes himself. In the process of externalization, he projects his own [ultimately self-deriving] meanings into reality.' 'Social structure [sic] is the sum total of . . . [Schutzian] typifications and of the recurrent patterns of interaction established by means of them.' 'The habitualizations and typifications . . . [are] conceptions of . . . individuals.' In this process, individuals (or groups of individuals) advance 'competing definitions' of 'commonsense knowledge' or, in contemporary terminology, competing discourses. Whatever emerges as 'commonsense knowledge' from this competition constitutes 'reality'. As what is called an 'objective facticity',[14] this 'reality' exists entirely on what Bhaskar calls the transitive dimension. There is no concept of social structure as consisting of intransitive relations.[15]

Applying PSC to news, Molotch and Lester (1974: 102) state: 'Our conception is not of a finite set of things that "really happened out there" from which selection is made.' Fishman (1997: 211, 213) argues:

> . . . news is neither a reflection nor a distortion of reality because either of these characterizations implies that news can record what is 'out there' . . . the notion of 'news selectivity' [is wrong] . . . in its assumption [of the existence of] . . . entities 'out there' in the world.

If news neither reflects nor distorts what really happens out there, what does it reflect then? Molotch and Lester (1974: 105, 111) see news 'as reflecting . . . the practices of those having the power to determine the

experience of others'. Fishman (1997: 211) states: 'News stories, if they reflect anything, reflect the practices of [journalists].' Thus, in PSC terminology, news consists of journalists' own discursive 'competing definitions' deriving from their routine practices in a process of the social construction of reality.

News does reflect the routine practices *in the sense* that news is constructed *partly* on their basis. But this correct insight of *how* news is partly constructed must not be conflated with the entirely different question of where the *contents* of what the practices have contributed to make into news come from. Surely, they cannot be derived from these self-same practices?

Rejecting the existence of something out there, Molotch and Lester (1974) nonetheless talk of 'what happened', 'happening', 'underlying happening', 'occurrence' and 'event'. Fishman (1997: 214, 215, 222, 224, all emphasis added) says: 'Happenings that become news must first become *objects* of experience'; he mentions '*things* going on right under a reporter's nose'; 'The incident was not reported. . . . It was a nonevent not in the sense that *it was* never *seen*'; 'though they [reporters] literally "saw" *something*'. But if these referents ('underlying happenings' and the like) are 'underlying', surely they are actually out there and have been seen, though they may not have been reported and thus transformed into news 'events'?

This is a classic case of what Woolgar and Pawluch (1985) call 'ontological gerrymandering'. On the one hand, in accordance with PSC, news is seen as purely discursive by, in PSC terminology, 'bracketing' its ontological basis, that is, supposing it to record nothing out there. On the other hand, contrary to PSC, the ontological status of referents is tacitly taken as given. Hence, the entire PSC thesis concerning news is epistemologically self-invalidating.

The only way to avoid ontological gerrymandering would be to eschew all empirical referentiality and withdraw into a theory of news as purely non-referential discursive games. This is, of course, what Derridean discourse theory is about. There is no space here to critique how such a move would be intellectually self-defeating, suffice it to say that, willingly or not and aware or not, PSC scholars in media studies such as Molotch and Lester and Fishman, and their contemporary followers such as Surette (1998), have worked on the premise that news is referential and hence epistemologically self-invalidating.

A realist account of routine journalistic practices

Though this is not explicitly stated, in accordance with PSC, the routine practices can only be conceptualized as objectivations of journalists' self-

deriving meaningful (inter-)actions as they negotiate within clusters of similar interactions (which constitute the news organization). Thus, Tuchman (1978: 183, 23) rejects the view that news 'presents to a society a mirror of its concerns and interests', arguing instead that what journalists present is 'justified by a professionally shared notion of news'.[16] This 'shared notion' arises from the above objectivation process.

For simplicity, we focus on the practices around 'facticity',[17] 'objectivity' and source dependence to critique PSC's subjectivist account of the routine practices. Tuchman (1972, 1978) examines verification procedures for 'facts', as well as showing how, when verification becomes unfeasible or impossible, 'finding facts entail[s] demonstrating impartiality by removing oneself [the journalist] from a story' by means of attributing the 'fact'-claim to a source. She also shows how 'fact'-claims from opposing sources are counter-balanced in the journalists' 'strategic ritual of objectivity'. She further speaks of the spatial anchoring of the 'news net' at centralized institutional sites.

Tuchman provides a phenomenological account of these practices, such as how the journalists' methods of the 'natural attitude' would or would not require 'facts' to be verified (and if so, to what extent). But such accounts simply *describe* what journalists do, they don't actually *explain* why they do what they do. As Berger and Luckmann (1967) explicitly state, social phenomenology does not engage in genetic (and causal) analysis. However, it is precisely genetic analysis which shows that the routine practices cannot be understood as objectivations of journalists' *self-deriving* meaningful (inter-)actions.

The historical genesis of the practices, and the associated values, around 'facticity' and 'objectivity' in Anglo-American journalism is well known, so much so that to go over it here seems superfluous. However, as this has never been used to debunk the phenomenological account of the routine practices, let us briefly consider it.

In Britain, the value of 'facticity' (separating 'fact' from opinion) emerged out of the previous partisanship due to economic considerations – fear of alienating part of the readership reinforced by rising costs (Asquith, 1978; Lee, 1978; Smith, 1979). In the US, the sales revenue dependent 'penny press', whose emergence Schudson (1978) attributes to the rise of 'democratic market society', pledged to record 'facts' and declared political independence from both government and party. The wire services enabled by the telegraph's invention had to be non-partisan for similar economic reasons. Relays were restricted to bare 'facts' for technical-economic reasons (Allan, 1997).

Emerging in opposition to partisanship, the terminology around 'facticity' consisted of 'truth' and (political) 'neutrality' or 'impartiality' up to the 1920s (Allan, 1997). However, the experience of wartime propaganda during the First World War and the contemporaneous rise of public

relations made American journalists wary of their previous 'naïve empiricist' devotion to 'facticity', leading to an emphasis on the rules and procedures for establishing 'facts' (Schudson, 1978).

'Fact'-claims could, of course, be subject to analysis. But this was not feasible for various practical reasons (Schudson, 1978), while any large-scale re-introduction of analysis would be against the recently established value of 'facticity'. The alternative that actually developed was to balance one 'fact'-claim with another made by a counter-posed source. This constituted the notion of 'objectivity', which has lived on until now.

Hence, the emergence of the values and practices around 'facticity' and 'objectivity' was overdetermined as journalism developed as a social practice in the context of a conjunction of socio-economic (rise of 'democratic market society'), economic (broadening readership, cost considerations, rise of public relations), historical (reaction against partisanship), political (wartime propaganda and rise of public relations) and technical-economic (the telegraph) factors.[18]

Concerning source dependence, Tuchman (1978: 18–24) states that the anchoring of the 'news net' at centralized institutional sites and the 'holes' (e.g. 'an unassigned social movement') in it are 'justified by a professionally shared notion of news'. A strong PSC reading of this implies that it is journalists' self-deriving norms, arrived at through interaction, that determine where the anchors are and are not placed. But Tuchman repeatedly speaks of 'logical locations where stories might be expected to occur', 'where stories supposedly appealing to contemporary news consumers may be expected to be found' and the like. This is, of course, a tacit admission that the 'news net' is determined by objective factors. As another example of how Tuchman (1978: 34) actually refutes her own PSC position, in a section entitled 'Negotiating Newsworthiness', she states: 'The metropolitan editor of a major daily would be mocked by his colleagues [at the editorial conference] if he suggested front-page coverage for an item about a small fire in a deserted garage'.

To conclude the discussion in this and the previous sections, while journalists are active agents, their routine practices have nonetheless arisen in the context of various objective factors. As internal factors that impact on news production, the effects of these practices are clearly manifest in the news product. However, that does not mean that news does not derive from objective reality.

Discussion: some implications of a critical realist reflection on news production

The above realist analysis highlights an important issue. Constraining extraneous factors can conceivably be removed. Can internal factors also

conceivably be removed? Obviously, some internal factors such as *specific* society-wide ideologies or values held by journalists are subject to change. However, from a critical realist view, other internal factors such as news values (except frequency) are hardly alterable because they represent spontaneous everyday cognitive and perceptual features transposed to news production. This implies that, even with the removal of other factors, news would still not provide an accurate representation of reality.

In critiquing the coverage of a Black Power 'riot' in Trinidad, Hall (1981: 154–5) laments that 'the explanatory concepts of "neo-colonialism" and "native bourgeoisie" were not available'; instead, the usual person-alized and eventalized categories such as 'the Prime Minister', 'resigna-tions from the government' were quickly wheeled out. In light of our analysis, such criticism amounts to demanding that journalists become critical sociologists and that news become social science.

Concerning routine journalistic practices, as seen, source dependence cannot be satisfactorily explained in PSC terms, but only in terms of frequency (which we hypothesize derives from socio-structural factors) and the concomitant 'institutional imperative' of meeting deadlines (itself derivative from news organizations being businesses). Evidently, these factors can conceivably be changed, if only over the very long term. However, it seems that source dependence of some kind and in some form will remain for simple *general* practical reasons. Moreover, dependence on establishment sources seems at least partially premised upon the news values of amplitude and elite-centeredness. A president's statement is generally privileged over statements of small pressure groups because, if for no other reason, of their differential impact. As a BBC journalist remarks, if the government puts out a legislative press release, 'that will be a story because it is actually a fact that affects people's lives' (cited in Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994: 168). To the extent that inequitable access is partially premised upon news values that are unalterable, it seems inevitable, though its degree and form may change under different socio-structural environments.

There is a bias against marginal groups, not only because of the effects of amplitude and elite-centeredness, but also because of the journalistic value of non-advocacy (Tuchman, 1978: 92). In contrast, inequitable access effectively permits establishment and resource-rich (not necessarily pro-establishment) sources to engage in de facto advocacy simply by letting them make statements. Thus, eradicating this discrimination requires either changing the value of non-advocacy, or overcoming the ability of estab-lished sources to engage in de facto advocacy, or both. As a historical product, the value of non-advocacy is subject to change if favourable circumstances exist. However, if, as argued, some degree of inequitable access is inevitable, journalists will have to be transformed into knowledge-

able analysts instead of simply letting sources make statements in order to eradicate de facto advocacy by established sources. But our analysis shows that such a general transformation of journalists seems impossible.

Closely related to inequitable access is the question of journalistic conceptions of competence and credibility. Again, every society has its prevalent conceptions of what Becker (1967) calls the 'hierarchy of authority'. It seems likely that, like news values in general, journalistic conceptions in this respect are largely everyday conceptions transposed to news production. Early studies tend to see such journalistic conceptions working hand in glove with the greater access enjoyed by establishment sources. Later studies see non-establishment sources as also capable of gaining authority. Authority may or may not be justified in terms of real competence and knowledge. But given that ordinary people, including journalists, are not spontaneously social scientists, this is to be expected and is to a large extent unavoidable. For instance, given what may be regarded as modern-day people's naïve empiricism, quantitative figures are commonly fetishized as being synonymous with objectivity. In the metropolis in which this author lives, a number of opinion pollsters have in the recent politically turbulent years been transformed into authoritative political analysts. This transformation may seem like a pure media creation, but from a realist view, it is at least partially premised upon the above fetishism.

As historical products, the values and practices surrounding 'facticity' and 'objectivity' are subject to change. Though how changes may possibly occur cannot be foretold, some possibilities seem unlikely. A return to a partisan media is a logical possibility. But even were 'facticity' and 'objectivity' to be overcome, would news be able to engage in a search for truth? Disregarding definitional problems concerning what constitutes truth, in so far as such a search, at least vis-à-vis certain subjects and on certain occasions, involves delving into Dr, it would be unrealistic to expect the media to be able to rise far above De.[19]

The above comments on inequitable access (and effective permitting of de facto advocacy by established sources), conceptions of authority unjustified by real competence and knowledge, and Dr versus De, evidently bear on Habermas' 'ideal speech situation' as a 'practical hypothesis',[20] whose empirical conditions of realization are seen as an a posteriori matter. There seems to be an intrinsic limit to the degree to which the media can serve as a Habermasian forum.

Since social struggle involves mediated consciousness, does the fact that news inevitably remains largely at De imply that news has inherent system-maintaining effects? The answer is 'no'. As the case of the Third World peasants previously mentioned shows (see note 11), the mediated consciousness in social struggle does not require delving into Dr. Social

struggles are not an intellectual undertaking. Whether news has system-maintaining or system-subverting effects or both (in varying combinations) depends on other factors.

The three approaches in the prevailing typology of the sociology of news production have functioned somewhat like Kuhnian paradigms. Kuhn sees rival paradigms as incommensurable. Indeed, realist and anti-realist approaches are incompatible. But once routine journalistic practices and news values are grounded on a realist basis, news production can be approached from a unified realist perspective. In critical realist terminology, the process of news production occurs in an open system, in which various factors (both extraneous and internal) possessing causal powers exist. Benton (1981), drawing upon Lukes' (1974) analysis of the three dimensions of power, argues that some social powers that exist may remain unexercised yet be actualized. In news production, the concept of unexercised but actualized causal power applies to extraneous factors, but not to internal factors whose causal powers will always be exercised. For instance, capitalist proprietors may not have to intervene (unexercised power) for journalists to do what is expected (actualized power). Curran's (1990b) concept of 'licensed autonomy' precisely expresses a form of unexercised but actualized power. On the other hand, causal powers may be exercised but unactualized by having their effects cancelled out by those of other causal powers. For instance, the government may intervene in media reporting (exercised power) but to no avail (unactualized power). It should be noted that conceptualizing news production as an open system leaves open the question of the relative determinative weight of the different causal factors. While it may be argued that the combined effects of many of these factors tend in many situations towards maintaining the dominance of established forces, and that the view of the media as a pluralistic site of widely open contestation (as postmodernist thinking makes fashionable) should therefore be rejected, critical realist insights do not enable us to draw any definite conclusion.

Conceptualizing news production as an open system from a unified realist perspective throws further light on the fallacy of PSC (and *pari passu* discourse-theoretic) arguments. For instance, one favourite early PSC theme is that crime waves are a non-reality-based media creation (Fishman, 1981). Even if there are occasions when crime reports diverge from the real crime situation (assuming this to be ascertainable), since in an open system news is an overdetermined product, such an occurrence need not be surprising. In fact, in analysing the British 'mugging' crisis of the early 1970s, this is in effect what Hall et al. argued (irrespective of the validity of their argument): the rise in the relevant crime rate, in comparison to an earlier period, did not justify the media's moral panic over 'mugging', which was actually precipitated by the hegemonic crisis of the state.

Concluding remarks

Despite the relative decline of the more politically oriented topics in media sociology in comparison to the rise of popular aesthetic topics, news production remains a fundamental issue. Reflecting on the insights of previous research into news production, this article argues that several interrelated aspects can be approached from a fresh angle on the basis of critical realism. The basic tenor of the sociology of news production is critical. In retaining this critical tenor, this article argues that some of the factors that distort the representation of reality (most news values, inequitable access and journalistic conceptions of authority and competence) are, however, either wholly or partially premised upon everyday spontaneous cognitive and perceptual features and conceptions. To say this is not to deny the active role of the media, but this active role should be understood on a realist basis.

News, therefore, will inevitably provide certain specific representations of reality, even if other distorting factors were to be removed. From this perspective, the critique of news with regard to the factors concerned requires some adjustment. For instance, it seems more useful to critique inequitable access in terms of its combined effects with the value of non-advocacy as explained above. As another example, the critique of journalistic conceptions of authority and competence can be seen to be a formidable task.

Our analysis enables a unified realist approach to news production. The objective is not to replace the existing paradigms but to make them commensurable by means of the critical realist concepts of an open system and multiple causal powers. With news production occurring in an open system, news is an overdetermined product. As such, any divergence between news and underlying reality is the outcome of specific configurations of actualized causal powers.

Finally, the reflections in this article serve an exploratory purpose, which hopefully will stimulate critical realist investigations into various aspects of media and communication research.

Notes

The author is grateful to the anonymous reviewers.

1. Critical realism is a particular defence of realism (the ontological belief in the existence of an objective, extra-discursive reality and the concomitant epistemological belief that knowledge can gain access to it), especially as applied to social science. In this article, it refers to transcendental realism (Bhaskar, 1997) and 'first moment critical naturalism' (Bhaskar, 1998: vii), ignoring Bhaskar's subsequent more contentious dialectical critical realism.

2. These social constructionist terms contrast with the realist terms of 'objectivity' and 'externality'.

3. Problematically because Schudson himself wonders *en passant* whether or not the value of personalization might be 'universal'.

4. The term 'journalist' is used in a generic sense, abstracting from differences between, for example, reporters and editors.

5. Curran (1990b) speaks of 'ideological influences', which seems to imply that such influences constitute an extraneous factor. However, journalists do not subscribe to ideologies and values as something *imposed* upon them extraneously, but *share* them as members of society. Hence, ideologies and values held *spontaneously* by journalists constitute not extraneous, but internal factors.

6. Schudson also mentions symbolic interactionism, which applies more to Tuchman than the others, a point to be addressed in due course.

7. Galtung and Ruge (1965) regard the last three factors as (Western) culture-bound, the rest as culture-free. But curiously, they explain consequential negativity (wholly) and personalization (partially) in terms of several of the culture-free factors. As shown below, personalization is also rife in non-Western cultures. Elite-centeredness is explained in terms of, *inter alia*, consequential weight, which is clearly linked to amplitude and does not appear to be culture-bound.

8. Sayer (1992: 119) gives a simple example to illustrate this. Water is formed from a specific structural (molecular) relation between two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. It does not exist apart from these atoms, yet its reality and causal powers are not reducible to them. Thus, water has the capacity to extinguish fire, whereas both hydrogen and oxygen are highly inflammable.

9. For argument's sake, we ignore the element of ideology in social science.

10. Hereafter, 'cognize', 'cognitive' and 'cognition' are meant in the epistemological sense. Cognition includes perception in the psychological sense.

11. To illustrate, *pace* Galtung and Ruge, the universality of personalization, watching a documentary years ago on the communist-led peasant struggle in a developing country, I was impressed by how some peasants tied up a kneeling landlord and hurled abuse on him, asking myself: were the peasants made to understand that the problem wasn't with this or that particular landlord but with structural relations of which the landlord was a personification, wouldn't that make their struggle more rational? But, of course, that was an armchair intellectual demanding the peasants to delve into Dr. As seasoned politicians and political activists well know, to mobilize people, one needs to pin things down to concrete cases involving concrete individuals. The peasants' case also shows that although they had been mobilized to think in mediated class terms, thereby rising above immediate cognition, class for them was still grounded in individual persons.

12. One exception is frequency, which actually appears to have a social origin. In his ethnographic study of indigenous Algerians, Bourdieu argues that their consciousness of time is different from that of modern Europeans and explains this socio-structurally (see Lane, 2000). Hence, there is reason to believe that modern-day people's demand for daily news is not premised upon any intrinsic cognitive or psychological basis. While this awaits research to be established as a hypothesis, the daily cycle might be understood in the realist terms of (a) the shortened rhythm of social life in general in capitalist society as capital attempts to turnover as rapidly as possible, and (b) media capital's own attempt to increase the turnover rate.

13. I say 'basically' because other factors also come into play. For instance, besides being event-oriented, conflicts are also dramatic, which fulfils the enter-

tainment requirement of news. These other factors can, of course, also be given a realist explanation.

14. The term 'objective facticity' is in contrast to the realist term 'objective facts'. We will be discussing the journalistic value of 'facticity' later on. In that context, the term is used *not* in the PSC sense.

15. The intransitive dimension of knowledge refers to the external world that exists independently of our transitive knowledge of it.

16. Apart from PSC, Tuchman also follows Goffman, without realizing that, as Collins (1994) shows, Goffman's theoretical position is antithetical to PSC.

17. Facts are always theory-laden, although, contrary to Kantian idealism, that there are no non-theory-laden facts does not mean that science cannot objectively access Dr. We use the terms 'facticity', 'facts' and 'factual' in relation to news in quotes not because we reject the notion of objective facts, nor because we think that news is incapable of recording facts, but in order to underline the point that though facts (without quotes) are being recorded in news, at the same time, as a result of the development of the journalistic profession, journalists also regularly record as 'facts' (in quotes) what are simply statements attributable to sources instead of real facts (without quotes).

18. Tuchman (1978: 157) remarks that she has 'not demonstrated that contemporary news frames develop in concert with other institutions and are historically linked to them', and briefly considers Schudson (1978). However, she does not clarify whether or not Schudson's study is seen as providing the genetic analysis missing in her own work, and if so, what its implications for her phenomenological account are, or if not, how we are to understand the relationship between Schudson's account and her own of the practices concerned.

19. Hence, Lichtenberg (1996) conflates the question 'Is there objective truth?' with the quite different question 'Can news arrive at objective truth?'

20. While Habermas understands the 'ideal speech situation' first and foremost as a presupposed, if counterfactual, constitutive condition of the meaning of discourse, he nonetheless intends it to be more than a Kantian regulative principle, and sees it both as being socially effective because 'immanent' in society's life-process and as a 'practical hypothesis' (see McCarthy, 1981).

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