

Journalism Research

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Contribute more, broadcast less

On the role of feedback and articulation in a model of “elevated journalism”

By Sebastian Köhler

Abstract: The paper discusses the extent to which journalism needs to take its function of articulation more seriously and fulfil it more effectively as part of the profession’s public role. To do this, the paper develops aspects of a model of “elevated journalism” – an approach that also includes dialectic criticism of key tendencies in established journalism. Working with feedback from users, be it actual or anticipated, is expected to gain importance in future if journalism is still to maintain a place in societies that are constantly modernizing in so many ways.

1 An elevation?

An important distinction to start: As an achievement of modern civilization, journalism should be elevated rather than out of touch (cf. Jarren 2015: 114ff.). Elevated in what sense? To decide, we need to assume that continuity and discontinuity in social developments are interdependent (cf. Fuchs 2017: 262f.). A new phase of social development would elevate previous phases in such a way that existing features could be 1.) retained, 2.) eliminated or 3.) supplemented with new qualities to a certain extent. The degree to which this occurs can be determined by coincidence and necessity; by structures and actions; by crises and social conflict. One example is the debate in Switzerland and Germany in spring 2018 about the future of public broadcasting. In line with the proposals outlined here, one solution would be to elevate it: An open, public debate would be held and decisions made on which areas should be retained, shut down or raised to a new level, and to what extent.

2 Who is in which “filter bubble”?

One key aspect, not least of the debates about the future of SRF, ARD, ZDF etc. seems to be the fact that, for a while now, many people have criticized modern journalism in the Western world as an elitist project – from both a practical and, increasingly, a theoretical point of view. It is indeed hard to deny that journalism was and is shaped by an elite (Jarren 2015:113ff., cf. Steindl 2017: 403). This is the result of its links to economic elites (formerly the upwardly-mobile property-owning

bourgeoisie as owners), political elites (the emerging capitalist states and today those who profit from globalization, for example) and cultural elites (not least the once social-liberal and now “green” educated middle class that produces more than its fair share of young journalists in Germany (ibid.[1])).

I therefore hope that my thoughts will contribute to models of journalism and journalism studies that help to foster successful communication in society (cf. Dath: 2012: 427). That is the logic behind my proposals for reflection and practical application: more varied and open contributions, rather than one-sided broadcasts.

After all, journalism can be understood as a social field in which society’s knowledge is (re)constructed based on relevant contributions. In this sense, the word ‘contribution’ is used normatively to mean something made on an equal footing between those involved, and as such different from more one-sided broadcasts with a certain sense of mission. Journalistic contributions can thus be determined as interactive communication between producers and the public that is ideally informative for everyone involved (cf. Köhler 2009: 10ff.).

3 Elevated in terms of information?

So how can we define information more closely in this direction? According to Dietmar Dath and Barbara Kirchner, information is not a property of physical objects, but a relationship between such properties and our options for interacting with these objects. Both need to exist - we can never know objects other than in the form of the relationships we have with them (Dath 2012: 806). Material and its transformations can be systematized at body level between structures and materials, and at field level between energies and information (Schlegel 1996: 105ff.).

If we look at the tribal history of humans, a four-tiered historic sequence of change can be seen.

In a layered model like this, the older formation in each case is elevated by the subsequent formations. ‘Structure transformation’ (Stone Age/ancient civilization) and ‘material transformation’ (Metal Ages to Middle Ages) thus complement one another at the ‘body’ level, while the same can be said for ‘energy transformation’ ((pre-/post-)modern industrial age) and ‘information transformation’ (historically open) at the ‘field’ level.

We can therefore pinpoint two key roles for such elevated journalism:

1. Journalismus as a relatively self-sufficient factor in societal communication (“engine”) in its co-focus of attention that is open to criticism (both in the form of journalism that is accelerating all the time and in the deliberately slower form);
2. Journalism as a special medium (“mouthpiece”) in its feedback-rich co-moderation of debates in society (cf. Meier 2013: 63).

Especially in its uses, with its practical value for the individual, the community and society, journalism could gain a new type of social relevance, not least given the blurring of boundaries that is currently underway (hybridization e.g. towards citizens' journalism and data journalism). In their not only passive, but also in terms of possibilities diversely participative appropriations, journalistic services as contributions might become "building blocks of societal self-understanding" (Lüneborg 2012: 453) – elements of social and public self-criticism, self-limitation and self-regulation.

Suggestions from Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology allow journalism to be defined as "doing journalism" that is open to involvement, and as public, communicative forms of intercourse in the broader sense of social practice between expert and layperson cultures that could lose all distinction here (Wiedemann 2014: 83ff.; Lüneborg 2012: 454f.). Journalism studies as a laboratory of change in journalism should therefore both describe and analyze the production of journalistic processes of interpretation and develop changed communicative practices experimentally. When it comes to questions of journalism, democracy and participation, forms of participative communication in and between changing societal and communal public (sub-)spheres are of interest, with a view to established and newer power structures in the social and journalistic field (Lüneborg 2012: 456).

The journalism studies laboratory focuses less on providing training in established journalistic forms and more on experimentally designing, testing and evaluating – i.e. also 'elevating' new types of contribution in more participative forms than previously, with corresponding feedback. Diversity in editorial offices should increase in many respects, for example through the employment of more migrants in the field of journalism (cf. Pöttker 2016: 11ff.). There might then be justification to hope for the development of experimental content and forms that appeal more and better to classes and groups that have been underprivileged in terms of journalism up to now, in order to open up discussion with them on an equal footing. These groups include women and girls, the unemployed, people with experience or fear of losing social status, those with little formal education, young people from low-income backgrounds, people with a background of migration, and people with certain sexual or gender orientations.

After all, it appears that the articulative role of journalistic media is still underestimated as an important part of its public function (see German state press laws). In a study (Steindl 2017: 420), just 46.9 percent of the journalists in Germany questioned stated that they found it extremely or very important to "give people the opportunity to articulate their views." 48.9 percent of women questioned gave this response, while the figure for freelance journalists was just 37.5 percent. This indicates that editorial offices certainly tend to need more resources for a style of working that is open to feedback. Those working in newsrooms today have the chance to hear more than ever before, with feedback (including negative and critical feedback) an integral part of the ever more dynamic editorial routine. However, there is clearly a need for change if we are to prevent mainstream journalism from becoming potentially the most powerful of all filter bubbles (as described by Norbert Bolz, among others, see Klöckner 2017). It is therefore vital that forums and comment functions are not closed – even though their maintenance is sometimes hard work and may not increase the output per se. However, the at least cultural and technical opportunities for

participatory communication (cf. Köhler 2015:13ff.) beyond traditional and new elites could become a central moment for renewing and developing journalism as a resource for successful communication within society and thus for social self-design.

Despite the risks for its traditional practices, journalism would thus gain important opportunities for fundamental renewal, as long as it did not remain a primary means for other purposes – for example to create an audience for consumption of advertising messages or to shape loyal citizens. Much more than in the past, it can become a purpose in itself (cf. Kiefer 2011 & 2011a): towards global, intergenerational, social and environmental democratization. Journalists should therefore shift their attention away from contributions that determine facts to more open contributions: away from complaining about what journalism has lost, such as range, credibility and status, and towards processes of emergence, change and passing in which journalism itself plays a role, i.e. processes of ‘elevation’ of participatory public spheres.

4 Journalism as interaction - indications and links in media economics

Today, it is almost impossible to maintain a strict distinction between communicators and recipients (Kiefer 2017: 682ff.). As a result, many media economists are trying to model journalism as more of a service and less of a typical property. They argue that “collaborative value creation” (Kiefer 2017: 688) should play a greater role and that recipients are therefore strengthened. Kiefer argues that, just like a university professor who acts as a producer of information when conducting research and a service provider when teaching, journalists today are both information producers and functional service providers for the users of their contributions at the same time. These services should “expand, change or improve” users’ knowledge of the researched topic “in interaction” with the users and factors they contribute (ibid.: 688). According to Kiefer, the focus is no longer merely on the mere “transfer of services from the journalist to the recipient” (ibid.: 689), but on interaction between the players in a spirit of informational sociality, with the co-productive aspects of cognition, communication and cooperation (cf. Fuchs 2017a). This means that, without collaboration from the users, journalists can neither provide their service nor create any other individual or social value (Kiefer 2017: 689) – they are simply reliant on collaboration from the users. Only by working together do the two sides have the resources needed to produce journalistic services. The logical consequence of this is that, ultimately, the final decision on the benefits of this in terms of the exchange and utility value lies with the users.

This could be regretted as a restriction on the (myth of) journalistic autonomy, but it can also be interpreted as a potential gain in terms of participation and democratization. If the users are taken more seriously than in many previous models – not least from a media economics point of view – this also means that the kind of cooperation needed for communication within society could often be rife with conflict or even doomed to fail (see ibid.) due to the structural asymmetries between the players in journalism. However, this model appears to offer a more useful explanation, both practically and theoretically, than naïve claims of the ‘independence’ of journalists. From a dialectic

point of view, the restrictions of production and usage processes mean that everyone involved shares responsibility for public information and the formation of opinions (Kiefer 2017: 690). Journalists should base their work on the needs and problems of those who use it – which is not the same as populistically giving the audience what they want to hear (Kiefer 2017: 696). It is important to pay attention to their interests and especially to feedback – in the context of social forms of interaction in individual, shared and societal communication (cf. Köhler 2001).

According to Kiefer, the discipline of cultural studies is particularly likely to employ service theory models of users as co-producers, as long as their studies describe interactive connections between media production, media text and reception behavior on the part of the audience (Kiefer 2017: 690). This is an effective starting point for a model of elevated journalism, as long as this specific economic perspective also engenders a move towards journalism and journalism studies that are “humbler” (Kiefer 2017: 693) and more self-critical. Journalism could therefore be modelled in a new way, as a public and especially expectation-oriented service provider. The specific public value it provides is the production of public spheres that enable and develop freedom of information and speech for all citizens of democratic societies. And, where journalism is understood in this way, its structure is based on “collaboration” (Kiefer 2017: 695f.). Journalists should therefore look for and promote collaboration from users in a very different way and more than before (Kiefer 2017: 696). Not least, it is about communicating and dialectically ‘elevating’ mutual expectations (Kiefer 2017: 697). According to Marie Luise Kiefer, this kind of perspective also enables “potential disruption” to be identified more easily, while the amalgamation of journalists’ roles as information producers (researchers) and service providers (communicators) can also be interpreted and criticized as another ambivalent aspect of convergence in the field of journalism (Kiefer 2017: 698f.)

5 Fake news and feedback

“Fake news” was named Word of the Year 2017 by the Collins English Dictionary, while “alternative facts” became Germany’s “ugliest word of the year” (cf. Fuchs 2018). It is not a new phenomenon, but the internet has inexorably increased its spread. But dealing with fake news should not be left to states and laws, nor to companies and algorithms. Instead, in order to promote social and environmental democratization, it should be addressed permanently by tiered public spheres with active users at every level. This would mean intermediaries like Google and Facebook doing their own part to help the formation of these kinds of more varied public spheres. One approach would be for them to pay people appropriately for curating this professional content and moderating the resultant debates on the large platforms. Christian Fuchs rightly highlights the fact that, as they are focused on economic concerns, intermediary corporations prioritize automation and big data over human practitioners. In contrast, he argues, as many people as possible should be involved much more to prevent the establishment of (even more) “profit over democracy.” According to Fuchs (2018), this interplay between journalists and users could create something totally new here: Laws should force media corporations around the world to employ journalists as fact checkers, for an appropriate salary. This would mean that, if enough or sufficiently qualified users triggered a certain

interaction, it would be much easier to help decide what was and was not appropriate democratically (not based on profit or power). Public or public service internet platforms appear a sensible alternative to intermediaries here. They should be free from advertising and slowed down as much as possible, in order to enable political debate and democratization in a new way.

6 Moving towards societies with more feedback

According to this approach, the focus would be on brokering the human exchange of information (both with other people and with nature) and the human exchange of energy (also with others and with nature). "Information relations and energy relations are the abstract (...) template for that which Marx calls the "means of production" and "productive forces" (Dath 2012-807). Back then, industrialization (productive forces) and capitalism (means of production) formed the historical frame of reference. But looking back, in terms of dialectics, it was also about "pedigree collapse relations between energy and information attributes," which Dath and Kirchner use to determine "the mutual emergence from one another of the different moments of the become, the becoming and the possible" (ibid.).

The normative point of reference in terms of enlightenment here is a political program that moves towards a "just self-production and self-regulation [of the species society] that are responsible in terms of energy and information". In economic terms, achieving this would mean that both distribution and production were socialized in such a way that people were not and could not be blackmailed, but could play a part in shaping society (Dath 2012-808). The common channels of public participation do not appear suitable for making politics "feedback richer" and thus more democratic (Dath 2012-427). Dath and Kirchner argue that, when protests and conflicts of societal relevance occur - be it for example surrounding the Castor transports in Germany, in the US town of Ferguson, Missouri in summer 2014 following the shooting of the black teenager Michael Brown by the police, or in connection with the G20 summit in Hamburg in 2017 - it is clear that "destruction and uncoordinated protest are very telegenic, sexy on the one hand and demoralizing on the other." Situations in which justified anger gets violently out of hand are the ideal place for the common mass media to demonstrate the two central aspects that make up their being. The authors describe these two "souls" as marketable sensationalism and the system-supporting propaganda function of many mass media. According to Dath and Kirchner, this sensationalism is less a product of the fact that information is a commodity in capitalism and more because news of natural disasters or large technical accidents serves to intensify existing fears of a loss of competitive advantage, unemployment and homelessness - in short, to update latent threats that the community constantly holds ready for the individual.

Those who are not as fearful about their position among people are more flexible in discussion and not as quick to panic or be mobilized in a mob (Dath 2012-809f.).

As a result, people can develop into creatures and creators of their own energy and information

possibilities (Dath 2012-808). Progress could then be redefined in terms of information, with the yardstick of the speed of development being the extent to which one no longer learns how things are or were, but instead learns how to learn how things are not yet and how this can be extracted from the way things are or were (Dath 2012-809).

A traditional “public sphere” would need to be reformulated and elevated in this direction, including as “production public spheres” (in the sense of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge), i.e. to be pluralized and improved. It would also be vital to establish and protect the access of as many people who are not and cannot be blackmailed to machines that can produce, save, transmit, encrypt or explicate energy and information, and that can calibrate, determine and change the proportions of transformation, implicate and explication between energy and information (Dath 2012-811f.). Elevated journalism should find and play its (proven and new) roles there. Cuts in social services, the destruction of the environment, violence and similar general signs of crisis and the increasingly authoritarian tendencies on display in such contexts show that, if these problems are not to be seized upon for authoritarian or fascist purposes, journalists still have a lot of work to do in terms of the cultural role of public media in the modern democratization of societies (Krüger 1992-220).

Bertolt Brecht made two clever suggestions. One was the proposal - much quoted and more topical today than ever - to transform broadcasting from an apparatus of distribution to one of communication, i.e. with a diverse range of changing perspectives and feedback at a whole new level. The less well-known of Brecht’s two ideas is to see popular sovereignty as sovereignty of arguments. In my view, this means modelling democracy as a form of intercourse for society as a whole, enlightened by information, whose cognitions, communications and cooperations reach an argumentative level, i.e. one that is convincing with as little force as possible.

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Footnote

[1] See also the study by Siegfried Weischenberg et al. "Journalismus in Deutschland 2005", overview published in Media Perspektiven, issue 7/2006, p. 346-361; see <https://www.wiso.uni-hamburg.de/fileadmin/sowi/journalistik/kvvarchiv/KvvArchiv/jouridmp.pdf>, accessed on 24.9.2017, 19.33)

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