DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 350 606   CS 213 538

AUTHOR   Overduin, Hendrik
TITLE   Meaning and Validity in Ethnographic Studies of
                Journalism: You Can't Have One without the Other.
PUB DATE   Aug 92
NOTE   31p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
                Association for Education in Journalism and Mass
                Communication (75th, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, August
                5-8, 1992).
PUB TYPE   Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints
                (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) --
                Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   *Communication Research; *Ethnography; Foreign
                Countries; Higher Education; *Journalism; *Research
                Methodology; *Validity
IDENTIFIERS   Canada; Communication Context; Empirical Research;
                *Habermas (Jurgen); *Journalism Research

ABSTRACT
                Journalists have some justification for dismissing
scholarly inquiries into their craft because communication science
does not take journalists and their craft seriously either. Empirical
research into journalistic practices fails to take journalism
seriously in the sense Jurgen Habermas outlined: meanings of news
texts are described without reference to the conditions of their
validity with respect to the news claims such texts are intended to
convey. A three-volume work by a team of University of Toronto
(Ontario, Canada) investigators (Richard Ericson, Patricia Baranek,
and Janet Chan) on how Canadian journalists and mass media work can
be taken as a paradigm for such empirical research. The theoretical
and methodological presuppositions of the Ericson-Baranek-Chan
research constitute a principled exclusion of validity as a
legitimate object of inquiry. This failure to include the question of
validity results in a forced, if not totally alien, account of
journalistic efforts to establish factuality. Their interpretation of
the news text overestimates its autonomous status by disregarding its
illocutionary force in proclaiming the news. By including Habermasian
insights into communicative action in their theoretical and
methodological approaches to journalistic news-making, sociological
interpreters will be more likely to address journalism as it is.
(Thirty-one references are attached.) (RS)

Meaning and Validity in Ethnographic Studies of Journalism: You Can't Have One Without the Other

By: Hendrik Overduin, PhD
University of Western Ontario
Graduate School of Journalism
London, Ont., Canada N6A 5B7

Meaning and Validity in Ethnographic Studies of Journalistic Practices: You Can't Have One Without The Other

Many journalists and some journalism educators do not take "learned" research into their craft very seriously.[1] However this sometimes-hostile but usually-benign disinterest is rationalized,[2] the feeling persists that something is wrong. Can it be that journalists are right in ignoring what communication science can reveal about their occupation? Or, conversely, can a case be made that journalists are simply wrong-headed?

In this paper I am going to argue that journalists *have some justification for dismissing* scholarly inquiries into their craft. Their justification is due to a single,

---

[1]The research results have been described as "little more than ritualistic articulations of the self-evident." (Raudsepp, 1989: 10) Cf. the polemical blasts of Jake Highton (Highton, 1989) and Charles-Gene McDaniel (McDaniel, 1990).

[2]Some of the reasons are (a) professional suspicion of "outsiders", (b) concerns about how such research may affect freedom of the press, (c) a general, anti-academic bias, and (d) an occupational reluctance to appreciate some of the abstract, theoretical constraints of such research, to mention a few.

1

critically important reason: *Communication science does not take journalists and their craft seriously either.*

But what does it mean to take an object of inquiry such as journalistic discourse "seriously"? Habermas points out that to study a domain of discourse requires that the investigator needs to attend to the <u>validity</u> as well as the <u>meaning</u> of symbolic expressions in the domain. (Habermas, 1984, I: 106)[3] His argument on this point is intuitively accessible. He argues, on the basis of what is required to interpreting a traditional text, a paradigm case: "...the interpreter understands the meaning of a text only to the extent that he sees why the author felt himself entitled to put forward [as true] certain assertions, to recognize [as right] certain values and norms, to express [as sincere] certain experiences." (Habermas, I: 132) To understand reasons as reasons, furthermore, requires that the interpreter take a position on their soundness. If, to the contrary, an interpreter "*would not so much as* enter upon a systematic assessment, if he were not only to suspend taking a position, however implicitly, with respect to the reasons that the author could

---

[3]My arguments here are deeply indebted to the work of Jürgen Habermas, specifically his <u>The Theory of Communicative Action</u>, Thomas McCarthy, trsl. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984. The work is in two volumes and was originally published in German in 1981. Volume 1 is entitled <u>Reason and the Rationalization of Society</u>, and Volume 2, <u>Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason</u>. Subsequent references to these works will be indicated as Habermas I and Habermas II respectively.

have adduced for his text, but were to regard this position as incompatible with

the descriptive character of his enterprise, he would not be able to treat reasons

as that which they are intended to be. In this case the interpreter would *not be*

taking his subject seriously as a responsible subject." (Habermas, I: 133)

I will try to show that empirical research into journalistic practices fails to

take journalism seriously in the sense Habermas outlined: Meanings of news texts

are described <u>without</u> reference to the conditions of their validity with respect to

the news claims such texts are intended to convey. Though what I have to say

applies in varying degree to the work of Breed (1955), Sigal (1973), Gans (1979),

Tuchman (1978), Fishman (1980), and Roshco (1975), among others, I will use as

a paradigm of this research genre a recent, three-volume work by a team of

University of Toronto investigators (Ericson, Baranek and Chan)[4] on how

Canadian journalists and mass media work.[5]

---

[4]The team was headed by Richard V. Ericson, professor of criminology and sociology, University of Toronto. His co-workers were Patricia M. Baranek, a former research associate at the Centre for Criminology, now manager of the health human resources policy unit of the Ontario ministry of health, and Janet B. L. Chan, now a lecturer in sociology and social policy at the University of New South Wales.

[5]The titles and publication dates of these three books, all published by the University of Toronto Press, are as follows: <u>Visualizing Deviance: A Study of News Organization</u> (1987), <u>Negotiating Control: A Study of News Sources</u> (1989) and <u>Representing Order: Crime, Law, and Justice in the News Media</u> (1991). Subsequent references to these works will be indicated by <u>Deviance</u>, <u>Control</u>, and <u>Order</u> respectively. The work has been well received by academics. One reviewer

As an investigation of how meanings get embedded in and conveyed by news as media product, the Ericson-Baranek-Chan opus has much to commend it; as an account of journalistic practices, it falls short in the way suggested. Ericson-Baranek-Chan's theoretical and methodological approach construed the action in the domains of discourse they observed as strategic actions by agents engaged in a systemically-constrained power/knowledge dialectic. *They failed to see* that those agents, in so far as they were autonomously-acting agents, also engaged in a reason-driven dialogue -- communicative actions in Habermas's sense[6] -- about (1) the pragmatic justification of the news claim, (2) the normative appropriateness of information required to encode this news claim, the news text or story, and (3) their professional right and obligation to truthfulness and sincerity as participants in this process.[7] I will restrict my arguments to the first of these: the pragmatic justification of the news claim.

_____

hailed the first volume as a "remarkable tour de force of scholarly endeavour." (Pike, 1990: 115) A lawyer-journalist, on the other hand, dismissed the final volume of this work as a "383-page rant against modern journalism." (Kinsella, 1991: 30)

[6]I should note here that Habermas does not construe mass communication as a form of communicative action in his special sense of a discourse oriented toward achieving consensus based on reasons alone. He considers mass communication to be a generalized form of communication, one in which in addition to reasons, power and influence are exerted to arrive at consensus. (Habermas, II: 390-91)

[7]This way of describing the situation is indebted to Habermas's theory of communicative action. For obvious space reasons a detailed account of that theory cannot be given here.

Following some general remarks to underline the importance of truth to journalism, my arguments try to show (1) that the theoretical and methodological presuppositions of the Ericson-Baranek-Chan research constitute a principled exclusion of validity as a legitimate object of inquiry, (?` ʰat this failure to include the question of validity results in a forced, if not totally alien, account of journalistic efforts to establish factuality; (3) that their interpretation of the news text overestimates its autonomous status by disregarding its illocutionary force in proclaiming the news, and (4) that (1), (2) and (3) together establish that they did not take journalism seriously.

Truth in Journalism

That truth and truthfulness are important elements of responsible journalism need hardly be argued. The significance of veracity in news reports is not just an element of journalistic ideology and rhetoric; it is matter of common sense. Hence, if we take journalism and common sense seriously -- which as media consumers we do -- we accept that news is about "[r]eal things happening to real people in real time, and news reports derive from the examination of real situations 'out there'." (Mayer, 1986: 21) Disregarding this aspect of journalism

for a priori methodological reasons of empirical inquiry seems counter-intuitive to

the point of defying all reason.[8]

Be that as it may, the issue here is how sociological interpretation of

journalism can deal with the truth-seeking and information-validating practices of

journalism. That difficulty is underscored by Ettema, Whitney and Wackman

(1987). Their survey of empirical research results pertaining to the question of

truth in journalism, while sympathetic[9] to the idea that journalism's "...task is to

find the truth despite strong economic, political, and organizational constraints,"

(Ibid.: 750) is inconclusive and tentative. Questioning the usefulness of the notion

of truth in such research, they suggest that the best that empirical research can do

is "help define the terms and enrich the vocabulary used in the ongoing discussion

of these enduring questions." (Ibid.: 774.) This suggestion skims over the very

---

[8]As Mayer (1987: 21) rightly suggests in his comment on Molotch and Lester
(1975). In their influential study of the news coverage of the Santa Barbara oil
spill of 1969, Molotch and Lester argue, on the basis of considerations from the
"ethnomethodological perspective", that they can "suspend, for strategic analytical
purposes, the assumption that there is any objective reality 'out there' to be
reported. Thus our working assumption is that the determination of what is or is
not news, what is or is not significant, is a function, not of the nature of the world
'out there,' but of the work of those who must somehow bring into being some
things which are more important than others and hence more worthy of
publication." (Molotch and Lester, 1975: 236)

[9]As well it should be, given that all three work in journalism schools. (Source:
Journalism and Mass Communication Directory 1991, AEJMC, University of
South Carolina, Columbia, SC.)

point at issue. For if sociological interpretation cannot address the question of truth in a substantially helpful way, how could its findings possibly "enrich" any subsequent discussion of the issue?

If we move from the epistemological to the ethical dimension of truth in journalism, the work of Lambeth (1986) is especially pertinent. His argument, while cognizant of much of the same empirical research considered by Ettema et al, stresses the fact that despite the seeming "juggernaut of scholarly and anecdotal evidence of organizational influence on the moral of and professional autonomy of media practitioners...the potential for the exercising of individual initiative and values still exists...." (Lambeth, 1987: 72) He points to "[a]ny given year's crop of investigative journalism" as proof that "journalists, as a group, have enough professional competence and enough moral freedom to fully face and accept the responsibilities implied by the constitutional protection granted them." (Ibid.: 79)

Sympathetic to journalism's professional aims, Lambeth's appeal to "any year's crop of investigative journalism" will not do as a rebuttal of the "juggernaut of evidence" he cited. It will not do for the same reason that pointing to happy marriages proves that the institution of marriage works. All that "any year's crop of investigative journalism" proves is that sometimes journalists get it right. And that is no argument against the evidence of systemic restraint which suggests that journalism's self-proclaimed interest in truth is of peripheral interest at best and of

little or no consequence with respect to the scientific understanding of their craft.[10] To be sure, Lambeth's argument does point in the right direction: there is a potential for autonomy and individual responsibility for professionals engaged in the news-making process.[11] I will return to this point below; it is one of several outstanding merits of the Ericson-Baranek-Chan opus that the reality of this autonomy is recognized, even if not fully appreciated.

Ericson-Baranek-Chan

Ericson, Baranek and Chan construe news as a form of knowledge, information with "an objectivated, real meaning that is used in action and has social consequences." (Deviance: 11) Thus, news as knowledge is a social construct, belonging to a culture, the knowledge society. In a knowledge society such as Canada, the authors point out, the production of knowledge through the communication of information is "a primary activity and...a key aspect of organizational power and social stratification." (Deviance: 11)

---

[10]Cf., on this question, Ettema and Glaser (1985) on the epistemology of investigative journalism. They identify a journalist's sense of "moral certainty", not verified truth, as the relevant criterion. Still, this work at least recognizes the significance of the justification process in journalistic news-making.

[11]Lambeth makes the "principle of truth telling" one of the cornerstones of his journalism ethics. The alternative, some "good employee model" of journalism ethics is hardly desirable. Cf. Demers (1989).

The substance of this knowledge called news is information about real or alleged deviance, the latter being interpreted as "not only serious forms of abnormal behaviour such as criminal acts, but also such behaviour as straying from organizational procedures and violations of common sense knowledge." (Deviance: 4) Given this broad notion of deviance, the attendant conceptualization of journalism follows almost as a matter of course: "The defining characteristic of journalism is that it visualizes deviance and control as these relate to visions of social order and change." (Deviance: 8)[12] Furthermore, since the control of deviance is seen as the quintessential element of all organizations and organizing activities, and since the news media themselves are major players in the organizational mosaic of the knowledge society, they postulate that mass media and their journalists act as agents of social control and reform in their visualizations of deviance and order. (Deviance: 53-54)[13]

---

[12]The key notion here is "visualizing deviance" which is, in effect, equated with what I have called the "news judgment proper." (Overduin, 1991: 4-5) A news judgment proper is a decision to the effect that a report about some event or state of affairs is newsworthy (is visualized as deviant, in Ericson et al).

[13]"Deviance prompts discourse; about the symbolic boundaries between organizations, about their power relations, and about their norms. It is these boundaries, power relations and norms which the news media attend to, offering an ongoing articulation of what journalists and their authorized knowers deem to be out of order and visualize as possibilities for control [and reform]." (Ibid.: 54)

Given the fact that journalists must tell their stories in terms most people

would understand and accept, the "ideological effect" of news discourse is

"reproducing hegemony." (Deviance: 31) The latter means that the aggregate or

cumulative effect of mass media news is that it tends to maintain the dominant

culture and its social organization, along with its controlling elites, though

individual members thereof are not immune to the effects of journalistic

surveillance and reform does take place.[14]

Such, in a general way, is the theoretical core that informs the Ericson-

Baranek-Chan research program.[15] To address the social control aspects of the

news-making process and its products, they identified three object domains for

detailed scrutiny and analysis: (1) the interactions between journalists and their

peers and superiors in the newsroom, with results reported in Deviance; (2) the

---

[14]For a useful summary of the hegemony thesis and its origins see Gitlin (1980:
9-11). For Ericson-Baranek-Chan, news "provides a daily barometer of hegemonic
processes." (Order: 12)

[15]What distinguishes their understanding of this theoretical perspective is the
rejection of deterministic simplifications. Deterministic models or the dominant
normative paradigm tend to depict journalists as "agents for others" (Epstein,
1975: 17) or as robotic information processors servicing capitalist, corporate
interests (Cirino, 1971). Ericson et al are open to the evidence of autonomy in
observing the interactions between journalists and their superiors, as well as
between journalists and their sources. In addition, the authors recognize the
evidence that mass media news is often a major contributing factor to reform. It
is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the substantive elements of their
theory, the "vocabulary of precedents." in a systematic way. I only point to the
features relevant to my argument, such as its recognition of journalistic autonomy.

interactions between journalists and their sources, with results reported in <u>Sources,</u>

and (3) the interaction of the news text and media consumers, with results

reported in <u>Order.</u> Ethnographical methods -- first-hand observation (with some

participation) and qualitative content analysis -- were used as the primary research

tools, supplemented by interviews, analyses of organizational documents and

quantitative content analyses.[16]

To understand how they came to identify the domains and objects to be

investigated, it is necessary to consider their model of the news-making process.

That model (<u>Deviance</u>: 41) depicts the news-making process as moving from

source-interpreted versions of an occurrence (source-event), to journalistic

adaptations of this source-event into a media product.[17] There is no room in the

model for a reference to an 'outside' reality beyond the recognition that there are

"amorphous happenings in the world". (<u>Deviance</u>: 40)

---

[16]The conclusion of all this work is: "News is *the* most available, serious, and powerful means by which we represent our social organization and aspirations. News is also one of the most available, serious, and powerful means by which each of us orders our daily life. As such, news touches everyone. It soothes some, pricks others, and wounds a few. While news is clearly 'programmed' within the economic, political, social, cultural, and technological criteria of the news-media institution, its programs can be used in myriad ways to visualize deviance, negotiate control, and represent order." (<u>Order</u>: 357-58; Cf. Pike, 1990: 115)

[17]Ericson et al say their model is adapted from the various mass communication models presented by McQuail and Windahl, 1981 in light of their discussion of organizational and societal contexts of newsmaking. (<u>Deviance</u>: 40)

Whatever else we may think of this amorphous world, the world journalists and their sources attend to, *it can never be referred to as a test for truth.* Thus, the common sense (and journalistic) idea that visualizations of deviance (news judgments) are true or valid if the deviance visualized is actually there cannot be made. According to the Ericson-Baranek-Chan model, therefore, there is no point in looking for journalistic attempts to verify their visualizations of deviance, for there is no such verification to be had. There is no 'external' world of happenings, independent of our perceptions, against which visualizations of deviance could be tested: "What is really happening in the world is a matter of what journalists and their sources attend to." (Deviance: 21)

It is important to understand the rationale for this apparent shortcoming of the model and the prima facie absurdities, as exemplified by the last quotation, to which it seems to lead. Ericson et al recognize, of course, that the picture of the world journalists and their sources present can be compared to other versions of that world. For example, a journalistic account of a crime wave can be compared to a police account and the latter, in turn, compared to a criminologist's study. Such comparisons may, perhaps, lead us to some understanding of what "really happened." On reflection, however, it becomes evident that it is difficult, if not impossible, to specify just what the "real" in "really happened" stands for. It's like trying to describe a sound that nobody heard.

If, in the case of a crime wave (Fishman, 1980), for example, we were to

say that the police version was likely to be the most accurate, and hence, that

other versions of this crime wave are to be judged accordingly, we give a

preferential status to the police version. In technical terms, we hypostatize the

police picture of reality, taking it to be the true picture of reality. Now, if we are

predisposed to believe police versions of crime over alternative accounts, then we

cannot be objective in considering competing accounts, for our perceptions of

those other accounts will, necessarily, be coloured by what we think we already

know, i.e. take to be true.

The application of this crime wave example to the Ericson-Baranek-Chan

model of the news-making process helps to explain the absence of any reference

to an external reality. Any such reference would be to some other *version* of

reality, not to reality itself, for *that* notion is empty. Whatever we do to articulate

it, we produce some version of reality. To the extent that such a version is

allowed to "count" or make a difference in what we "look for", to that extent is the

usefulness of the model to yield valid observations compromised.

The Ericson-Baranek-Chan model, therefore, excludes reference to an

external reality for sound, methodological reasons. For these same *principled,*

methodological reasons, the authors thereby also exclude journalistic truth-seeking

as something beyond the scope of the social interpreter, at least in so far as this

truth-seeking consists in appeals to some external reality as the test for truth. But

not only is it impossible for them to consider tests for truth, comparing different

versions of reality, they note, "...tells us nothing about the knowledgeability that

goes into the work of journalists and their sources." (Deviance: 21-22; Order: 53-

54)

Recall that "knowledge" in sociology refers to, roughly, "information in use,"

or "objectivated meanings with a social consequence." What they are saying here

then is that comparing different versions of reality (testing for truth) is irrelevant

for the process of discovering how meanings get objectivated, i.e. how news stories

(objectivated meanings) are related to the interaction between journalists and

sources.

To underscore this point, the authors point out that the news story is an

'nth-level' piece of knowledge, indirectly-obtained information often based on still

other indirectly-obtained information, a report about reports about reports about

some occurrence. Given this notion of nth-level knowledge, it follows that "the

newspaper is not a mirror of reality, but a realization of the potential of its

sources...." (Smith, 1979: 182 quoted in Deviance: 22)[18]

---

[18]This claim suggests, incidentally, that if news were a first-level piece of
knowledge, then, presumably, it could be said to mirror reality. I will return to
this point below. Or maybe we should call it a barometer, as they suggested?
(Order: 12)

There thus seems to be little hope that sociological interpretation along the lines envisioned by Ericson et al can take journalistic truth-seeking seriously. Methodologically. it appears to be beyond the sociologist's grasp; substantively, it appears to be irrelevant as well. But we have not yet finished. Though the model identifies the object domains to be investigated -- journalist-peer-superior interaction in the newsroom, journalist-source interaction, and text-consumer interaction -- what makes them identify the interactions over symbolic representations of meaning (language, story angles, visuals) as the proper objects of investigation? What, in other words, has made them select these strategically-oriented, discursive struggles over meaning between agents with their own agendas as the relevant objects to be studied and analyzed?

It is easy to understand why Ericson et al focused on this aspect of news production. Their own experience in criminology, previous studies of social deviance, and a survey of the relevant literature help to explain this emphasis in their research. Similarly, their conceptualization of news as knowledge and its role in the knowledge society also helps to explain why they select the processes by which meanings objectified in news stories get to be what they are. Note, however, that these consideration do not justify or explain this focus as correct. The latter could only be concluded by hypostatizing the knowledge society, i.e. by

claiming that what is "really real" about our culture is that it "really is" a

knowledge society as postulated.

If, on the other hand, the idea of the knowledge society is merely intended

to function as a heuristic device, the door is left open to an alternative

interpretation of the same domains, one that is as reasonable, if not more so, than

that of Ericson, Baranek and Chan. Before considering that possibility, however, I

want to illustrate how this emphasis on meaning biased their discussion of

journalistic efforts to establish factuality.

Establishing Factuality

On the face of it, "establishing factuality" seems to be what truth-seeking is

all about. Facts are what constitutes truth; statements are true if they are

statements of fact. But note how Ericson et al construe this matter: "The primary

means of establishing factuality is to find sources to make statements that can be

quoted as fact." (Deviance: 282) The phrase "quoted as fact" is ambiguous, for it

leaves unclear whether the "fact" is the entire statement, e.g. "Snow is green,' said

John Smith, president of the Colour Identifiers League of North America." If

John Smith is who he is identified as being, and if he did say what he is alleged to

have said, then the entire statement is a fact and the use of the quotation and its

source can then be seen as an effort to maintain the truth of the propositional

content of a news text. But the expression quoted, "Snow is green" is not a fact, nor is it clear that it is "quoted as fact." It is just quoted.

From the context of the discussion in <u>Deviance</u>, however, it seems that the authors mean that journalists would quote Smith's claim to make it appear as if the quoted assertion, "Snow is green" is fact. Ericson et al claim that "source quotations often provide the only factual basis of the story." (<u>Deviance</u>: 282) On the contrary, it is not the quotations that provide the factual basis; it is the fact that the source said what he is quoted as having said. That, and usually only that, is what a journalist can verify if challenged.

A similar ambiguity exists in the account given of sources as "authorized knowers." "The sources selected must be the best persons available to <u>represent</u> the organization involved in the matter, often regardless of whether they are in the best position to know the facts....Social hierarchy and social exclusion are not only determined in terms of specialist knowledge; they also relate to who is authorized to represent the common sense." (<u>Deviance</u>: 282-283)[19] The point Ericson et al want to make is that such sources are going to produce symbolic representations

---

[19]To be sure, Ericson et al realize that sources are also "normative witnesses to events in the world" (<u>Ibid.</u>), but that, by itself, need not invalidate their use as "authorized knowers" or even make it suspect when it comes to using such a source to determine what the facts of a situation are. I return to this point below.

of order and deviance that reflect their interests and that journalists thereby get involved in source efforts to maintain social control.

That may well be a valid conclusion if it pertains to the cumulative effect of news texts. It does not ring true with respect to journalistic activity, and, at any rate, overlooks the obvious. Journalists use sources who can be expected to be "in the know" and who, to the best of their knowledge, will not deceive them with false information. Hence, by attending to such sources, the journalists have good reasons to believe that information obtained from them will be _true_. Common sense logic, after all, dictates that one cannot know what isn't so. Hence, if someone who should know, with the "should" being qualified by "all other things being equal", and does claim to know, then that is the best guarantee for truth that can be had on short notice.[20]

On the whole, the Ericson-Baranek-Chan account of journalistic efforts to validate their facts seems forced. The authors appear to overlook that the main

---

[20]Of course, there are difficulties here, especially related to the working creed of objectivity. But those difficulties are ethical in nature, not epistemological. Should journalists give credence to sources who make statements that seem clearly false? That is an ethical dilemma, for its resolution depends on who said it, the nature of thing said, the importance of the thing should it turn out to be true, and other factors. Hence, though Ericson et al appeared puzzled by the fact, one of the reporters they followed decided, on his own, not to report the claims made by a politician about certain real estate transactions on the grounds that the man was a "bullshit artist" (Deviance: 295), an untrustworthy source of information and a devious source of comment.

point of the verification process for journalists is to insure that each declarative

sentence of the news text is true. Nothing that they do address impugns that way

of understanding the means used to "establish factuality" in journalism. The role

of the "vocabulary of precedents" in this verification process is to suggest

"shortcuts" to this goal of sentential truth, or veracity of the news text.[21]

In sum, for Ericson et al "establishing factuality" deals with the meaning of

sentences, not their validity.[22] For them, a journalist verifies a "fact" -- allows as

objectivated meaning -- a symbolic representation of such meaning when, and only

when, it is authorized or attributed to some representative source. (Hence their

seeming puzzlement over the peculiarity of bald statements of background facts.)

I have shown that in the process of showing how such meaning representations are

negotiated in the discourses of journalists with their peers, editors and sources, the

authors did not consider that activity as a truth-seeking or fact-validating process.

Their model simply did not allow this.

---

[21]It should be noted that this "news text" is more than a string of propositions;
it is a narrative, a story with a beginning, middle and end. Values are embedded
in the story structure and sources used have, indeed, a profound bearing on what
form a story will take. But that is a different issue from the one being addressed,
which pertains to factuality of the sentences used in such stories.

[22]But note that one of the primary "meanings" of any sentence is that it refers
to some state of affairs. How can this referential function be dealt with in a
model that excludes the very possibility of 'outside' reference? What justification
could there be for such exclusion of considerations of validity other than that the
cultural paradigm (knowledge society) is hypostatized?

However, to make my case that this failure to consider the genuine truth-seeking and information-validating process that goes on in journalistic practice amounts to a failure to take journalism seriously, I need to do more. I need to show that this shortcoming in the research program amounts to a de facto, if not principled, refusal to take a position on the soundness of the reasons journalists could advance for admitting the particular symbolic representations that they do allow, as exemplified in the news text. To do this I will have recourse to some additional elements of Habermas's theory, though I will try to keep such references at a level where they are intuitively plausible.

Communicative Action

I have shown that Ericson, Baranek and Chan interpret each of the domains under investigations as constituted by action. The domains reported on in Deviance and Sources are construed as strategically oriented discourse, "discursive struggles" (Order: 342), in which relatively autonomous agents negotiate for the acceptance of symbolic representations of meanings that most closely fit their own interests and agendas. (Deviance: 355) There is nothing deterministic about the outcome of these processes of negotiation (Sources: 377-79), though the overall and cumulative effect as exemplified in the news texts supports the hegemony thesis. (Order: 108-110; 356-358)

Though two of the domains are constituted by "discursive struggles," the interaction between reader and text -- while interpreted as an action (<u>Order</u>: 54) -- is of a different sort. While the Ericson-Baranek-Chan analysis of this reader-news text interaction has much to commend it,[23] the critical point for my argument here is their claim that in being published or broadcast for a particular market by a particular medium, "news texts are objectified and commodified. As such, they escape their authors and become autonomous as they are interpreted, understood, and used in other contexts." (<u>Order</u>: 357)[24] This way of construing the news text overlooks the fact that it is the journalist who speaks and utters that text; the news text can be construed, in other words, as the journalist's "speech act." It is the public utterance of the news text that is the end, or goal, of all journalistic news-making. As such, its intrinsic importance for understanding that process is manifest.

Autonomous news texts as construed by Ericson et al are, from a journalist's point of view, good only for wrapping fish or parakeet poop. News is

---

[23]Their interpretation of the news text-reader interaction recognizes and emphasizes the interpretive role of the news consumer in this process. Theirs is a sophisticated ethnographic approach to both qualitative and quantitative questions of content analysis.

[24]This opinion seems to be inspired, at least in part, by the claim that news content is "always" secondary to medium and market requirements. (<u>Ibid</u>.) The latter claim seems to be simply false, but I will not argue the point here.

a perishable commodity; it self-destructs in the reading. What remains may well be symbolic representations of deviance and order, and a study of these remains may, indeed, tell us something valuable about our society and culture and the role of media institutions in them. But it is through these news texts that journalists make their news claims, and the making of such claims (not just visualizing them) is the heart and soul of journalism.

What is important for understanding journalism is that in the performative action of uttering their news texts (publication or broadcast) there is a doing, an action.[25] The action embedded in the public news text -- when it is still "fresh" -- is, I submit, a communicative action distinct from, though pragmatically related to, the act of communicating the news text. In print media, this implicit communicative action within the news text is expressed by the headline and placement of the story. This implicit communicative act proclaims: "This Story is about something that **IS** newsworthy! Read all about it!"

---

[25]Though the authors are aware that the public utterance of a news text constitutes a performative action, they construe this action as a consequence, as perlocutionary effect of the utterance . (Deviance: 66) They cite Austin as an authority here, but do not list his work among the references. Had they consulted Austin (1975), they would have found that Austin does not just claim that the "words used in the marriage ceremony are part of that ceremony, not a description of it." (Deviance: 66) He claims that performatives (illocutionary forces) are doings; in uttering the words "I hereby declare you man and wife," the priest marries the couple.

In what way can this communicative action be said to be embedded in the public utterance of the news text? The answer to that question is to be found in Habermas's adaptation of Austin's insights into the performative character of language. (Austin, 1975)[26] For the purposes of this paper, it suffices to note that Habermas unpacks the notion of illocutionary force (the doing in the saying) for contexts of communicative action as follows: For every utterance in contexts of communicative action, speakers are committed to defend with reasons, that (a) the existential presupposition of the statement obtains, i.e. that it is true; (b) the normative values or rules embedded in the claim are appropriate under the circumstances of its utterance, and (c) the speaker is sincere, truthful, in making the utterance. (Habermas, I: 99) A communicative utterance can be challenged on each of these grounds; agreement with the utterance implies that the hearer accepts the three validity claims embedded in the utterance. (Habermas, II: 120-21)

---

[26]For any speech act, Austin distinguishes what he considers to be more primitive, or basic speech acts. These are the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary, each of which can be characterized as a distinct "doing" or "action". Austin himself neatly sums up these various senses "in which to say something is to do something. Thus we distinguished the locutionary act...which has a meaning; the illocutionary act which has a certain force in saying something; the perlocutionary act which is the achieving of certain effects by saying something." (Ibid.: 121)

The locutionary mode of an utterance will make reveal the primary way a speaker wishes an utterance to be taken, whether it is to be understood as an assertion about the way the world is, how it is with the speaker personally, or how a certain norm is being invoked. (Habermas, I: 99)[27] As already indicated above, and as I have argued elsewhere (Overduin, 1991), the primary assertoric claim made by the news narrative or news text is that the reported state of affairs or event the news text is about is newsworthy.[28] Though, in the Ericson-Baranek-Chan terminology, the visualization of deviance (news) precedes the creation of the news text, that entire text serves as the raison d'être of this news claim. The

---

[27]"...the illocutionary role -- under standard conditions, the meaning of the illocutionary component -- determines the aspect of validity under which the speaker wants his utterance to be understood first and foremost. When he makes a statement, asserts, narrates, explains, represents, predicts, discusses something, or the like, he is looking for an agreement with the hearer based on the recognition of a truth claim. When the speaker utters a first-person experiential sentence, discloses, reveals, confesses, manifests something, or the like, agreement can come about only on the basis of the recognition of a claim to truthfulness or sincerity. When the speaker gives an order or makes a promise, appoints or warns somebody, baptizes or weds someone, buys something, or the like, agreement depends on whether those involved admit the action as right." (Habermas, I: 308-309)

[28]Secondary claims are that the values and norms embedded in the narrative are appropriate, given this reported state of affairs, and that the journalists is truthful and sincere in relating it. I wish to acknowledge, with thanks, a postdoctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (756-92-0041) to explore these latter dimensions in greater detail.

latter "loudly"[29] proclaimed by headline though implicit in the news text itself and made manifest only through the illocutionary force of its utterance.

How can this news text serve as a <u>reason</u> for this illocutionary force of its utterance? As my account of the paradox of journalistic news judgment shows, the relationship between the news text and news claim is not a logical one. True news texts may make false news claims, and vice versa, a false text may make a valid news claim. The relationship between the truth of the news text and the news claim is a pragmatic one; truth of the news text suffices to justify its utterance, <u>even though it does not suffice to establish the validity of the news claim itself.</u> All that is required for the latter is that the journalist be <u>prepared</u> to give such reasons, and hence that, presumably, such reasons exist.[30]

My case here depends on the plausibility of the former: Truth of the news text suffices as a <u>pragmatic reason</u> to justify its utterance so that the news claim can be made. Making news claims (proclaiming the visualized deviance as newsworthy) is, furthermore, the very purpose of journalism. But if this much be

---

[29]Working for mass media institutions gives journalists a loud voice; from their perspective (as autonomous professionals) that is all mass media are good for. They <u>use</u> mass media for their vocational aims, just as mass media use them for commercial gain.

[30]I readily grant that this has proved to be notoriously difficult. Errors of news judgment are seldom, if ever, acknowledged. I have addressed these issues in Overduin (1991: esp. Chapter 4) and (forthcoming: b)

granted, then it follows that the news-making process is not just a systemically-constrained power struggle over meanings. It is also, and from the journalist's perspective, much more so, a reason-driven discourse with peers, superiors and sources to establish truth so that the news (visualized deviance) may be proclaimed.

To the extent that this reason-driven discourse is excluded from the sociological interpretation of the domain in which this discourse takes place, the scientific observer does not take journalism seriously. And it is in that sense, I submit, that I have shown that Ericson, Baranek and Chan (and ethnographically-oriented interpreters like them) have not taken journalism seriously.

On a more positive note, I think my arguments here also suggest a way in which communication science research programs pertaining to journalism need to be enriched. Habermasian insights into communicative action, and his concept of mass media as "generalized forms of communication" (shortcuts to reaching consensus on action orientations through the exercise of power and influence), suggest themselves as potentially useful. By including such notions in their theoretical and methodological approaches to journalistic news-making, sociological interpreters will be more likely to address journalism as it is, not some anaemic version of it.

REFERENCES

Austin, J. L. 1975. *How To Do Things With Words*. Sec. Ed. (J. O. Urmson and Marine Sbisà, eds.) Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

Breed, Warren. 1955. "Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis," *Social Forces*, Vol. 33 (May)

Cirino, Robert. 1971. *Don't Blame the People: How the News Media Use Bias, Distortion and Censorship to Manipulate Public Opinion*. Los Angeles, California: Diversity Press.

Demers, François. 1989. "Journalistic Ethics: The Rise of the 'Good Employee's Model': A Threat for Professionalism?" *Canadian Journal of Communication*. Vol. 14, No. 2 (Spring)

Epstein, Edward J. 1975. *Between Fact and Fiction: The Problem of Journalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Ericson, Richard, Patricia M. Baranek and Janet B. L. Chan. 1987. *Visualizing Deviance: A Study of News Organization*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

-- 1989. *Negotiating Control: A Study of News Sources*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

-- 1991. *Representing Order: Crime, Law, and Justice in the News Media*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

Ettema, James S., D. Charles Whitney and Daniel B. Wackman. 1987. "Professional Mass Communicators," *Handbook of Communication Science*, Charles R. Berger and Steven H. Chaffee, eds. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications Inc.

Ettema, James S. and Theodore L. Glasser. 1985. "On the Epistemology of Investigative Journalism," *Communication*. Vol. 8

Fishman, Mark. 1980. *Manufacturing the News*. Austin: University of Texas Press

Gans, Herbert. 1979. *Deciding What's News.* New York: Vintage

Gitlin, Todd. 1980. *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left.* Berkeley: University of California Press

Habermas, Jürgen. 1984. *The Theory of Communicative Action.* Thomas McCarthy, trsl. Boston: Beacon Press (Two volumes)

Highton, Jake. 1989. "'Green eyeshade' profs still live uncomfortably with 'Chi-squares'", *Journalism Educator* (Summer)

Kinsella, Warren. 1991. "Slim thesis rests on anti-media bias," *Content* (September/October)

Lambeth, Edmund B. 1986. *Committed Journalism: An Ethic for the Profession.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Leach, J.J. 1977. "The Dual Function of Rationality," in *Foundational Problems in the Special Sciences: Part II of the Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress in Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science, London, Ontario, Canada - 1975.* Robert E. Butts and Jaakko Hintikka, eds. Dordrecht: Reidel

Mayer, Martin. 1987. *Making News.* Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.

McDaniel, Charles-Gene. 1990. "Ubiquitous surveys reveal shallow research designs," *Journalism Educator* (Spring)

Molotch, Harvey and Marilyn Lester. 1975. "Accidental News: The Great Oil Spill as a Local Occurrence and National Event." *American Journal of Sociology,* Vol. 81

Overduin, Hendrik. 1991. *Assertoric Validity in Journalistic News Judgment.* PhD Dissertation, Department of Philosophy, University of Western Ontario, London, Canada

--   Forthcoming a. "The Philosophical Problem of Journalistic News Judgment"

--   Forthcoming b. "A Recursive Clarification of the Concept of News"

Pike, Robert M. 1990. *The Canadian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (May)

Raudsepp, Enn. 1989. "Reinventing Journalism Education," *Canadian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (May)

Roshco, Bernard. 1975. *Newsmaking.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press

Sigal, Leon V. 1973. *Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking.* Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company

Smith, Anthony. 1979. "Technology and Control: The Interactive Dimension of Journalism," in *Mass Communication and Society*, J. Curran et al, eds. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications

Tuchman, Gaye. 1978. *Making News.* New York: Free Press

Winch, Peter. 1958. *The Idea of a Social Science.* New York: Humanities Press