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Chapter 3

Journalism in a Globalizing World Society

A Societal Approach to Journalism Research

Manfred Rühl

For journalism research in a globalizing world society, macro conceptions like the societal system approaches are unavoidable in order to understand better the function of journalism in society and its difference to other forms of public communication, e.g. propaganda, public relations, advertising, entertainment. Societal system theories are an invitation to open up the study of journalism as a system of society, as decision-making organizations and as performing and achieving markets. Unlike approaches focusing entirely on journalists as total individuals, societal system theories are describing journalistic producers and journalistic recipients as social role structures in world society's journalism.

The old Greek word *systema* stands for a whole divided into parts, without environmental relations. This whole/parts system idea was able to maintain its position for two and a half thousand years (Riedel, 1990). It was used in the phase called *Zeitungswissenschaft* in early German communications, when “real” newspapers and “real” journals were described, classified, compared and systemized as journalistic parts (objects) of a sum total (Wagner, 1965). This whole/parts system view was dropped, when problems replaced objects in journalism research. Since the 1940s, several system theories emerged in social sciences, some of them used in journalism research.

Why Societal Approaches Are Needed: The Case of the Gatekeeper

Current usage of “system theory” (in the singular) is a catchall concept for very different denotations in various disciplines. Some journalism researchers comment on “system theory” to be a settled thing (Russ-Mohl, 1997). We oppose this statement with the thesis that without a sufficiently complex system theoretical architecture, no journalism research can be successful. Let us have a look at an example – the way the so-called gatekeepers were studied by journalism researchers.

Social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947) used the term gatekeeper first, to describe housewives deciding which foods are to end up on the dinner table of their families. Concerning the activities of the gatekeeper, Lewin wrote: “This situ-

ation holds not only for food channels but also for the traveling of a news item through certain communication channels in a group" (Lewin, 1951, p. 187). A journalistic gatekeeper study was conducted "to examine closely the way one of the 'gatekeepers' in the complex channels of communication operates his 'gate'." David Manning White (1950/1964, p. 162) seized upon Lewin's concept, observing the activities of one decision-making wire editor of a small Midwestern newspaper, filtering copy and news stories, from inception to publication. Unlike the housewives in Lewin's study, "Mr Gates" was deciding upon subjective criteria, explicitly on his personnel prejudices (Rogers, 1994, p. 335). White's gatekeeper was an individual, and the study did not problemize organizational structures, decision-making programs, occupational and working roles, hierarchical positions, legal and moral norms, or enforceable values, typical social structures in journalism research.

Methodologically, White's and most other journalistic gatekeeper studies rely upon the doctrine of methodological individualism. This method maintains that statements on social matters are completely reducible to statements about individuals, finding interpretive access to underlying motives of those individuals. Max Weber, elaborating on this method, requests that before looking into factual acting of individuals, scholars should know the individual's social and cultural background – whether he is a "king," a "civil servant," an "entrepreneur," a "pimp" or a "magician" (Weber, 1968, p. 15). Aside from some demographic data, we do not know much about the social and cultural background of "Mr Gates."

For more than a quarter of a century, the term gatekeeper stood for the production side of journalism, although the scholarly perspectives of interest have changed to institutional and organizational problems (Robinson, 1973; Weiss, 1977). Individuality kept its research priority, when determinations and dependencies of journalists to editors-in-chief and to publishers were studied (Breed, 1952, 1955; Schulz, 1974). Interviews served to collect data and researchers did not expound problems of journalism as objective, social and temporal problems in newsrooms. When journalism researchers became interested in the making and manufacturing of news as journalism's reality (Roshcoe, 1975; Tuchman, 1978), they referred to newsrooms in the traditional bipartite way, viewing organizations as courses of events and as hierarchies of positions, without explaining, whether these two parts can be checked empirically, and how they operate in making and manufacturing news. It may be concluded that gatekeeper studies sufficiently did not take into consideration the social and cultural background of journalists and journalistic organizations. The societal dimension of journalism was neglected.

Social Systems Theories

There is a saying that it takes two to tango. Although journalism is considered to be a major societal and cultural achievement, emerging in 19th-century Europe and North America, journalism researchers usually study only the production side. When classical social scientists prepared ground for the study of making,

buying and reading journalistic products, the societal problems of the time, especially industrialization, urbanization, migration, literacy and democratization came into the game.

Émile Durkheim (1893/1968) conceived social facts as basic elements of social life, and elaborated on division of labor affecting the evolution of modern society. Georg Simmel, intensely affected by the cross-currents of up-and-coming metropolis, operated in many social intersections, examining especially social differentiation (Frisby and Featherstone, 1997). Simmel had a profound impact on Robert E. Park, who emphasized urban journalism and practiced "publicity," that is, public relations, for years (Rühl, 1999), before becoming the sociologist as city editor of the Chicago School (Lindner, 1996). Max Weber (1968) developed new ideas and new methodological approaches for social research, and some of his many interests were directed to domestic and foreign "press cultures," to the newspaper reading of farm workers and industrial workers. Albert Schäffle (1875), Karl Bücher (1896, 1915), Charles Horton Cooley (1909/1972, 1918) and Robert Ezra Park (1903/1972, 1922) reconstructed independently a field of scholarly interests emphasizing the press, journalism, public relations, with social action and forms of communication as basic processes. All of these scholars differed greatly in their reflections and research on journalism, but they all recognized journalism's linkages to society, studying and evaluating societal components such as publishing, journalistic and editorial work, publics and public opinion, media and technologies, readership, advertisement, ideologies, and so on.

At this time, it was fashionable to describe society as an organism in the historical steps of birth, maturity and death. However, when Schäffle (1875) described society, he used organic terms without putting societal structures into organismic analogies. Immanuel Kant, Georg W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx designed theories of history with a recognizable system paradigm. Before becoming professor of philosophy, Hegel was a rather successful and well-paid all-round-editor of the daily *Bamberger Zeitung*. During his eighteen months' stay in Bamberg, his first major work, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807/1978), was published, explaining his system paradigm (Rühl, 1999). Unfortunately, Hegel never wrote a book on journalism.

Only in the mid-1940s, when the terms media, mass media and mass communication came up in the United States, they were employed first to criticize American "mass media culture," that is, film, radio, magazines, etc. as a system effecting "mass deceit" in the service of "culture industry" (Adorno, 2001). Theodor W. Adorno claims that products of culture industry are intended to function as goods for economic markets, primarily, tailored to affecting the masses, without attempting to differentiate between media and journalism.

At the time, again almost exclusively in the United States, several cybernetic and communication science system/environment theories are taking shape. The first order cybernetics of observed systems (Wiener, 1946; Ashby, 1956; von Bertalanffy, 1962/1968) stimulate a macro-communication system study in Germany (Reimann, 1968); second order cybernetics of observing systems (von Foerster, 1982) inspired reflections on a variety of communication problems (Krippen-

dorff, 1979). Another theoretical system approach of generalized assumptions and functional relations is known by the collective title Structural Functionalism. Usually, the American sociologist Talcott Parsons is called the best known representative of Structural Functionalism. But we lean to the assumption that Parsons has designed a world society theory of his own, while parts of his theories found entrance in structural functional system theories, particularly developed and promoted by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann.

More than others, Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann pioneered the analysis (and synthesis) of world society theory. For the purposes of this chapter, we shall focus on the ideas of Luhmann and briefly sketch a few important features of his work. Luhmann is not known as a journalism researcher in a narrower understanding of the concept. But he has an impact on present day journalism research worldwide.

Basic Ideas of Niklas Luhmann

In the preface to the English edition of his first major work, *Social Systems*, Niklas Luhmann confesses: “This is not an easy book. It does not accommodate those who prefer a quick and easy read” and “this holds for the German text, too” (Luhmann, 1995, p. xxxvii). When we try to open up Luhmann’s complex thinking for the sake of this chapter, we are convinced to offer a suitable theory of reflections for macro-, meso- and micro-perspective journalism research.

Luhmann worked out decisive and coherent thoughts for a functional theory of world society, conceived as communication system theory. Entering social sciences in the 1960s and studying with Parsons, Niklas Luhmann began as an action system theorist (Luhmann, 1964, p. 23). When reconstructing a world societal communication theory, the Parsonian world societal action system theory was no longer inspiring. Luhmann noticed inconsistencies, and especially “subject” and “action” were found to be irredeemable for describing world society (Luhmann, 1995, p. xxxvii–xliv). Instead, Luhmann assumes that the complexity of world society is reduced by social systems. The political system or the economic system, to name just a few, are considered subsystems of world society that were set up to solve particular societal problems. Social systems “are by no means given objects, but constitute their identity by drawing a distinction between the system and its environment and by setting boundaries against their environment” (Görke and Scholl, 2006, p. 646). As basic elements of social systems, Luhmann identifies neither actors nor specific individuals but communication. Individual actors such as journalists are not constituents of social systems but important external co-performers for communication systems.

In the 1970s, Luhmann found communication to be the most sophisticated expression of human abilities. Although mankind practices communication every day and experiences communication as something self-evident, Luhmann advises scholars to start from the premise that communication is improbable, and improbability is not a given phenomenon (Luhmann, 1995, p. 154). Early American

sociologists (Albion W. Small, George E. Vincent) likened a “social nervous system” to society’s communication apparatus, whereas Robert K. Merton explicitly codified and paradigmatically presented a teleological functional analysis, credited to advance the study of mass communication (Wright, 1989). Luhmann’s work does away with notions of system in traditional wording. He reconstructed law, science, religion, economy, politics, media and art as functional systems of world society (Luhmann, 1997). World society’s journalism system, however, was not found on his research agenda.

Problems of Journalism System Research

Reviewing research on journalism as a world societal system, we find approaches with Luhmannian, Parsonian, and Structural-Functionalism impacts (Rühl, 1980; Blöbaum, 1994; Kohring, 1997; Scholl and Weischenberg, 1998; Görke, 1999; Malik, 2004). Some of these empirical journalism-and-society or journalism-in-society studies, however, are not tested with the help of functionally generated data, but with data generated in behavioral-positivist manners. Empirical studies taking into account the societal dimension of journalism and using systems theoretical approaches to define journalism are still rare (Scholl, 2002). In order to identify journalism and to differentiate between journalism and other highly complex social systems such as public relations, advertisement or propaganda, a unique function of journalism has to be defined (Rühl, 2001). A quarter of a century ago, I described performance and provision of themes for public communication as the specific journalistic function (Rühl, 1980, p. 322).

In the meantime, there have been many changes in state and field of journalism research. Re-entering this definition in interrelation to current world society, journalism’s function can be described as asserting selected and varied themes of persuasive (sometimes manipulative) communication, deliberately improving world populations readability, comprehensiveness and transparency (Rühl, 2004, p. 82). Journalism research works on preserved journalism theories. Primarily journalism re-analyzes sensemaking themes and information in interdependence with societally accepted norms and values, professionalizing labor and challenging problems of literacy, in past, present and future.

In our days, the populations of constitutional societies around the globe belong to journalism as readers, listeners and viewers, combining these with the social roles as parents, youth, citizens (or immigrants), consumers, traffic participants, patients, sports fans, tourists, and so on. In different areas of world society, with or without democratic governments, journalism is still growing as urban journalism in mega cities, suburbia, ghettos, country-sides and holiday resorts. Journalism is not a unique achievement. In early 17th-century France there were newspapers and press-related institutions with features and attributes, later on differentiated as journalism, public relations, advertising or propaganda (Solomon, 1972; Rühl, 1999). Efforts to differentiate between journalism, public relations, advertising and propaganda with the help of specific functions, performances and

tasks, are rather new. But all these persuasive systems can be analyzed on three social levels, on an organizational level (Rühl, 1969, 2002), a market level (Rühl, 1978), and a societal level (Rühl, 1980).

Realigning journalism research is a significant conceptual and theoretical break with gaining information about journalism from collectives of journalistic practitioners. In case studies of newsrooms as organizations with a specific social environment, journalistic operations are steered by pre-programmed decision-making (Rühl, 1969; Dygutsch-Lorenz, 1971; Hienzsch, 1990; Neumann, 1997). Operating journalism starts with obtaining resources in short supply. Producing, distributing and receiving of journalism causes different costs, not only time and money, but professional work, enforceable topics, sensemaking information, public attention, stabilizing laws, consented ethical principles, public trust and private confidence. Journalistic resources are divisible and obtainable via markets of politics, economy, labor, lawmaking. Not all journalistic resources can be paid by money.

The major benefit of this approach is: Journalism cannot be reduced, neither to single journalists nor to life systems (operating brains) or consciousness systems (active thinking). Journalism systems operate circularly, without a known beginning and without a foreseeable end. Journalistic repertoires of possibilities in social memories are texts produced in agencies and other journalistic organizations, in Internet, journals, books, archives, libraries, realized through psychic memories. Journalism systems construct and sustain themselves in this way.

As an academic undertaking, journalism research can be observed as an intersection of world society's journalism system and world society's science system, forming a self-descriptive system containing its own descriptions. Journalism research deserves more attention. Many theoreticians believe that older journalism theories are obsolete. Quite the reverse! In the past two hundred years, families, sciences, economies, politics, religions, journalism also have changed their semantics, sometimes rapidly (Koselleck, 1972). There is no standardized journalism, and our knowledge of journalism is always a selection, variation and retention in interrelations to changing families, sciences, economies etc.

Globalization in Journalism Research

For several thousands of years, face-to-face-communication determined mankind. In the middle of the 15th century, typography offered chances for radical changes, when books, newspapers and journals printed by a letterpress became readable works in vernacular languages, and goods to be evaluated and traded on markets. Different from Latin texts, handwritten and read in medieval monasteries for the order's own use, books, newspapers and journals are produced for markets, addressing potentially everybody, prompting telecommunication worldwide.

As a researchable concept, globalization implies a theoretical history. The term came up to describe wishful thinking of emperors for a united world, built by secular or religious power. In current issues and controversies, globalization is used

more often as an umbrella term for a complex series of *economic, social, political, technological and cultural* changes, standing for increasing *interdependence*, integration and interaction between peoples and countries in disparate locations. "Global players" are said to dominate markets for goods, money, credits, personnel, and the Internet, being suspect to oppress areas of remote culture or tending to concentrate the sources of energy and knowledge.

Definitions of globalization discussed in communications are highly subjective, depending on political-ideological premises, most of them narrowly related to political-economic problems. When media scholars describe a media globalization, they refer to processes of adapting software applications and web sites, seemingly suitable for global use. Discussed in combined wordings of engineering, economics, culture, marketing and communications, media globalization is not explicitly referring to journalistic problems, modelling communication as transport of something (Hepp et al., 2005).

Analyzing globalization as changes and confrontations between journalism and other societal systems (politics, economy, religion, law etc.), world society expresses the foremost comprehensive system of human communication, and as a public communication system journalism is attainable worldwide, second to none. Journalism's sensemaking informations can reach all of us, and we all are well advised to be concerned with what's in the paper, what's on television, or online. There is no centralized journalism but a variety of productions and receptions, diversified locally, regionally and nationally, bound to different values, norms, themes and texts. Freedom of the press and voluntary self-control of the press, film, radio and television are not fixed and standardized frontiers, but borderlines relating journalism's freedom of expression to politics, economy, religion, etc.

For centuries, mankind fixed boundaries between territories, powers, religions, languages or currencies areas. Modern borderlines are endless horizons, moving themselves at every approach. Yet, all navigators use endless horizons for orientation and guidance (Husserl, 1999), and everything journalism observes as distinguishable, forms, schemes, frames, themes, informations, genres, headlines, decision-making programs, and so forth, they happen on this side of the horizon, not beyond. Concepts and schemes of journalism are known worldwide, but journalism varies structurally – hopefully in the future, too.

Globalizing journalism refers to sensemaking as the ultimate horizon of world society, permeable for new possibilities, drawing up limits for orientation. Journalism responds to globalization with renewing networks of production, organizations, marketing, house-holding, re-entering preserved journalism cultures. A unity of journalism education is not worthwhile. Time costs for googled journalism go down extremely. But what about news offered anonymously, without a traditional newspaper title. Do we trust it (Rühl, 2005)?

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