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Dynamics of news selection in different socio-cultural context:

Theoretical and methodological issues

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Abstract: *This paper tackles theoretical and methodological issues of a comparative research in three countries of different journalistic cultures (UK, Sweden and Greece) that contributes to an explanation of news judgement, called 'journalistic gut feeling' by journalists, as implemented in varying social contexts. A thesis of this investigation is that the combined consideration of the theoretical domains of news values, news practice and journalistic professionalism is required so that an adequate explanation of the dynamics of news evaluation is produced. The theoretical approach adopted is Bourdieu's 'field' perspective as applied in journalism research by Benson, while the methodological one is a comparative, mixed methods design that pays attention to contextual factors, drawing on suggestions by Bryman, Hantrais and Hanitzsch. The methods applied are a questionnaire survey of journalists and focus groups simulating editorial meetings.*

Keywords: comparative journalism, professionalism, news practice, news values, field theory

Introduction: Aims and contribution

Since the dawn of the twenty-first century scholars writing on news production use terms such as: new era, new environment, new revisionism, new paradigm, new conditions, new challenges, reconsideration, rethinking, reinterpretation, revisiting, restructuring and the like. Cottle (2000, p.21) suggested that there was a demand for a “second wave of news ethnography”, because the “theoretical orthodoxies”, produced by the first one of the nineteen seventies and eighties, had been “out of touch with today's [news] production practices”. Several researchers (Matthews, 2010; Willig, 2013; Usher, 2014) situate their works within that “second wave”, though not denying that the “golden age of newsroom ethnography [...] has stood the test of time because these works so accurately identify forces that still order newswork” (Usher, 2014, pp.21-22). So, although “social theory continues to provide the necessary theoretical and conceptual framework”, Cottle (2000, p.21) suggests that “these must be tested empirically”.

It is context, therefore, that the present investigation places at the core of its attention; the manner in which the social, political, economic, cultural, technological or other conditions contribute to shaping the ideas behind, and processes of, news selection. Moreover it is a comparative approach that is being followed so that the context variable is effectively distinguished, as the investigation

takes place in three countries- UK, Sweden, and Greece, representing different media cultures (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Hallin and Mancini (2004) identified varying *patterns* of journalistic ideology and practice, largely related to the context that was dominant in countries of similar (western) political systems, but with a different mix of conditions prevailing over the role of media in politics and the status of journalists in society. Limitations of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) theory are acknowledged by the authors, in their original and subsequent works (2012a; 2012b), and they are suggested in various scholars' critical reviews of their approach (Hanitzsch, 2009; Couldry and Hepp, 2012; Esser and Hanitzsch, 2012; Humphreys, 2012; Hanitzsch and Donsbach, 2012; Hardy, 2012; Brüggemann et al, 2014). This notwithstanding, I argue that making use of their typology is still helpful and does not compromise the framework of my research design or the purpose of this investigation. That purpose is to seek empirical evidence on the following: (1) Whether the ongoing transformations in the socio-political environment of the countries studied have significantly affected the prevailing journalistic culture prevailing in each of them; (2) How similar or different decision-making processes and factors of newsworthiness are in the context of each country's journalistic environment. The latter has been suggested by Hallin and Mancini (2004, p.303), who indicate that “[t]here is a need [...] for comparative data [...] that would show differences or similarities in news selection criteria [and] conventions of presentation”.

1. Comparing journalism: Beyond Hallin and Mancini

Hallin and Mancini's self-criticism has also been considered, with respect to factors not covered by their study, such as the factor of *power*, on which they recommend further theoretical analysis: “research that systematically addresses issues of media and power in a comparative way is almost totally lacking” (2004, p.294). The findings of the present investigation, therefore, are complementary to Hallin and Mancini's theory, or they suggest some departure from that, especially because their approach to politics does not extend further from a criticism of differentiation theory, which “is generally concerned with relations among social institutions, not among agents of social interests” (2004, p.82).

My empirical research seeks to uncover relationships between media ownership (or media influence by other agents of economic interest) and the decision-making logic of journalists (Hanitzsch, 2009). Analytical approaches helping the quest for such a mix of contextual factors are: Bourdieu's (1998) 'field' perspective, the 'societal' approach of comparative methodological design adopted by Hantrais (1999), and Hanitzsch's (2007) 'de-construction' of journalistic culture. These three approaches are used together and lead to bridging the analytical gap between macro and micro social accounts; i.e. to co-examining examine the role of internal and external to the newsroom— factors in

the process of news selection. Hanitzsch (2007) has offered an appropriate thread connecting conceptual and methodological views of comparative journalism research. He suggests a deconstruction of the culture of news production into “three essential constituents (institutional roles, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies), further divided into seven principal dimensions: interventionism, power distance, market orientation, objectivism, empiricism, relativism, and idealism” (Hanitzsch, 2007, p.371; Table 1). Hanitzsch’s (p.380) suggestion of the specific constituents and their dimensions is made on both actual and normative grounds, and relates to the “essential shared values” that according to Elliott (1988, p.30) “give journalists a group identity”, or according to Keeble (2005, p.55) facilitate the construction of a “collective conscience for the profession”. It thus offers useful analytical instruments useful in for building the research design of this project, including the conceptualisation and operationalisation of the idea of 'power'. Hanitzsch (2007, pp.373-374) refers to the dimension of 'power distance', explaining it as “the journalist's position toward loci of power in society”, where on the one end one finds the 'adversary' pole and on the other one the 'loyal' pole; the former matching the 'watchdog' role of the press (scrutinising and criticising authorities), and the latter that of a 'propagandist' or 'agitator' of dominant (or hegemonic) ideas, who is openly or implicitly serving “as an ideological state apparatus in an Althusserian sense” (Hanitzsch, p.374).

Table 1: Deconstructing Journalism Culture

Institutional Roles			Epistemologies		Ethical Ideologies	
Interventionism	Power Distance	Market Orientation	Objectivism	Empiricism	Relativism	Idealism
Intervention (+)	Adversarial (+)	Consumers (+)	Correspondence (+)	Empirical (+)	Contextual (+)	Means (+)
Passive (-)	Loyal (-)	Citizens (-)	Subjectivity (-)	Analytical (-)	Universal (-)	Outcome (-)

Source: Hanitzsch, 2007, p.371

2. News selection: Conceptualising the ‘meso’ level

Explanations of news selection or news production make use of various perspectives, ranging from the 'gatekeeping' tradition that places a great decision-making weight on individual journalists (White, 1950; Shoemaker, Vos and Reese, 2009), to pure political economic ones that view external factors only as determinants of newsroom logic (Herman and Chomsky, 1998; Murdock and Golding, 2005). Between the two, classic works of newsroom ethnography suggest that the dynamics shaping journalistic practice and leading news judgement may rather be explained by use of a mix of factors, internal and external to the newsroom, the former including a set of routines along with a ritualised

occupational culture or 'ideology', and the latter including influences exercised from the side of political, economic and cultural forces of society (Schudson, 1989; 2005a; Cottle, 2003; Becker and Vlad, 2009; Schudson and Anderson, 2009). In the area of news selection, all three above approaches can be observed.

The 'classics' Galtung and Ruge (1965), and Harcup and O'Neill (2001) tend to adopt a gatekeeping view. Rosengren (1974), and Golding and Elliott (1979) place more weight on external economic and political factors. Westerståhl and Johansson (1994), and Allern (2002) follow intermediate – though not identical – routes, considering both internal (technical) and external (ideological and economic) factors. The present study examines the mix of internal and external factors comprising the environment or 'context' of news evaluation in each of the three countries investigated, and the way this context interferes in the journalists' news judgement. In doing so, appropriate theoretical spectra and methodological tools are adopted, meeting the need of examining the dynamics impacting on journalists, as this is assessed not at a micro (individual news outlet) or macro (societal) level, but at a meso one; the level of the journalistic 'field' as a whole (Bourdieu, 1998). This particular analytical approach, suggested by Bourdieu (1998) and complemented by Benson (1999; 2006; 2013), is deemed to provide the appropriate level of analysis for a combined consideration of internal and external factors.

As the micro perspective tends to theoretically understate and methodologically ignore the role of wider societal factors, while the macro perspective tends to overlook the role of individuals or organisations, the meso perspective brings the two together and studies their relationship and interaction by examining the institutional or interorganisational level (Benson, 2005, p.11; Benson, 2004, p.280). The journalistic field, according to Bourdieu (1998, p.39), "is a microcosm with its own laws, defined both by its position in the world at large and by the attractions and repulsions to which it is subject from other such microcosms". Bourdieu (ibid.) clarifies that, by referring to 'own laws', to 'independence' and 'autonomy' of the field, he means that "what happens in it cannot be understood by looking *only* [my emphasis] at external factors". Other authors suggesting the field perspective are cautious too with the use of the term 'autonomy', and clarify that this should by no means be perceived as an absolute property of a field. This idea of relative autonomy suits the objective of the present investigation, which aims to relate journalistic professionalism to the process of news selection. The degree of autonomy present can be an indicator of the level of professionalism. In the context of this research project, journalistic autonomy is assessed while the process of news selection is empirically investigated, but also the concept of autonomy is theoretically considered and studied, in order for the factors and dynamics of news selection to be understood and explained.

A word of caution is necessary here. Using field approach as an analytical tool does not imply that the journalistic field in any given country is conceived as unitary nor that a unitary logic, professional culture, and set of rules, forms or routines are believed to govern journalistic practice. One may refer to 'national culture', which, according to Benson (2013, p.33), "is best understood as a 'repertoire' of logics, with some more dominant than others". In the same way, the journalistic field – as a cultural intermediary- reflects such a 'repertoire' of logics. Nevertheless, Benson argues that "[a]lthough any given field features multiple logics of practice, the dominant field logic is evident in the most commonly shared 'form' of news that provides a template for the reporting, writing, and presentation of news" (2013, p.196). On the one hand, that is, Benson posits that "the [field] system is not of a piece" (2013, p.142), and on the other that "the nation-state clearly remains an important demarcator of difference" (2013, pp.188-199). This is considered in the empirical part of this study, where external influences on the journalistic field are traced, as are internal variation and exceptions. In short: though by no means it is claimed that there exists a singular journalistic culture- even within a country, it is underscored that varying conceptions of rules and principles, and varying patterns of journalistic practice are indeed observed in different countries or regions, the source of their differences being "the societal structural configuration of fields that regulate, fund, and provide normative legitimization of distinctive journalistic practices" (2013, p.23). However, ultimately, this is one of the points being empirically assessed in this investigation.

The field perspective is not taken as a distinct theory of journalism, but rather as "a research tool, the main function of which is to enable the scientific construction of social objects" (Bourdieu, 2005, p.30). Benson (2013, p.195) adds that the field model is not offered "in opposition to the standard sociology of news but rather as a more comprehensive or 'ample' framework for research". Benson (Ibid.) also draws an analogy between field perspective and Gramscian hegemony by accepting that they share "the same critical engagement" about "how media often serve to reinforce dominant systems of power". However, he suggests an additional advantage of the field framework, which is that it pays "closer attention to distinctions in forms of power" (Ibid.). This last point is also of interest for the present research project, investigating the role of different types of power in the process of news selection, as implemented in different cultural (national) contexts. Power is conceptualised as the influence of the fields of politics, economics and culture on the field of journalism; that is, as the degree of delimiting the autonomy of the journalistic field that is. Moreover, it is operationalised as selection and framing criteria in the process of news production, as they relate to external (to the newsroom) forces: ownership, advertisers, corporate actors, politicians, audience / wider public (in the sense of a dominant culture, containing ideological features).

The use of 'field theory' as an analytical 'tool' implies viewing the field of journalism as a set of individuals and organisations (diverse but, on the aggregate, forming a prevalent culture); also as well as a subset within a larger set of social actors (individual, organisational and institutional) interacting with each other under different capacities and with different degrees of influence on other actors. Such a theoretical view is methodologically expressed by a research design studying journalists both as individuals and as units of larger groups (organisations; institutions; society). This research design follows the logic of a comparative approach, ensuring that the investigative tools used are appropriate for considering contextual differences and assessing their impact on the practice of journalism.

3. Methodological instruments

Bourdieu's 'field theory', referring to the relationship between the fields of journalism and power, can fruitfully be combined with Hantrais's (1995) societal approach of comparative methodology, focusing on the relationship between the micro and the macro. It can also be combined with Hanitzsch's (2007) model of 'deconstructing journalistic culture', involving –among others - considerations of context and the distance (or relationship) between journalists and centres of power. The link that connects these theoretical and methodological approaches and shapes an integrated framework for the investigation and the interpretation of its findings is the inter-organisational perspective informing the research design of the present project. The research instruments employed, a survey via questionnaire and a set of focused discussions simulating editorial meetings, are built on the adoption of research questions tracing the factors that determine: (1) the newsworthiness (publishability) of 'events' as this is understood by journalists; (2) the process through which these factors are assessed, and (3) possible exceptions to the application of the relevant rules and criteria usually at play. Additionally, to form a foundation framework leading to a better understanding of the concept of newsworthiness and the process of news selection, this investigation touches upon the normative aspect of journalists' conception of their main role and mission in society (to report fully and truthfully as accepted in theory). It also seeks answers concerning what factors facilitate or hinder the implementation of such a mission.

The main (overriding) research question of this paper is: How does socio-cultural context impact journalists' decision on news selection and evaluation? In order to establish an answer to this research question, two sets of secondary (partial) questions are asked; one set aiming to correlate factors, thus serving the quantitative requirements of this - combined method s- investigation, and one aiming to explain processes, thus serving the qualitative ones. The quantitative component comprises the following research sub-questions: (1) What are the main criteria of newsworthiness (publishability)? (2) What factors can make a newsworthy event (complying with the above mentioned

criteria) not be published (in compliance with the above mentioned criteria)? (3) What factors can lead to publishing a news story despite its non-compliance with the widely accepted criteria of newsworthiness? (4) What factors, other than newsworthiness, are at play in news selection/treatment? (5) What is the main mission of journalists? (6) What factors can override the main mission of journalists? The qualitative component seeks answers to the following questions: (1) How is a degree of newsworthiness assigned to events? (2) How are events / news stories classed and evaluated in practice? (3) How 'close' to (political or financial) centres (or actors) of power are journalists? (4) How does such 'proximity' impact on the news selection process? (5) How are journalists constrained or challenged in fulfilling their mission?

4. Quantitative component: Survey via questionnaire

Of the above mentioned research sub-questions, corresponding to the quantitative component of the investigation, sub-questions one to four are approached through the section of the questionnaire referring to the theme of newsworthiness. Research sub-questions five and six, are assessed through the section referring to journalistic professionalism. The options for factors of newsworthiness included in the questionnaire have been grouped in units of fairly similar meaning, so they correspond to factors most widely suggested in the literature. Data retrieved via the questionnaires produce indications leading to the assessment of journalists' sense of their own 'autonomy' (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, p.14); leading also to the assessment of other components of journalistic professionalism or of the institutional roles of journalists as they perceive their occupational culture, and as the latter is 'deconstructed' by Hanitzsch (2007, p.371).

The population of interest in this investigation consists of the entire body of professional journalists in the United Kingdom, Sweden and Greece; the 'professional journalists' being defined as the regular members of the journalists' unions in the three countries. The sample of the survey is established by contacting the whole of the population, after ensuring the practical support of journalists' unions for that purpose. The technique applied allows for obtaining a random and representative sample, while the sample size allows for classification of the results according to sub-categories in which the respondents belong to; such as: (1) years in the job; (2) type of media they work for; and (3) personal political stance. The questionnaire is concluded with an invitation for participation in the qualitative part of the investigation, so that participants for the simulation meetings are recruited.

5. Qualitative component: Simulation of editorial meeting

To generate data supporting inferences regarding the process of news selection, the research method applied is a set of group discussions simulating regular editorial meetings of a newspaper. Media-related qualitative research, involving focused group discussions, was conducted and explained in literature by the Glasgow Media Group (GMG) (Eldridge, 1993; Philo, 1993; Kitzinger, 1993). The latter suggested a 'news game', elements of which are also utilised in the present investigation. These elements refer to participants selecting from several alternative photographic captions or being asked to produce their own ones. In the present investigation, participants are asked to choose between alternative headlines to suit the news stories discussed. The difference between GMG's 'news game' and this project's is that the former investigated the audience's understanding of the news, while the latter investigates the professional journalists' criteria for the selection and evaluation of news items.

The focus group discussions are simulations of editorial meetings, during which the process of news selection, evaluation and framing is observed. Participants are given a pool of artificial –but realistic and timely - events, and are asked to decide on each one's suitability for publishing, evaluation of the degree of prominence they deserve; also on the headline that best suits each of the publishable ones. Each of the participants plays the role of a section head representing a different newsbeat: (1) internal politics; (2) foreign news; (3) economy; (4) social issues. Summaries of ten potential news stories (events) for each beat are distributed to the participants. Each participant has to discard five and select five for publication. Out of the five selected, one is evaluated as the top story of the beat, which is to be mentioned on the front page of the newspaper. Out of the four top stories, the section heads discuss and select the main story of the newspaper. Each newsbeat head also has to decide on the headline to be used in each of the stories selected for their section of the newspaper; the selection is made among four given options, but a fifth, open one, is also available. In this way: (1) the initial stage, of choosing five stories, produces indications of the way participants judge the newsworthiness of the stories; (2) the second stage, of selecting one top story for the newsbeat and then one for the front page, produces indications of how the prominence of stories is decided; (3) the third stage, of assigning headlines to stories, produces indications of the logic journalists frame the stories.

Data generated in the way described above is used to answer the first and second qualitative research sub-questions, referring to degrees of newsworthiness and criteria of evaluation. Data used to answer the remaining three sub-questions, about non-journalistic factors potentially influencing the process of news selection – especially the role of various power centres - is gathered through the discussion during which the editors are supporting their choices or are challenging the choices of

colleagues. The researcher prepares the news items used for the experiment, also the available headlines. This is done in a way that, firstly, they reflect various news dimensions, so that light is shed on the journalists' logic of newsworthiness. Secondly, they can be associated to the dimensions of journalistic culture suggested by Hanitzsch (2007, p.371; Table 1), so that a contextual correlation is made between the participants' perception of journalistic professionalism and their views regarding newsworthiness. Thirdly, they facilitate discussion by providing challenging cases that lead to making inferences about the distance of journalists from loci of power, as well as about possible constraints they face during their news selection routine.

6. Analysis and limitations

Discussion and analysis of the quantitative and qualitative components of this combined methodology investigation is integrated. The correlation of all partial answers of the two sets of sub-questions, produces inferences that lead to answering the main research question of this investigation. The analysis thus produces evidence regarding views of the participants: (1) on journalistic professionalism and news factors; (2) on the relationship of journalists to agents of power, as well as on the normatively desired and actual degree of journalistic autonomy from such power loci; (3) on the role of internal and external to the newsroom factors influencing the process of news selection. The findings on these areas are studied separately for each country, and then the patterns and thematic analyses for each of them are compared, so that the impact of context on the dynamics of news selection is finally assessed. To ensure that the analysis serves the aim of for corresponding to a meso- or interorganisational (field) perspective, factors such as type of media outlet the respondents work for, years on the job, and personal socio-political views are correlated to their views on journalistic professionalism and news values. In this way, the impact of field logic is assessed, as opposed to that of individual views or rules applying in particular organisations, and to a possible direct impact of wider societal forces and dynamics.

Limitations of this investigation are: (1) Bias of self-selection resulting in imperfect randomness and representativeness of the sample. This is addressed by an over-recruitment of participants. (2) The artificiality of the environment and conditions in the simulation of editorial meetings. This is addressed by posing that there is hardly any non-artificial research case, since the presence of the researcher can be viewed as influencing even the most 'natural' ethnographic observation. (3) Selecting the participants of the focus groups among survey respondents (who know the logic of the investigation) entails the risk of conditioning them, so they are less spontaneous during the editorial meeting simulation process. This is understood; yet, deemed to be preferable to other ways of recruitment, because utilisation of a large base for a –random and stratified- selection is

possible. By acknowledging such a limitation, an effort to minimise its potential cost is made, in the form of: a) using different wording for survey and focus group; b) placing emphasis on describing processes rather than selecting factors, which is the case in the quantitative part; c) creating an –as typical and routine as possible– atmosphere of a real editorial meeting.

Concluding remarks

The combined discussion of quantitative and qualitative approaches of this investigation serves as a 'bridge' between the micro- and macro- levels of analysis. The survey findings draw a picture of the aggregate (prevalent), which is then related to the particular (anecdotal) that is produced through the focus groups. Given that the participants in both components of the investigation are diverse, representing a variety of media outlets (which, in turn, represent a wide range of media types) the overall journalistic culture is reflected in the findings. Given, also, that the (survey and focus group) questions specifically ask about factors and forces influencing the logic of news selection, the investigation produces indications of the participants' perception on such influences. Finally, although the subjects of this investigation are individual journalists, the meso- or inter-organisational level is still studied, given that the units of analysis are the aggregate for the survey and the whole group for the focus group discussions.

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Biography

Andreas Anastasiou is a teaching assistant and doctoral researcher in the department of Media and Communication of the University of Leicester, shifting to the academia after twenty five years in journalism. He holds an MA in Communication Media and Public Relations from the University of Leicester and a BA in Economics from the American College of Greece. He teaches modules on Media Theory, Journalism Practice and Research Methods, and provides academic support to students attending via Distance Learning. His research interests include journalistic professionalism, news values, international - comparative media research, 'patriotic' bias and representing the 'other' in the media.

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