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Journalism Research in Germany

Origins, theoretical innovations and future outlook

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The Origins of German Journalism Research

In Germany, the study of journalism has a long tradition. Löffelholz (2004b) identified the work of the writer and literary historian Robert Eduard Prutz (1816-1872) as being the ancestor of journalism theory. In 1845, long before the establishment of newspaper studies (“Zeitungskunde”) as a field of research, Prutz published “The History of German Journalism.” In later years the theoretical study of journalism was dominated by normative approaches, which continued for many decades. The belief that journalistic talent, similar to artistic talent, lies in the personality of the journalist (see Dovifat 1962) endured well into the 1970’s. At this time the scholarly discussion was mainly centered on the journalist as an individual who could barely live up to the normative expectations placed on news people. The result was a long-lasting (into the 1990s) array of often romantic demands on journalists which they could hardly fulfill.

While shortly after World War II journalism research in the United States began to break away from normative paradigms, empirical journalism research only slowly gained foothold in Germany. The vast array of gatekeeper studies in the 1950s (White 1950) as well

as the increasing interest in research on editorial processes (Breed 1955; Gieber 1956) appeared not to inspire German journalism studies. It was not until 1969 when Manfred Rühl adopted some of the viewpoints being developed in the United States in his dissertation on the news desk as organized social system ("Die Zeitungsredaktion als organisiertes soziales System") that these perspectives began to take root in German journalism studies. Another valuable contribution to journalism research came from Scandinavian scholarship with the development of the concept of news values (Galtung & Ruge 1965; Östgaard 1965). The news values concept was later modified by the German scholar Winfred Schulz (1976). It is important to point out that journalism research in the United States has, since the 1950s, been overly dominated by an empiricist perspective, which has led to a deficit of theoretical analysis, causing the United States to fall far behind Germany in this respect.

In the 1970s at the University of Mainz in Germany, the traditional normative orientation of German journalism studies gave way to a conservative scientific discourse, later characterized as "legitimism" school of thought (Baum 1994). The so called "Mainz School" perceived German journalists as a group of privileged individuals, acting as conformist and leftist outsiders, who use a mainly subjective form of journalism to turn their above average, socially unjustified participation opportunities into political influence (Löffelholz 2004b). The theoretical background to this perspective was laid out by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1980) in her book "Spiral of Silence" in which she described a state of divide in public opinion between the general public and the – mainly left-wing – journalists, leading to a distorted representation of the public opinion in the news. Wolfgang Donsbach (1982; 1989) observed an "unnatural homogeneity" among journalists, no longer just playing the role of political watchdogs, but also competing in the struggle for political influence. Schulz (1989) characterized, for this reason, the advocates of the Mainz School as having a tendency to suspect some sort of conspiracy going on behind the scenes of the media. Within the scope of the Mainz research tradition, Köcher (1986) classified, in a comparative study, German journalists as "missionaries" because of their tendency toward subjective reporting, while she referred to the research-oriented British journalists as "bloodhounds." Donsbach (1993; 1995; Donsbach & Patterson 2004) came to very similar conclusions from the findings in his own research. However, two representative journalist surveys later contested the

central assumptions of the Mainz School (Schoenbach, Stuerzebecher & Schneider 1998; Weischenberg, Löffelholz & Scholl 1998).

Since then German journalism research has brought a wide spectrum of theories to light (see Table 1), as indicated by the diverse approaches exhibited in the two editions of “Theories of Journalism”, edited by Martin Löffelholz (2000; 2004a). With the declining dominance of the Mainz School and normative approaches to journalism research, the 1990s gave birth to constructivist social systems theory. The establishment of the neofunctionalistic paradigm led to a phase of experimentation which focused on integrating other approaches that possess heuristic potential complementary to systems theory. Some approaches that were examined during this time include Schimank’s actor-structure dynamics (Gerhards 1994; Neuberger 2004) and Giddens’ structuration theory (Altmeyen 2000; Quandt 2002; Wyss 2002). Furthermore, approaches based on action theory have, in the meantime, gone through a renaissance (Baum 1994; Bucher 2000), during which the first steps toward the application of Goffman’s theory of interaction were made (Willems 2000).

Table 1: Theoretical perspectives in German-speaking journalism research

Perspective	Main contexts	Object	Advocates
Normativity	journalists as gifted people, advocacy, legitimacy	individual journalist	Karl Bücher, Emil Dovifat, Otto Groth, Wolfgang Donsbach, Hans Mathias Kepplinger, Wolfgang R. Langenbucher
Differentiation theory	theory of social systems, constructivism, organizational theory	society, organization, interaction	Bernd Blöbaum, Alexander Görke, Matthias Kohring, Niklas Luhmann, Frank Marcinkowski, Manfred Rühl, Armin Scholl
Action theory	linguistics, theory of communicative action, critical theory	action	Achim Baum, Hans-Jürgen Bucher, Maximilian Gottschlich
Micro-macro integration	actor-structure dynamics, structuration theory	individual and system; action and structure	Klaus-Dieter Altmeyen, Jürgen Gerhards, Martin Löffelholz, Christoph Neuberger, Siegfried Weischenberg, Vinzenz Wyss
Cultural Studies	critical theory, semiotics, hegemony, cultural sociology	individual and culture	Andreas Hepp, Elisabeth Klaus, Margaret Lünenborg, Rudi Renger

While the Cultural Studies movement did also gain foothold in German journalism research, German scholars have not yet presented anything particularly new to the international academy. They are mostly concerned with the processes of news consumption

and pay only little attention to news production (e.g., Klaus & Lünenborg 2000). German Cultural Studies scholars draw heavily on concepts developed by theorists from the English-speaking community, such as popular journalism (e.g., Hepp 2002; Renger 2000), and much of their work readily fits a diagnosis made by Stevenson (2004) for the Anglophone Cultural Studies: Their publication output is often more polemic than scholarship and is argument rather than investigation.

The following outlines a few of the current innovations in journalism theory in the German-speaking community: the field of differentiation theory, action theory and micro-macro integration theories.

Differentiation theory

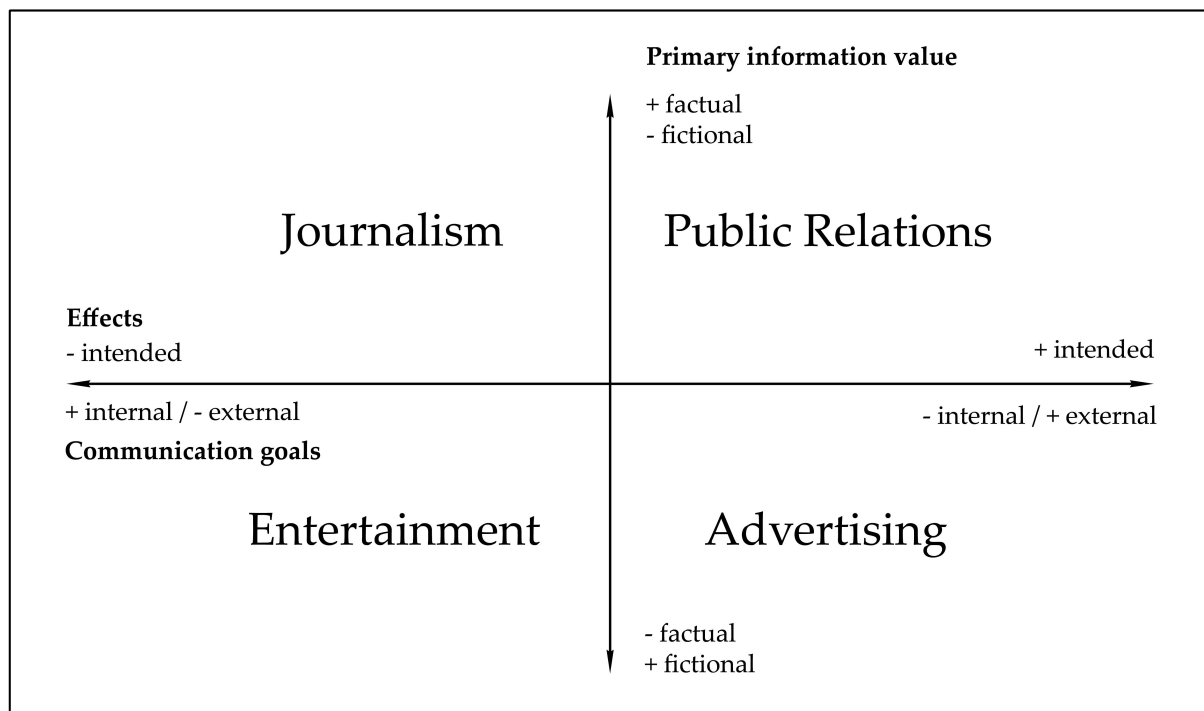
An effective way to identify and distinguish journalism is offered by post-Parsonian systems theory, developed by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1995, 2000a, 2000b). Luhmann's systems theory is a branch of general differentiation theory, which is itself rooted in the work of Émile Durkheim (1893) and Talcott Parsons (1951). Differentiation theory holds that increased complexity, selectivity and contingency of modern society require functional differentiation of social systems (politics, law, economy, education, etc.), each of which fulfills a specific function that is essential to maintain order in society.

In the early 1990s, differentiation theory became commonplace in the German social and behavioral sciences. Journalism was conceptualized as an autonomous and self-determined social system (Blöbaum 1994; Weischenberg 1995). Its function was identified as the "selection and dissemination of information on current-affairs for public communication" (Blöbaum 1994: 261). Other scholars define journalism as a sub system of the larger social system "public" ("Öffentlichkeit") (Gerhards 1994; Görke 2000; Hanitzsch 2004; Kohring 1997) which enables the "self-observation of society" (Marcinkowski 1993: 113). It seems that most researchers agree that journalism in a functionally differentiated society essentially contributes to the conversation society has with itself.

Differentiation theory implies that the onward march of functional differentiation poses at least two serious threats to the fabric of society (see Hanitzsch 2004): First, given their autonomous and self-referential nature, social systems operate increasingly self-centered and inconsiderate of the extent to which their operations disrupt other systems. Second, a functionally differentiated society allows a multiplicity of equivalent perspectives,

as no system can legitimize its individual perspective as being superior to others. Consequently, society had to institutionalize the problem of enabling social co-orientation. As a result, a social system *public communication* evolved with the function of *facilitating a common, socially binding reference by permanently (periodically) providing information of immediate topicality*. This common reference is vitally important to society because it allows the co-orientation of the social universe. While less-complex societies could maintain social co-orientation, coordination and integration through interpersonal communication, in modern society public communication has become central to its organization (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach 1989). In other words: The emergence and evolution of a system *public communication* is a reaction of modern society to the problems caused by functional differentiation. The generalized medium of exchange in public communication is *public attention*. This view allows the integration of all public communication activities, such as journalism, public relations (including propaganda), advertising and entertainment, into one concept, "public communication".

Figure 1: Distinction of journalism, PR, advertising and entertainment



In order to separate journalism from the other areas of public communication, we can identify three dimensions which are able to distinguish journalism, PR, advertising and

entertainment on the operational level (see Figure 1). The first dimension, the *primary information value*, refers to the traditional distinction between fact and fiction. Because communication messages usually contain complex information, the individual scores have to be seen as rather relative to one another: They make up a continuum that stretches from “primarily factual” (+factual/-fictional) to “primarily fictional” (-factual/+fictional). The second dimension, *intended effects*, is concerned with the question of whether a communicated message is intended to have a particular effect on the attitudes and/or behavior of those who consume it (in terms of purchase decisions, positive perception of a company, etc.). Parallel to this axis, there is a third dimension which indicates whether the *communication goals* of a particular message come primarily from the inside (“internally defined”), or are, for the most part, externally defined by a client, host organization or particular groups of stakeholders.

According to the above criteria, journalism shapes its messages in a way that is mostly factual, while its communication goals are primarily internally defined and have mostly no intention of resulting in a change of attitude and/or behavior of the audience. This is not to say that journalistic content per definition does not result in attitudinal and behavioral changes, but the essential question is to what extent these changes are intentional and serve the needs of a specific non-journalistic organization. Public relations, in contrast, does mostly rely on facts, but its communication goals are externally defined (e.g., by political parties, companies) and have the intention to alter attitudes and behaviors of their audiences. Advertising has quite a lot in common with public relations, but it relies mainly on fictional information. Entertainment, on the other hand, is different from public relations and advertising because its communication goals are internally defined, and there is no primary intention to alter the attitudes and behaviors of the audiences. Entertainment is also different from journalism and public relations, as it mainly refers to fictional information.

The presented model does not attempt to simplify social phenomena in binary terms. It does not say that information can be either factual or fictional. The model actually classifies the forms of public communication in relative terms, holding that some information, for instance, is more factual and less fictional than others. This allows us to capture the existing diversity within journalism. In the journalism quadrant of Figure 1, the traditional Western understanding of objective and neutral “just-the-facts” journalism would be located in the upper left. The diverse forms of advocacy journalism, on the other hand, would be situated

to the right, closest to public relations, starting with high factual content in the upper right (e.g., civic/public journalism, development journalism, peace journalism) and moving in a downwards direction as fictional content becomes more prevalent (e.g., partisan/patriotic journalism). In the lower left, close to the entertainment quadrant, one would find popular journalism as an expression of entertainization and tabloidization tendencies in news-making.

Action theory

Klaus Dieter Altmeppen (2000: 293) wrote that approaches based on action theory are having a difficult time in journalism theory due to the dominance of systems theory. On the other hand, Hans-Jürgen Bucher (2000) perceives the two perspectives as being complementary to one another and, for this reason, holds the dichotomy of systems and action theory for an inappropriate simplification. Modern action theory opposes in particular the exclusion of individual actors from journalism theory, as it is the case in systems theory. Its focal points are not the individual journalistic actions, but rather the formalized processes which build the frame of reference for journalistic activities and the consumption of news by the public (Bucher 2000).

An attempt to describe journalistic action in terms of Habermas' (1988) *Theory of Communicative Action* was made by Achim Baum (1994). In his dissertation he drew from the assumption that the original mode of journalistic action is geared toward reaching understanding ("Verständigung") in communication processes. Because mass communication is embedded in everyday life, journalistic action must be understood as social action in both its everyday life and its systemic contexts (Baum 1994). Bucher (2000) is another scholar who has based a significant portion of his work on that of Habermas. He worked with the basic terms "norm", "communicative principle", "shared knowledge" and "recursivity of perception". He focused on the specific dynamics of communication and not primarily on the intentions and goals of the individuals involved. Journalistic action, which is also seen as institutional action, is grounded in the social function and purpose of journalism as institutional storyteller. The empirical analysis is driven by the view that a specific action is indicative of its underlying structures and functions. Furthermore, Bucher (2000) placed value on the fact that an individual action is only possible within a network of actions. In this sense, the smallest unit of analysis is not the individual action, but rather

sequences of actions and the unfolding thereof. Only when one observes an action within its sequential context can its meaning be determined.

Micro-macro integration theories

The differentiation between approaches based on action theory and attempts to integrate macro and micro levels of social analysis, as done in the so-called integrative journalism theory, is not always easy. In the German-speaking community, Altmeppe (2000), among others, has examined the micro-macro link by dividing journalistic action into two broad categories, differentiating between decision-oriented action and coordinative action. Because in journalism, decision-oriented action often occurs in risky and uncertain situations (e.g., in times of war and crisis), coordinative action can help to reduce uncertainty. In these situations, coordination is mainly directed towards reaching an agreement regarding the necessary and appropriate means of action. Altmeppe described editorial organizations, for this reason, as "coordination centers". Moreover, he took a cue from Giddens (1984), conceptualizing coordinative action both as structure-dependent and structure-building. The experiences that journalists make with the help of coordinative action sediment as collective stock of knowledge and serve as models of successful problem solving efforts which can then be applied to similar situations in the future. Two forms of resources, allocative (e.g., staff, funding, equipment, image of the media organization) and authoritative (e.g., forms of power and leadership), become constituent factors of journalistic action (Altmeppe 2000).

The assumption of a reciprocal relationship between social action and structure did also inspire the work of Thorsten Quandt (2002), one of the most promising young media scholars in Germany. He based his work on the key concepts "patterns" (reoccurring sequences), "scheme" (individual, long-lasting patterns of action with a high level of predictability), and "norms" (super-individual, long-lasting patterns of action with a high level of predictability). Journalistic action, according to Quandt, is shaped by norms and resources which are themselves created through journalistic action. Any attempt to trace back the relationship of these two reciprocal factors, either chronologically or casually, would thus be less than meaningful.

The work of the sociologist Uwe Schimank (2000) has been used as a foundation for further studies by Jürgen Gerhards (1994) and, more recently, by Christoph Neuberger (2004) and Thomas Hanitzsch (2004). Schimank identified three dimensions of social structure in his

model of the *actor-structure dynamics* ("Akteur-Struktur-Dynamiken"). *Subsystemic orientation horizons* are the most abstract structural dimensions and connect readily to differentiation theory. They reduce social complexity and indicate the boundaries of a given communicative realm constituted by a particular sub system. In the eyes of the journalists these subsystemic orientation horizons appear in the form of binary codes (e.g. "timely" vs. "not timely") which indicate whether or not a particular communication falls under the category of journalism or belongs to the realm of another social sub system. *Institutional structures*, on the other hand, manifest in the form of informal routines (in journalism, for example, writing style, the "inverted pyramid" in news-writing or media roles) or they appear as formalized codes (e.g., codes of conduct, membership in journalists' unions) and constitute as such the frame of reference for proper journalistic action. *Constellations of actors* emerge from the insight that everyone must coordinate his or her actions with others. This structural dimension describes what individual actors can expect and can attain in a given constellation. Constellations of actors, in which acting individuals observe, influence and negotiate with one another, are particularly useful in the explanation of journalistic conduct in unusual situations in which established routines are not (yet) available.

The future of German journalism theory and research

In the decades following World War II international communication research has become very US-centric. Theoretical progress made by German scholars was largely hidden from the radar of international publishers and journal editors, falling victim to the language barrier. Particularly in journalism studies, the field was dominated by American – to some extent also by British – media scholars, in such a way that theoretical input from non-English-speaking researchers was virtually nonexistent. Even today, many British and American Cultural Studies scholars impulsively oppose theoretical ambitions rooted in functionalism and differentiation theory with the argument that "obviously" these approaches could hardly gain foothold in international journalism theory, ignoring the fact the greater part of German-speaking journalism research is driven by functionalism and differentiation theory.

In recent years, the work of German theorists is becoming increasingly visible at international conferences. The 2005 annual conference of the International Communication Association, for instance, devoted a special session to German theories on journalism. In 2004, the Ilmenau University of Technology, Germany and the Journalism Division of the

German Communication Association (DGPUK) joined forces with the University of Indiana's School of Journalism to organize a well-attended and very stimulating international conference "Journalism Research in an Era of Globalization" which was held in Erfurt, Germany. Moreover, the number of German journalism scholars who publish in international journals has sharply increased during the last few years. In fact, many developments in the field are nowadays driven by German scholars: In 2004, Thomas Hanitzsch and Martin Löffelholz, both teach at the Ilmenau University of Technology, together with David Weaver founded the Journalism Studies Interest Group within the International Communication Association (see Hanitzsch, Löffelholz & Weaver 2005) with currently around 300 members. Beate Josephi who graduated from the University of Mainz is currently the chair of the Professional Education Section of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR).

In the meanwhile, journalism theory in Germany has reached an experimental stage. While the neofunctionalist approaches and differentiation theory have become established, many – mostly young – German media scholars try to make use of theories which have not yet been applied to journalism. Some of these ideas are included in the forthcoming volume "Journalism Theory: Next Generation", edited by Altmeyden, Hanitzsch and Schlüter (2006). The book intends to make use of concepts and theories which have been rarely used in journalism studies, such as "rationality", "interaction", "networks of action", "constellations of actors", "capital – field – habitus" as well as "lifestyle" and "milieu". The number of considerable attempts to contribute to innovative theory building is growing: Stefan Frerichs (2000) has proposed an approach based on chaos theory, while Thorsten Quandt (2005) based his research on new sociological network theories. Carsten Reinemann (2005) utilized a variant of rational choice theory, and Sabine Schäfer (2004) draws on the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Given these new developments, the future of German journalism theory and research is promising. However, German journalism scholars must keep in mind that their ideas need to be made available to the international community, because this is the only way to challenge American scientific hegemony.

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