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Building a home for the study of journalism

ICA creates a Journalism Studies Interest Group

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The background

The idea was intriguing: there was so much academic work on journalism, along with a multitude of books and articles, and the number of scholars in the field was constantly growing. But the International Communication Association (ICA), one of the world's largest organizations of academics in the field of communication, had no journalism section. This held true until May 2004, when a group of scholars concerned with the study of journalism proposed the creation of a Journalism Studies Interest Group at the ICA during the association's annual conference in New Orleans. It was amazing to see how fast this initiative evolved. After all, it took only four months from the initial idea to institutionalization, and this came as a surprise even for those who started this movement.

To establish a new section in ICA, one has to find at least 30 member colleagues who are willing to sign a petition. Therefore, we screened the ICA online membership directory for potential petitioners who had devoted a great deal of research to the study of journalism. Our first call, sent out by e-mail by the end of February 2004, met with an overwhelming response from all over the globe. We approached 50 colleagues; 31 responded during the first six hours! All of them were supportive and not a single one opposed the initiative. Many of them said that the establishment of a journalism section at ICA was a 'long overdue' (H. Stocking¹) and 'timely move' (J. M. Chan²). Some seemed

somewhat unhappy with the present state of ICA that 'doesn't value journalism/journalists that much' (R. Coleman³), while others argued that many members of the ICA's Mass Communication Division might be 'more interested in entertainment than journalism' (J. C. Pollock⁴).

This lively response to the initial call encouraged us to move on toward institutionalization. A petition was drafted in close collaboration between the 'ringleaders' in this initiative and with the help of many supportive colleagues. Our aim was to explicate and substantiate the need, potential and purpose of such a Journalism Studies Interest Group. The following sections are, far from being a manifesto, a snapshot of an ongoing discussion on the legitimacy and mission within this interest group.

The purpose

Growing in importance: journalism and its relevance for society and culture

A large and growing number of scholars recognize and take part in the development of theory and research on journalism. As a result, journalism is becoming an increasingly autonomous field of study, indicated through 'a serious enough, even if not altogether coherent, body of scholarly literature and ongoing scholarly work' (M. Schudson⁵). Universities and colleges, especially outside the USA, have responded to this trend with the increasing formation of independent schools of journalism. The academic community has created two new international journals in the field – *Journalism* (Sage) and *Journalism Studies* (Routledge) – along with several journals devoted to the inquiry of journalism at the national level. At the beginning of the 21st century, the study of journalism constitutes 'a specific field with its own literature and theories (agenda-setting, gate-keeper, etc.) distinct from areas such as television or film studies' (M. Meyers⁶). It is, as Mark Deuze⁷ pointed out, 'most definitely about time journalism scholars establish a field of their own, bring more coherence to their paradigms, and in so doing further support the professionalization of journalism studies and journalism education'.

These developments, which are leading to more autonomy of the field, reflect changes in journalism itself. Journalism has come to rival interpersonal communication as a primary source of social co-orientation. The news becomes 'a part of the daily rethinking and reconstructing of a common social world' (Schudson, 2003: 212). Journalism serves as a kind of 'social cement' (Merrill, 2000: 198) through coordinating 'individuals and groups through

shared symbols and meanings' (Schudson, 2000: 56). Although these optimistic views are not shared by all theorists in the field, journalism studies nevertheless cultivated a common and mostly unspoken understanding of journalism as being too fundamental to contemporary society to remain a secondary subject (K. Sunghae⁸). In a normative sense, journalism is regarded as an essential part in the processes of democracy and social change. That journalism has become crucial to such concerns is indicated by our use of normative concepts such as *public journalism*, *civic journalism*, *development(al) journalism*, and *peace journalism*.

At the same time, we witness the rise of a kind of *service journalism* which, in contrast to public service journalism, 'represents the development of a hybrid social identity – part citizen, part consumer, part client – that is oriented to resolving the problems of everyday life' (Eide and Knight, 1999: 527). This form of journalism, which provides help, advice, guidance and information for the management of self and everyday life, continues to develop as a reaction to the growing scepticism, hostility and resistance towards dependency on established forms of professional expertise and the demand for greater individual autonomy. These developments lead to fundamental changes in the social functions of the news. In a world where virtually any kind of information is accessible via the internet, journalism moves away from merely disseminating information to selecting what is relevant. News people thus become 'search engines' (Hartley, 2000: 43) that help their audiences to navigate through the problems of everyday life.

These and other issues concerning the relationship between journalism, culture and society could be an important focus of further conceptual and empirical work. We need to explore the impact of the growing importance of journalism for macro-scale developments ('democratization', 'knowledge gap', 'cultivation', etc.) as well as its importance for everyday life. We will have to keep an eye on transformations in journalism in order to predict the future of news-making. An interest group organized around the concept of journalism itself would be in a much better position to address these matters than other existing venues within the international academic community.

Old definitions, new media: journalism as an interdisciplinary field of studies

Journalism studies cut across existing fields of inquiry. This is, among other factors, boosted by the rise of online communication which continues to blur the boundaries between mass communication and interpersonal communication. The study of journalism incorporates related fields of research such as,

but not limited to, communication technology (online and multimedia journalism), mass communication ('traditional journalism'), political communication ('mediated politics'), intercultural communication ('global journalism'), developmental communication ('development journalism'), popular communication ('popular journalism'), cultural studies ('journalism cultures'), peace research ('peace journalism') and gender studies (woman journalists). Journalism studies is, by nature, an interdisciplinary field.

Much confusion in the field, however, arises from the fact that many researchers do not make clear distinctions between core concepts like 'journalism', 'public communication', 'the media' and 'the news'. Journalism, as an important though not exclusive area of public communication, is not identical with the media, which is the carrier of (mostly) mass communication. Mass media serve as a *vehicle* for a broad range of content such as journalism, public relations, propaganda, advertising or entertainment. In this regard, it seems indeed worthwhile to address the issues surrounding the meaningfulness of the term *mass* communication, and a group of outstanding scholars has done this at the last ICA conference in May 2004.⁹ After all, it has to be noted that mass communication refers to the sociological concept of 'mass society', which has its origin in the 19th century. Given that the process of social and cultural differentiation is highly progressive, the view of the audience as a 'mass' should rather give way to a more pluralistic view of *audiences*.

Journalism, in contrast, generates specific content ('the news') to be distributed by several channels, including traditional mass media and internet-based online media. Thus, the circulation of news as the output of journalism is not limited to traditional mass communication: there are many forms of alternative journalism, not to mention the 'online challenges' to journalism such as personally tailored news outlets (*Daily Me*) or web logs (Singer, 2003). Despite the importance of journalistic content for the consumption of news and our sense-making of what is going on in the world, journalism itself needs to be seen as a highly autonomous though not entirely independent social entity, no matter whether we label it 'sphere', 'field' (Bourdieu, 1998) or 'system' (Luhmann, 2000). The study of journalism should, therefore, explore the structures and individuals behind the organized production of news. It has to assess the interplay between journalism, culture and society. The news is relevant as a point of reference as to the extent to which the structures of news production, the individuals involved and the constraints under which they operate do actually shape the output of their professional work. Journalism studies means inquiry into the highly complex processes of news-making in order to learn indispensable lessons for subsequent journalism education.

The unsolved problems of defining core concepts like 'journalism' and 'journalist' have numerous empirical consequences. Scholars often have different things in mind when they talk about journalism. This results in conceptual incompatibilities prevalent in the comparative study of national journalism systems. In his book *The Global Journalist*, Weaver (1998: 455) introduced the final chapter on the comparison of journalists around the world by stating: 'Comparing journalists across national boundaries and cultures is a game of guesswork at best.' This guesswork will continue unless we start a conceptual debate on the core concepts of the field which will generate definitions applicable for comparative research. Up to now, journalism researchers often seem to reinvent the wheel when it comes to the conceptual definition of what is 'journalism' and what is a 'journalist'. That said, we desperately need more comparative research on journalism as this strategy can provide us with valuable insights into global trends of news-making which we cannot obtain otherwise. One excellent example of comparative research on journalism is the Donsbach (1995) and Patterson (1998) study. And although their conclusions are debatable, we should have more of this kind of research.

In order to tackle all these conceptual problems, the group invites 'a wide array of theoretical and methodological approaches, uniting around an interest in journalism and sharing the aim of enhancing existing understandings of how journalism works across temporal and geographic contexts' (B. Zelizer¹⁰). Central to the mission of the interest group is 'to explicate what we recognize intuitively but has become increasingly vague within both the academy and the profession: What is news?' (J. Newhagen¹¹). What is journalism? What distinguishes journalism from other fields of public communication such as public relations, advertising or entertainment? Who are the people responsible for making decisions about what is news – and how do their backgrounds, education, attitudes and beliefs influence these decisions? How do the individual, routine, organizational, extra-media and ideological constraints (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Reese, 2001) influence the daily work of journalists?

The Journalism Studies Interest Group at ICA can be a perfect place to discuss these issues because it provides the academic community with a permanent forum for the exchange of ideas, criticism and research cooperation. The group, however, is aware of the fact that 'developments in academia over time seem to point toward a fragmentation of the field' (S. Sosale¹²) and a proliferation of separate entities may become self-defeating since the ICA already has many divisions and interest groups. In order to discuss journalism with regard to its geographical, social, cultural, political, economic, legal, technological, etc. contexts, the Journalism Studies Interest Group will continue to engage in the larger conversations involving related areas such as

mass communication, political communication or intercultural communication.

A fragmented field: journalism and the academy

Notwithstanding the growing importance of journalism as a social phenomenon and object of inquiry, the academic community seems to remain a fragmented field: 'While journalism is presently studied across the field, often the individuals behind these different research endeavors do not have a place to speak with each other' (B. Zelizer¹³). One reason for this unhappy situation lies in the historical development of the field (Zelizer, 2004). Especially in the USA, journalism schools have long been seen primarily as educational institutions, dominated by practitioners who do not place much emphasis on research. The conceptual and empirical work on journalism was left to university departments devoted to, broadly speaking, communication and media studies. This has led to a long-lasting gap between practitioners, who regarded the study of journalism as mainly an academic enterprise, and the academy, which often failed to make its theories and results applicable to the realities of everyday news production.

In that regard, the purpose of the Journalism Studies Interest Group reflects an interest in journalism per se, i.e. interest in journalism education, professionalism, training, etc., as well as in its inquiry. The group is intended to further facilitate the professionalization of journalism studies *and* journalism education (M. Deuze¹⁴). Journalism scholars need, therefore, to create a platform with the study of journalism as its foundation, on which scholars employing different kinds of academic approaches can engage in dialogue. It would be a clearinghouse of sorts for the wide range of scholarship on journalism (B. Zelizer¹⁵). Another important aim is to facilitate empirical research and bring more coherence to research paradigms. Considering the state of the art in journalism theory and research, there is still a lot of work to do toward the integration of production, content and effect studies, as Shoemaker and Reese (1996: 257) have reminded us. Also, the interest group would be a networking place that provides many opportunities for scholars to meet and engage in international and intercultural research.

Another reason why the academic community in the field of journalism research appears fragmented is the language barrier. Hartley (1996: 232) argued some years ago that the 'best work on journalism tends to be written by people who are thinking about something else'. When he wrote these words, he actually had Stuart Hall and Richard Ericson in mind. Hartley's assumption, however, seems contestable at least for one reason: many quite intriguing traditions in theorizing journalism are 'lost in translation' and consequently

rarely recognized. The German-speaking academic community (for an overview, see Löffelholz, 2004), for instance, has cultivated a fruitful and extensive discourse on journalism as a self-referential and self-organizing system (in English, see Scholl, 1996; Luhmann, 2000). This ongoing debate on post-Parsonian systems theory and journalism is highly complex and has been used as a framework for empirical research (Weischenberg et al., 1998). French scholars, however, have developed a stimulating discourse on the concept of the 'journalistic field' (in English, see Marlière, 1998), drawing from Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) sociological work. Even though English has become the *lingua franca* in the social sciences, a Journalism Studies Interest Group should thus attract scholars from non-English-speaking countries in order to contribute their national potentials to the international scientific discourse. Mastering proper English, though essential for publication, should not be made a criterion that prevents potential papers from being presented at international conferences.

Institutionalization

In April 2004, 50 scholars sent their petition to the ICA headquarters. A few weeks later, just at the beginning of the ICA's annual conference, the Board of Directors approved the creation of a Journalism Studies Interest Group, thus making the first meeting of the group, held in New Orleans, organizational. The first steps toward organizational structures have been made; now the group is ready to run its first independent program panels at the next annual ICA conference in New York, 26–30 May 2005.

There are still many things to do, though. The interest group will, in one way or another, try to link up with relevant journals in the field. Also, there should be ties established with journalism sections at national levels, such as the Journalism Division of the German Communication Association (DGPK). Last, but not least, the group will work hard in order to move to division status since this would entitle the interest group to more privileges in ICA. Any interest group having at least 200 active members enrolled for two consecutive years can become a division upon approval by the Board of Directors. The Journalism Studies Interest Group should have a good chance to do this in a few years.

Notes

- 1 Personal e-mail, 8 March 2004.
- 2 Personal e-mail, 26 February 2004.

- 3 Personal e-mail, 26 February 2004.
- 4 Personal e-mail, 26 February 2004.
- 5 Personal e-mail, 26 February 2004.
- 6 Personal e-mail, 8 March 2004.
- 7 Personal e-mail, 26 February 2004.
- 8 Personal e-mail, 26 February 2004.
- 9 Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, John Funabiki, Elihu Katz, Leah A. Lievrouw, Zhongdang Pan and Barbie Zelizer have participated in this session.
- 10 Personal e-mail, 10 March 2004.
- 11 Personal e-mail, 12 March 2004.
- 12 Personal e-mail, 28 February 2004.
- 13 Personal e-mail, 10 March 2004.
- 14 Personal e-mail, 26 February 2004.
- 15 Personal e-mail, 10 March 2004.

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Editors' note

Following the setting up of the Journalism Studies Interest Group (JSIG), an agreement has been reached between the group and *Journalism* and *Journalism Studies* to offer a 35 per cent discount rate to JSIG members for both journals. The JSIG will also publish a yearly report and advert in the journals and provide authors of top papers, accepted for the ICA annual conference, a choice of submitting their papers either to *Journalism* or to *Journalism Studies*.