

Dialectics of Media Practice

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Abstract

Media practice is inherently dialectical in nature. In this theoretical article, I build on the literature to explore three nested dialectics related to the connection between media discourse and material context, the journalistic use of language, and the construction of meaning and identity. I treat these dialectics as a distinct characteristic of the journalistic field. Following the tradition of critical theory and critical discourse analysis, the article discusses the role of human agency in the dialectics of journalistic practice. The paper concludes with an optimistic perspective of journalistic intervention.

Introduction

The idea of dialectics has a long tradition in both ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ philosophies. Although ‘Western’ thought is sometimes associated with linear logic and a positivist view, a dialectical tradition has been firmly established by scholars ranging from Socrates to Georg W. F. Hegel and the members of the so-called Frankfurt School of critical theory (e.g. Horkheimer and Adorno 2004 [1947]). In this article, I argue that the ‘Western’ media, too, is inherently dialectical in nature. The particular point this article contributes to the literature is that several nested dialectics of journalism exist that relate to the use of language and the connection between discursive process and material context. These dialectics and their interrelation harbour the possibility for agency in journalistic practice. In making this argument, I build on the literature related to the

journalistic field and critical theory, and existing scholarship that has examined the various dialectical dimensions of media practice.

This article adds to a growing literature that documents the complex nature of dialectics in journalism. For example, a recent study of media reporting on the Human Genome Project and race-based medication uncovered a series of nested dialectics that juxtapose ‘race’ as functions of genetics or social context and of geography or ancestral origin (Lynch 2008: 273). Other recent research has investigated the dialectical nature of language use and journalistic argumentation (Walton 2007). In addition, critical discourse analysts have stressed the dialectic between media reporting and material context (e.g. Wodak 2001, 2006).

This article follows the tradition of critical discourse analysis, which treats language as a “form of social practice” (Wodak 1997: 258) contributing not only to the production of meaning and identity but also shaping material circumstances. It also embraces the principles of critical theory, which situates human agency in the dialectical process (e.g. Adorno 1963, Horkheimer and Adorno 2004 [1947], Marcuse 1964). I suggest that the media constitutes a separate field in which these traditions and principles apply in a particular manner.

Below, I first argue that these dialectics are similar to a set of rules that structure the journalistic field. I develop this argument by discussing the journalistic field as understood by Pierre Bourdieu. Second, I examine three “forms” of dialectics of journalistic practice. Third, I discuss the role of human agency in these dialectics and draw on the examples of national identity, geographical scale and language community to

illustrate how these dialectics are materially located. Finally, I conclude by expressing optimism for journalistic intervention.

The Journalistic Field

In his work on television and journalism, Pierre Bourdieu (1998a) separates the media from other social, political and cultural fields.¹ Bourdieu (1998a: 39) defines the journalistic field in the following way:

Journalism 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. To say that it is independent or autonomous, that it has its own laws, is to say that what happens cannot be understood by looking only at external factors.

As a separate field, journalism and the media possess their own hierarchies and practices of distinction and reproduction. They also follow a particular logic of cultural production and symbolic expression, observe “a set of shared assumptions and beliefs” and impose a “mental grid” according to which journalists select and interpret information (Bourdieu 1998a: 47). This understanding of media as a field has recently attracted considerable attention in media studies (e.g. Hesmondhalgh 2006, Benson and Neveu 2005, Marlière 1998, Couldry 2003a, 2003b, Benson 2006).

This journalistic field is neither uniform nor static. Rather, it contains subfields that vary, for example, in terms journalistic specialization, degrees of professionalization, levels of commercialization and relations to non-journalistic fields (Marchetti 2005).

Bourdieu (1998a) explored mainly the subfield of television. Within this subfield competition and risk-averse behaviour among media agents, leads to a convergence of

¹ Although Bourdieu (1998a) speaks of the “journalistic” field, rather than the media field, for the purpose of this paper I use the two terms interchangeably.

journalistic practices (Bourdieu 1998a). Other subfields include radio and the print media. Despite the differences between subfields, the journalistic field also shares characteristics and practices across sub-fields. For example, Bourdieu (1998a: 10) draws parallels between television and print journalism with respect to the coverage of jingoism and racism. In addition, the journalistic field and its subfields are changing over time. For example, the internet and other communication technology are rapidly transforming the manner in which journalism is practiced, information is collected, news are produced and stories are told.

As the above quote by Bourdieu (1998a: 39) illustrates the field of journalism is defined “by its position in the world at large”; it is not isolated from other fields. Media professionals and their journalistic practices are influenced by the interests and intentions of other social, political and cultural agents and institutions. For example, depending on national contexts, close relations between the media and government exist. Governments typically regulate the media, in many countries fund the media and sometimes intervene in programming and hiring (Marlière 1998). Governments also feed information to the media, via designated spokespersons, public relations professionals and “spin doctors”, who manipulate the media to achieve political aims. Conversely, the “journalistic field produces and imposes on the public a very particular vision of the political field” (Bourdieu 1998a: 2), which politicians rely on for legitimacy and “symbolic support” (Bourdieu 1998a: 4).

Similarly, the journalistic field entertains linkages to the field of business. The dependence of the media on private advertisers and the private ownership of media further solidify the journalism-business relation. Media czars like Rupert Murdoch,

Conrad Black and Izzy Asper may have been able to foster their political agendas, for example, through appointing personnel and editors. In addition, the fields of journalism, politics and business are linked through the principle of competition and market exchange (Bourdieu 1998a). In their famous “propaganda model”, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (2000) even present the media as an extension of private corporations and their interests. They suggest that structural factors, such as ownership, funding sources, the pre-fabricated nature of information and ideological pressures, shape media output and stifle dissent.

The journalistic field also links to other social and cultural fields. Todd Gitlin (1980) has long suggested that media representations are connected to bourgeois hegemonic agendas. Social and cultural elites develop, reproduce and circulate discursive concepts and categories that are also used by journalists and media professionals. Teun van Dijk (1987, 1991) argues in the context of the analysis of ethnicity and race that the media draws on “preformulations” (van Dijk, 1987: 361; van Dijk, 1991: 41) of concepts and categories articulated by powerful social and cultural elites, engages with these concepts and categories, and subsequently “reformulates” existing ethnic and racial identities (van Dijk, 1991: 7).

Furthermore, the journalistic field interlocks with everyday practice. For example, in the ‘mainstream’ media, reporting caters to a popular readership, which journalists consider when authoring an article (Walton 2007). In this context, the media presents “scripts” for the interpretation of news events and political affairs that also guide everyday social interaction between individuals and social groups (Downing and Husband 2005: 43). At the same time, an audience does not blindly accept these scripts

but exercises agency in the way it decodes journalistic reporting and feeds its own interpretations back to the media (Hall 1980).

Some researchers propose that journalism occupies a special, agenda-setting position relative to other fields. Nick Couldry (2003b: 668), for example, argues that the media functions as a “meta-field” because it influences other fields, such as politics, and supplies “representations of, and categories for understanding, the social world” to these fields. With such agenda-setting and influential functions, the field of the media is of particular interest to empirical researchers because it can provide insights into how the social and political world is represented in other fields and understood in the everyday.

Although neither journalism and its audiences nor politics, business or cultural elites are entirely isolated fields (Marlière 1998), journalism can be conceptualized as an “autonomous” field with its own practices (Bourdieu 1998a: 39). While structural constraints imposed by business and politics must be acknowledged, norms of professionalism in the media demand that journalists maintain a degree of distance from economic and political fields (Hallin 1996). One way in which this distance is revealed is through journalistic practices that differ from other fields. Although Bourdieu (1998a) focused mainly on unveiling power-relations and hierarchies particular to the journalistic field, he also acknowledged that journalistic production follows distinct set of rules, conventions and norms. For example, print journalism observes the “laws” (Bourdieu 1998a: 44) to be inoffensive and inclusive and follows a “code of ethics” (Bourdieu 1998a: 71) that constrain and control the way newspaper output is produced. As an autonomous field, journalism operates according to its own logic.

The concept of habitus, which Bourdieu (1977, 1984) developed in his earlier work, is useful to understand the practices that exist in the journalistic field. Habitus is a system of practices dispositions, styles and tastes shared among the members of a social or professional community. Within a given field, such as academia (Bourdieu 1988)—or journalism—habitus defines the “rules” by which to play the “game”; it is “a feel for the game” and represents the embodiment of “the immanent structures” of a field (Bourdieu 1998b: 80-81). Although Bourdieu (1998a) did not apply the concept of habitus in his work on journalism, his work suggests that habitus defines a guiding principle for practices in journalism.

Researchers have applied the concept of habitus to the journalistic and media fields (e.g. Couldry 2003a, Downing and Husband 2005). According to these researchers, a range of media practices represent this journalistic habitus. Editors, reporters and media staff share a habitus and embrace common rules of news publishing, standards of journalistic integrity, norms of establishing legitimacy, practices of selecting information, styles of writing and ways of constructing meaning. For example, in news rooms and editorial meetings, media professionals rely on journalistic “gut feeling” to selecting newsworthy information (Schultz 2007). Again, this journalistic gut feeling may be cultivated in connection with other fields, including structural factors that influence “definitions of newsworthiness” (Herman and Chomsky 2000: xi). Nevertheless, this “feeling” remains a distinct habitual characteristic of the journalistic field.

Language use is also habitual (Bourdieu 1991). Accordingly, the journalistic habitus specifies conventions of how news is reported, information is presented and narratives are constructed. In a review of media research, Michael Schudson (2002)

identifies an approach to media studies that recognizes “that news is a form of culture” (p. 251) and “a form of literature” (p. 262), which follows certain professional traditions and styles of storytelling, and which deploys particular journalistic strategies, such as presenting expert voices to establish authority.

In the context of news production, an important journalistic practice is “framing”, referring to the selection and interpretation of information by referencing this information in the context of wider societal and political circumstances (Gitlin, 1980, Goffman 1974, Tuchman 1978). According to John Downing and Charles Husband (2005: 36), the practice of framing is “habitual and ... rarely reflected upon” by the media professionals who reproduce these frames. These practices of journalism differ from practices in other fields, such as the political, business or academic fields (Bourdieu 1991).²

In the next section, I will explore practices of news reporting in greater detail. In particular, I will argue that the journalistic practices follow the principle of dialectics.

Dialectics of Journalistic Practice

Dialectics are a distinct feature of the journalistic field. To explore this feature in greater detail below, I draw on examples from the sub-field of the print media. In addition, I focus on the media practices of the late 20th and early 21st Century and not on the manner in which the internet and other technologies are currently transforming these practices. I am particularly interested in the print media’s practices of reporting news,

² Bourdieu’s (1998a: 19) explains the practice of framing through a comparison: “Journalists have special ‘glasses’ through which they see certain things and not others, and through which they see the things they see in the special way they see them.” These glasses help journalist to see the unusual, tone down the ordinary and interpret news and events in certain ways. In France, for example, the journalistic vision using “special glasses” are projecting an association between “inner city” and “riots”.

analyzing information and constructing meaning. In this context, journalistic practice is subject to at least three interlocking and nested dialectics.

The first dialectic applies to the interaction between the journalistic field and other fields. More than four decades ago, Raymond Williams (1966: 19) recognized the dialectical relationship between “communication” and material “reality”. He wrote:

We have been wrong in taking communications as secondary. ... the struggle to learn, to describe, to understand, to education is a central and necessary part of our humanity. This struggle is not begun, at secondary hand, after reality has occurred. It is, in itself, a major way in which reality is continually formed and changed.

The recursive relationship between communication and material circumstances is reflected in the dialectic between journalistic reporting and social and political structures. The proponents of critical discourse analysis explicitly refer to this dialectical relationship at the center of their investigations. For example, Ruth Wodak (2001: 66) remarks: “On the one hand, the situational, institutional and social settings shape and affect discourses, and on the other, discourses influence discursive as well as non-discursive social and political processes and actions”. Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 258) define this dialectic as a “two-way relationship: the discursive event is shaped by situations, institutions and social structures, but is also shapes them.” Critical discourse analysis therefore examines the “dialectical relationship between particular discursive acts and the situations, institutions and social structures in which they are embedded ... In other words, discourse constitutes social practice and is at the same time constituted by it” (Wodak et al. 1999: 8). An extension of this dialectic is that media discourse itself can be treated as a social practice. Wodak (2006: 599, referring to James Paul Gee 2003: 1)

speaks of the “scaffolding” of human practices as a “dialectic among institutions, culture, situations, and agents who perform activities produced and reproduced in these settings.”

Corresponding to such an understanding of dialectics, empirical research employing critical discourse analysis has focused on the relationship between linguistic and material practices. In particular, research has examined the newsprint media as a site where the dialectic between discursive practices and material structures can be observed, where the mediation between social norms and material practices manifests itself, and where the interest of politicians, civic administrators, corporate leaders, media owners and other groups are reflected (e.g. van Dijk 1991, 1997, Wodak and Meyer 2001, Wodak and Menz 1990, Fairclough 1992). In this way, the journalistic field is not only recursively related to the circumstances and practices of other fields, but it is also embedded in wider society. This first dialectic defines the connection between journalistic and other fields.

The second dialectic, or “second dimension” (Wodak 2001: 65), of media discourse refers to the linguistic practice of presenting and analyzing information through juxtaposing oppositional viewpoints. This dialectic relates to the classical Greek tradition of dialogue as exchange of proposition and counter-proposition. The concept of discourse reflects this classical Greek interpretation of dialectics as a method of argument (e.g. Burke 1969 [1945]). In fact, the very word “discourse” has its origin in the Latin verb *discurrere*, meaning “running back and forth” (Wodak 2006: 596).

Douglas Walton (2007) suggests that linguistic journalistic practice simulates a conversation between two speakers. He examines that when journalists seek to persuade their audience, “they imagine a dialogue to establish the initial position of the audience,

and they then work within that framework to persuade the audience through dialectically secured claims” (Walton 2007: 4). The same practice is used when journalists seek to inform their audiences and analyze news event by presenting multiple perspectives and viewpoints.³ In these cases, the second dialectical dimension refers to a rhetorical strategy reflective of the journalistic habitus.

The empirical analysis of media discourse often focuses on the very contradictions, juxtapositions and opposing viewpoints embedded in press reporting (e.g. Wodak and Meyer 2001). Wodak (2001: 65) observes: “text or discourse immanent critique aims at discovering inconsistencies, (self-)contradictions, paradoxes and dilemmas in the text-internal or discourse-internal structures”.

This presentation of contradictory views is common in media reporting. Journalist and editors often aspire to offer oppositional perspectives of news event and to juxtapose differing opinions and interpretations. This dialectical practice of journalistic reporting is a method of presenting a nuanced picture of an issue and obtaining a deeper understanding of news events. Contradiction and negation—rather than agreement—are central elements of journalistic discovery.⁴ In the words of John Merrill (1989: 8, original emphasis):

³ Walton (2007: 153) suggests that journalism which does not explicitly juxtapose opposing viewpoints can also be “dialectical in nature”. For example, when media reporting seeks to evoke fear or pity, it often fails to present of oppositional perspectives. Even in the absence of contradictory viewpoints, journalistic reporting anticipates the audience’s reaction of fear and compassion, and therefore simulates the audience’s involvement in a dialog. This dialog imitates the dialectical engagement between journalist and audience as if both parties participated in a conversation.

⁴ Journalists also practice a variation of this second dialectic by continual “code-switching” (Schudson 2002: 263) between presenting themselves as objective observers of events and moral interpreters of these events, and by applying “profession narratives” following their journalistic values and “cultural narratives” following a practice of myth building when they report news (Nossek and Berkowitz 2006).

Absolutes and extremes are unproductive in journalism if they are honored as static values. They must be looked at upon as *means*—as instruments of opposition and friction—that lead to a new better journalistic idea or essence. [...] No journalist can afford to push aside the awareness that ideas and events have complex and contradictory natures and that all is constantly changing. Flux is king in journalism. Dynamic thinking and dialogue is essential to journalistic progress.

While journalists may seek a synthesis of opposing viewpoints, they are never able to present a definite endpoint of the interpretation of news. Rather, the dialectical movement of journalistic reporting continues indefinitely on the basis of contradictory evidence and viewpoints (Merrill 1989). News is a “product that must be made fresh daily”, Gaye Tuchman (1978: 179) observed more than three decades ago. Journalistic discovery rests with the daily reinterpretation of events and circumstances, not the fixing of concepts and meanings.

The fluid and incomplete nature of media reporting presents the possibility to introduce new perspectives and positions. While the media—due to its structural connections to other fields—often repeats existing positions and reinforces the established limits of debate, the dialectical nature of journalistic reporting also enables the inclusion of alternative viewpoints. This ability harbours the potential to give exposure and legitimacy to fresh and/or previously marginalized positions. Dialectical contradiction and juxtaposition are also a way for journalists to *discover* news positions and perspectives.

When Merrill (1989: 11) calls on journalist “to form a habit to thinking dialectically”, he implies that this dialectical practice of news reporting is habitual. The presentation of contradictory viewpoints and the positions of the “good guys and bad

guys” (Bourdieu 1998a: 35) reflect tacit linguistic rules of the game that define the journalistic field.⁵ On the one hand, these habitual linguistic rules represent a rhetorical strategy that enables journalists to project an image of professional neutrality; in this case, the habitual performances should neither be equated with the free expression of opinion nor with transcending the established limits of debate. On the other hand, these performances also enable the journalistic discovery and legitimation of alternative positions.

The third dialectic occurring in the journalistic field relates to Hegel’s (2005 [1807]) “dialectical movement” of the construction of meaning and identity. This dialectic is characterized by the interplay of subject and substance. Abstract concepts (*Begriffe*) through which people comprehend and know about the world are referenced in material contexts. Language and meaning, we know from Ludwig Wittgenstein (2001[1945/1946]), are always situated in a particular context. In regard to journalistic practice, material context is central for understanding the meanings constructed by journalistic texts and media discourses. In particular, the events and circumstances which the media reports on constitute the material matter in which the journalistic formation of meaning and identity are referenced. In other words, material context “embeds the communicative or interactional structures of a discursive event in a wider frame of social and political relations, processes and circumstances” (Wodak 2001: 65).

⁵ Bourdieu (1998a: 35) also relates this journalistic practice of presenting contradictory viewpoints to the language games explored by Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (2001 [1945/46]), suggesting that journalism uses language in a manner that is always context particular and that meanings are never fixed but revealed in the use of language.

This third form of journalistic dialectics is related to the other two dialectics outlined above. Similar to the first dialectic, material context is important; unlike the first dialectic, however, this third dialectic concerns mostly the formation of discursive concepts and identities and less the impact of these concepts and identities on material practice. Material events and relations are incorporated into journalistic discourse. In addition, the presentation of contradictory evidence, which is characteristic of the second form of journalistic dialectics, is also important to the third dialectic. This third dialectic stresses that this evidence is not fictional. Rather, in the words of Michael Schudson (2002: 255), journalists are constrained by “having to write ‘accurately’ about objectively real occurrences in the world”.

While the news media may be obligated to write accurately about material facts, it also follows particular practices to select, interpret and present these facts (Tuchman 1973). These practices relate back to the first dialectic and the circumstances and interests that exist in other fields (Gitlin 1980). For example, framing practices construct analytical categories in which facts are presented and interpreted. Accordingly, media reporting in North America and Europe have portrayed immigrants as an economic utility (e.g. Wengeler 2003, Bauder 2008) or a threat to a country’s civic order (e.g. Whitaker 1998, Mathani and Mountz, 2002). Other characteristics of immigrants have fallen out of the frame and are rarely reported on. The meaning of immigration and the identities of immigrants, in this context, are a function of how facts about immigrants and immigration are ordered relative to these frames.

These frames, in turn, change with shifts in material contexts and the changing circumstances in other fields. For example, in Germany, the image of immigration painted in the press followed the country's changing geopolitical role and fluctuations of labour demand throughout the post-war period. Subsequently, immigration was reframed from welcome infusion of demanded labour to undesired and undeserving job stealer (Wengeler 1995). Framing practices of immigrants in the press also respond to key news events, such as violent attacks on asylum seekers by racist Neo-Nazis in Germany (Brosius 1993/1994), or the 2001 airplane attacks in New York and Washington, which framed immigrants as security threats (e.g. Tsoukala 2008a, 2008b, Vukov 2003). Similar to the second dialectic of journalistic discovery through juxtaposition, this third dialectic never reaches a fixed endpoint but continues with the transformation of the material contexts and the ongoing occurrence of news events (Bencivenga 2000: 48).

Discussion

The triple dialectics outlined above raise the question of agency in journalistic practice. In this section, I address this question through a discussion of Hegelian and Marxian dialectics. In addition, I examine issues of geographical, linguistic and national contexts, in which agency is situated. In his work on the journalism, Bourdieu (1998a: 8) proposes that the "routines and habits" which govern "the journalistic field represent the world in terms of a philosophy that sees history as an absurd series of disasters which can be neither understood nor influenced." This journalistic representation of the world relates to the third dialectic described above, whereby meaning is constructed through the selection and interpretation of news and events. This journalistic view of the world also resonates with Hegel's (1970[1820], 1961[1837]) philosophy and his passive idealism,

which denies that philosophy can have an influence on material practice. Hegel (1970[1820], 59-60) famously wrote that philosophy's "owl of Minerva takes flight only as dusk begins to fall", suggesting that philosophy can only passively observe and interpret the world but has no influence on material events. Philosophy, according to Hegel, can only explore what already happened, not what will or should happen (Benecivenga 2000: 53-56). From this Hegelian viewpoint, journalism and philosophy share common ground. Journalists only passively observe the world. They do not make the news, but they report them once they have happened.

Journalists, however, are not only passive observers but also active agents in the way they select and interpret news events. In particular, when journalists engage in the second dialectic, they actively seek out contradiction, develop oppositional viewpoints, and anticipate audience responses when they craft their stories. While this engagement may be habitual, it is also active practice and a form of agency. According to Hegel's understanding of identity formation, which he developed in the preface of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, self-awareness of the knowing subject is achieved through "doing" (*Tun*), which mediates between the acting subject and the material world (Hegel, 2005 [1807], pp. 162-163). "Doing", in this context, should be understood as a wide range of practices that shape, manipulate and reflect on the material world, including the "mental form labour" (Adorno 1963: 35). Media work and the authoring of news stories, commentaries and other texts published in the news media can be interpreted as such acts of mediation between material events and the formation of meaning and identity. News is the material reference point, on which journalists act to construct meanings of objects and people.

In addition, the third dialectic of the journalistic construction of meaning does not occur in a vacuum. Rather it connects to the first dialectic between journalistic practice and material circumstances. In particular, the meanings that are constructed by journalistic practice are consumed by readers who, in turn, make decisions based on these meanings.

Again, parallels exist between philosophy and journalism. Affirming the dialectical principle, Ludwig Feuerbach (1986 [1841]) and subsequently Karl Marx and Friederich Engels (1953) critiqued Hegel's idealism and emphasized the historical and material foundations of the dialectical process. Furthermore, Karl Marx acknowledged the active role of the philosopher as educator. In "Theses on Feuerbach", he argued that philosophy is a "revolutionary practice" that transforms material relations by producing knowledge based on which agents act (Marx 1964[1845]). In this way, philosophy does shape material circumstances. In a similar way, journalism not only reflects the material world, but it also shapes this world by selecting and interpreting information which subsequently informs politician and cultural elites and affects everyday practices. Journalistic reporting becomes part of the knowledge base on which a wide range of agents act.⁶

The journalistic field and the dialectics of journalistic practice are defined by their geographical context. For example, Bourdieu's translator, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, emphasizes the importance to situate *On Television and Journalism* in a French context and explains to an English-language readership the differences between the American and French journalistic fields (Bourdieu 1998a: 83-85). Variations between France and

⁶ Wodak (2001: 65) identifies a "third dimension" of critical discourse analysis, aimed towards the "improvement of communication" and social transformation (also Wodak 1997). This third dimension resonates with the reflective nature of Marxian-inspired critical theory.

the United States have also been observed in the relationship between journalistic, commercial and political fields (Benson 2005). The national scale is particularly important in the manner in which journalism is organized, regulated and practiced. For example, in The Netherlands foreign affairs journalists are working independently and experience relative autonomy while in the United States they experience greater pressure and competition (Cohen 1995).

As material circumstances are geographically located, the journalistic constructions of meaning and identity are also geographically particular. To stick with the earlier example of news about immigration and immigrants, the Canadian media constructed the landing of 599 refugees from China on Canada's Western shores in 1999 as a crime and framed the event in a context of racialized national identity (Hier and Greenberg 2002, Mountz and Mahtani 2002, Vuko 2003). In Germany, the media frames Turkish foreign residents in racial terms to dialectically construct an ethnic national identity (Beck-Gernsheim 2007, Korteweg and Yurdakul, 2008, Bauder 2009). In Israel, the media produces an ethnic national identity in opposition to an Arab ethnic population (Frosh and Wolfsfeld 2006). Although the material events and circumstances differ, a dialectic of identity formation exists in all three national journalistic contexts. Even the same international event is often framed differently in different countries. For example, the interpretation of the 2005 riots by second-generation immigrant youth in suburban Paris varied between newspapers in Canada, France, Germany, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States (Snow et al. 2007). Although ownership structures are becoming multinational and the market principle increasingly serves as the overarching regulatory paradigm (Bourdieu 1988a), the national scale continues to

provide an important geographical context of news events and interpreting these events in a manner that is meaningful to the audience (Couldry 2003a, Wolfsfeld 1997, Schudson 2002: 263-264).

Other geographical scales, including urban and regional scales, also matter. For example, when the media in Cardiff reported on the national settlement dispersal program of asylum seekers, it framed immigrants in the context of cosmopolitan local identity and constructed asylum seekers as one of “us”. The media in Leeds, on the other hand, presented asylum seekers as labour competition and portrayed immigrants as deviant “others” (Finney and Robinson, 2008). Local political, economic and social circumstances provide different material points of reference for the formation of asylum seekers’ identities.

Language community provides another important context, which intersects with the journalistic field. Language can define a “linguistic habitus” (Bourdieu 1991), which guides language use and subsequently journalistic practice. In addition, language is closely related to national community. For example, the German language served as the defining marker for a pan-German national identity in response to the fragmentation and disintegration of the Holy Roman Empire in the 19th Century, and German writers, such as Arndt, Fichte and Herder, played a catalytic role in linking language and nationhood (Sheehan 1992; Preuss 2003). In the French context, Bourdieu (1991: 48) illustrates that the standardization of language practices and nation-building went hand-in-hand.

Benedict Anderson (1991) further argues that the invention of the printing press and the emergence of the print capitalism had a catalytic impact on the normalization of national languages and the formation of modern nations in Europe and elsewhere. In this

process, the print media “gave a new fixity to language” and facilitated the formation of national identity (Anderson 1991: 44). From this viewpoint, the journalistic field has a close historical connection with the national community.

Journalistic practice has another important influence on nation building. Through the dialectical production of meaning, journalism also engages in the formation of national identity. Again, the reporting on immigration and immigrants serves as a useful illustration. The media typically frames immigration as a matter of belonging to a national community. By presenting images of who belongs in the nation, who does not belong, and who should be allowed to become a member of the national community through immigration and naturalization, the media dialectically constructs meanings of nationhood (Bauder 2009, Mahtani and Mountz 2002, Wodak et al. 1999). Through its audiences, the media communicates these meanings to actors in other field, who, in turn, participate in the formation of nationhood and the production of the national field.

Conclusion

In his work on French television, Bourdieu (1998a) paints a rather pessimistic picture of the media. He laments the increasing obsession of market-driven journalism with audience ratings and argues that in contemporary journalism serious discussion loses out “to pure entertainment” and “mindless chatter” (Bourdieu 1998a: 3). Similarly, Herman and Chomsky (2000) argue that powerful political and business interests control media output. My interpretation of journalism is more optimistic. While the journalistic field may indeed experience ownership consolidation and embrace the competition principle, journalistic practice and media discourse have not become “one-dimensional” (Marcuse 1964). Rather, journalistic practice upholds the dialectical principle, which

stands at the centre of critical thought (Adorno 1963, Horkheimer and Adorno 2004 [1947]).

Human agency is an integral element of the dialectical principle as understood by both Hegel and critical theorists. In fact, the existence of a series of interlocking dialectics infuses journalistic practice with an equally rich set of opportunities for intervention. Certainly, powerful national, political and economic voices tend to be privileged in these journalistic dialectics (van Dijk, 1987, 1991). Yet, although dissenting and “inconvenient” positions are often sidelined in the contemporary media field, the media still possesses “some limited autonomy” to present and produce these positions (Herman and Chomsky 2000: xii). Although a discussion of recent technology-driven changes to the structure and practices of the media field was beyond the scope of this article, these changes may further widen the spectrum of opportunities for critical intervention.

The limited autonomy of the media should not obscure the fact that the capacity for human agency to engage in the journalistic construction of meanings and identities is distributed highly unevenly. While reporting often focuses on marginalized people, expresses compassion towards human suffering, and draws attention to injustice and hardship, the objects of such reporting have little influence on contents, coverage and the interpretation of them and their situation in the media. For example, racialized and immigrant groups have few means to engage and intervene in the mainstream media discourses (Balibar 2002, 2004).

In addition, important constraints exist. Journalistic dialectics hinge on news, which provide the material substance on the basis of which media discourses are constructed. In addition, they are contingent on geographical context which defines the field and situates journalistic practice. These material constraints, however, are not beyond the influence of journalistic agency. The example of the 'nation' illustrates how journalistic dialectics on the one hand are deeply embedded in the national context. On the other hand, journalistic practice also participates in the formation of national identity and the normalization of the national scale. The possibility for intervention, however, continues to exist since neither the 'nation' nor any other discursive concept and structures are fixed but always subject to dialectical movement.

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