Social Scientists and Journalists: Are the Former Really so Different from the Latter?

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Introduction

As a journalist who has recently begun carrying out sociological research, I have been struck by the parallels between social science and journalism. I have also been intrigued by some sociological studies of the media which seem to me to suggest that we are little more than a bunch of jumped-up charlatans. This article seeks to examine whether journalism is, in fact, so very different from the social sciences and to ask what might motivate some social scientists to wish to establish a firm differential between the two occupations.

'Objectivity' versus 'Validity' and 'Reliability'

Many sociological studies of the media tend to focus on the idea that journalists cling to the notion of 'objectivity' or related ideals such as 'impartiality or neutrality' as if the profession would fall apart without them. In my own experience, journalists, who are by nature sceptical about everything, are actually very sceptical about the idea that we can be truly objective. Nevertheless, social scientists have rightly pointed out that journalists use objectivity in the form of 'letting the facts speak for themselves' as a protective device behind which they can take refuge. As E. Barbara Phillips puts it:

> Letting 'the facts speak for themselves' instead of offering an interpretation of events avoids controversy which, in turn, avoids offending news (and advertising) consumers who may reject the news (and advertised) product along with the unwanted interpretation. By 'sticking to the facts' and eschewing explicit explanation, journalism in the objective mode skirts the problem that one person's truth is another's propaganda.
>
> (Phillips 1977: 68)

Journalists have constructed a further protective cover for themselves in the form of 'news values' which, as Stuart Hall quite correctly comments, remains an elusive notion:

> 'news values' are one of the most opaque structures of meaning in modern society. All 'true journalists' are supposed to possess it: few can or are willing to identify and define it. Journalists speak of 'the news' as if events select themselves. Further, they speak as if which is the 'most significant' news story, and which 'news angles' are most salient are divinely inspired.
>
> (Hall 1988: 234)

However, if 'news values' are intangible to the outsider, the manner in which newspapers, broadcasting stations and individual journalists organize themselves tends to be clearly defined. These 'routine modes of processing different kinds of news stories' (Tuchman, 1977: 48) have also been highlighted by social scientists as another means by which journalists give their work credibility. They include such practices as making check calls with the fire service and the police, asking certain standard questions when

speaking to information sources and adopting different approaches to 'hard' and 'soft' news stories.

One of the customs most faithfully adhered to is that of attribution to sources; 'a government spokesman said', 'security sources say' etc. This is, of course, yet another protective device, helping to ensure that the journalist does not have to take ultimate responsibility if the attributed statement is factually incorrect.

The 'routinization' of journalism is also apparent in the way the finished product is presented. As Phillips notes, there are fixed formats for newspaper and TV stories. These, she says, allow journalists to judge their output through set criteria. (Phillips, 1977: 69-70). Standardization is also imposed in terms of limits on the amount of space a story is given. This frequently means, as any reporter will testify, that 'good quotes' or facts viewed by the journalist as pertinent, have to be left out.

Here we have, then, a set of 'professionals' who dress up their work with an elaborate series of routinized practices designed to lend some spurious weight to their haphazard doings. Just in case this alone fails to fool the public, a mystery ingredient – 'news values' – is added in; an ingredient which, rather conveniently, is never explained and yet has to be fully understood by anyone wishing to call themselves a journalist. It is hardly surprising then, that journalism has provided rich pickings for social scientists. But what about the social scientists? Are they so very different from journalism? Might not some of the above observations apply equally to their practitioners?

While journalists talk of 'objectivity' and 'impartiality', social scientists hold to the ideals of 'reliability' and 'validity'. However, just like journalists, social scientists rely on certain rules of procedure, both in terms of methodology and presentation of findings. Do these routines make the findings of social science worthier than those of journalism?

Phillips maintains that social scientists are encouraged to make their values and beliefs explicit in their work, a practice discouraged in news journalism (Phillips, 1977: 67-8). In my own reading of academic journals, I rarely come across such 'admissions'. Even where they exist, what do they prove? At the end of the day, social scientists – just like journalists – rely on the device of 'letting the facts speak for themselves'. Whether they admit to certain ideological leanings or not, they do interpret their results. However, it is made clear it is for the reader to accept or reject that interpretation. Is that custom so very different from the newspaper editorial which 'interprets' the 'facts' presented in news stories? Is not the understanding also that newspaper readers can agree or disagree with a leader column?

Ah, I hear you say, but there is a difference. What social scientists produce are real facts – what journalists put forward is merely a construction of reality masquerading as 'facts'? Let us look at some of the arguments alluded to above which would bolster that argument and apply them to social science.

Firstly, journalists rely heavily on sources. Do not social scientists? Are academic journals not littered with citations, attributing almost every fact and opinion to someone else (including, of course, numerous references to newspaper articles and news broadcasts)? Secondly, the presentation of news follows a strict format. Again, is that not equally true of academic work? Do not most research reports have an introduction containing a statement of the problem, a literature review, an explanation of the methodology, a summary and then analysis of the findings? In relation to the observation of the restrictions of time and space imposed on journalists — do social scientists send in 12,000 word articles if the journal concerned stipulates a maximum of 6,000 words?

As Jeffrey Katzer et al. have commented:

> 'Not only is every article a shortened version of what occurred, it is
> also a distorted reconstruction ... The method section usually

includes only what they actually did – all changes necessitated by poor planning or unexpected events are omitted. When the major results don't come out as expected, the final section of the article may suggest that the minor results are all that matters. And sometimes the entire introduction is written last, giving the impression that the author was in total command of everything that happened and was able to predict all of the results.'

(Katzer et al., 1978: 33)

So, if journalists can be accused of selectivity, might not that criticism apply equally to academics? There is another way in which it could be argued that social scientists can be just as 'selective' as journalists. Like journalists, where they have quotes, they surely select the best ones. Certainly, in my presentation of my own sociological work, I would pick quotes – preferably made with a degree of articulacy – that 'flesh out' my argument. It would seem to me that those social scientists who use quotes at all in the presentation of their work tend to do likewise.

However, selectivity in journalism goes further than just picking quotes. Media sociologists would say that journalists have a selective world-view. For one thing, they generally fail to make connections between different news items, a process which results in what Phillips calls 'a kaleidoscope of unconnected bits and pieces'. (Phillips, 1977: 69). As she rightly says, this practice permits editors to add or drop stories at will. However, sometimes when I am reading academic research I also feel as if I am reading 'a kaleidoscope of unconnected bits and pieces'. So many studies have not been followed up. So many seem to set their own agendas with scant regard for what has gone before or what might come after. Part of the problem here, I believe, is the peer group pressure to have something original to say. All aspiring young academics will know success is more likely if you can find that potential gold mine, an 'under-researched' area. In a sense the problem in social science is quite the opposite of that in journalism. Journalism remains bitty because that suits the organisational needs of the profession. Social science, it could be argued, remains bitty because it has not got itself well enough organised.

'Deviance': A Shared Interest

One important criteria for the selection of stories is the degree to which the events described are unusual, strange, different from the run-of-the-mill. And who decides what is unusual? Why, journalists themselves, of course. Therefore, it is argued, by defining the unusual, they are also constructing a definition of what is normal and acceptable. Thus all crime is outside the media-defined limit of normality. But some crimes get more attention and are thus more 'unusual' or 'deviant' than others – it used to be joyriding and acid house parties, now it is child sex abuse. Rarely has the media spotlight focused for long on motoring offences or tax evasion.

Now, it just so happens that the symbolic interactionist school of sociology has traditionally had a particular fascination with – guess what? – crime and deviant behaviour. Ten years ago, when I was an undergraduate, I was struck with this particular preoccupation which I regarded as rather gratuitous. Why did symbolic interactionists find drug-takers and psychiatric patients so much more interesting than church goers or farmers? Basically, because the behaviour of the former lay outside the limits of what society appeared to consider 'normal'. By studying society's deviants, symbolic interactionists argued that they could learn more about the rules governing 'normal' behaviour. Yet, ironically, in so doing, symbolic interactionists were, in effect, stating just like the media – that the unusual was more interesting than the routine.

Alvin Gouldner has pointed out that this particular school of sociology is much keener to concentrate on those who can be portrayed as helpless 'victims' of society's evil ways rather than those who have actually got up and done something about their

situation. He maintains that relatively few studies have been conducted of those involved in civil rights struggles or peace groups. He further believes that underlying such sociology is a world-view that sees the problem as the 'caretakers' who 'society has appointed to administer the mess it has created rather than the way society is organised and those at the top in charge of the 'caretakers'. (Gouldner, 1970: 228-230). This criticism could be applied equally to the media.

Paradigms and Parallels

When it comes to the question of just whose interests the media operates in, the predominant viewpoint seems to have been that of the neo-Marxist structuralists. They see journalists as working within and reproducing a consensual paradigm which masks the reality of the conflict of interest between oppressor and oppressed.

Gouldner makes almost exactly the same criticism of the 'deviance' school of sociology. He asserts their work actually suits the establishment because it keeps the lid on embarrassing questions challenging the very social institutions that might be responsible for the problems those sociologists uncover. Gouldner sees such sociologists as part of a professional, liberal mafia in which one might equally include, in my view, the media. (Gouldner, 1970: 237-244).

Although many sociologists do challenge the consensus view both within the world in general and within their own professions – social scientists do operate within the confines of paradigms. While there are many competing paradigms within the social sciences, its practitioners do sometimes seem to slip a little too easily into a cosy consensus. Take the Northern Ireland 'problem'; John Whyte points out that social scientists have reached a remarkable degree of consensus on this subject. The dominant paradigm is the internal-conflict model which gives primacy to the conflict of interest between the two communities within Northern Ireland. This paradigm is also, of course, shared by the British government, unionist politicians and much of the media. Whyte suggests that the time might have come for academics to move on and adopt a new paradigm. (Whyte, 1991: 255-259).

Conclusion

Thus there seems little doubt that social scientists do share some characteristics with journalists; that the former have certain rules of procedure which lend weight to their work, that they too rely ultimately on 'letting the facts speak for themselves', and that they can be just as selective as journalists in terms of quotes, subject matter and the stance they take.

I am not suggesting that social scientists are not sufficiently critical of their own profession or that they are too ready to criticise journalists. I have been a little surprised that there seem to be very few sociological works which note let alone analyse the parallels between the two professions. There are, of course, parallels to be drawn between all the professions but it seems to me that the similarity between elements of journalism and social science is particularly obvious. It is the apparent lack of interest in this particular fact among sociologists combined with the patronising tone sometimes adopted by media sociologists which causes me to wonder whether there is a doubtless unconscious desire to erect a firm dividing line between the two sets of practitioners.

Why might such a wish exist? I suspect the answer may lie in the insecurity which surrounds all professions. Although they have carved out niches for themselves, the professions must always be on the guard for potential rivals seeking to encroach on their territory.

In reality, there is overlap between the social sciences and journalism. Not so much in that many journalists would claim their work amounted to social science – unless like

me they are doing postgraduate degrees in the subject! However, many social science works are designed to have appeal to a wider audience than academics. Certainly, several of the better known books on Northern Ireland (Steve Bruce's *God Save Ulster!* or Padraig O'Malley's *Biting at the Grave*, for example) employ a journalistic style of presentation, making laudable use of a highly readable narrative form while not neglecting a penetrating level of analysis. I welcome such an overlap. I do not in any way believe that social science and journalism are essentially the same crafts. However, I do feel that the notion that there is always a firm dividing line is simply another example of the 'social construction of reality' which symbolic interactionists are engaged in trying to unmask.

Acknowledgement

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