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Journalistic Ethics as Field Strategies: A Particular Case of the Possible

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Panel: Distant Suffering

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Introduction

This paper draws on a discourse analysis of interviews with British and American war correspondents to investigate the extent to which media ethics should be seen as purely strategic, or whether there can be a defensible deontological ethical framework. It begins from the Bourdieusian proposition that in a professional field, morality can only exist if it is supported by structures and mechanisms which give people an interest in morality. The empirical evidence suggests that rather than cynically calculating how best to perform or project journalistic ethics, reporters tend to internalise and interpret ethical symbolic economies as common-sensical character traits. Drawing on Weber and Merleau-Ponty, the discourse analysis reveals how this embodiment leads to decontestation of journalistic ethics, precluding debate not only about the form and priority of specific ethics, but also awareness of the function they serve as forms of capital in a competitive but generally unacknowledged economy. The data mostly supports the Bourdieusian premise that media ethics exist primarily to reproduce gatekeeping and hierarchical structures in the journalistic field. However, it also suggests a greater level of consciousness of the contingent foundations of the ‘rule of the journalistic game’ than Bourdieu concedes. The paper ends by arguing for the viability of debating ethics in a manner which is not (wholly) discursively complicit or relativist. Media ethics as a symbolic economy are not entirely arbitrary but rather a particular case of the ethical symbolic worlds possible in the context of the generative structures of the journalistic field and its positioning within political and cultural metafields. This move allows us to interpret journalistic ethics as determined not only by the internal structures of the field but also broader external forces. The moral dimension of consuming ‘distant suffering’ will be used to illustrate this point and suggest new directions for research.

There is space here to give only a brief overview of Bourdieu’s conception of ethics as field strategies, but two facets warrant particular emphasis. First, ethics have no deontological essence; the defining aspect of their existence is instead their status as structured, structuring effects within a field of differentiated positions. That is, journalistic ethics should be understood primarily as the means by which positions of economic or political domination are appropriated and contested. This does not rule out their operation as normative imperatives guiding interaction between journalists and their sources, but such norms should be interpreted as conditional upon their primary role in the field of struggle between journalists, and between journalism and adjacent cultural and political fields. Second, individual journalists will adhere to ethical codes only insofar as they have a strategic interest in doing so. This does not cast all journalists as irredeemably cynical: in phenomenological terms, both aspects of the consciousness of the media professional – the unreflexive doing of quotidian journalistic practice as well as explicit reflection

on the ethical dimension of the trade – serve to obscure the fundamental contingency of journalistic ethics upon an underlying symbolic economy. While it will be seen below that Bourdieu significantly underestimates the capacity for cultural producers critically to articulate the competition which gives the lie to any consideration of morality and ethical practice, the starting proposition is that the habitus of a journalist fully immersed in her field will be sufficiently orientated towards its generative structures that the ‘game’ at the heart of it will be misrecognised as the natural state of things, and its specific context and history will be misperceived as normal and universal.

To the extent that systematic misrecognition does occur, it is predicated on processes of embodiment, naturalisation and normalisation. After Weber, an ethical journalist is not one who successfully applies established codes of professional practice, but one who is perceived by peers and audience as ‘naturally’ ethical. Likewise, while debates proceed over specific issues in media ethics, for the most part their resolution is described by field actors as a matter of common sense. Both individual embodiment and the mutual constitution of common sense have the effect of decontesting contestable ethical principles and give an unremarkable solidity to what should properly be understood as symbolic capital. These processes are by no means inexorable, and I have described elsewhere the (nonconscious, in Durkheim’s sense) discursive strategies by which they are realised, including inclusion/exclusion, affinity, humour, cynicism, dismissiveness, latent or overt agency, generalisations and non-verbal gestures (this is particularly interesting in iterating the unarticulable obviousness of field norms). Discourse analysis of interviews with war reporters concluded that there are two largely misrecognised symbolic economies underlying overt competition and contestation in the field. First, confirming Johnson’s thesis on professionalisation, an economy of esotericisation established journalistic skill as something ineffable, a mystical quality which cannot be learned, contextualised or even, in many cases, described. Second, there is an economy of ambivalence towards power (what Bourdieu terms an interest in disinterest) which has the effect of establishing authenticity, which in turn consecrates the journalist as a natural repository of moral authority.

It would be fair to respond to this by asking why it matters if journalists perceive authority and value in cultural production according to explicit or unacknowledged criteria. In short, it matters because these misrecognised symbolic economies reproduce both the gatekeeping mechanisms by which entry into the journalistic trade is strictly controlled, and the internal hierarchies of the field. Both are effected through a combination of esotericisation and naturalisation, such that the conceivability of going into journalism and assuming a position of power within it depends upon the extent to which one’s habitus is already aligned to the unspoken rules of the game – and this appears to be related to socioeconomic (McNair, 1998), educational (Sutton Trust, 2006) and ethnic status (gender did not emerge as a significant variable, interestingly).

It is worth looking briefly at specific ethics to flesh out this analysis. The systematically recognised (Deuze, 2005) principle of objectivity, for instance, enacts a hierarchy of truth which the journalist is uniquely authorised to discern. While we may fairly play down the effect this has in terms of the journalist’s status in society more broadly (see below), within the field taking up the position of truth-speaker is not reducible to the fact of writing accurately but instead consists in a recognition by peers and audience of truthfulness. This in turn is dependent upon a perceived *disposition* which speaks truth to power, and this ‘underdog’ status is by no means pre-given but instead projected through a practical mastery of a set of linguistic (and potentially corporeal, though the evidence here was less convincing) signifiers of symbolic value – cynicism and understatement chief among them – which come more easily to some than others.

...you'll be reliant on briefings and on a few happily released pictures to keep the television people cheerful. [Interviewee 14]

Those guys [the UN] used to water things down a lot. We'd like make bets over how watered down things were, the reports of bombs dropped by Nato. [Interviewee 13]

Similarly, independence from undue external influence is regarded as a sine qua non of ethical practice, but its recognition both within the journalistic field and the broader field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993: 115) appears in the data to be tied to a disposition of rugged individualism which is not naturally 'owned' by any individuals but the performance of which will be more natural to those entering the field already closely aligned to the field's structures. Third, while *anonymity of sources* is widely agreed to be essential to the ethical 'doing' of journalism, it bears noting how this institutes the source as an almost mystic source of truth, and the journalist as uniquely (though naturally) capable of simultaneously safeguarding this sacred origin and acting as its conduit. Around this ethic in particular any qualification is regarded as taboo (this was the most common locus of expletives in the discourse analysis), effectively closing down any questioning of journalistic authority.

Conceiving of journalistic ethics as field strategies can also be considered at the meta-level, beyond how it influenced as is used as a resource in influencing the internal mechanisms of the field. There is no shortage of evidence that journalism is among the least trusted institutions in society (MORI, 2003). However, this prevailing view co-exists with the acceptance that a journalistic code of practice – if only it were followed – is an unremarkable thing. That is, while journalists may routinely fail to meet ethical standards, it seems that journalism is publicly perceived as naturally having an ethical dimension. This not need be the case: there is no teleological imperative that the retrieval (or construction), processing, institutionalisation and dissemination of information should be necessarily morally implicated, and it is one of the chief recurring questions surrounding this research to ask what we can validly say about the political and sociological preconditions of this moralisation. Matheson (2003) has observed that when journalists explicitly reflect on and debate journalistic ethics, what is obscured is precisely this broader assumption that journalism provides a natural context for ethical discourse. But the opposite is also true. In the war reporting case study while some respondents did discuss professional ethics, there was a corresponding subgroup which directly disavowed the idea that journalism is, or should be, an ethical practice.

He became like that [a moral authority]. He was going and pontificating on things. I mean I don't mean to backbite, I've got nothing personal against him, I don't know him, in fact I avoid him, I avoid people like that. As soon as I see them I avoid them, because they are busy getting things wrong, and they're busy pissing me off in I'm standing anywhere nearby...

...I hate worthy. People who take themselves seriously. Last night – fuck. Did you see *Newsnight* last night? It was Jackie Rowland's thing at the trial, and it's the front page of the *Guardian's* magazine. That's what I hate. She came out and she said 'Oh I felt great, I was on a roll,' and I thought 'You stupid cow, you stupid, stupid woman'.

You know whatever you think of Milosevic, I mean he's killed a fair few people but actually, what he was doing made some sense, because we've now got a Kosovo which instead of being a drugs corridor, is now a drugs plateau, and that's what he was aiming at. So okay he's a pretty bad guy but how dare Jacky Rowland go in there and grandstand. We shouldn't be doing that. [Respondent 5]

However, this in itself does not amount to a refutation of the inevitable moral dimension of journalistic practice. In line with the logic set out above, statements against professional ethics should be seen first and foremost as the performance of an anti-moralising disposition, which is invested in a 'no-nonsense' identity perceived by the majority of peers in the case study as authoritative. Further, the anti-moralising position remains very much a moral claim. It does not suggest that journalism is essentially amoral, but rather that acting properly is not a matter of what one respondent referred to as 'hand-wringing moralising' but, again, common sense. This is not a negation of the centrality of morality, but its decontestation – what Foucault terms rationalisation, and what in Bourdieusian terms we can describe as the mastery of strategic practices which serve to constitute the moral authority of the journalist in a manner perceived as unproblematic and uncontroversial.

The discourse analysis suggests that morality has indeed achieved an effective universalisation in journalistic discourse – not, of course, as a prevailing presence, but as a dominant principle of differentiation. One way of explaining this is to point to the conflation of true/false and right/wrong as a way of consecrating a phenomenological and epistemological instrumentalism as the dominant mode of interpreting the world, which there is not space to develop here but which is amply discussed elsewhere. An alternative, if speculative, interpretation is Foucaultian: that the fundamentality of ethics means that both the production and consumption of news incites internal ethical discourses which on the journalist's part serve to reproduce coercive hierarchical and institutional differential relations of power, and on the reader's to institute regulatory regimes of behaviour. Dent (2008) recently argued that the journalist effectively amounts to the public's confessor in the Foucaultian sense, eliciting and giving form to its inner thoughts and thereby rationalising and controlling it. I would suggest that this is compelling but ultimately unfalsifiable. What we can say is that journalistic ethics specifically and media morality generally are neither disinterested nor only a means by which journalists compete amongst themselves and for broader cultural status. The pervasiveness of morality in journalism means that consumption also has a moral dimension, and this should also be seen as strategic. That is, instead of seeing audiences as merely regulated by the journalistic discourse of ethics, they can alternatively be seen as themselves engaging in an economy of morality, using their practices of consumption to make cultural significations and distinctions of symbolic capital. I return to this theme below.

Is it futile to discuss journalistic ethics?

The previous section set out the theoretical case for interpreting journalistic ethics primarily as strategic, as well as the further contention that the disavowal of ethics can also be regarded as strategic practice. While this could reasonably be understood to indicate that the particular content of journalistic ethics is inconsequential, in the following it will be seen that debating ethics remains viable despite their broader role as symbolic capital in the journalistic field. In theoretical terms the basis for this assertion is that the lifeworld which professional journalists inhabit is not a self-contained, discrete phenomenal realm. It is similarly not a direct expression of the material differential space in which journalism subsists. The journalistic field as

experienced by its agents is effectively ‘completed’ by the symbolic world of the journalistic game, such that there is not, as Adorno had it, a material remainder which generates the possibility of access to an ‘objective’ reality. But this is not the same as saying that the symbolic form of the journalistic field is arbitrary, or unrelated to its political and economic context. Instead, the journalistic world is characterisable, after Bachelard (Bourdieu, 1998b), as a particular case of the possible: it is a reasonable (in the Millian sense of having reason) expression of the generative structures of the field, but its particular emergence from those structures could not have been predicted. Likewise, journalistic ethics should be seen neither as natural responses to the objective reality of journalistic practice, nor as arbitrary clusters of symbolic forms whose particular shape bears no relation to the external strategic role that journalistic ethics play. They are reasonable manifestations of the conditions of possibility from which they emerged, but should be seen as only one of a set of possible manifestations. This effectively means that journalistic ethics make sense in retrospect, but their observed practical universalisation in specific contexts should not be misinterpreted as absolute. There is thus a one-to-many correspondence between the generative structures of the journalistic field and its observed manifestations, and it is in this basis that comparison of such manifestations is valid. (This runs parallel to the epistemological claim that two truth claims are not constitutions of distinct realities but differing claims about the same objective reality. See Vandenberghe, 1999). Conceiving of journalistic ethics in these terms is thus not nihilistic but unsettling, suggesting that we reject seeing contemporary codes of practice as the inevitable product of incremental refinement and instead asking, given a common generative origin, how different things could be.

This theoretical grounding of the viability of contesting ethics then leads us to the question of how such discussions should proceed. Journalists debating ethics among themselves is perhaps the obvious starting point, though the relative autonomy of the journalistic field which is argued to be essential to fostering certain kinds of cultural production, also limits the reflexivity of field actors. This is best encapsulated by the maxim that fields produce the means of their own apprehension: that is, the conceptual apparatus with which agents make sense of their context is itself a determination of the field. As such, the way that journalists reflect upon ethics, however frankly, will necessarily misrecognise the radical contingency of ethics as such. This is consistent with Matheson’s (2003) observation that journalistic discussions of ethics tend to be conservative insofar as they implicitly reinforce more than they submit to scrutiny, and it is also in line with Pötker’s (2004) contention that ethical debates tend towards dogmatism because they remain blind to the existence, and possible normative merit, of an ‘outside’ of ethics. It is further consistent with those theories of professionalism in which professional identities and discourses are reproduced by mutual performance and projection as such by individuals (Carpentier, 2005; Frith & Meech, 2007; Schultz, 2007). According to this position there is no solidity of identity or discourse beyond the structured practices enacting them. But while this suggests fluidity or transience, the logic of such practices means they do have a (contingent) durability. The upshot is that while the ethical discourse enacted and reproduced by journalists is properly characterised as quasi-arbitrary – which is to say not *sui generis* but rather a singular emergence from a finite range of possible emergences – it comes to matter through hysteresis. While it is easy enough to identify individual speech acts or gestures, or even individual ethical worldviews as more or less interchangeable with a range of possible others, their structuredness and structuringness deserve to be taken seriously insofar as they endure, adapt and influence other arenas. So while there may be nothing about journalistic ethics as such which is naturally of analytic value, the cultures of journalistic practice which sustain these ethics are viable objects of study.

Ethics and journalistic identity

Journalistic ethics are in this sense not a resource or guide, but a constitutive element of professional identity and discourse. Their reproduction therefore depends not only on their operationalisation in everyday practice, but their institution in practices of individuation and intersubjectivity (through interaction with colleagues). It was suggested above that the naturalisation of professional ethics has two dimensions: first, the normalisation of a tacitly agreed set of specific ethical principles, and second, the normalisation of journalism as having a natural ethical aspect. If this is to succeed it means that these ethical commitments must be rooted in the journalistic habitus, taking effect not (only) through conscious reflection but through the anticipatory mechanisms which structure behaviour at the level of what is experienced as instinct or spontaneity – the unreflexive ‘nose for a story’ or ‘gut instinct’ (Schultz, 2007) which operates in unfamiliar contexts as effectively as it does in the routine and mundane, and in socialisation as much as professional practice. By an admittedly crude calculus one can aver that the efficacy of this habitus in structuring cultures of practices and ultimately reproducing the dominant principles of differentiation in the journalistic field will depend on three factors. First, it depends upon the insularity of journalistic interaction; second, it depends upon the homogeneity of actors in the journalistic field; and third, it depends on the availability of a stable journalistic identity (marked as distinct from other fields) to practices of individuation.

In fact there is only qualified evidence in respect to these three factors to suggest that the dominance of a specific ethical discourse in journalism, and the naturalisation of journalism as having an ethical aspects, is produced primarily intrafield. In the first case, journalism is at best classed as weakly autonomous (Bourdieu, 2005), insofar as it is more subject than most fields of cultural production to the logic of the market (Bourdieu, 1998a). It does, to be sure, have a more autonomous pole – quality journalism, for want of a better term – where it is more than plausible that the two dimensions of ethics identified here could serve the strategic purpose of enacting the broadsheet journalist’s distinction and thus claim on symbolic and economic capital. But even here the economic imperative remains dominant, certainly relative to other sites of cultural production. The relative insularity of a field or subfield also matters on a phenomenological, quotidian level: put simply, how much professional life proceeds as a discrete, self-contained world. Journalism by definition largely entails interaction with members of other fields, and while this can have the effect of enhancing the scope for professional distinction, it means that cultures of journalistic practice, while influential, lack a fertile context for reproduction at the level of personal interaction and shared routines and space. That individual autonomy is itself a form of symbolic capital in journalism also perhaps diminishes the scope for reproduction of professional ethical discourses, though there is also evidence that the processes by which this autonomy is established are themselves shared cultures of practice. Respondents marked out their autonomy according to a clearly delineable schema which entailed distancing themselves from colleagues (often rationalised through statements of personal character – being a ‘loner’, not ‘play[ing] well with others’ and so on), and politicians – though less so from senior military personnel and PR officers, to whom ‘natural’ affinities were often posited.

I do sympathise to some extent because the pillock factor rises amongst journalists, and I mean I say that as a 58-year-old who’s been doing it for a long time, but I don’t think I was as much of a pillock as the ones I see now. I think it might be quite a pain being a PR man, even if you’re the greatest PR man, subtle, gentle and understanding, probably eventually the journalistic pillocks piss you off so much that you become unreasonable.

The second key determinant of discursive and indentitive reproduction is a more promising candidate. While some research indicates that journalism in the UK is becoming more diverse, most evidence points towards a particularly resilient uniformity in the trade. Hanna and Sanders (2007) observe that the body of journalism students has become more ethnically heterogeneous in the past 20 years, but the combination of the increasing pervasiveness of BA and postgraduate qualifications as standard and of unpaid internships for junior journalists means that journalism is becoming a more and more middle class occupation. While this is significant in terms of social equality, in our present context the rub is how it influences structural reproduction. If phenomenological subjectification in Hegelian terms is contingent upon the reflecting back of self from others, then it makes sense that reproduction through mutual enactment, recognition and validation of professional identity and discourse is more readily achieved if the other is immediately recognisable. In Bourdieusian terms, this suggests a common pre-professional habitus already aligned (or at least easily adapted) to the objective structure and symbolic world of the journalistic field. In more concrete terms, this means a demographic for whom currently dominant media ethics and the normalcy of professional ethics are already familiar.

The final determinant, like the first, suggests that there is only limited scope for reproduction of identity. While the interviews yielded some recognisable ideal types of journalist, these were largely used either ironically or derisively. Secondary analysis did demonstrate the existence of implicit field-recognisable journalistic identities, such as the underdog, defined through distinction against elite authorities in other fields, and through personal character as much as anything else. This identity, further, entailed an ethical dimension, though amongst war correspondents this is largely of the ‘rough-and-ready’, perceivedly pragmatic ethical demeanour whose performance is achieved through an explicit disavowal of ‘moralising’, as seen above. This, however, was the exception. Otherwise, there does not appear to be a stable, dominant configuration of symbolic forms recognisable as journalistic subjectivity and enactable in cultures of practice of individuation. This appears consistent with historical accounts of the journalistic identity crisis, argued by some to revolve around the failure of British journalists to achieve the formal status of a profession (Deuze, 2005). It also confirms the lack of scope for distinction available between journalists and other media and cultural producers: the proliferation of new media production and the creative industries generally has left the ‘journalist’ lacking a stable, intuitive field position. While it might be argued that professional bodies such as the NUJ provide at least the basis for shared cultures of practice, the truth is that contemporary journalistic roles are too dispersed and too overlapping with other modes of cultural production for there to be a fertile environment for discursive reproduction ‘within’ journalism.

Looking for the conditions of possibility of observed economies of journalistic ethics

Why does this matter? I have argued so far that ethics in journalism can reasonably be characterised primarily as strategic, as the symbolic capital through which struggles for domination proceeds, rather than as a good in themselves. I also contended that this does not render journalistic ethics entirely arbitrary: as a particular case of the possible, their particular emergence has reason and can thus be analysed. Their particular form can be unpacked and compared against the conditions of possibility of the field (though only if we reject the Bourdieusian interchangeability of specific emergences), and this raises the question of how best to establish the parameters of a critical debate over ethics. It has been seen that the parameters as set by journalists themselves are inadequate, both because of the unrecognised contingency of ethics and because of the unacknowledged subjection of journalism to external actors, dominant symbolic forms and what Bourdieu terms ‘principles of vision and division’. This section will tackle that broader, extra-journalistic context of establishing the preconditions of ethics as

discourse and subjectivity, making the point that within the metafield of cultural production, in which academia subsists, morality also exists primarily because there is a market for it: it is as strategic for academics and artists as it is for journalists. It will also be seen that this logic applies to cultural consumption as well as to cultural production. This paper does not suggest that only field outsiders can tell journalists what it really means when they enact or discuss ethical practice. Indeed, it should not be taken from the previous section that any further weakening of journalistic autonomy should be welcomed, on the grounds that it disrupts the discursive and indentitive reproduction which underpins the hierarchies and borders of the journalistic trade. Qualified autonomy, while undeniably elitist, is an essential prerequisite of certain forms of cultural production. This means that if there were a highly autonomous space in the journalistic field (it has been suggested that broadsheet investigative journalism was previously such a space) within which ethical criteria were established entirely endogenously, this may be normatively defensible in spite of the associated power effects of esotericisation.

In any case the point here is not normative, but rather to establish the contingencies and effects of discourse of ethics in journalism and the field of cultural production generally, and it appears that ethics are field strategies in journalism in the same way that they are in other fields. If external critics can routinely deride journalists for moral turpitude, it can only do so if the trade is seen by them, in the same way that journalists have been argued to do here, as naturally having an ethical dimension. I would argue that this is only plausible if the media itself is seen by academics as naturally morally implicated. There is certainly some strong support for this view. The late Roger Silverstone, for example, argues in his final book that insofar as the media are in the business of mediating relationships between global citizens, their very essence is irredeemably moralised – and Western media in particular fall short on moral criteria by failing to sustain an effective distance or framing of the global other. This position effectively, and usefully, establishes media morality as deontological (which is not to say unproblematic), and as such provides a stable basis for critiquing the media on moral grounds and allowing for guidelines for media production and representation which, if not universal, are broadly applicable and uncontroversial. While this entails a strong refutation of moral relativism, it goes further: the suggestion is that since representation of humanity is inevitably morally implicated, then the argument that the ethics of representation can ever be a purely technical, disinterested matter does not stand.

Of particular interest in our present context is how this line of argument is helpful in making clear the claim to moral authority which underlies the objectivity criteria for assessing the cultural value of media products. As with disavowals of morality (more correctly, moralising) seen in interviews with war reporters above, recourse to objectivity, while manifest as an appeal to bypass subjective moral judgements, instead amounts to an appeal to objectivity as a meta-ethic. Invoking objectivity as an ideal in journalism is not equivalent to a refusal to engage in strategising or in struggles for authority. The interviews make clear that statements of objectivity are, like those explicitly citing ethical practice, tied up with subjectification, of performances of professional identity which signify (or are at least oriented towards signifying) the personal embodiment of a configuration of symbolic capital associated with positions of power within the journalistic field. I have noted elsewhere that this need not be characterised as a subversive or heterodox form of authority: the parallel worlds of the journalism of attachment and reportage have long been documented functionally to co-exist, and the case study certainly demonstrates that this is the case within war correspondence. But nor is there any reason to overstate the autonomy of these subfields. Instead, it remains plausible that underlying the two symbolic economies, in which overt normative commitments and objectivity are respectively dominant currencies, is a single dominant principle of differentiation which is largely *moral* in character. That is, there is an interest in disinterest in moral claims, and that interest is oriented towards authority defined not only according to getting the facts right, but *being* right.

The strength of Silverstone's argument is that it allows us, without resorting to dogmatism, to see the moral commitments and implications of all media practice and reflections upon the journalistic trade, including those which on the face of it disclaim any moral interest. However, if we follow Laclau and cast the moral imperative as a limited, practical universality, then journalistic ethics can be described in Bourdieusian terms as doxic cultures of practice aligned in our present, observed context to the objective differential positions of power in the journalistic field. There is always the danger in Bourdieusian methodology of overdetermining all observed practices as strategic. The logic set out here does not suggest that everything a journalist is observed to do is geared towards appropriating ethical symbolic capital (and more generally it is important to defend the possibility of meaningless in observed behaviour), but instead recognises that a contingent form of moral reasoning has achieved a quasi-dominant position as a principle of differentiation in the discourse of journalistic ethics. This will act as a key determinant of journalistic cultures of practices – meaning not only overtly professional actions but also practices of reflection, distinction, subjectification and so on – but there is no need to overstate the case. Journalists clearly exhibit a capacity for critical awareness –

...now everyone thinks the way you present things is you know with a furrowed brow and an earnest manner. [Interviewee 5]

...these guys who come back from Afghanistan with their scarves around their necks, a little bit of dust on their shoulders. [Interviewee 14]

– and in any case the field determination of their behaviour is never singular, as all professionals inhabit multiple ‘fields’ simultaneously. What is important to emphasise is that if a certain discourse of ethics has attained dominance in the journalistic field, it will be manifest not only through codes of conduct and the public perception of journalism as morally implicated, but also through dispositions, tastes and so on – and, crucially, these are associated with the contingent stabilisation of relations of power both within the field and across the field of cultural production.

Similarly, building on the earlier assertion that academic recognition of the necessity or universality of journalistic ethics is itself dependent on a strategic academic interest in ethics, we can now go further to contend that only by recognising the contingency of the universality of morality as a recognised dominant criteria for ascribing symbolic value in the field of cultural production can we be in a position to discern the specific symbolic forms through which this domination is manifest, and by extension the power differentials thus rendered stable, natural and unremarkable. This need not lead us into an ontological disquisition on morality: instead, all it means is that if academics are more or less naturally geared towards interpreting the media in moral terms, it is because we too are engaged in a broader game the stakes of which are social or cultural authority. This is intended as neither cynical nor as nihilistically self-reflexive. It seeks instead to decouple observed practices of ethics from those practices which constitute the (journalistic and academic) apprehension of morality. Both sets of practices can reasonably be described as strategic insofar as they are field effects oriented through anticipation towards accumulation of symbolic capital. This does not cast either as arbitrary: again, if such cultures are seen as manifestations of a one-to-many correspondence, then their emergence is reasonable and analysable.

Concluding remarks and suggestions for further research

What can be said about the broader preconditions and implications of the dominant discourse of journalistic ethics in the war-reporting case study? First, it is predicated on a dominant norm of instrumentalism, and I would suggest that this applies both to journalism arranged according to criteria of objectivity, and to journalism valorised according to moral authority. In the case of the former this can be simply put: the journalistic game is contingent upon a cultural prioritisation of the idea of facts being collected from ‘out there’ and retrieved and presented to the audience through the authorised medium of the journalist.

I don't mean an egotistical, egomaniacal role, I mean our very basic role, which is our basic mandate, of going in and bringing information back to people wherever they might be. [Interviewee 8]

The second is not dissimilar: while there may be more of an emphasis on bearing witness, say, or speaking truth to power, there is still an idea of a journalist gathering information, in this case translating it into terms that make sense within a doxic (moral) decoding framework, and disseminating this meaning in a way that suggests that receipt of it serves a function, which is not limited to information. Next, we can note the conditions of possibility for what can embody the symbolic capital of authority, moral or otherwise. The case study demonstrated that, to a limited degree, institutions are capable of being perceived as having an ‘immediate’, unproblematic authority, though on admittedly limited data there is a sense that this is increasingly rare. Far more common in the interviews was recognition of the sort of personal integrity which Weber depicts as the personalised internalisation of contingent forms, and this in turn relies on a prevailing norm of symbolic individualism. In the data (restricted as it is to media producers), it seems that individuals as the basic units of authority are more dominant than either particular pieces of media output or organisations – and as regards the latter it should be borne in mind that autonomy from institutions is itself a means of marking out individual symbolic capital. I do not suggest here that this is evidence of a new individualism, but rather confirmation of existing research which has concluded that it is individuals which are most readily perceived as repositories for authoritative symbolic capital. While this would ideally need to be backed up by audience research, the suggestion is that under the currently hegemonic discourse of journalistic ethics and media morality more broadly, there are certain types of symbolic moralities which have particular currency. And here it is clear that moral authority consists especially in an anti-elite, anti-institutional, individualised morality. Whether this individualistic, underdog morality represents a simple extension of Weberian authority as personal integrity, or is indicative of a shift in the parameters of the symbolic economy of morality away from traditional (that is, elite and institutional) field positions, remains an open question.

I noted earlier that media audiences should not be regarded merely as passive receivers and tacit consecrators of moral authority (and potentially as disciplined by it), and it is important to recognise that journalistic ethics do not exist only to negotiate the relationship between journalists and their audiences, nor as I have suggested here the relationship between journalists and their peers. Journalistic ethics are also strategically functional in relation to cultures of consumption. I have suggested that discussions of journalistic ethics rely to an extent on an assumed norm of instrumentalism: journalistic ethics are only meaningful because retrieving, processing and disseminating are unproblematically perceived as meaningful practices. But instrumentalism does not entail audience passivity, and it is important to look at what audiences do with media. In particular, it is worth taking seriously the possibility that the consumption of journalism is as

much about social performance as it is about information. Consuming ethics can then be seen as strategic practices by which audiences engage in practices of distinction and subjectification in the various social contexts they inhabit. To be sure, for Bourdieu this type of functionality would be largely determined by doxic forms: audiences are strongly oriented towards consuming and using information in ways which are themselves field effects and geared towards the reproduction of the existing political status quo. There is not space here to enter into a the structure/agency debate, but it bears emphasising that, whether willed or not, journalistic ethics operate as strategic resources for consumers as well as producers. This is not necessarily sinister. But by establishing as contingent and functional a practically universalised discourse of media morality, beyond observed journalistic ethical discourse, this discussion allows us to understand the use of media consumption as symbolic capital as particular emergences which could as easily have been different. And as such, we can ask why it is that news consumption appears at present to be used to make specifically moral distinctions and significations, as opposed to other, equally reasonable, forms. Hammond (2007), drawing on Boltanski (1999), has recently suggested that mediatisations of conflict may serve such a signifying function for news consumers, and a cursory survey of news representations of China and Russia in 2008 suggests that the same trend may be at work here.

A Bourdieusian always has the option of downplaying the particular currencies which dominate social struggles: it doesn't make much difference whether the capital by which journalists, other professionals and their publics compete against amongst themselves and between each other has a dominant moral aspect or something else. But since the basic thrust of Bourdieusian field analysis is that individuals and institutions vie for power via political mechanisms misrecognised as benign and natural, it makes sense to clarify the contingency of that which appears phenomenologically as unremarkable. The suggestion is not that morality is a novel means by which social groups and individuals compete and perform distinctions – on the contrary, I would presume this is fairly constant. What perhaps is new, or at least more widespread, is the use of media production and consumption as vehicles for moral subjectification and signification. The reasons for such a shift are beyond the remit of this paper, but potential factors would potentially include the disruption of orientations towards traditionally recognised repositories of moral authority, political individualism and what Lasch (1978) referred to as cultural narcissism.

Similarly, returning to an earlier point, it is always arguable in the Bourdieusian paradigm that the specific content of journalistic ethics is necessarily secondary to their strategic function. I will conclude by suggesting that this remains the case, but does not preclude the viability of ongoing discussions over ethical journalistic practice. I have argued that the journalistic or academic discussion of ethics – both in terms of specific ethics and the ethical discourse as such – only proceeds if there is a strategic interest in ethics, and as such we must consider the implications of such interest. In particular it has been seen that journalistic invocation or disavowal of ethics can both be seen as practices constituting authority, and presumably the same can be said of the sociological contextualisation of such debates in academic research. But if this is true, then the implications of not discussing specific ethics – regardless of their primary function – should also be taken into consideration. In short, if one is candid about the normative motivation of Bourdieusian analysis – the contestation of decontested structures of domination – then it remains as important to critique the particular symbolic forms which effectively ‘complete’ the discourse of journalistic ethics as it is to destabilise it as a mechanism of political reproduction in general. And this is defensible since different cultures of ethical practice are not arbitrary, self-contained symbolic words, but comparable, rational expressions of the generative conditions of possibility of the journalistic field.

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