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SCHOLARLY MILESTONE ESSAY

A Media Sociology for the Networked Public Sphere: The Hierarchy of Influences Model

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We have promoted a hierarchy of influences model for understanding the complex factors shaping media—particularly news—content: from the individual to social-system level. Meanwhile, technology-enabled changes in the media eco-system have shifted old boundaries and encouraged new, more spatially oriented concepts, such as fields and networks. In this essay we revisit our levels-of-analysis perspective, which in the historical context of communication research was a response to

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the media effects paradigm, and incorporate within the model examples from recent research. We argue that the hierarchical of influences can still take into account new realignments of media and other forces. Emerging spaces in the network public sphere may not fit as easily into the once familiar professional, organizational, and institutional containers, but the new media configurations supporting these spaces must still be understood with reference to a larger framework of power.

We take for granted that most of the modern world with which we engage is mediated in some form; we don't experience it directly. But less well understood is that mediation process, operating through a combination of social practices and institutional arrangements. To understand this complex picture, in *Mediating the Message* (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014) we have advocated taking a levels of analysis perspective to sort out the "hierarchy of influences," the factors that shape media content. This model helps disentangle the relationships among individual-level professionals and their routines, the organizations that house them, the institutions into which they cohere, and the social systems within which they operate and help maintain.

The mediation of the social world has broad relevance for an expanded idea of what constitutes media work but particularly so for journalism, where the version of that world presented to citizens is full of legal, ethical, and professional implications. Fiction does not lay the same claim to truth, making its social construction more taken for granted, but journalistic representations have had an implicit ontological expectation that news hews close to something called reality, giving special counterintuitiveness to the idea that reality is social constructed. Explaining how this mediated, symbolic reality takes shape has been a challenging task, made even more so by the way technology has shifted the media terrain, redrawing boundaries of organizations and media professions. A "spatial turn" in communication research has accompanied these shifting media boundaries, with less fixed and linear variable-oriented concepts: networks, fields, and spheres. Indeed, these more geographical metaphors have informed some of the most compelling approaches to modern media analysis, including the *Network Society* of Manuel Castells (1996), Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) *field* of cultural production, and the *Public Sphere* of Jurgen Habermas (1991).

Spatial concepts, even if not always easily defined and measured, direct us to new configurations through which messages are mediated. They may be shifting and unpredictable, but some guiding model helps alert us to more predictable structures that develop, as they eventually do. We still need a systematic framework to understand these emerging spaces of mediation, and we would argue that, in spite of the major changes in the media landscape, the hierarchy of influences model remains a valuable guide to

identify key elements at different levels of analysis and how those elements interact across levels.

ESSAY PURPOSE

This is a good time to revisit the levels-of-analysis perspective and how it can best accommodate this new theorizing. In this essay we consider what should be adapted and what remains in place, how to reconcile the old with the new, as we revisit our approach to media sociology. We consider first how media have become more networked along various dimensions, then briefly review the hierarchy of influences model, and within each level consider some of the historical shifts that have occurred. We go on to consider some of the adaptations of the hierarchy to the current landscape and how mediated spaces can coexist with, and be informed by, a levels of analysis framework. Media analysis in the 20th century closely tracked the prevailing industrial forms: News was what news organizations produced, and journalists were the professionals who worked for them. How does our model fit with the new media world where the lines are not as tidy?

Our scholarship takes an approach broad enough to encompass our own diverging interests of ethnographic and quantitative (even big data) methodologies while still intending to bring order to a diverse field.¹ We lay out the essential aspects of the hierarchical model as a helpful summary for those not as familiar with this area while taking into account important new work, in what since our original efforts has grown to be a robust area of research. Our personal academic home is largely in the sociology of news tradition, but our ideas are not so different from production studies in the entertainment domain. So we at times use the term *media work* to suggest relevance, as Deuze (2007) employed it, across a wide terrain of news, entertainment, public relations, and even gaming. We explore some of the historical roots of a sociology of news, clustered around newsroom ethnographies, although we don't regard this inductive, close observational technique as the primary method dictated by the hierarchy of influences. The model accommodates studies with a more deductive, variable-analytic style of analysis to produce a broad approach to understanding the process of

¹ In writing this essay we have realized how challenging it can be, given our complementary yet divergent intellectual directions, to write a joint essay that does justice to both of our views. Indeed, we separately could write two rather different pieces but appreciate the opportunity to do one last one together. One difference lies in the greater emphasis Shoemaker advocates for influences on "content," whereas Reese's ethnographic bent has led him to deemphasize that construct. She graciously allowed him the last edit, and he hopes he has not abused that privilege.

mediation, where ethnographic insights can be tested more systematically through hypothesis testing.

Similarly, we take a hybrid approach to the symbolic reality that is the ultimate output of this our process. Our earlier writing emphasized the *content* concept (e.g., “theories of influence on mass media *content*” in our 1991 and 1996 editions of *Mediating the Message*). Reese’s (2008) encyclopedia essay headed a section called “Media Production and *Content*.” In our article *Exposure to What?* (Shoemaker & Reese, 1990), we advocated taking content seriously, in the sense of examining specifically what was being produced, in the process of integrating it with effects studies. In some ways this was a reaction at the time to the field’s focus (as we were experiencing it) on process and effects (examples including studies of media dependency, and uses and gratifications, where the specifics of the message were almost beside the point—unlike more interpretive traditions where content was the only point.)

For some scholars, content may be an awkward term, a production-oriented concept that seems to overlook issues of meaning and devalue the aesthetic attributes of media. Yet in *Exposure to What?* we argued—against this trivialization—that knowing the nature (aesthetic attributes) of media output/content was crucial. Thus, content is a historically useful and descriptive term that describes media output, and we have used it for more than two decades as an integral part of our theorizing. Conceiving content as a variable, specifically a dependent variable, allows linking it to a host of contributing factors and connects well with a long tradition in communication of content analysis, of systematically examining media features, and classifying them into reliably observed categories. Some such studies have been criticized as overly descriptive (image of/number of), but putting them within a larger context and linking to other noncontent variables helps avoid this weakness. Certainly, the availability of large bodies of digital material has pushed content studies to the forefront, including blog and Twitter capturing, so finding a way to meaningfully organize and contextualize these big data dumps becomes even more important.² Although *content* signals a certain research tradition, we conceive it broadly as a construct under which patterns of expression, linguistic characteristics, and visual dimensions can be identified, and toward which all the influences we have modeled are directed.

Although we need not regard this content, so central to media sociology, as a true representation of events, people, or ideas, it is often treated as an *implicitly* true indicator of *social reality*. For example, studies of the *New York Times* content have variously assumed that it represents history, evidence of social change over time, a depiction of the United States (on some variables) compared

²Certainly, big data and related computational tools have begun to allow the kind of network analysis more consistent with the complexity of the new media ecosystem (e.g., Neuman, Guggenheim, Mo, & Bae, 2014).

to other countries, and so on. In how many of these studies do the scholars reveal their assumptions about the content's possible impartiality and veracity? How many discuss the limitations of such concerns or their attempts to validate the content by comparing it to other sources? Very few, because they reify the *Times* as a satisfactory approximation of reality, a picture of the world at the time of publication. The term *reality* is as vague as it is difficult to define.

Some people assume (correctly) that the Facebook posts people write about themselves are planned to draw attention to their positive traits and perhaps not a real depiction. Yet YouTube information about faraway events is often taken to be news, complete with the unstated assumption that news represents things as they really are (instinctively giving social media more credence than mainstream media). Social media produce information ranging from veracity to flattery to deception, and the same questions apply as they have with mass communication. So where does that leave us? Discussions of reality and mediated reality become mired in a variety of questions about the nature of the world and how we experience it, but that need not prevent us from linking content features to the countless factors suggested by the hierarchical model. Media content provides valuable indicators of social phenomena and vary in systematic ways—whether we call that bias, frames, balance, or impartiality—and those properties are explainable.

NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE

Before laying out our model in more detail, we consider the backdrop of media changes, with which research must cope. Here we focus on journalism, but as just suggested the same conceptual issues are relevant to entertainment and media more generally. The Internet has severed the former association of advertising with the news product, undermining the once robust subsidy provided by those seeking the mass audience. As a result, large-scale news organizations have faced serious economic disruption, as digital access to free content threatened professional journalism's gatekeeping control. An explosion of digital practices and platforms has brought in many respects new, more effective journalistic forms—but at a cost to institutional clarity and coherence. In the process, these changes have made the very definition of journalist and news organization increasingly problematic.

As the boundaries of media have shifted with more citizen interaction and global connectivity, various terms have been invoked, but they all suggest a more networked quality than the older conceptual partitioning of media, audience, and society. This extends to the broader sociopolitical deliberative arena to which journalism contributes, a space now often loosely deemed a “networked public sphere,” or even a “global networked sphere.” Regarding journalism's new reality, Benkler (2011), for example, uses “networked 4th estate” to refer,

along with professional journalists, to those citizen and other social movements that combine to form a more decentralized democratic discourse, revealing a redistribution of how content is created and shared. One of the most prominent writers in the “future of news,” Jeff Jarvis (2006), uses “networked journalism” to refer to the new collaborative relationships between professional and citizen in creating new information. Like the citizens they engage with, journalists have become nodes in this “diffused capacity to record information, share it, and distribute it” (Haak, Parks, & Castells, 2012, p. 2927). At the more formal news industry level, Anderson, Bell, and Shirkey (2012) use “networked institution” to capture the need for news organizations themselves to become more collaborative. All these terms suggest that journalism can no longer be easily understood within organizational containers but extends across traditional boundaries in unpredictable ways. As an orienting concept, the *network* captures the blurring of lines between professional and citizen, and between one organization and another, as they develop more collaborative partnerships across digital platforms.

This is a different way of theorizing media work compared to studies of production solely within and between institutions. Adding a more organic quality to the network leads to terms like news *ecology* and *ecosystem* (Anderson, 2013), still suggesting interconnected units, all participating in a similar space but with their own differentiated roles and functions. Larger scale institutional media provide an anchor for smaller publications, bloggers, and citizens, who react to and supplement what happens in the larger press (and vice versa).³ The ecosystem shift is revealed in new forms of newswork. The relentless flow of abundant information has led to a new breed of news aggregators who add value through digesting and repackaging information—stripping it down to its core components. The news narratives traditionally housed within article story structures now get broken down into smaller *atomic units*, which can be restructured, reordered, annotated, aggregated, and widely shared—ordering them back up into different narrative structures (Coddington, 2015). Thus, interconnectivity extends to even the area of content structure.

Of course, this flow of dis- and re-aggregated news content would not be possible without the computational power now available. Journalism, like other forms of knowledge production, has encountered its *big data* moment. From an early concern with *precision journalism* (Meyer, 1979), which encouraged journalists to use the tools of social science for more rigorous insights, other terms emerged later to capture this phenomenon (Coddington, 2014). *Data journalism*, loosely employed, refers to the use of data by journalists to gather and present stories, merging with web design and visualization to allow massive amounts of information to be marshaled and made available for crowdsourcing analytics.

³The concept of ecosystem is not new but does underscore the increased difficulty of understanding new media without taking the dynamic interaction with their environment into account.

Access to big data tools not only brings both greater analytical power to *journalists* but also changes the way they can structure stories to allow greater utility for the *audience*. “Computational journalism,” as used by Hamilton and Turner (2009), embraces both, bringing “algorithms, data, and social science to supplement the accountability functions of journalism” (p. 2). Through algorithms, the audience can interactively tailor its news consumption.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MEDIA SOCIOLOGY

Our original concern with the forces shaping media content was a reaction to a narrow media effects focus in the field of communication research, at least the part we were trained in. We wanted to recuperate in some respects the more holistic approach of the University of Chicago school of sociology in the early 20th century, which emphasized community-based, multimethod participant observation including issues of communication and public opinion. This perspective has become newly relevant. Early figures like Robert Park had an interest in the newspaper and how it not just affected but created community itself by extending social networks—regarding communities as existing in communication. The post–World War II shift of sociological influence to Columbia University, and related communication research along with it, displaced this more holistic concern with a short-term effects, variable-analytic, social-psychology perspective on questions of interest to the burgeoning mass consumer industries—and the mass media built on their advertising revenue. Communication research had a preoccupation with the large-scale mass media in the United States and Western Europe, and the task of research was to explore the *process* of communication and ways audiences responded to media messages. This left relatively less room for more critical questions concerning how those messages fit within the larger social structure—including, in the case of journalism, who makes news, what counts as news, and whose interests does news serve (Gitlin, 1978; Reese & Ballinger, 2001)?

Two lines of research ran counter to this process and effects tradition, inspired by early newsroom studies that signaled special concerns with journalism as a social practice. David Manning White’s (1950) classic study of the news *gatekeeper* suggested that news is what the “newspaperman” says it is, whereas Warren Breed’s (1955) study of social control in the newsroom showed how journalists absorbed news policy, even if that policy was not always explicit. He showed how the tension between the conflicting motivations of journalists and (often more conservative) owner needed to be reconciled to make the system work. As Reese and Ballinger (2001) argued, the findings of White and Breed were safely interpreted at the time within the prevailing narrative, or received history of the field, as upholding the status quo: namely, that the gatekeeper and

newspaper publisher would select stories in the interest of the community of which they were part. This blunted the critical edge and subversive quality of such research, which had threatened to make journalism decision making newly problematic. We incorporated into our own framework these two strands of research. Breed emphasized the internal dynamics of the newsroom through a qualitative analysis, whereas White, even with his focus on a single editor, suggested a framework for a more systematic, quantitative analysis of larger data sets of the news stream, including a focus on decision making and the personal factors affecting those decisions.

Journalism professionals have historically adhered to a philosophically realist view of the world in which news of external events is “out there” waiting to be gathered and disseminated. But this process is a social construction determined by a number of larger forces, making the search for these forces and understanding how they interact a logical focus of theoretical development. This has brought questions of power, control, structures, institutions, class, and community—all concepts that, as Waisbord (2014) observed, have been applied to journalism research in particular, compared to other communication subfields, yielding an area often called *media sociology*. Broadly speaking, this is our own approach to journalism: to tie social structures to symbolic formations (media content), understand how social reality takes shape, and bring to the foreground normative concerns of how well journalism is working.

LEVELS OF ANALYSIS: HIERARCHY OF INFLUENCES

In the Chicago tradition, we have sought a multimethod and holistic conception of media sociology that incorporates the ethnographic perspective along with other levels of analysis, including individual professional issues and larger macrosocial structures. The hierarchy of influences model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2014), does this by considering factors at five levels of analysis that shape media content, suggesting ways in which variables can be defined and related. These include, from the micro to the macro: individual characteristics of specific newswriters, their routines of work, organizational-level concerns, institutional issues, and larger social systems. The model “takes into account the multiple forces that simultaneously impinge on the media and suggest how influence at one level may interact with that at another” (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 1). At each level, one can identify the main factors that shape the symbolic reality—revealed through content, constituted and produced by media-work—and show how these factors interact across levels and compare across different contexts (e.g., national, technological).

By juxtaposing different levels within the same model, this approach raises the important distinction between structure and agency. As a human activity,

media work naturally involves the agency of individuals, which is both constrained and enabled by the structures surrounding them. Ascribing relatively more agency to individuals leads to a greater emphasis on the personal characteristics that guide them (the crusading journalist myth and biographical tradition, along with auteur theory in film studies, underscore this tendency); an emphasis on macrostructures, on the other hand, tends to deemphasize this personal agency. A hierarchical model has encouraged the sorting out of these micro-, meso-, and macrolevels and provides a framework for analyzing the operation of combined factors. Evaluating the contribution of multiple levels simultaneously helps yield greater explanatory power. A survey of journalists, for example, by Weaver and colleagues (2007) examined the contribution of different nested contextual factors on journalistic work (organization, medium, etc.). Adding the social system level in this hierarchical approach tests the factors shaping international journalism through cross-national comparison (Hanitzsch et al., 2010).

As key concepts developed within communication research, it has become helpful to unpack them across this levels-of-analysis perspective. *Professionalism*, for example, can be seen to operate in different ways across each of the five levels (Reese, 2001), as can another key concept—news *gatekeeping*: the winnowing of a vast amount of possible news items into a constricted space. Vos and Heinderycks (2015) examined gatekeeping across the five levels, discerning the forces at each level operating to shape news decision making. In spite of an increasing online abundance of news and social media platforms, capacity and audience interactivity, news decisions are still being made—but in different locations and sequences. This seemingly flattened hierarchy of gatekeeping authority may, as the authors argue, still leave a persistent homogeneity to certain stories, and the omission of important others altogether (e.g., financial crisis of 2008).

Hierarchical power—not the least of which the State’s—is still with us and reasserting itself in many areas, even if deployed in a dramatically restructured news environment. And much media work, even if increasingly yielded to those outside the traditional media, continues to occur in organized, institutionalized settings. This is true even for those organizations that are not primarily media oriented but practice journalism as a part of their social mission. Advocacy nongovernmental organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, investigate, report, and disseminate information not only to provide to traditional media organizations but to share directly with their stakeholders (Powers, 2015)—and they can be examined within a levels-of-influence framework.

We next briefly summarize the questions pertinent to each level, with examples of recent research and the related, spatially oriented conceptual issues regarding how research within these levels has adapted to a reconfigured public

sphere. The hierarchy of influences has been a valuable guide, but to what extent must it be reconsidered as evolving ecosystems bring new conceptual and methodological challenges?

Individual

On the most microlevel, we assume that individual creative, professional practitioners matter and knowing who they are helps understand the larger journalistic project—who is being drawn to the profession, how adequately they reflect society, and what professional values they support. The individual level of analysis considers the personal traits of newswriters, news values they adhere to, professional roles they take on, and other demographic features (e.g., gender, race, class). In spite of the traditional notion of professional “objective” detachment, we assume these characteristics affect their work. Journalists make decisions based on psychological-level attributes, but they operate within a web of constraints.

Thus, this level of analysis considers the relative autonomy of individuals, how they are shaped by, contribute to, and identity with their surrounding organizations. Defining news professionals as those working in major decision-making capacities for media organizations, Weaver and colleagues (e.g., Weaver et al., 2007) in the tradition of Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman (1972) have tracked the composition of that group over several years, along with how they perceive their roles. Surveying journalists working for traditional news organizations shows perceptions by those individuals most invested in the shrinking professional core. They see journalism heading in the wrong direction, have declining job satisfaction, but give greater importance to their role in analyzing complex problems and investigating official claims (Wilnat & Weaver, 2014).

Although many such studies seek to capture a description of the profession as a whole, the individual level certainly draws attention to the fact that there is no single professional type, not even within national cultures. As professional environments are shifting rapidly, analysis at this level helps understand how professional roles relate to larger structures, serving as a means of adaptation and survival. In the dynamic Chinese media context, for example, Hassid (2011) identified four types of journalists: American-style professionals; communist professionals (“throat and tongue” of the Communist Party); workaday journalists (corrupt, anything for a price); and advocate professionals, who push the envelope and are committed to ideals of transparency, openness, and public participation. Geall (2013) argued that these are the professionals especially equipped for survival, who can exploit the openings provided by the chaotic aspects and contradictions of the Chinese media environment.

Societal changes force a general reexamination of the relationship between individuals and larger structures. That is, the aggregates traditionally signaled by levels—whether community, organization, or nation—are containers that don’t

have the same meaning as they once did, as new structures are woven outside of and through institutional frameworks. As Castells (1996) argued, we need to rethink particularly the fundamental issue of identity, given that people “increasingly organize their meaning not around what they do, but on the basis of what they are, or believe they are” (p. 3). They are no longer as easily described by their individual markers of group membership. As a result, we need to be more cautious about the explanatory power of traditional demographic and other classifications when it comes to journalists (and other creative workers). For example, technology has brought new pressures on information workers in general, increasing the velocity of incoming information and need for multi-tasking, but it has also given them the ability to create a personal brand apart from their employer, using social media such as Twitter.

Routines

The routines level is concerned with those patterns of behavior that form the immediate structures of mediawork. As a social practice, routines are the ways of working that constitute that practice, including those unstated rules and ritualized enactments that are not always made explicit. In studying these routines we assume that power is exercised within organizations—not always by idiosyncratic dictates by leaders but through establishing a pattern of practices that serve the needs of the organization, adapt to requirements of information sources, control the workflow, and give it a meaningful structure. In the case of journalism these range from deadline and space requirements to pack journalism and Tuchman’s (1972) strategic rituals (e.g., using quotations and balancing) designed to invoke “objectivity” itself. News routines serve the needs of journalists and the organization, but they also have come to embody considerations about the audience, what it will find acceptable and interesting in the form of news values.

But these routines have been unsettled, as news media adapt to digital flows and metrics, affording the ability to present information that allows greater user participation. From a time when journalists had only a vague conception of their audience, reading and viewing now can be monitored in real time, leading to new value being placed on what is trending, shared, and endorsed. News aggregators, for example, both within and outside traditional news organizations, have had to develop new routines of screenwork, continually checking the incoming streams of information, monitoring what types of stories drive audience traffic, and finding ways to appropriately verify and advance what Coddington (2015) called “second-hand story-telling,” with routines that support transparency. They help to reconcile the tension between the professional imperative of control and a more open participatory news space online. This “second-order” newswork still

maintains a professional ethos, distant from the eyewitness field-reporting professionals have always valorized, yet still holding that ethos as an aspiration.

In the past we have thought of news values and occupational norms as a routines-level phenomenon. In that respect technology has reshaped the ecosystem indirectly by importing new values. As news organizations have had to rely on those outside the professional field for digital expertise, the values of the technology culture have become linked with journalistic practice. The open source concept, for example, is both a practical approach to coding and a philosophy of sharing (it makes transparent the DNA of its design). Lewis and Usher (2013) argued that the ethos of open source—embedded in hacker culture and emphasizing iteration, tinkering, transparency, and participation—draws journalism out from its closed professional boundaries into greater transparency.

Organizational

Associated with the organizational level in particular, the ethnographic approach to journalism contributed the insight, now well accepted, that media representations are an organizational product. The walls of these organizations have become more fluid as they enter into collaborative relationships, and they take on a range of new emerging forms from the large-scale enterprise of daily news gathering to the small-staff, minimalist blogging operation. The key question at this level is still “How does it work?” In that respect, the early analysis of Breed (1955) of social control in the newsroom continues to be relevant today in considering how the different parts of the organization work together to maintain itself and accomplish its goals.

Social protest and upheaval in the 1960s brought greater concern about how journalism was implicated in a discredited power structure, leading to greater interest in the inner workings of media at the organizational level—as represented most visibly by a number of newsroom ethnographies. Stonbely (2013) located a group of such studies that, after a long hiatus, followed in the later 1960s and 70s the earlier example of White and Breed. These studies, she argued, represent a “cornerstone” of American media sociology, covering that “legacy” period of media development centered around a handful of major broadcast and print media that commanded mass audiences and, for the most part, their trust. Among these she identifies Edward Jay Epstein’s (1974) *News from Nowhere* (about network television news), Mark Fishman’s (1980) *Manufacturing the News*, Gaye Tuchman’s (1978) *Making News* (about local newspapers), and Herbert Gans’s (1979) *Deciding What’s News* (about national newsmagazines and television). They all broke with the prevailing communication research tradition by emphasizing news as an organizational product that had to be socially constructed, not simply transmitted to the audience. These became

classic examples of newsroom sociology, time-consuming but rich in detail, and served to anchor until recently our understanding of how newswork happens.

The sociology of news has continued to highlight the ethnographic method, long marginalized within mainstream sociology—providing insights that pertain to the aforementioned routines level, as well as the organizational. Ethnographic observation has proved especially useful in understanding the impact of technology on a more digitally oriented journalism practice. Prominent examples include the work of Boczkowski (2004, 2010), especially in showing how technology has affected the newsroom organization and practice. His work on Argentinian newsrooms reveals the paradox of striving in an age of digital abundance to conform to the news competition. Ryfe's (2012) analysis of three American newsrooms showed that journalists have not adapted very well to change, using the tensions embedded in their profession to reconfirm and justify the same procedures they have used since before the industry upheaval.

Usher (2014) provided the most recent single-newsroom ethnography—within the Gans tradition—of the *New York Times*, choosing an elite news organization as the embodiment of the journalism profession. Her participant observation shows what happens when a traditional and powerful institution must adapt to the inescapable digital world, that despite the major technological shifts, “many of the routines and practices of news production observed in the golden era of news ethnography remain constant” (p. 228). What is more, the routines surrounding key values of immediacy, interactivity, and participation show remarkable similarities to a diverse host of other online news settings (Domingo & Paterson, 2011; Paterson & Domingo, 2008).

These tensions at the organizational level are particularly revealed during times of social change. Lee and Chan (2008) showed, for example, that although Hong Kong has a strong tradition of journalistic professionalism, self-censorship has increased following the handover to the mainland government, bringing greater political pressure on local media. News managers try to minimize conflicts by assigning sensitive stories to less experienced journalists, warning them ambiguously to “be smart,” or justifying their instructions with a professional rationale (“be objective”). Since the so-called Umbrella Revolution, news organizations there have faced greater challenges in smoothing over these conflicts with owners, many of whom have business ties to the mainland.

In traditional observational research, the ethnographer must decide the appropriate site, identify the social actors, and describe their practices. But when news production becomes more diffused, with journalists working and communicating remotely, in small organizations loosely aligned with a larger parent company, or dispersed across platforms, the single site becomes more difficult to select (e.g., Cottle, 2007). How can ethnography be done on decentralized, deterritorialized communities? What is there to observe? In keeping with the *networked journalism* perspective, newer efforts fittingly have shifted away from a location-based

“factory floor” ethnography. Howard (2002) demonstrated the utility of a *network ethnography*: “The process of using ethnographic field methods on cases and field sites selected using social network analysis” (p. 561). In his analysis, he identifies a distributed “e-politics” community, not based in a single organization but in various agencies, party and campaign staffs, and individual consultants—a loosely configured professional group of digital tool developers for political communication. His method helps locate the critical actors through their position in the network that links them together, with interviews targeted accordingly.

Social Institutions

In previous versions of our work, we referred to this next level as “extramedia,” meaning everything “outside of” media organizational boundary. This could include everything from audiences, powerful sources, public relations, or even technological forces. We have refined that conceptualization as the social institution level, making it clear that we are referring to the concerns beyond any single organization—to the “inter-organizational field.” Here we consider how the various organizations doing media work cohere into a larger institution. The media institution in turn is affected by the way in which it enters into structured dependency relationships with other major systemic players: including the state, public relations, and advertising. It is this structure that has become an increasingly important area for research. Benson (2004) advocated bringing the sociology of media (systems) back in to the analysis, by emphasizing the journalistic institutional field, deconstructing the media system (especially cross-nationally) into its institutional components. This represents the mesolevel environment for media—the interplay of economic, political, and cultural factors—lying between organization and society as a whole.

The new institutionalism perspective imported from political science treats the media as a political actor in relationship with others (e.g., Ryfe, 2006). This approach includes a historical dimension, which helps explain the emergence of practices and norms as a contingent outcome. In showing how the news media have in common their goals of seeking legitimacy, access to information, and making money, institutionalist analysis helps explain their homogeneity (Cook, 1998; Sparrow, 1999). Bourdieu’s (2005) field theory is similar to institutionalism in identifying spheres of action, which must be understood in relation to each other and which, in the case of the journalistic field, implies autonomy, homogeneity, and a path-dependent historical trajectory.

Both fields and institutions bring up questions of where the boundaries lie among these institutions as they jockey for power—and how these interdependencies shape the news product. Power flows not only from the state to the media but the other way around in a process of mutual adaptation. Fox News, for example, has dictated to the Republican Party as it seeks to manage the

presidential campaign by creating a debate forum for aspiring candidates, some of whom had contracts with Fox for on-air appearances. At the institutional level we can better recognize the even more complex nature of *mediatization*: a distinctive stage in mass democracies in which political processes have grown more or less dependent on the mass media and shaped themselves accordingly. The institutionalist perspective was a valuable corrective in political science, giving the media appropriate recognition for its power with respect to other, particularly political, institutions. But it's also clear that news media no longer function as a single homogeneous institution, considering the trends of media fragmentation and polarization. To the extent certain media sectors do show this homogeneity, their interactions with other major institutions help explain their work and content.

Whether between fields or institutions, borders have become particularly relevant. At a lower level, certain norms and routines of newswork, such as verification and sourcing, serve as boundary objects or markers to distinguish between journalism practiced by professionals and what they deem as less worthy practices. In a related dynamic at the organizational level, individual media firms such as the *New York Times* seek to differentiate themselves from less acceptable entities as WikiLeaks, suspect because of its statelessness and noninstitutionalized relationship with official sources (Coddington, 2012). The institutional level points to how mainstream journalism experiences an identity confusion, given the fuzzy borders between it and partisan news organizations such as Fox News, or comedic platforms such as *The Daily Show* and the former *Colbert Report*. Fox News is a political actor in many respects, but in others it participates with other news outlets using similar practices and with comparable dependency relations with other social institutions.

Social System

The most macro level is concerned with traditional theories of society and power as they relate to media. The new media geography has disrupted the very definition of journalism and its boundaries with other fields (Carlson & Lewis, 2015), but this disruption can still be understood within a levels perspective. As media fields police their boundaries and defend their professional prerogatives, they engage a process of repair and maintenance of the journalistic "paradigm" (e.g., Reese, 1990), an ideological process captured best at the *social system level* of analysis. This level encompasses perhaps the most diverse intellectual traditions, making it difficult to so easily summarize. Much of early U.S. communication research was predicated on a benign, functional pluralism view of power in democratic society that assumed a self-righting balance of interests, and thus relatively little attention was paid to this level. But when media decision making becomes problematic, powerful interests must be taken

into account. More critical political economic explanations, for example, consider journalism to be an extension of class and corporate power, with Herman and Chomsky's (1988) *propaganda model*, giving journalists relatively little autonomy as they work to uphold the interests of their sources, advertisers, and other elites. In a more subtle elaboration, long predating the propaganda model, hegemony theory takes Antonio Gramsci's extension of Marx to explain how power relations become naturalized, even while granting media some relative autonomy from class power and interests. Ideology explains how the social system hangs together as the media project ideas and meaning in the service of power. The hierarchy of influences model has led, for example, to inferences bridging levels about how routine framings of war serve larger corporate and government interests.

One doesn't need to take a Marxian perspective, however, to recognize that media institutions function within a larger social system, and these systems increasingly span national boundaries. A direct and variable-oriented way to examine influence of factors at the social system level is through cross-national comparison. This comparative approach applied to professional journalism is exemplified by Hanitzsch and colleagues (2011), who mounted a survey across 18 countries from a mix of news organizations on their role perceptions, epistemological orientations, and ethical views, a design that allowed them to directly assess the influence of national context on the perceptions of journalists themselves. Their research raises the question, To what extent is there a global journalistic culture? They differ on the value of interventionism, the promotion of certain goals of social change, but in general there is evidence for a universal ideology and professional identity. These designs allow for testing the influence of the national social system and help untangle institutional-level variables—showing, for example, how the extent to which media rely on commercial support as part of the political economic field shapes media practice (e.g., Benson, 2013). But comparing institutional fields like this overestimates the degree of media homogeneity in countries. Certain components of a journalistic field—such as television, and increasingly online news—may converge toward a more global standard, whereas the printed press, more firmly rooted in historical styles, may resist this change.

The social system level brings a sensitivity beyond the nation-state to more globally connected forces that affect media. Studies can be designed to compare cross-national differences, but explaining those differences requires making reference to different components of the world system—whether political, economic, or cultural. The changing theoretical landscape has been obliged to respond to globalization, which brings a stretching of social relations, connecting people at a distance, and compression as they interact with simultaneity and synchronicity. This has led to a fresh look at the social system level to various aspects of media globalization, beyond the hegemonic dynamics within a single

national culture. Corcoran and Fahy (2009), for example, took a more pan-national approach to global journalism, examining how power flows within and across national contexts through elite-oriented media, whether the *International New York Times*, *Wall St. Journal*, or in their case the *Financial Times* (FT). The FT is global in the sense that it has a privileged place in European Union discourse, with a core audience among globalized elites doing business in Europe and Brussels. Journalists became part of networks of information flow that support elite structures, leading the authors to suggest a “cosmopolitanism embedded in the transnational culture of European elites, whose material interests stretch beyond national boundaries and whose social imaginary is nourished by elite media such as the FT” (p. 110).

NEW CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

This level-by-level review shows how new research is located within the hierarchy of influences model, but the changing media ecosystem has brought new conceptual challenges. How are they accommodated within a levels-of-analysis framework? We argue that the model still helps guide this thinking, even as it requires some shifts in emphasis. Globalization, for example, brings phenomena that don’t scale the same way across a continuum of nested levels—for example, from local to international. Something of the “global” is embedded in local subnational spaces (e.g., Sassen, 2006). Examining global media forms brings this kind of insight from case studies with thick description of these new combinations. Firdhaus (2012), for example, illustrated a creative search for such new cases in her study of Al Jazeera journalists working in Malaysia, signifying a subnational, “glocal” journalistic space embedded within the global media-hub city of Kuala Lumpur. But these professionals still have their routines and organizational affiliations, even as they participate in something new.

Technology is also multiscalar and at the heart of transformational connectivity affecting media work, tools, processes, and ways of thinking. Rather than regarding it as an exogenous force making its effects felt from the outside on media (which we once located in the “extramedia/social institutional” level), it becomes integrated into practice. This has led to new ways of theorizing socio-technical systems and examining their interconnections, such as Latour’s actor network theory, borrowed from science studies (reviewed in Turner, 2005). From a levels perspective the actor network theory doesn’t make the same distinction between individual-level factors and routines (including technological affordances), and they become closely integrated.

The network perspective itself, so central to understanding the networked public sphere, does not necessarily run contrary to a hierarchical approach. Social network analysis emphasizes relationships among and characteristics of nodes (whether

people, news sources, or stories), but these relationships are still conditioned by larger systemic factors. Members of networks still have their characteristics, values, and norms. As discussed earlier, network structures help identify the critical junctures where new media configurations and communities are forming. Anderson (2010), for example, mapped online hyperlinks in the Philadelphia community to describe the news ecosystem, “pointing to a pattern of iterative pyramiding in which key web sites positioned within highly particular communities of interest act as bridges to larger, more diffused digital communities” (p. 289). More broadly, from the perspective of the hierarchical model, we have previously suggested studying links between individuals, organizations, and social institutions, all within their given social systems (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), so we have anticipated a greater emphasis on interlevel networked connections.

Related to the network is the richer concept of *assemblage*, a concept that has become useful in many areas of social science to capture dynamic phenomena spilling out of existing categories, becoming recombined in new ways, and not as easily identified within a single level of analysis. An assemblage is a contingent set of relationships to accomplish shifting social objectives not otherwise defined by formal institutions. This leads Anderson (2013) to argue that newswork itself is one of assemblage and “can be envisioned and described as the continuous process of networking the news” (p. 172) across “news products, institutions, and networks ... drawing together a variety of objects, big and small, social and technological, human and non-human” (p. 4). Thus, the concept cautions against treating media structures as static and preordained and directs attention rather to shifting configurations over time. The hierarchy of influences has centered around media organizations, which in years past were easier to discern, but we obviously need to be more creative in identifying what have become more loosely coupled, heterogeneous organizational structures. Chadwick (2011) called them “hybrid media systems” and considered how, facilitated by digital platforms, political information cycles are best seen as complex assemblages of modular units—journalists, technologies, and political actors—which can be understood only in their relationships with each other.

The hierarchical model makes it easy to think of power as flowing in one direction, from one level to another, but this need not be case, as dynamic structures form across levels. Political communication studies, for example, have treated media as relatively passive receptacles of elite messaging—either in a cascading activation process (Entman, 2003) or through the indexing of news construction to the boundaries of political debate (Bennett, 1990). But these linkages between levels also can be regarded as interactive and multi-directional. As Davis (2007) argued, policy-making networks—a form of assemblage of elite actors—constitute microspheres of power that don’t correspond to representative politics. Journalists are integral, often captive, parts of these networks, not just the recipients of political newsworthy information.

CONCLUSION: CONTENT AND MEDIATED SPACES

The networked public sphere is constituted with new configurations of media work, institutional arrangements, and global connections, which give rise to new emerging deliberative spaces. Many studies would seem to equate these spaces with a mapping of media patterns (social, mass, and otherwise), treating the media arena as tantamount to the public sphere. This is often true in research on online content that takes the hyperlink as the fundamental connecting feature allowing the mapping of the networked space, including blogo- and Twitter-spheres. These analyses often provide striking visualizations of the patterns, but these networks must still be related to their larger contexts, as we have advocated. Indeed, in our earlier theorizing, we were much more explicit (than in the much of the discussion in the present essay) about linking levels of influence directly to media content, treating content as the dependent variable upon which various forces operated.

But, without ignoring content by any means, we can see how, from a spatial perspective, it becomes more intricately blended into the underlying structures. Social structures define and support *mediated spaces*, through which symbolic reality is formed and expressed—a discursive space. As suggested earlier, the assemblage concept alerts us to wider combinations of elements that come together to constitute such spaces. In the case of social movements or information cycles, for example, these may include a variety of media workers, citizen journalists, social movement activists, media-savvy political professionals, and officials. In Reese's (2015) analysis of the Chinese “green public sphere” he examined the globalization of these mediated spaces, as areas of issue discourse created by the interaction of transnational environmental nongovernmental organizations, grassroots groups, traditional media, netizens, and government officials. This particular spatial perspective may at present not have a precise operationalization, but it has value as a provocative orienting concept.

New media configurations must be identified and their emergence accounted for, even as they may prove elusive and transitory. They constitute and are still located within a framework of power, even if not so intuitively. In spite of shifting conceptual terrain and the spatial turn, the hierarchy of influences remains a useful organizing model and standard against which to measure the destabilization and realignment of media forces, and as a means to incorporate explanatory power. Just as it has contributed to building an important field in communication research, of media sociology, we expect it will continue to provide explanatory power well into the future.

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