

Journalism and Critical Engagement: Naiveté, Embarrassment, and Intelligibility

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Abstract:

This article explores the possibility of journalists acting as custodians of critical engagement, drawing on Rancière's conception of dissensus as organized disagreement over the conditions of understanding. It begins by assessing the status that worthiness and naiveté have as negative symbolic capital in the journalistic field, before asking whether journalists' ambivalent detachment from the objects of their inquiry hinders their ability to engage critically with experts in other fields. It argues that journalism's role in marshaling dissensus amounts to making clear the limits and absences of intelligibility in journalism and other fields, in distinction to disseminating knowledge as such.

Keywords:

Journalism in society; critical engagement; intelligibility; Rancière; phenomenology.

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Introduction

In a panel discussion on the relationship between aesthetics and politics at the International Communication Association annual conference in 2011, there was broad agreement amongst delegates that it is impossible, or at least unwise, to reduce aesthetics to some teleological core. When the same thinking was applied to politics, however, there was more interest in defending a more reductionist approach, a basic concept of 'the political' that applies across different contexts, practically if not ontologically universalized after Ernesto Laclau's delineation.¹ After it was suggested that we can afford to have a fairly messy idea about what this political is, Georgina Born² countered that only with a sharper focus can we be properly on our toes as cultural analysts, alive to the stuff of politics, or aware of the power stakes inherent across the full range of social situations. I have argued previously³ in relation to Pierre Bourdieu's work that there is something unnecessarily, normatively political in his conception of practice: that there is something 'about' it which makes it complicit in the reproduction of unequal power relations that is never made explicit but always assumed. However, in pragmatic terms Born's was a convincing refutation of relativism, and consistent with the widely-heard critique of Foucault,⁴ that if power is everywhere then as a concept it is of little use to us. The question then is what work we want the concepts 'the political' and 'politics' to do for us. For Bourdieu, the former can be pared down to relative domination and dominatedness,⁵ while the latter refers to the struggle that is inherent in the lived experience of any relational field.⁶ And yet this commits Bourdieu to a fairly conservative conception of power:⁷ there is something about the way fields are structured that orient them towards the reproduction of the political status quo. In particular, as Benson notes, Bourdieu overlooks the active role that institutions play in the ongoing structuration of fields.⁸ For Bourdieu the institutionalization of struggle inevitably produces symbolic violence, in the sense of individuals becoming predisposed to acting instinctively against their own interests.

But instead of unthinking complicity in one's own dominatedness, what if the political were reconceived as the contestation of that which is tacitly agreed within different professional or cultural contexts, consensuses which have become unspeakable because of their sheer obviousness to insiders and opacity to those outside?⁹ This article draws on Jacques Rancière's contention that politics is about the organization of critical dissent,¹⁰ meaning the radical questioning not just of party politics but the power relations embedded in all aspects of professional and cultural life. In particular, it assesses the role that journalism might play, in practice as well as theory, in institutionalizing what Rancière terms dissensus, or a disruption of the obviousness

that attaches to the power arrangements of any social order.¹¹ By this model, journalism addresses itself to the mutual intelligibility of the distinct lifeworlds associated with different professional and cultural fields as well as the imagined communities¹² populated by media audiences. This goes beyond journalism's role in society as translator between different groups, to critical engagement with the contingent underpinnings of their taken-for-granted experience of the world: that is, whether and to what extent journalism can enable deliberation of that which is implicit in the seamlessness of everyday life. It will be seen that there are obstacles to journalism performing this function, not least professional-cultural ones associated with journalists' reluctance to appear naïve or sophomoric. The article concludes that it is possible for journalism critically to address the contingency of intelligibility in different fields, beginning with its own, by way of an acknowledgement that the language journalists use to talk about politics (and other subjects) is not just rhetorical, but foundational of the very conceivability of the political.

Journalism and the culture of consensus

Despite having factional and partisan news organizations given to the reduction of issues and events to simplistic binaries and to policing the boundary between the virtuous and deviant, there is little in the UK's print media¹³ or broadcast news in the US¹⁴ which can be held up as evidence of substantive dissensus. While exaggeration of disagreement around specific topics is standard practice in both popular and quality journalism, there is little debate over the big questions: the principles according to which society is organized, the appropriate economic system for maximizing human potential and satisfaction, and what it means to live a good life. There is a self-evident explanation for this, in the sense that for the mass-market, populist British tabloid the *Sun* to start waxing philosophical about self-mastery would be absurd. But there is a tangible lack of imagination in news media about how different things could be, and amongst the public a smothering consensus that seems to answer the deliberately blunt question I pose to students: why haven't we seen more strident campaigns for systemic reorganization – or violence, for that matter – since the financial crisis broke? Despite the best efforts of much media to focus on the social disorder angle of the Occupy movements,¹⁵ the campaigners themselves have sought to self-identify and organize according to principles¹⁶ in opposition to the hierarchical conceptualization of conflict that Bourdieu and others place at the core of the social field. Press outrage at bankers has not led to substantive mainstream journalistic consideration of the alternatives to capitalism, nor has it fed through to physical attacks on finance professionals. The London riots of 2011 prompted instinctive evocations of the urban underclass¹⁷ or editorial hand wringing over alienation,¹⁸ but not a widespread radical re-evaluation of the social contract or, conspicuously, violence towards elite persons and institutions.

The lack of *dissent* in the news media has been observed elsewhere,¹⁹ and reflects similar arguments about centrism in party politics. The most common explanation is commercialism: that profits demand illusory conflicts because that is what sells.²⁰ This is well-established, though I would argue that it is less about what appeals to fickle consumers at the newsstand, and more about the entrenched will to engage in habitual practices of positioning and distinction-making, as part of the everyday life of the working journalist. Another, more systemic, explanation offered by academics is functionalist: journalism is a fundamentally conservative institution which exists to reproduce dominant norms and power relations by patrolling the boundaries of the discursive center; political and cultural stability effected through the government of what counts as news.²¹ This position has fallen out of favor in recent years as the structure/agency debate has leaned towards more agentive readings of mediated society.²² But it is worth unpacking the normative commitments of the functionalist account. First, it assumes a teleology of institutional evolution that is somehow stacked against the interests of non-elite members of society, which, given that functionalism generally disavows the instrumental manipulation of institutions towards their own ends, in turn points to a teleology of history in which the disempowerment of the non-elite is a given. Second, it assumes a mediated center around which society revolves, and Couldry has argued compellingly that this is not necessarily the case.²³ Journalism and the media more broadly exist in relation to multifarious competing institutions, and while we often act as though the mediated center has an ontological stability, in fact power relations, domination, and resistance are found elsewhere.²⁴ This is not an argument for a decentered society, but rather a rhizomal one²⁵ in which dissenting manifestations of politics function as multiple centers, each effecting a gravitational pull on individuals the magnitude of which depends on where they are situated. Third, the functionalist position assumes that there is something 'about' professional practice that is politically nefarious. On the one hand this reflects concerns about the wider erosion of autonomy of cultural production from the logic of the market over the past 30 years.²⁶ But it also points to an over-readiness to ascribe politicality to observed professional practice. Social scientific methodology after Bourdieu more or less requires that practices will be characterized as structured as well as structuring, in part determined by and also determinant of field logics.²⁷ But the ascription of political implicatedness is a judgment call.

To what extent, then, if any, is journalism or the media more broadly responsible for the generalized absence of mass unrest and mobilization in response to the financial crisis? The manufactured consent argument is vulnerable to the charge of paternalism, in line with Michael Mann's response²⁸ that the disempowered are under no illusions about their situation and to suggest otherwise is at best patronizing and at worst insulting. It is possible that journalistic discourse is simply incapable of successfully expressing the true import of the banking crisis, whether in economic or ethical terms, both because of its modus operandi of reducing all events to familiar narratives,²⁹ and because its exaggeration of trivial issues makes proportionate scaling of newsworthiness

impossible.³⁰ It is also normal for journalists to keep some knowledge from the public,³¹ not through editorial diktat but because they see themselves as uniquely able to deal with information that the public at large couldn't handle. It is a frequent theme in interviews I have conducted with conflict and political reporters that a journalist would speculate about what would happen if people knew what they did (mass panic, for instance), and a desire to protect them from the worst that bordered on the condescending.³² Although this may apply to the horrors of war or natural disasters, there is no firm evidence that the public in general is less economically or politically illiterate now than in other eras. Whether bankers or politicians are blamed, it is not necessarily a lack of knowledge but a lack of articulation of that knowledge to action that characterizes the current air of fatalism,³³ and one of the questions this article raises is whether prevailing norms of journalistic professional identity contribute to that lack.

A trawl through electronic archives of front pages from the first months of the crisis reveals no lack of drama nor indeed detail; the distinct sense one gets is that there is nothing that could have been said, or said differently, that would have broken through the fog of the public's pre-given everyday experience of the world. There are a number of explanations for this on offer: cultural theorists talk of a wave of narcissism,³⁴ while psychologists point out that we solipsistically believe ourselves to be less vulnerable to outside forces than others,³⁵ and that we are incapable of seeing the world other than through existing, rationalizing lenses. It is also difficult to know what could have been done differently, though I offer a tentative answer to this below. Simply trying to scare the public into awareness is counter-productive; we know from research on reactions to distant suffering that audiences are quick to spot manipulation, and over time they tend to become inured to or cynical about drama.³⁶ Nor is disrupting the fabric of phenomenal experience an immediately realistic option. Many have made the link between public apathy and the particular species of consumerist liberalism that currently dominates western democracies.³⁷ But this implies breaking through to an outside of that culture, invoking an unsustainable mystified other of what we have now. Whatever one thinks of consumerist liberalism – and we can't presume how it is experienced, since while for some it is the source of anomie and anxiety,³⁸ for others it is pleasurable and satisfying³⁹ – its phenomenal experience is as hard-wired and constitutive of subjectivity as our physical surroundings. There is no shortage of research proving that mainstream media under- or mis-represents alternative and radical perspectives;⁴⁰ the flipside, however, is that there is a tendency in academia to romanticize the same. It is telling that where dissenting views are promoted by media commentators, they tend to represent particular political movements that have cultural cachet at this point in time: environmentalism,⁴¹ horizontally-organized groupings such as the UK student protests⁴² and global Occupy movements,⁴³ and libertarianism⁴⁴ (examples from journalistic commentary are examined below). Each offers a different politics, whether in the form of anarcho-socialism, networked individualism, or radical humanism, but it is arguable the extent to which these positions are radical breaks with

the established consensus which dominates our political discourse. Further, their elevated cultural status means that calls for journalism to be inclusive of more 'alternative politics' reflects less a thoroughgoing commitment to dissensus⁴⁵ and more a claim on the symbolic capital associated with these social movements. That is, it reflects precisely a lack of journalistic cultural authority, and an attempt to piggyback on a form of politics which is increasingly valorized: non-professional, ordinary people engaged in issue-focused activism.⁴⁶

What explains this apparent lack of self-confidence in journalism's potential to challenge conventional wisdom and received thinking? Some have argued⁴⁷ that it is the natural result of precarity – an unwillingness to speak out in the knowledge that work is insecure and employers are finite. But in the majority of interviews I have conducted since the beginning of the economic crisis journalists have come across as notably self-possessed, revealing little of the inferiority complex vis-à-vis academia written about by Deuze,⁴⁸ and more than able to perform systematic unpickings of consensus views and to express dissenting alternatives of their own. Most appear to find it relatively straightforward – and enjoyable – to 'other' our dominant political climate, standing above it and providing perspectives that insiders could not (the insider/outsider distinction between politicians and their observers was fairly consistent, suggesting that the 'Inside the Beltway' and 'Westminster Bubble'⁴⁹ theses are not necessarily experienced as such by those operating within it). This confidence in person might be seen simply as bravado, a commodity in no short supply in journalism. But when pushed in interviews, journalists are generally able to back up their contentions with logical arguments and references to examples and authoritative sources, highlighting a tension that exists between a professional journalistic disposition which is ever ready to take on all comers, and a hesitancy in professional discourse – when journalists are talking to each other and to their publics – to engage in critical dissent. Many of these interviews revealed a quickness to criticize the way we do politics and a propensity to draw connections between disparate personae and events, but a real reluctance to articulate anything that might be interpreted as a cohesive political agenda. When pressed, such an agenda often emerged (this was especially noticeable in interviews with war reporters), usually in the form of a theory about how politics or simply the world 'really' operates. However, to speak publicly in an ideological fashion is to risk coming across as 'worthy', 'studenty' or 'idealistic', while to express anger – for example, at the systemic exploitation that pervades the economy of the media industries – is to risk appearing naïve. And these two broad qualities – worthiness and naiveté – are collectively recognized as negative capital, posing a unique threat to journalistic authority.

Reluctance to engage in organized dissensus then reduces to a fear of *embarrassment*: it is not that one has to present oneself as worldly, as such, but a sense of appropriateness is crucial – an instinct as to what is normal and 'weird' to talk about. This can be seen as a kind of competence, not in the sense of being competent at journalistic tasks, but being

naturally able to navigate the usually unspoken rules of professional identity. There is an obvious rejoinder to this: is it not the case that journalists are famous for being shameless and thick-skinned? The answer is yes – but only in relation to specific practices and ideas. For example, it is well documented⁵⁰ that amongst British tabloid journalists there are a sizeable number who regularly deal in speculation and allegation, and there appears to be little sense of contrition or shame if these turn out to be wrong.⁵¹ Moreover, many journalists are reflexive about this aspect of journalism – knowing full well, for instance, that the outrage they express in their work is performed and exaggerated⁵² – but actively enjoy participating in the game. But when asked about bigger picture issues, through questions about their political commitments and solicitations of general worldview, respondents appeared to be out of their comfort zone, becoming almost sheepish in their reticence. As much as anything, this is a discomfort with the discursive shift such questioning requires, to a register where the usual linguistic practices with which journalists have an unproblematic facility⁵³ – I have suggested that while these are neither universal nor uniform, they are distinguishable features of journalistic identity – do not have currency. While the contextual constraints of the interviews need to be taken into account (both in the performative sense and the fact that the majority of interviewees have been British), there was a distinct resistance to taking things seriously, with politics in particular talked about irreverently, dismissively, humorously, and cynically. But when pushed on what mattered to them politically, recourse to sarcasm and gallows humor appeared inappropriate to respondents. It was not that the journalists interviewed became solemn and reverential when prodded onto broader issues and questions about conviction; it was that no style of articulation seemed a natural fit.

I would suggest that this speaks to the contingency of journalistic authority.⁵⁴ In the robust, sometimes bawdy world of UK political journalism (in particular) a journalist's authority is tied to their ease with practices of criticism, ridicule, and a rejection of 'playing nice'. But worthiness threatens this form of professional authority in that it undermines the sense of detachment, which should be read as an embodied act of positioning, in which journalists' special status is manifest. Further, to move beyond the dominant cultures of the mediated center draws attention away from politics and issues as thought and talked about by journalists to other spaces where substantive dissent may or may not be taking place.⁵⁵ What happens when publics become interested in dissenting politics with a readiness to take them seriously, thinking about politics without irony or flippancy, that is in a manner that sits badly with a common (though not all-pervasive) journalistic orientation to the world? Instead of asking what journalists can do to reengage the public with politics,⁵⁶ this would suggest that mainstream British newspaper journalism, with all its reflexivity, referentiality, and playfulness – even when it is shocked and appalled at events – is instead a hindrance to reengagement. There is no shortage of moralizing in the UK press,⁵⁷ but it is a knowing, performative practice ill-suited to a straight-faced conversation about morality.

Ritualized outrage can be pleasurable to media producers and consumers alike, but it is inadequate to framing discussions of justice, fairness, and equality.

Journalism and dissensus

How, then, could journalism seek to locate itself at the center of a new seriousness more appropriate to the crisis? I contend that this involves more than simply explaining the severity of the situation better, or as it has often been put, seeking to collapse the distance between global events and the routines of everyday life by making plain the interconnectedness of the two.⁵⁸ A kind of authority as intimate trustworthiness would be conceivable were journalists to show how they too are affected by economic crisis, rather than positioning themselves above or outside ongoing events. But there are at least two drawbacks to this approach. First, complicity too has long been predicated on well-worn tactics aimed at projecting the idea that journalists and their audiences are on the same side:⁵⁹ its own performativity seems insuperable. Second, it is unclear whether a shared sense of victimhood can be any stable basis for a dissenting politics. Judith Butler has posited that our common vulnerability is a valid and indeed valuable basis for thinking about human subjectivity,⁶⁰ but it is also arguable that such a starting point devalues what we mean by the political subject before politics begins.⁶¹ Instead, a recentered journalistic authority could more likely be based on self-confidence – specifically, the confidence to be unafraid of embarrassment. There is an element here of the Foucauldian call to act as though complicity in power relations were avoidable, even if this cannot be demonstrated, or Bourdieu's argument that we have no choice but to act as if agency is possible,⁶² or indeed Žižek's conception of ideology in terms of fetishistic disavowal,⁶³ though there is no explicit evidence for this. In our context, it means acting with irreverence towards journalists' own cultural authority, as though such actions were genuine expressions rather than learned performances. It means risking appearing unworldly by tackling questions of ideology and how the state and its economy is organized and run.

It bears emphasizing that this is distinct from calls for journalists to become champions of a vanguard of specific activist movements, whether they be anti- or alter-globalization campaigns, environmentalism, or human rights. The last of these is an illustrative case. There is a broad consensus amongst political activists and journalists in contemporary Western societies that human rights are a good thing,⁶⁴ and that their protection and advancement are obvious aims for a culture to have. But scholars from law, political theory and philosophy have made clear that rights discourse has significant flaws, not least that it institutionalizes a debased legal subject.⁶⁵ A journalism critically engaged in political dissensus would seek to articulate and digest such ideas free from the embarrassment of appearing serious or elitist, and in a manner that goes beyond depicting the beyond of human rights through, say, criticism of specific institutions such as the UNHCR or the European Court of Justice. It would also entail a

willingness to make clear not simply gaps in the journalist's knowledge of human rights from these various perspectives, but of the specific *unknowability* of aspects of their discourses and naturalized orientation to the world, as well as a reflecting back of the limits of intelligibility on the part of the experts themselves.

More broadly, we can now set out what it would mean for journalists to play the role of custodians of dissensus. It is categorically not a call for journalists to embrace worthiness, or to become personally more politicized, or to want to change the world. Nor is it quite to suggest that journalists should speak more authentically or sincerely. For starters, authenticity is always contextual and reliant on embodied practices of enactment and recognition;⁶⁶ it is not something that can simply be willed, like Aristotelian good faith. Further, there is inevitably going to be a performative aspect to journalistic practice: there is not a level of artless expression to be discovered by stripping away journalistic discourse. In any case, the ironic detachment through which journalists position themselves in relation to the stuff of their work is, for better or worse, a defining characteristic of the professional culture.⁶⁷ That culture is criticized for its exclusivity,⁶⁸ but there is nothing to suggest that ridding journalism of its journalistic features, whether they be cultures of practice or institutions, would enhance its benefit to society. Instead, it means a readiness to try to understand other professional fields – politics, economics, philosophy – on their own terms, without fear of being exposed as inexperienced or ingenuous. Indeed, for Rancière establishing the limits of mutual intelligibility is precisely the point, which Phillips⁶⁹ encapsulates well through the metaphor of translation: the real impetus for improving dialogue between groups is not the fact of not knowing a word (jargon, say), but the point where one 'no longer recognizes in the other's language any shared object that one can present in one's own'.⁷⁰ It is in these absences of intelligibility that Rancière locates the possibility of radical political change.

The journalistic role in this model is not to fill these absences but to give them form, to translate the discourses of professions and disciplines as far as possible, but more importantly to set out explicitly what we outsiders cannot even begin to conceive of translating into our own words. For the Rancière of *Dissensus* this would mean journalists (and the rest of us) becoming political philosophers in their own right, fundamentally engaged in the project of redesigning society. But there are obstacles to this transformation, obstacles which I conclude below we can reasonably elect not to overcome. One of these is the problem of seriousness. While there is considerable variation, the interviews showed a quasi-congenital inability to be impressed – by power, argument, or drama. This propensity to understatement is a central feature of the authorial marker of wearing one's experiences lightly, a significant downside of which is that the expertise of others, while often respected, is never taken entirely seriously. But there is a difference between unseriousness and dismissiveness, and seeking to understand another field on its own terms does not mean following its pronouncements blindly, but establishing its conditions of intelligibility. The latter is

entirely compatible with a journalism that retains an ambivalent relationship with the objects of its scrutiny; what remains important is a commitment to the methodical unpacking of the world from which they originate. A second obstacle relates to the first. Part of the ambivalence journalists carry towards politicians, experts, and scholars is explicable by the anti-establishment vein that runs through extensive parts of journalistic culture, in the UK and elsewhere.⁷¹ Against this it could be argued that mainstream journalism is no lesser a part of the establishment than the elites with which they interact.⁷² Or in more principled terms, it could be said that the wariness with which journalists regard elite institutions should precisely be channeled into setting out the parameters of the symbolic world such elite actors inhabit. And since that symbolic world is for the most part experienced as seamless and whole, it is also incumbent on journalists to reflect back to those actors the contingencies and discontinuities of their phenomenal existence.

There is a modernist aspect to this conception of the role of journalism,⁷³ in that it reduces the journalist to conduit and facilitator. Yet there is nothing to suggest that as organizers of dissensus journalists cannot participate in political and other debates – only that it is not a requirement. In fact, this position is closer to Badiou,⁷⁴ or indeed Žižek.⁷⁵ For the former, democracy is conceived as that which does not ‘take persons into account’,⁷⁶ aiming instead at some universal truth, or in more modest terms appropriate to the present discussion, a commitment to process. What remains central is that dissensus is about disagreement over the conditions of understanding, rather than the sentiment. Instead of shackling journalism to notions of revealing universal truths or showing the world as it really is, its remit is instead the enunciative modalities of speaking and the conditions of possibility that govern them.⁷⁷ If journalism has a political function, it is because its practices have the potential to change the rules of intelligibility in public life. In Rancière’s pamphlet *The Politics of Aesthetics*⁷⁸ this is framed in terms of the ‘distribution of the sensible’, the shifting norms of journalistic discourse and beyond. The Foucauldian response would be to ask what is insensible in such distributions, which brings us to the import of talking in terms of enunciative modalities rather than voice or opinion. I suggested earlier that journalists instinctively avoid utterances that run the risk of appearing worthy, but this is indicative of a hard-wired awareness of a potent form of negative symbolic capital rather than unintelligibility. The former relates to a way of thinking about speaking as performance or enactment, against a backdrop that conceives of communication in terms of how individuals express themselves and how they are heard and represented. The latter, however, points us to the edges of regimes of truth, and it is here that Rancière locates dissensus.

For Rancière, it is art which is situated closest to the ‘precipice’ and thus best placed to give us a glimpse of the unspeakable. It has long been argued⁷⁹ that Foucault’s preoccupation with the transgression of discursive boundaries rests on an unsustainable distinction between the inside and outside of discourse, while Butler

forensically sets out the problems associated with positing interiority and exteriority of subjectivity.⁸⁰ Here, I would suggest that the problem is not with thinking in terms of the boundaries of intelligibility in discourse and public life more broadly, but how the outer is normatively loaded, as something elusive and tantalizing. It is, as such, the philosophical equivalent of an established journalistic strategy of holding out the promise to readers or revealing 'what no one else will tell you'. Alternatively, in the context of 'radical' journalism, a symbolic other is invoked which is politically loaded in terms which cannot be derived from first principles. This includes faith placed in organizationally different journalism – the Lockean claim that de-institutionalized or de-professionalized journalism will be less constrained and hence more truthful or pure, the Castellsian position that it is hierarchies of authority which constrain intelligibility and that journalism proceeding through horizontal networks offers a promising alternative,⁸¹ or that human agency itself is the problem and that it is journalism by algorithm which is the most radically democratic.⁸² In each case there is a gap between the status quo and the desired outcome; the conceptual work required to breach that gap is given over to metaphors (respectively structural, spatial, and systems-based) that clarify our thinking about possible alternatives to current reality⁸³ but do little to establish probability. The vivifying leap appears particularly prevalent at present,⁸⁴ with a kind of creative chaos attributed to environments marked by an absence of structure, or systems theory used to characterize computer-managed communication contexts as self-sustaining and self-correcting ecosystems.

Instead, following Phillips, we can take our lead from Derrida and take as our reference point the idea of writing itself as a dominant organizing structure. Journalism then cannot show us the world (or other worlds), but it can reveal the processes by which it becomes intelligible. This does not amount to a profound democratic function, but the argument is that if journalism reveals its own conditions of possibility as well as those of other fields, then productive and imaginative engagement between mutually uncomprehending fields will become increasingly possible. This is not an argument for journalism's traditional role of providing maximal information in order to sustain public discourse, an important role and also one disparaged from Walter Lippmann onwards.⁸⁵ It is instead about the methodical setting out of what we don't know, and what we don't know we don't know; not only correcting that which is lost in translation, but also giving form to those areas where the possibility of translation had not occurred to us. This requires candor about journalists' own naiveté, though I have suggested here that there is no compulsion to embrace the worthy, or to follow Rancière to his logical conclusion and become fully-fledged political philosophers. And yet the dissensus model is also a defense of professional journalistic authority, of the ability to engage with experts from specialized and elite parts of society and understand and disseminate not only their words but the phenomenal worlds they inhabit and to do so in a way that exceeds the rationalizing tendencies of journalistic discourse. The Rancière-derived model of journalists as custodians of dissensus, where dissensus is conceived as organized

disagreement over the conditions of understanding, is thus also a defense of expertise itself, amidst a broader context in which professional expertise is culturally devalued.

Intelligibility, nihilism, stakes

Needless to say, all of this is merely academic if there is an absence of journalistic interest in engaging with different fields (and the public) in different ways, and there is no shortage of evidence of disincentives to political communication in the face of diminished returns.⁸⁶ It appears that for journalists who do maintain a strong sense of political engagement, it is sustained through embedded practices of meaningfulness – that is, an internalized professional culture and superficial routines (not in the pejorative sense, but at the level of the everyday) of consumption and production that makes the meaningfulness of public engagement a given. Given the long-term decrease in interest in politics, economics, and other fundamental issues⁸⁷ it would be reasonable enough to despair as a journalist at the possibility of engaging substantively with audiences. An existential perspective would go further, and argue that establishing radical contingency amounts to the annihilation of meaning tout court, but this is refuted easily enough by re-asserting that meaning isn't absolute; cognition does not depend on the existence of meaning, instead, meaning is constituted through cognitive practices. But even so, the discontinuities between lifeworlds within a given society are stark, which means that the questions of why journalists should bother with critical engagement remains pertinent.

In order to address this, I conducted a small-scale (56 articles in total) qualitative analysis of content in the UK media that could be regarded as political, in the sense that they represent attempts to influence debates on matters of common concern.⁸⁸ This content would not on the whole qualify as dissensus, but it at least gives a sense of how the political is conceived across different media contexts: a columnist writing for the Guardian (George Monbiot), a Conservative political blogger (Tim Montgomerie), and a columnist for a think-tank whose views can be summarized as libertarian-humanist (Brendan O'Neill). It was straightforward to confirm that across the articles coded, although there is presumably an awareness of the lack of impact that contributions to political debates typically have, there is enough obvious, pre-reflexive meaningfulness about the subject matter to make attention to politics rationalizable. There is an aesthetic component to this,⁸⁹ a rhetorical way of valorizing politics as symbolic capital, but there is also evidence of a deontological dimension to 'the political'. The blogger, for instance, writes about knowledge of political machinations and phenomena as dangerous and subversive ('explosive', 'lethal'), while the Guardian columnist reaches for familiar reference points from university political theory classes, drawing on a reassuringly unchanging and trusted canon (Rawls on justice, Mills on liberty). The think-tank writer focused primarily on criticizing policy and trends regarded as 'dehumanizing' or 'infantilizing'. While we are used to hearing that journalists (and

others) use the same events to confirm their existing opinions,⁹⁰ what is interesting here is how each writer uses rhetoric and metaphor specifically to confirm an established orientation to the world, rather than simply a point of view. In each case, the ideas raised and the language used appears to lend either solidity or vitality (or both) to their engagement with events, rather than merely a specific stance, and thus, I would argue, to contribute to their phenomenal experience of the world as unproblematically meaningful, as pre-given. Language thus used is not merely a rhetorical device, but a condition upon which political meaning itself is predicated.

A journalist armed with this kind of reflexivity, not about the ideological narrowness of their positions but the conditions which make their work more or less unproblematically meaningful, would conceivably be well-placed to identify the conditions of intelligibility in other fields. But there remains the question of why contingent, internalized modes of intelligibility come to emerge in the first place. In our context, and to return to the question with which we begin, does it mean that the political *is* solid and lifelike, or that journalists (and others) *need* it to be in order for their lifeworlds to be experienced as continuous and relatively stable? The same question applies to the core orienting principles underpinning intelligibility in any field – finance, art, education, health, etc. If the latter alternative were true, then the journalist’s task would be essentially nihilistic, going from field to field pointing out contingency and arbitrariness.⁹¹ However, since dissensus journalism attempts to make clear the conditions of possibility of knowledge, it is also a revelation of *stakes*. That is, the aim of disrupting what are experienced as whole and seamless symbolic worlds is, if not to propose detailed possibilities for how different things could be in a quasi-utopian sense, then to establish how differently groups experience the world at an everyday level. The overarching goal may then be to foster intelligibility between fields or world-views, but the immediate effect of highlighting the fragility of given-ness is to demonstrate how narrowly contingent that given world is. The implication is not necessarily one of existential gloom. In the context of journalism, the benefit is not so much in establishing the arbitrariness of intelligibility in different fields, but rather in showing that there is nothing outside of intelligibility and thus there are stakes in how different phenomena – politics, aesthetics, well-being – come to have meaning. If there is an existentialist inflection to this, it is simply the notion of meaning as something always in a state of becoming, rather than inherent or final.

However, this raises potential problems. First, if the broader intelligibility of a field is conditional on it being a game worth playing, then it reduces to what Bourdieu terms *illusio*:⁹² the collective, and collectively misrecognized, sense that being invested in a competitive space is worthwhile. Concepts such as ‘the political’ or ‘finance’ then become functional: they exist to make living in society meaningful; they are a necessary condition of the seamless experience of the lifeworld and thus, possibly, secondary to subjectivity. This is not intended to be pedantic. The metaphors of space, mechanics, and systems mentioned above, whatever networks and processes they are intended to

explain, also carry connotations of solidity and vitality, which should give us pause. These metaphors and the thinking they represent are useful, in that they contribute to the solid, continuous experience of everyday life. But it is then arguable that it does not matter what form politics or finance (or education or art) take so long as they serve this function: since they amount to little more than a reaction against the possibility of nihilism, then whichever provides comfort and stability is sufficient. However, thinking about journalistic critical engagement in terms of the disruption of the obviousness of social orders is not to advocate the obliteration of meaning as a professional ideal. The point of understanding and communicating contingency is to establish that when it comes to meaning, political or otherwise, there is everything to play for.

Journalistic motivation is always relevant when discussing whether journalism should operate according to one principle or another. Why should journalists care? Here, we could begin with a refutation of the demotivating notion that even if it is full of disaster, suffering and scandal, journalism is essentially a kind of existential comfort, something to give people a routinized orientation to something solid, stable but essentially arbitrary. In the model discussed here, journalism does contribute to the experience of everyday life as pre-given, and yet if fully critically engaged it also draws attention to that given-izing function. The result is not to point to an existential void, to posit that meaning is either present or absent, but that meaning is both superficial and full, contextually constituted all the time and with tangible consequences. Journalistic motivation then reduces to something other than a misplaced notion of wanting to make a difference, or a romanticized idea of existential futility. It is the awareness that despite the cultural blanket of consensualism and the prevalence of cynicism in journalism, things are in a real sense precarious, in flux, and unresolved.

Notes

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² See, for instance, Georgina Born, "The Social and the Aesthetic: For a Post-Bourdieuian Theory of Cultural Production," *Cultural Sociology* 4, no. 2 (2010): 171-208.

³ Tim Markham, *The Politics of War Reporting: Authority, Authenticity and Morality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011)

⁴ See, for instance, Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984).

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).

⁷ See, for instance, Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72.

⁸ Rodney Benson, "News Media as a 'Journalistic Field': What Bourdieu Adds to New Institutionalism, and Vice Versa," *Political Communication* 23, no. 2 (2006): 187-202.

⁹ 'Lifeworld' (*Lebenswelt*) is used in the Husserlian sense of a taken-for-granted stream of everyday routines, interactions and events that constitute individual and social experience, rather than Habermas's conception of shared understandings and values which develop over time through face-to-face communication in a social group. See Tim Markham, "The Case Against the Democratic Influence of the

Internet," in *Web Journalism: A New Form of Citizenship*, eds Sean Tunney and Garrett Monaghan (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1999); Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Verso, 2004); John W.P. Phillips, "Art, Politics and Philosophy: Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière," *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 4 (2010): 146-60.

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¹³ James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility: Press, Broadcasting and the Internet in Britain* 7th ed. (London: Routledge, 2010), 66-100.

¹⁴ Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (New York: The New Press, 1999).

¹⁵ See, for instance, Kevin DeLuca, Sean Lawson and Ye Sun, "Occupy Wall Street on the Public Screens of Social Media: The Many Framings of the Birth of a Protest Movement," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 5, no. 4 (2012): 483-509

¹⁶ Simon Tormey, "Occupy Wall Street: From Representation to Post-Representation," *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies* 5, 132-137.

¹⁷ Mary Riddell, "London Riots: The Underclass Lashes Out," *The Daily Telegraph* (UK), 8 August 2011.

¹⁸ Esther Addley, "London Riots: 'A Generation Who Don't Respect Their Parents or Police'," *The Guardian* (UK), 9 August 2011.

¹⁹ Susan Moeller, "Media and Democracy," in *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times*, ed. Megan Boler (London: MIT Press, 2008); Natalie Fenton, "Drowning or Waving? New Media, Journalism and Democracy," in *New Media, Old News*, ed. Natalie Fenton (London: Sage, 2010), 3-16; Peter Dahlgren, *Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television and Journalism* (London: Pluto Press, 1997).

²¹ See especially Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

²² Greg Philo, "Active Audiences and the Construction of Public Knowledge," *Journalism Studies* 9, no. 4: 535-44; José van Dijck, "Users Like You? Theorising Agency in User-Generated Content," *Media, Culture & Society* 31, no. 1 (2009): 41-58; Graeme Turner, *Ordinary People and the Media: The Demotic Turn* (London: Sage, 2010).

²³ Nick Couldry, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism* (London: Sage, 2010).

²⁴ Fenton, "Drowning or Waving?"

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone, 1988).

²⁶ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*.

²⁷ Frédéric Vandenberghe, "The Real is Relational: An Epistemological Analysis of Pierre Bourdieu's Generative Structuralism," *Sociological Theory* 17, no. 1 (1999): 32-67.

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³⁰ Bourdieu, *On Television and Journalism*.

³¹ Roger Rosenblatt, "Rwanda Therapy: Battle-Scarred Journalists Heal," *The New Republic* 210, no. 23: 14-16; Markham, *The Politics of War Reporting*, 113.

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