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# Commentary on “Objectivity in Newsmaking: an Argumentative Perspective”: Reflections on Argument in Practice

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## 1. Argumentation in practice

The study reported by Zampa examines the relationship between argumentation and objectivity in the practice of news production in the newsrooms responsible for producing two different programs within one public broadcasting organization. The main aim was to illustrate that objectivity is routinely at issue in everyday journalistic practice by illustrating instances of journalistic decision making from the editorial room, the production room, and the solitary process of writing by the journalist. In each of these scenes, objectivity in some way becomes a practical issue that calls forth argumentative reasoning. A secondary aim is to show what plausible inferences are generated in the context of disagreement in moments of journalistic decision making that invoke issues about objectivity. The study demonstrates methods for reconstructing and analyzing argumentative reasoning in practice by combining *Pragmatic-Dialectics* – to show the structure of the moves in taking up an issue – with *Argumentum Model of Topics* – to articulate the reasoning about practice from the moves made in reaching a conclusion in the decision making.

The study offers some good reasons to believe that indeed issues of objectivity are material to everyday journalistic practice and that resolving differing values about objectivity is no mere arm-chair exercise but is in fact an aspect of everyday journalistic practice. The study suggests that it has "shown how objectivity is actually conceived of" in two newsrooms and "how journalists argue for newsmaking decisions by drawing on *endoxa* about objectivity" (Zampa, 2016). While these aims have been achieved to some extent, these claims disclose an important general ambition for argumentation theory and research. The contribution highlights a promising direction for making sense of the role of argumentation within practice and human activities and not just looking at argumentation as a practice in and of itself. Indeed, it is one thing to isolate from human activities the argumentative uses of language to analyze the structures of reasoning, and it is another to examine the ways in which methods of managing disagreement develop and evolve to sustain a practice. The study offers three points for reflection on this point.

First, the examples in the present study of the editor-journalist, journalist-cutter, and the journalist-as-writer highlight scenes of interaction within journalistic practice that reveal its internal complexities and that Journalism is bigger than any practitioner or organization. Following Nicolini's (2012) review of practice theories and the examination of *good work* in journalistic practice by Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon (2001), it seems best to assume that practice in general, and a practice like journalism more specifically, should not be understood simply as a set of uniform skills and unified beliefs shared by a community of practitioners. A practice is rife with differences and the potential for disagreement and we get a

feel for that in the selected scenes analyzed here. Each interaction reveals that particular senses of the practice are asserted in the making of journalistic products. What is noteworthy for understanding practice is understanding how these differences are managed, which is itself an essential part of the practice. There are a variety of means within the communities of practice for opening up differences and regulating disagreement. This includes standard lines of reasoning, such as maxims, but also routines and rituals that organize work, that inscribe preferred behaviour and action, and that set defaults in the decision process for settling impasses in decision making. What the present study points to, and that calls for more development, are these aspects of activity and organizations that are material to the conduct of practice but are not necessarily vernacular argument products. By examining the means for managing differences in conducting an activity, then, it is possible to better understand argument in practice.

Second, a noteworthy observation reported by Zampa is the variety of values about news identified in the study and the apparent differing value of news values. For instance, the public broadcasting organization in the study highlighted “credibility,” “independence,” “diversity,” “creativity,” and “fairness” while one of its programs highlighted “relevance,” “recency,” “audience interest,” “credibility,” “adherence to the facts” and “understandability” and the other program highlighted “clarity” and “balanced content” that is “not didactic or coarse.” While not too much is made of these differences in the study reported, the inclusion of these observations is important because it reveals differing value schemes for managing differences that arise in the conduct of work the organizations (the main news organization and its two programs). What can be made more explicit in studies of practice are the ways of disciplining talk and interaction among the practitioners, especially the patterns of questioning and calling-out that are organizationally and professionally sanctioned. Doing so would uncover the way differing values are highlighted and hidden in journalistic production. The maxims employed in such everyday routines of individuals and the different organizations of work articulate some common ground or common sense about journalism as cultivated within the organization of work.

The common sense(s) about practice plays an interesting role in the management of disagreement. For instance, Billig (1995, p. 238) makes an important observation about the relationship between argument and common-sense when he says that “on the one hand, common-sense seems to close off arguments.... On the other hand, common-sense seems to open up arguments.” The first sense highlights how “common-sense removes dilemmas of interpretation and makes social life meaningful” (p. 239) in that values provide common-places or objects of agreement across a community. The second sense, however, highlights how the range of common-places are means for expanding disagreement. For example, differences can arise about the interpretation of a value in a particular instance and differences can arise over which value is most appropriate in the case at hand (Billig 1995, p. 240). Argument arises in the management of these differences. Billig adds another piece to the story, however, in that the orthodoxies of common sense are open to change as minority opinions are expressed and majority opinions respond. The maxims method in this study can be used to closely reveal how values promoted by larger entities are embraced or resisted in practice while also examining how the means for managing disagreement within a practice, such as value schemes, shift and change over time and across the mode of production.

Third, the three scenes illustrated in the study – editorial meeting, editing meeting, and story writing – are three moments in the production of news (or journalistic output). In these scenes, the actors are making communication design arguments when asserting how a piece of journalism is produced and ought to be produced. A design argument entertains hypotheses about

how communication works and how it ought to work (Aakhus & Jackson 2005). In the cases, the hypotheses about the arrangement of words and images to convey a particular complex message (while avoiding other potential meanings being interpreted by various audiences) are at stake. The reasoning is about communication and so differing logics of message design (O’Keefe 1988) or practical theories about how to manage multiple competing demands (Craig and Tracy 1995) may be useful in articulating maxims that are being enacted and developed individually and collectively in professional practice. Exploring argumentation about communication processes, products, and consequences is a significant point of entry into understanding how built environment for thinking and acting is constructed (Aakhus 2007; Aakhus and Laureij 2012). Those involved in journalistic practice are engaged in one of the most consequential forms of communication design and the maxim approach illustrated here suggests a way forward for understanding design argumentation and design thinking in this work.

In conclusion, the work undertaken in this study opens up inquiry into argument in practice. It scaffolds a subtle but significant shift of attention from a strict focus on argument-as-a-practice to argument-as-an-integral-aspect-of-a-practice. A nuanced distinction no doubt but one that helps render visible the function of argument in society.

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