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The Political Phenomenology of War Reporting

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Abstract:

Drawing on interviews with war correspondents, editors, political and military personnel, this article investigates the political dimension of the structuration and structuring effects of the reporter's experience of journalism. Self-reflection and judgements about colleagues confirm that there are dominant norms for interpreting and acting in conflict scenarios which, while contingent upon socio-historical context, are interpreted as natural. But the prevalence of such codes masks the systematically misrecognized symbolic systems of mystification and ambivalence – systems which reproduce hierarchies and gatekeeping structures in the field, but which are either experienced as unremarkable, dismissed with irony and cynicism, or not present to the consciousness of the war correspondent. The article builds on recent theories of journalistic disposition, ideology, discourse and professionalism, and describes the political dimension of journalistic practice perceived in the field as apolitical. It addresses the gendering of war correspondence, the rise of the journalist as moral authority, and questions the extent to which respondent reflections can be defensibly analytically determined.

Key words: war reporting, political phenomenology, Bourdieu, culture of journalism, discourse analysis

The Political Phenomenology of War Reporting

Introduction

While the idea of a culture of journalism is contested, this article begins from a premissive definition of culture as entailing a shared set of ideas, practices and artefacts in specific contexts of media production (Hanitzsch, 2007: 369). The politics of journalistic culture may then be located either in the cognitive (attributing meaning to news), evaluative (occupational ideologies or worldviews) or performative (professional practice) dimensions of journalism. Cultural analyses have significantly augmented traditional studies of industry structures, editorial policy, ethics, narrative forms and so on, often by focussing on the experience of reporters (Tumber and Webster, 2004). However, the phenomenological approach to the study of journalism presents the opportunity to explore another distinctly political aspect of journalism: namely, the structured determination and structuring effects media professional's experience of the field. This article presents the results of a discourse analysis of interviews with fourteen respondents (see appendix for details) active in the field of war correspondence¹. It assesses the ways in which the contingent form of this experience as well as the manner in which it is reflected upon may stabilize quasi-arbitrary symbolic forms and ultimately help to reproduce hierarchies and gatekeeping mechanisms in war reporting more broadly. It begins with a brief overview of Bourdieu's phenomenology as it applies to fields of media production, before setting out the findings of the study. It argues that there are at least two systematically misrecognized symbolic economies in this journalistic subfield (esotericization and ambivalence), addresses specific findings relating to gender, generation and moral authority, and concludes with an assessment of the misrecognized politicality of journalistic practice and the status of respondent reflexivity.

Theoretical Context

The political phenomenological approach which this research followed is derived chiefly from the neo-Marxist phenomenology of Pierre Bourdieu. Like Merleau-Ponty, Schütz and arguably Husserl before them, Bourdieu's habitus/field model can be characterized as an attempt to reconcile phenomenology and structuralism, a move which has its roots in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and whose resolution has been posited in media studies through various negotiations of materialism and idealism from Silverstone's 'double articulation' (1994) to calls for a rematerialization of critical discourse analysis in the wake of the 'linguistic turn' (Jones and Collins, 2006). Central to Bourdieusian phenomenology is the characterization of rule-following neither as willed nor as a simple stimulus/response binary, but as practical, bodily knowledge. Bourdieu's *sens pratique* is traceable to Merleau-Ponty's corporeal memory, which encapsulates the process by which social, cultural and political structures are instituted in practice without the necessary mediation of consciousness. Hierarchical reproduction in social, cultural and professional fields proceeds by way of situated practices which are simultaneously structured and structuring. This is not to suggest that all practice in, say, journalism is linearly hard-wired to produce specific political effects. Rather, practices are structured according to schemes of anticipation, which are best described as generative rather than constraining. *Habitus* describes the set of dispositions, both durable and adaptable, manifesting a particular case of possible dispositions emerging from generative power structures, and enacted in behaviour which is experienced by the individual as spontaneous or instinctive, but which is generally oriented towards the conservative reproduction

of existing hierarchies and exclusions (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). Habitus is not static, and over time will structure and be structured by practices which are aligned to varying degrees to the symbolic economies of the field in which it subsists. A 'perfect fit' indicates a set of perceptual practices ideally oriented towards the quasi-arbitrary 'rules' of a field: it means that we experience the motivation of our behaviour as being not an imperative to act correctly or appropriately, but simply that it seems the natural or instinctive thing to do. Unpacking the determinants of corporeal naturalness is a tradition that extends back to Husserl, Goffman, and Berger and Luckman, though it is Merleau-Ponty who most succinctly describes how the sense of inhabiting a body and experiencing one's physical presence in the world is contingent on the inscription and internalization of rules and power relations which are anything but natural.²

This is adjacent to the Foucauldian model of discursive production, in which practices (including subjectification) are regulated according to corporeally-inscribed immanent power structures. The methodological tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)³, drawing in particular on Austin (1962) and Foucault (1981), seeks to identify the determinants of naturalization in discursive terms: that is, the forces which delimit the sayable and, since language is given to precede subjectification, identity. While CDA has been criticized for a failure to take into account temporal and exogenous factors and effects (Jones and Collins, 2006; Richardson, 2008), it can defensibly be rematerialized if refracted through a Bourdieusian lens. This approach sees discourses not as self-contained symbolic worlds detached from political or material context, but as reasonable expressions – albeit indirect and distorted – of generative structures associated with objective context, which can thus be at least partly understood. There are several variants of CDA, though this article is based on a particular methodology which trains its eye on how speech patterns are invested with the same politically-structured sense of normalcy or instinct, by looking not only at what respondents explicitly judge to be common sense in a given context, but that which is almost too obvious to articulate: the structured, structuring forces of habitus which are not generally present to the consciousness of an actor. I return below to the problems this raises, in terms of being methodologically committed to locating the unthinkable, and describing the systematic misrecognition of symbolic economies which is said to be an inevitable feature of professional (and other) fields. For now, what is significant are the twin misrecognitions that underpin the operation of habitus in general: those of historicity and politicality. As a structural memory, habitus is a product of history, but it is experienced as a-temporal, forgotten as history (Bourdieu, 1990: 56). Likewise, while habitus is inevitably the product of struggle and competition between social groups and relative positions of power, it is experienced as apolitical. Political phenomenological analysis thus aims to establish the preconditions of this decontestation and the steps by which it proceeds. It does not seek to uncover conspiracy, although the Bourdieusian approach does lend itself to the assumption that individuals are usually complicit in their own dominatedness. Instead, it starts from the proposition that the prevalence of naturalized or nonconscious configurations of symbolic capital has the effect of reproducing hierarchies of power in professional fields, arbitrarily preserving the predominance of elites within the field and cementing gatekeeping mechanisms so as to preclude broader access to it. Thus, regardless of the actual content of journalistic production, the structures underpinning journalistic practice have broader implications which can be argued against in a normative sense in terms of fairness. Nancy Fraser (Fraser and Honneth, 2003; see also Fowler, 2009) has revived and reworked Hegel's work on the centrality of recognition to citizenship: while recognition of one's work is one of Hegel's three aspects, Fraser adds the recognition of one's professional autonomy. In this light, restrictions on entry to and advancement in the journalistic field can properly be characterised as politically disempowering, while constraints on quotidian practice such as embedding and pooling not only frustrate journalists' work but significantly undermine journalistic professionalism.

Journalism can defensibly be characterized as a field of cultural production in Bourdieusian terms.⁴ This means that it comprises relative objective positions or power, which come to be associated with specific configurations of symbolic capital. Field positions differ according to the extent to which they are concomitant with economic success, prestige, influence, popularity, authority and so on. Journalism as a whole is located within the metafield of cultural production at the less culturally valued (relative to, say, fine art or literature) end of the spectrum where popular sanction and economic success are the dominant criteria of success. Within journalism, there are likewise subfields which differ according to the relative dominance of economic, social and cultural capital attached to each. There is not space here to explore the range of ‘principles of vision and division’ (Bourdieu, 2005: 36) enacted by respondents, but the following quotations give an indication of the symbolism used in making such distinctions, deploying metaphors of substance, categorical assertions of newsworthiness, and personal derision:

You know, some of ‘em are more used to human interest stories and that shit, you know, ‘cause that’s what they’re used to, it’s all nice stuff about Private Johnny and his kids back home in Nebraska. [Respondent 10] *Codes applied: hard/soft news, worldliness/parochialism, dismissiveness, group personification.*

That’s not a press issue, that’s not the kind of thing that I think about, it’s analysis, it’s soundbites on television. What’s my concerns is, what news editors’ concerns are, reporters’ concerns are news reporting, access to news, not whether someone calls this a quagmire on the editorial page. That is true, that is carried in newspapers and in all 24 hour cable channels, that is not news, that is thumb sucking. [Respondent 3] *Codes: news/not news, television/press, simplification/rigour, identification with authority, genre differentiation, professionalism.*

But TV, fucking fluff monkeys. On TV all they want to do is put on familiar faces, instead of good journos. It’s all about face time to them, so they put these fucking fluff monkeys out there. See with TV the standards are lower, and that’s producers too, not just the journos. There’s not as many of ‘em, and they don’t know anything. It’s like you’ll get a guy and it’s like the most exciting thing he’d ever done was the floods in Chicago or something. [Respondent 10] *Codes: television/press, substance/lack, dismissiveness, [reflexive] offensiveness, worldliness/parochialism.*

Bottom line was that a lot of the press you know thought this was wonderful, because they were given backpacks and they were you know given chocolate chip trousers and jackets and all the fucking paraphernalia of military status ... a lot of journalists love it, they love it, they get sucked in by the military, which is of course the idea. [Respondent 5] *Codes: group personalization, generalization, autonomy/dependence, gullibility/experience, conspiracy.*

This overarching emphasis on difference is encapsulated in Bourdieu’s concept of distinction. In our present context, it means that journalists do not exist as such; what exists are journalists who differ by age, class, gender, and their ‘appropriation’ or ‘occupation’ of various forms of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1998a: 23). The historical and literary romanticization of war correspondence means that it is more or less guaranteed a high degree of culturally-perceived cultural capital, though its social capital (influence over peers and public) would intuitively sit a few rungs lower than that of broadsheet columnists or political correspondents. Economic capital is more ambiguous, and I address below the idea that a disinterest in financial gain can itself be identified as a sort of symbolic capital.

Field relations are arbitrary, in two ways. First, no individual naturally possesses the specific configurations of capital associated with various roles in a professional field. Rather, individuals inhabit a position, and have the potential over time come to appear to others as the natural occupant of it. This proceeds by way of a process identified by Weber in the chapter on religion in *Economy and Society* (Weber, 1968 [1922]). Individuals enter a field being variably oriented to its demands – some need to adapt more than others, depending on their personal trajectories of education, class, geography and so on – the performance of which are structured, ritualized and progressively embodied: that is, experienced as personal character rather than something requiring conscious calculation or effortful enactment. Peers and audiences alike come to perceive this position-taker not as an effective performer of required values, but the natural repository of these values. For Weber, the clergy are seen not as individuals adept at enacting religious principles, but rather as holy themselves. Good journalists are perceived not as those who have acquired the requisite skills to excel in the field, but those who have a ‘nose’ or ‘gut instinct’ for news (Schultz, 2007). This is not to suggest that anyone can inhabit any field position and with time come to be seen as the embodiment of its symbolic capitals; nor are societal generative structures so broad and deep as to determine specific the professional progress of specific individuals from birth. Instead, we should see (successful) professionals as particular instances of the possible: they are not pre-ordained, but nor is their specific emergence random.

The other quasi-arbitrary aspect of the operation of a professional field are its axes of relatively dominant capital and the positions associated with them. This is perhaps the more controversial claim of political phenomenology: that the criteria for what counts as professionally or culturally valuable have no essential or universal content. These criteria are secondary to the broader teleological function which they serve: the reproduction of hierarchies of power. Individuals and groups in a field compete not only to occupy positions of reputation or popularity, but also to define what counts as signifiers of such. It is in this sense that those in positions of power in a field are referred to as cultural ‘consecrators’: that is, those with the ability to define what is systematically recognized as symbolically valuable – and thus, continued occupation of that position. The upshot of this is that if one of the qualities thought to characterise ‘good journalism’ is a strong grasp of ethics, we should view ethics not as a pre-given good but primarily as strategic; a form of symbolic capital whose chief function is to give form to struggles over positions of power. As Bourdieu puts it: ‘As a sociologist, I know that morality only works if it is supported by structures and a mechanism that give people an interest in morality.’ (Bourdieu, 1998a: 50)

While other approaches to analyzing journalists’ behaviour focus on the constitution of journalistic culture (Hanitzsch, 2007; Kögler, 1997: 145; Carey, 1999: 53), the institutional context (Benson, 2006) and the internalization of occupational values (Tumber, 2004; 2006), the political phenomenological perspective offers unique insight into the mechanisms underlying the individual’s role in field reproduction. Following the tenet that practice is both structured and structuring, it is possible to identify instances in which observed behaviour is both determined and determining, but which may or may not be consciously mediated in the process of self-identification. This is not the same as saying that the political sociologist knows the journalist’s mind better than she does herself. Instead, it means that even (or especially) in instances of what Bachelard (see Vandenberghe, 1999) termed ‘night-time’ philosophizing – that is, overt reflection on one’s professional identity – there may be nonconscious practices structured according to the demands of the field and with political effects in it. Matheson (2003) thus notes that it is precisely when journalists reflect on their profession that they – not cynically, but discursively – close down significant points of contestation and thus reproduce and rationalise field structures which are neither natural nor naturally defensible. Perhaps the clearest examples of this are where specific discussions naturalize and legitimize broader commitments. For example, a discussion about

particular ethical dilemmas or priorities in war reporting precludes a debate over whether war correspondence is, can or should be an ethical pursuit. Likewise, by discussing how best to guarantee objectivity or accuracy, correspondents are embedding an epistemology of journalism which is specifically instrumentalist, as though it is indeed possible – and naturally culturally valuable – to ‘collect facts’ and describe the world. I do not suggest that journalists should not strive to be objective: rather, the point is that embedding the notion that journalism is a natural repository for objectivity has broader political effects in terms of the symbolic capital it wields both in the field of cultural production and with relation to the public it serves. Similarly, if a journalist consciously reflects upon what constitutes authority or professionalism in the field, the putative effect is the reproduction of the idea that journalism is essentially compatible with authority and professionalism more broadly – when journalists are routinely polled as being less trustworthy than lawyers or politicians (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2008), and where the status of journalism as a profession has been hotly contested for well over a century (Deuze, 2005). To put it in phenomenological terms, there are aspects of the practice of reflection which are structured according to the pre-existing power relations of the journalistic field and which have structuring effects in that field, without themselves emerging to consciousness.

Discourse Analysis Findings

The interviews were successively coded for *in vivo* references (referents, explicitly ascribed values), second-order memes (metaphors, rhetorical devices, speech style et al.), classification systems, authorization and linguistic decontestations. This was initially aimed at determining the delimitation of the sayable in professional journalism, as well as making explicit that which is experienced as unremarkable. Against ‘linguistic turn’ CDA which treats discourses as self-contained worlds of meaning, the methodology followed here sought to take account of the context of production, documenting where possible the trajectories and current seniority of respondents and the potential impact of discourse beyond language – that is, how naturalized ‘truths’ or common sense might influence power relations within and outside the journalistic field (Richardson, 2008: 158). The data was fairly unequivocal in establishing what may be termed the overt symbolic economies of war correspondence: that is, those traits signifying authority which are explicitly invoked by individuals and implicitly consented to. These criteria matched those described in previous accounts (see for example Deuze, 2005: 446-447) of journalistic values: objectivity, autonomy, public service, neutrality, timeliness and impact, in particular – though it was evident that the first and last are often in conflict. Also noted *in vivo* were motivation and self-reliance, distinct from autonomy as such in that these referred to an individual’s ability to use one’s initiative, rather than simply remaining independent of undue external influence.

Of more significance was evidence of misrecognized symbolic economies operating in the field of war reporting. While the first set represent the structured aspect of the field, these characterise the *structuring* aspect of professional behavioural norms, both in the sense that they tend to entrench existing power relations in the field, and that they serve systematically to disguise the element of struggle which inevitably characterises any economy. In short, the stakes of the ‘game’, the rules by which it is played and the fact that it is competitive at all are all misrepresented to the professional consciousness as settled, or pre-given.

The first of these is an economy of mystification or esotericization. In accordance with the sociology of professions (Johnson, 1972), it was found that ascriptions of journalistic success were expressed in terms which defied questioning or disaggregation. Authority figures were said to have a ‘feel’ for

journalism, a verbal invocation of the Bourdieusian habitus naturally aligned to the contingencies of the game in which it finds itself.

He's just a better journalist; he always had a feel [gestures] for the job which Fialka doesn't. [Respondent 1] *'Just', 'feel' and the hand-gesture coded as signifying mystification.*

...they get a really good sense of what a reporter is. [Respondent 2] *'Sense' and the emphasis on 'is' coded as signifying mystification.*

Authority which is in reality a structural *position* inhabited by a war reporter is interpreted as natural talent, with the implication that the process involved in the embodiment of those qualities – internalization, identification, ritualization, rationalization and projection – is not subject to scrutiny. The upshot is that the relative positions taken up by individuals or generic roles within journalism are perceived to be the natural order of things, and debate over what those qualities are, how they are recognized and in particular the competition which underpins their possession (or inhabitation) is decontested.

The analysis found that there are various strategies for establishing the naturalness of authority, strategies which are presumed to operate below the level of conscious reflection. Beyond explicit invocations of the 'feel', there were many instances where participants literally shut down the possibility of contestation by trailing off in mid-sentence. The apparent suggestion in these cases is that a journalist's authority, where present, is self-evident – literally too obvious to be able to explain. The inability to articulate this verbally comes with the implication that one just knows: it cannot be described let alone explained or deconstructed, and if you have to ask you'll certainly never understand. For several participants these utterances were accompanied by gesticulations (seemingly) indicating frustration at attempting to give form to the self-evident. Speech indicating embodiment of authority also followed clear, though not all-pervasive, patterns. Rather than asserting professional integrity in rhetorical or forceful terms, for instance, actors were much more likely to use humour, irreverence, off-handedness, expletives and what might be termed ironic or reflexive offensiveness. Each of these devices can be seen as a nonconscious strategy, in the sense of being structured by the contingencies of the field and with structuring effects. That is, such styles of speech all have a defusing function; they are all in distinct ways decontesting:

...journalists who have been wounded or killed or otherwise prevented from doing their job. [Respondent 8] *Coded as ironic understatement.*

They pointed their guns at us and shouted, "Who are you? You don't have credentials". And we were like, "This is Pristina, we don't need credentials". But it was all quite fun though. [Respondent 13] *Coded as irreverence, ironic dismissal of risk.*

...you could get shot at and strafed if you played your cards right [Respondent 5] *Coded as irreverence, ironic dismissal of risk.*

Drew would be great if you want to talk to the bang bang guys [Respondent 10] *Coded as dismissal of journalistic status.*

I'd done a little bit on the fall of communism... [Respondent 8] *Coded as understatement, irony unclear.*

Two interesting corollaries of this finding were, first, that expletives were almost never used to express outrage at the horrors or injustices of conflict situations; they instead function to characterise highly valued and competed-over configurations of symbolic capital as, literally, laughably present or absent. Second, and perhaps more significantly, this language establishing contingent truths as unequivocal common sense in fact closely echoes the techniques which journalists – especially tabloid reporters and columnists – use to create a sense of complicity and intimacy with their audience. It is well established that informal, playful or reflexively offensive writing can be effective in the construction of a trustworthy, authoritative journalistic voice (Conboy, 2006: 14-45). It remains open whether the use of such language in interviews reflects a conscious deployment of journalistic techniques in order to most effectively construe opinion as unarguable fact, or whether it instead represents the non-reflexive internalization of such professional practices.

The second systematically misrecognized symbolic economy evident among the war reporters interviewed in this study is one of ambivalence towards or lack of interest in power. Bourdieu wrote about a prevailing ‘interest in disinterest’ within the scientific field, in which authority is associated precisely with a disavowal of economic gain, those which authority, once appropriated or occupied, may well lead to exactly such gain further down the line (Bourdieu, 1998b). There was limited evidence of this in the case study, insofar as no participants spoke of an interest in financial success, and several spoke in disparaging terms about colleagues who had ‘sold out’ their journalistic principles in order to turn a profit. More systematically evident, however, was an ambivalence towards power of the type wielded by the military and political professionals with whom they interact on a regular basis, and a routine playing down of the danger and drama of their work. The latter could be interpreted fairly simply as an effective indicator of ‘perfect fit’ with or embodiment of the demands of the field of war correspondence. The former appears to be associated more with the performance of one of several journalistic subjectivities perceived in the field – and potentially by the media consuming public at large – as signifiers of competence or natural authority.

It is advisable to be sceptical about the methodological use of ideal types in studies of self-identification and peer appraisal. However, it should be clear that this research begins from the premise that complete embodiment of ideal types is impossible in phenomenological terms but observable in limited, contingent contexts. Their emergence in discourse analysis thus represents not the discovery of journalistic identity as such (which is phenomenologically untenable), but rather exposes the dominant categories by which individuals enact their own and assess others’ professional identities. The three identified were *underdog*, *cynic* and *moral authority*⁵ – again, with the caveat that these do not operate as unproblematic roles which actors can simply inhabit. While there is not space to delineate the determinants and structuring effects of each in detail, what is clear is that all three use a distinction of self from elite power to establish credibility, autonomy – and thus authority. Starting from the premise that there is likely to be an interest in such disinterest in power, it is thus important to establish how this quality is encoded and decoded, as well as how the presumed struggle to appropriate this form of symbolic capital is misrecognized as noncompetitive.

Moral Authority

In the interviews it was largely fellow war reporters, other media professionals and elite military personnel who were given to have the power to confer authority on a journalist. I would argue that

this elite determination has dominated the principles of differentiation in the field historically (Gjelten, 1998), but it has always co-existed alongside an alternate means for establishing authority: public popularity (Champagne, 2005: 58). This alternate legitimating framework has grown increasingly important over the last two decades, anecdotally evidenced by the fact that while in 1982 Max Hastings was broadly criticized for casting himself at the centre of the narrative of the military campaign in the Falkland Islands, by the turn of the century the prominence of 'star' war correspondents, such as John Simpson or Rageh Omar, is unremarkable. The relative popularity of a correspondent may be measured by quality and quantity of feedback from consumers of their media output, or by the extent to which they become a talking point, especially in conversation outside the context of war reporting. For present purposes, however, more significant are the *preconditions* of celebrity, which is to say the forms of performed or embodied symbols publicly recognizable as either desirable or authoritative, and more broadly the symbolic economy in which this form of symbolic capital is valid currency. I would suggest that this celebrity capital is a 'speaking directly to the people' value, an (apparently) immediate relation of public statement and private consumption which bypasses traditional mediating institutions. It is also a performed subjectivity which is recognisably noble; the journalist as moral authority is not a natural subject but one constituted through repeated practice – a repetition which endures because there is a market for it, which is to say that the projected subjectivity is one that the public recognizes as positive. In the same way that Bourdieu documented the phenomenon of academics achieving success by means other than peer review (Bourdieu, 1998a), journalistic public popularity is readily conflated with a notion of *democratization*, in that the correspondent is interpreted as a figure whose speech expresses public principles in a way that is autonomous of elite and institutional influence. Such a misrecognition ultimately derives from the conflation of cultural and political criteria for ascribing value, pointing to a diminished autonomy of the internal logics of cultural and political spaces. It does not lead to the conclusion that moral authority is in some way conspiratorial. Rather, professional success is recognized according to a complex economy of symbolic capital which is not wholly constructed according to the overt principles of journalism. Specifically, a journalist's disinterest in or autonomy from 'ordinary' politics can be argued (also) to serve a strategic purpose.

Generation

Bourdieu did not focus extensively on journalism for most of his career, but did begin to comment on the (mainly French) journalistic field in the last ten years of his life. In a lecture delivered in 2001 (see Bourdieu, 2005), he discusses how a new entrant to the field internalises the rules of the journalistic game and mimics the regulating norms of the field in professional practice. The standard narrative is that a young journalist enters the field full of idealism and a conviction that she will not be compromised by economic factors or other constraining structures (such as deference and tradition). Over time, Bourdieu argues, these young, strongly moral journalists will come gradually to abandon the idea of journalism as an ethical practice. This process of field immersion has been accelerated by the multiplication of university-level journalism courses. This does not proceed largely through conscious compromise – a weighing up of principle and job security, for instance – but through the unthinking assimilation of the established language of journalism, socialization increasingly exclusively with other journalists and, most significantly, taking on the structure of journalism as an industry as increasingly pervasively generative of practice – and unremarkable.

However, the discourse analysis suggests the reality is in fact more complex. First, it is clear from the preceding section that there *is* a market for moral authority, that is, that a journalist can attain self-identity through professional and public recognition by engaging in specifically constructed ‘moral’ professional practice. This is a symbolic economy not limited to the young (or, indeed, to either of the nationalities represented); it co-exists with the adjacent field of just-the-facts reporting, and undoubtedly competes with it for the dominance of principles of legitimacy of journalism more broadly, but not in such a way that necessitates the absolute ascendancy of one sub-field or the other. Second, there are young (under 40) war correspondents in the sample who explicitly eschew the moral aspect of their profession, either directly raising the possibility that what they do is (on occasion) morally harmful, or dismissing any such lofty notions and self-effacingly speaking of how lucky they are, how much ‘fun’ the job is, and so on. What is emphasized in these cases is a lack of presumption to speak authoritatively about that on which they report, or on journalism’s role in society, for example:

I mean, war is the best spectator sport in the world. It’s fun, I love it, it’s just such a rush ... it’s kind of like watching sport, but much more intense. So I kind of tend to say if people ask me why I’m a war correspondent, it’s like, well if I didn’t I’d have to have a fucking job. I mean, this isn’t work, it’s fun. I’m getting paid to do all this stuff which is totally amazing and I love it, we all do. [Respondent 10]

The question of structural ageing is an interesting one, insofar as it offers a vantage point on how the internalization of the imperatives of a field actually proceeds, and with what level of self-reflexivity. At what point does one’s disposition become maximally aligned with the ‘rules’ of a field (Bourdieu, 1993)? The data here cannot be conclusive, as only a longitudinal study would provide the necessary perspective and scope. However, it is clear that structural age plays a role, no doubt alongside myriad other factors including socioeconomic background (Marchetti, 2005). Whether or not the differences are manifest at the generational level, however, we can still approach the practices and self-reflections of the younger respondents as strategies aimed, at either a reflexive or pre-reflexive level, at transforming the field of war reporting. As regards the moral authority pole, since it could reasonably be claimed that war reporting is *necessarily* an ethical practice (insofar as it involves subjective selection with potential political implications), the question then becomes what is the impact of prioritizing or making explicit this aspect of professional practice. It is feasible that such a ‘strategy’ represents an attempt at ‘domain expansion’ (Best, 1999), that is, an attempt to extend the differentiating principle of moral heft not only to journalism but to the field of cultural production as a whole, against the alternative principles of differentiation which characterise the fields of academia and politics (Bourdieu, 1993). I would suggest that this is a viable construction of such professional practice, but that the more substantive point resides in the social preconditions against which such competition proceeds, namely the relative currencies of fact or instrumental worth on the one hand and affect on the other. And if a transformation of the field were proven to have taken place, the imperative is to look beyond the transformation itself to what is preserved by a possible ‘conservative revolution’ (Bourdieu, 1991: 55-69). This may amount to nothing more than a ‘plus ça change’ perspective, though there is the potential that even a radical transformation of the field reproduces or reinforces at least some of its generative structures, whether they be economic, political, or social.

Within the field of war reporting itself, self-effacement on the part of younger correspondents is potentially more interesting still. In the sample there is a clear division of generations of the journalists who emphasise the value of ‘just-the-facts’ (‘pur et dur’) reporting (Champagne, 2005: 52) with one cohort aged 28-40 and another aged 55-65. What both share is a tendency to avoid casting judgement on the relative moral standing of different actors and sides in a given conflict

(competence, however, is a common target for all, whether discussing military or media personnel); what distinguishes them is interest. That is, while it was seen above that disinterest in drama and elite power has currency as symbolic capital in the field of war correspondence as a whole, the younger reporters were unabashedly enthusiastic about their work and frequently impressed by those whom they interviewed. Without casting self-descriptions as disingenuous, one can construct the strategies which may reasonably be inferred to be operative behind their articulation. It would be relatively straightforward to argue that youthful vigour is an effective means of marking out one's distinction, which certainly is compatible with the theme of adventurousness set out above. It also makes sense that, while enthusiasm and energy are doubtless valuable to the 'doing' of war correspondence, those who dominate the field – almost exclusively, in their own descriptions, older correspondents – are in a position to impose other principles of differentiation by which success is gauged. If both groups share a reluctance to articulate value judgements, it is clear that this serves different functions for each. For the younger group, self-effacement can be seen as a valuable symbolic commodity in itself (not thinking of oneself as higher than one's interlocutors), and it also serves to excuse (and close down discussion of) lack of experience or knowledge. For senior correspondents, however, absences of explicit judgement about situations on the ground are not only absences – that is, they are positively structured, by cynicism, irony and other discursive performances. Cynicism and irony are never simple negations, but rather implicit alternate constructions; they are invariably marked by a distinct knowingness which, crucially, do not engender further explication. This simultaneous refraining from forming a value-judgement, the suggestion of requisite knowledge to make such a judgement, and the instantaneous preclusion of further articulation, has the effect of establishing a legitimacy which can only remain implicit – and thus, mystified.

Gender

The number of women working in war reporting has increased significantly over the last twenty years (Tumber, 2006: 444), and in the interviews there were no explicit suggestions that women should not work as war correspondents (c.f. de Bruin, 2000). However, there were sharp distinctions between descriptions by male correspondents about male and female colleagues; further, the three female correspondents interviewed all saw the field as heavily, and problematically, gendered.

There are some principles of personal valorization which were applied uniformly – intelligence, substance, autonomy and the ability to communicate and good relations with contacts were used regardless of gender. However, two descriptors were only used about male correspondents. In terms of valorization, only males were described as having a natural talent or feel for war correspondence. With regard to derision, it is interesting that alcoholism remains a key form of negative symbolic capital (seven respondents mentioned it in this sense), and that it was only applied to male correspondents. There were no forms of positive symbolic capital used exclusively to describe female correspondents, but two negative forms were readily apparent. The first is physical attractiveness:

There's another one, really ugly girl, working in New York, really thin face with sort of lank hair, and she was in Africa before. And she became a moral authority. [Respondent 5]

The second is sexually inappropriate behaviour. One war correspondent, for instance, expressed a negative opinion about the professional ability of a prominent female colleague and, when asked

the reasons for his judgement, recounted a situation in which she had gained access to senior military sources by gambling with them and ‘...dancing around in her knickers’. [Respondent 14]

There is an interesting parallel to this last example, insofar as it can be reconstructed strategically as resentment of intimacy with sources or figures of authority. Two of the female correspondents believed that the men were *too* likely to become close to powerful sources, that they were unable to retain a professional distance when embedded with military personnel. This was ascribed to their being overly impressed by traditionally masculine manifestations of power: fire-power, machinery, or the adventurousness of special operations:

Anyway he was covering Kosovo and I think he was a journalist who had been tricked into becoming too close to the armed forces, and I think it happens a lot with especially male journalists, who like to see themselves as one of the boys. [Respondent 4]

Ultimately, however, there was no evidence that there is a single masculine or ungendered disposition to which any actor in the field would come increasingly to embody in professional practice. What we can say is that of the multitude of differential field positions which characterise war reporting, some are associated with symbolic capital which is either recognized by field actors or have been interpreted by scholars as gendered in other fields⁶, and particular individuals may inhabit such positions (or be seen to do so) under certain temporally specific and unstable conditions. There is no sign of systematic decontestation (or in Laclau’s (2000) terms, limited universalization) of gendered symbolic forms in war reporting.

Self-Identity, Reflexivity and Further Implications

This article has examined how the occupation of a field position, characterized by specific configurations of symbolic capital, is perceived according to structured practices of recognition in the field as the natural embodiment of the qualities of a particular brand of ‘good journalist’. This relies on the presence of dominant signifiers of journalistic authority, and a culture of practices – including but not limited to assessment of peers – whose enactment decontests these quasi-arbitrary signifiers, legitimates the individuals and institutions most closely (i.e. instinctively, nonconsciously) oriented towards the game, and effects the misapprehension that there is no underlying symbolic economy in play. However, it is also important to attempt to establish the status of correspondent’s self-consciousness or sense of self-identity. There is not space here to explore the broader philosophical implications behind the claim that we are always-already oriented toward experiencing consciousness as pre-given. In a limited professional context, it is possible to conjecture what structures a journalist’s sense of self as nature, and what strategic field effects this might have. If we follow Bourdieu’s (and also Merleau-Ponty’s) assertion that the experience of selfhood as nature – extending as far as instinct, spontaneity, the natural gaze and the sense of corporeality – is not only socially contingent but determined by coercive political relations, then the logic quickly moves to the more conspiratorial end of the political phenomenological spectrum. However, instead of claiming that those aspects of selfhood which have become arenas of nonconscious practice are inevitably geared towards complicity in the reproduction of an actor’s domination or dominatedness, we can instead explore specific commitments which may serve to concretise power relations in the professional field.

The clearest example of this emerging from the discourse analysis confirms Glasser’s (1996) thesis that journalists share an epistemological orientation to the world. This is an assumed one-to-one

correspondence between events in the world and their description or meaning in a social or professional context: that is, underpinning a resilient belief in the possibility (if not dominance) of objectivity is the idea that facts are discovered and gathered (and certainly filtered), rather than constructed. This sits at odds with the theoretical premise of this research, which argues not that the social or professional rendering of events is wholly determined according to a disconnected symbolic economy, but rather that that symbolic rendition is a particular case of the possible. It also has its advantages, such as a constructive scepticism towards mediation of information through PR techniques. But this epistemological relation when enacted in professional practice is inextricable from the 'sense' or 'feel' of what constitutes good journalistic practice – its belief in objectivity is not innocent, but rather complicit in the mystification of what this sense is and the struggle for symbolic capital associated with it. The same may be said of the gaze of the journalist, which sees the world as information to be gathered, filtered and disseminated. This is experienced by the journalist as unproblematic or as too obvious to be consciously conceivable, but it is again tied to the politically structured and structuring sense of what counts as news. Finally, the correspondent's experience of motivation – fact-gathering – as instinctive, could potentially mask a Foucauldian will to knowledge (or incitement to discourse) or, in Austin's terms, the forced iteration of norms by generative structures which are the precondition of this motivation.

Both Foucault and Bourdieu would agree that the production of a naturalized will to collect, categorise, rationalise and express knowledge – determined and determining as it will inevitably be – is a far more efficient means of instigating disciplinary regimes and entrenching structural inequalities and barriers to positions of symbolic accumulation than mere censorship. Instead of a system of restrictions or prohibitions on what a journalist is able to say and do, the naturalized alignment with the extant epistemology of news positively generates a journalistic disposition, a structured subjectification which enacts norms about what is news and what constitutes normal journalistic behaviour and common sense – which at the broader level of the field of cultural production legitimates the present, quasi-arbitrary distinction between official and unofficial knowledge. This embodied regulation of knowledge is not the product of a state or corporate conspiracy; it is instead a rationalization which simultaneously lends solidity to and obscures to the conscious experience of field actors the political structure or arena of struggle in which journalists subsist. I have argued elsewhere (Markham, 2007; see also Eckstein, 1988) that Bourdieu overstates the ubiquity of structural reproduction, a hardwired tendency in professional fields towards the entrenchment of existing power relations. But the evidence presented here suggests that competition between journalists and between journalism and other fields is misperceived as simply doing the job well, whereas in fact what is experienced as competition for authority based on overt principles is at base a struggle for power – on the evidence here, the power to influence rather than economic or political power:

But you do have some responsibilities, you do have to think a little bit about what you're doing, both to the people you're contact with and the impact it will have on their lives and on your viewers (Respondent 4).

This is not to suggest that the content of conflict journalism is irrelevant; rather, the rationalization of its production and consumption structures the professional field in a way that necessitates the mastery of a set of practices – enacting principles, epistemologies and dispositions – whose particular form does not emerge naturally out of the substance of news.

Of course, there is a simple counter-argument to what might be called the determinist thesis set out here: that reporters themselves frequently express consciousness of the game in which their peers compete to possess and project 'secondary journalistic characteristics' as quasi-natural expressions

of their professional and also personal subjectivities. When the analysis picked apart the constituent parts of the authoritative persona of the underdog or anti-elitist journalist, a similar set of traits was evident across the board: world-weariness, cynicism, offhandedness and provocative humour. Moreover, four participants actively noted the part these forms of symbolic capital played in the journalistic game, deriding the affectation of authenticity:

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

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

If we follow Matheson we could suggest that it is precisely the conscious reflection on such phenomena that prevents critical appraisal of it: that is, since reflection is structured by extant norms of introspection and peer review (not to mention by interview context), then it will tend to proceed narrowly, precluding a thorough analysis of its premises and commitments. This is partly true. Journalists are capable of significant insight into the economy of their profession – specifically how success is widely divorced from the acquisition and execution of transparent skills. Their reflections on the ‘hidden’ economies at work appear genuinely to transcend what otherwise would be interpreted as simply another example of strategically performed cynicism. And yet such modes of insightful thinking are invariably narrow, and exclude consciousness of the contingent nature of journalistic instinct and the sociocultural value of gathering facts.

This leaves unresolved the question of where a limit to the political phenomenological reconstruction of the consciousness of the war correspondent should be set. Such a limit is certainly defensible, if only on the grounds that the doing of academic research is itself open to allegations of complicity, that journalism, although characterized only as weakly autonomous, would be better served by the internal generation of rules rather than those imposed from the outside – or even the potential arrogance of the implication that sociologists are capable of greater reflexivity than other professionals. Against this, it is clear that the phenomenological approach offers two significant insights. First, journalistic debates over ethics and good practice, by focussing on specifics, do systematically entrench and obscure the contingency of the broader normative framework in which these specifics subsist. And second, positing that the nonconscious aspects of journalistic practice – instinct, common sense, epistemology and the bleeding obvious – are determined in part by broader power struggle, does help us to understand how the systematic mystification of war correspondence, which rationalises its hierarchies and boundaries, proceeds. Finally, how far this ascription of political determinism should extend is perhaps best decided on normative grounds. That is, there is a point at which structuralist analysis leads not to constructive insight but to fatalism; and, by the normative prioritization of contestation as a political goal, this is the point at which we should cease looking for unwitting complicity and let the debate between journalists proceed.

Notes

¹ To paraphrase Bourdieu, in order to understand the meaning of journalistic production it is important to take into account all those who have ties with journalism, who live for journalism and, to varying degrees, from it, and who confront each other in struggles where the imposition of not only a world view but also a

vision of the journalistic world is at stake, and who through these struggles, participate in the production of the value of the journalist and of journalism (Bourdieu, 1993: 261). Eight of the interviewees were war correspondents, of whom five were journalists active in the British media, three in the American media; five worked in print media, three in broadcast journalism. There were six male and two female correspondents, and ages ranged from twenty-eight to late sixties. In line with the Bourdieusian principles, interviews were also conducted with two newspaper editors (one of whom had been a war correspondent previously), a US government official, a think tank president and a (retired) US Army general (who at the time of the interview also advised a think tank).

² “We said earlier that it is the body which understands in the acquisition of habit. This way of putting it will appear absurd, if understanding is subsuming a sense datum under an idea, and if the body is as an object. But the phenomenon of habit is just what prompts us to revise our notion of ‘understand’ and our notion of the body. To understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance – and the body is our anchorage in a world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 167).

³ See especially Fairclough (1995), Van Dijk (1988), Wodak (2001).

⁴ ‘The field of production and circulation of symbolic goods is defined as the system of objective relations among different instances, functionally defined by their role in the division of labour of production, reproduction and diffusion of symbolic goods.’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 115).

⁵ Roughly speaking, ‘underdog’ characterized as operating in individual opposition to dominant establishment power; ‘cynic’ is characterized in opposition to normative claims in journalism and politics, and to personal morality; and ‘moral authority’ is characterized as giving voice to the powerless, exposing suffering and speaking truth to power.

⁶ See, for example, Reay (2005).

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Table 1: Respondent Profiles

No	Age	Gender	Years in journalism	Nationality	Residence	Current Position	Former Position
1	65	Male	N/A	US	Washington DC, US	Think tank senior advisor	US Army general
2	Late 50s	Male	≈30 yrs	UK	London, UK	Columnist, UK broadsheet	War correspondent, broadsheets and tabloids
3	50s	Male	N/A	US	Washington DC, US	Think tank president	Political scientist
4	38	Female	≈15 yrs	Australian	Oxford, UK	Broadcast Journalist, BBC	Broadcast journalist, Australia
5	58	Male	≈35 yrs	UK	London, UK	Broadcast journalist, Non-BBC	War correspondent, broadcast and broadsheet
6	50s	Male	≈25 yrs	US	Washington DC, US	Senior editor (quality newspaper)	International editor (quality newspaper)
7	Late 40s	Female	N/A	US	Washington DC, US	State Department press officer	Government advisor
8	40s	Female	≈20 yrs	US	London, UK	Broadcast journalist, non-BBC	War correspondent, US Television
9	50s	Male	≈20 yrs	US	Baltimore, US	Senior academic	Broadcast journalist/ editor, NPR
10	28	Male	3 yrs	US	Washington DC, US	War reporter, US news magazine	N/A
11	63	Male	≈40 yrs	UK	Washington DC, US	Journalist, US newspaper (quality)	Journalist, various US and UK broadsheets/tabloids
12	62	Male	≈40 yrs	UK	London, UK	Senior editor, UK broadsheet	War correspondent, international editor.
13	Late 30s	Male	10 yrs	UK	London, UK	War correspondent, UK broadsheets	War correspondent, tabloid
14	50s	Male	≈30 yrs	UK	Washington DC, US	Columnist, UK broadsheet	Journalist/war correspondent, UK tabloids/broadsheets