DOSSIER

JOURNALISM RESEARCH AND THE HIERARCHY OF INFLUENCES MODEL: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

STEPHEN D. REESE
University of Texas, USA

ABSTRACT My emphasis in this article is on international and global approaches to journalism research. And my challenge is to consider some integrative and global contexts for that task. I have always advocated setting up clear conceptual levels of analysis in examining media questions within the emerging communication subfield in the U.S. of media sociology. The work of my colleague Pam Shoemaker and me began with this idea to consider the various levels of influence of shaping media content (SHOEMAKER & REESE, 1996). I took this a step further in approaching similar questions of relevance to "global journalism" (REESE, 2001) and continue to be interested in those issues.

KEY-WORDS media sociology, symbolic environment, strategic ritual.

As journalism research becomes more international and globally oriented, this clarity becomes even more important. It is tempting to pose questions about journalism at the "global" level, given the increasing transnational quality of the practice. But here we need to proceed with caution. Rather than presenting some extra-large macro level of analysis, the global reconfigures spaces and reconstitutes relations already in operation. As we sort out these spaces, it is helpful to review some of the basic levels of research that have been useful for journalism and how certain models help structure our questions. I revisit some of the early discussion from Shoemaker and Reese (1996) and reflect on how our approach may provide guidance for current scholars in the area, particularly as we engage with internationally oriented questions.

The "symbolic environment"

We need to examine the forces that work to shape media content, the "messages" that constitute the symbolic environment. This is an ambitious task, given the multitude of factors that exert influence on the media. Not only that, but questions of media operation, bias, and control have moved to the center of the public arena, with an increasing number of media literate citizens developing and promoting their own views. Media questions are highly normative and politicized. Thus, these scholarly research questions are very much in the public domain, closely related to press criticism that circulates among activists, policy elites, and media professionals themselves. Reconciling these conflicting and often partisan-based charges can be difficult.

What is more, a cynical public appears increasingly skeptical of the possibility of settling questions with evidence, substituting instead a combination of ironic detachment and impressionistic theories of personal media experience. But systematic media research on even the most controversial subjects is possible. That is why we must bring conceptual and theoretical organization to this area of research, to build understandings and research into a more comprehensive pattern. The same research tools used so extensively to examine media effects can be turned on those media and their links with the culture, other organizations and institutions. These questions must be examined with a clear and accepted conceptual framework--and that the field of communication should devote the same sustained research to the creation, control and shape of the mediated environment as it has to the effects on audiences of that environment.

Clarifying models for journalism production

We do this by trying to be clear about our definitions, assumptions, and perspectives, developing a model for locating our questions, and suggesting how that model can be used to organize research and suggest other hypotheses and fruitful areas for additional study. The "hierarchy of influences" model we developed takes into account the multiple forces that impinge on media simultaneously and suggests how influence at one level may interact with that at another (SHOEMAKER & REESE, 1996). The personal bias of an individual

journalist, for example, may be relevant to reporting, but journalists of a particular leaning often self-select into organizations because of their pre-existing policies, history, and organizational culture. The news organization and its employees, in turn, must function within the ideological boundaries set by the larger society.

Such models cannot capture all of the complex interrelationships involved in the media. Models, by definition, are meant to simplify, highlight, suggest, and organize. But in doing so, they can exert a powerful guiding effect in determining how questions are posed and defining the relationships singled out for investigation. In retrospect, this particular model has had a greater impact on the field than we could have imagined when we first started. Certainly a survey of the current field shows that research has grown, classes have been organized, and an area of study has been legitimated. I will try to suggest some reasons why I think this has been so. In part this can be attributed to providing a compelling way to think about the subject matter, and more firmly integrating it into the existing communication field.

I use the term "media sociology" to refer to much of the journalism research of interest to me, because it comes closest to describing what I am interested in. The term, however, does come with some ambiguities and disadvantages. Certainly, many of the newsroom and other media ethnographies are typically referred to as media sociology, particularly given their use of traditional sociological fieldwork methods. But within the "influences on content" perspective we would also want to include the more psychological studies of individual media workers, and how their personal traits affect their decisions. Outside of the U.S. fieldwork tradition, media sociology has been used in other international contexts--particularly Europe and Latin America--to refer to the entire context of media production and performance, the entire social structural context. I use media sociology then to refer to this larger body of interests--how the mediated symbolic environment gets constructed--by individuals--within a social, occupational, institutional, and cultural context--with special application to the practice of journalism.

When discussing content, particularly news content, there is a tendency to ask how "objectively" it reflects reality. The "mirror" hypothesis--the expectation that media reflect social reality with little distortion is no longer discussed seriously--although this lack of distortion may be vigorously defended in self-serving attempts by professionals to argue the accuracy of their work, in holding up a

"mirror to society." In a more subtle version of the mirror idea, media are rendered neutral or "objective", by reflecting the self-regulating and balancing compromises between those who sell information to the media and those who buy it. This notion--the repudiation of which has launched countless media critiques--now seems rather quaint and self-evidently untrue. Certainly, the problematic issue of content is a basic scholarly premise, not to mention an article of faith of the many media watchdog groups that monitor press performance. They find fault with those media for not adequately representing the "reality" they have in mind.

The notion of bias itself used by many press watchdog groups suggests that media deviate in some measurable way from a desirable standard, which can be independently known. Of course, the very idea of a "reality" out there with which to compare media is problematic. The postmodernists have been ridiculed by lay critics for rejecting the more traditional concept of a single unified universal external reality, or the idea that there can be no independent standard for distinguishing among rival interpretations. But we all apprehend reality within the framework provided by our senses; even the concept of "empirical" reality refers to those things that can be measured using those senses. The simple fact is that we cannot lift ourselves out of our human context and apprehend reality apart from it. We need not get too hung up on such philosophical problems.

On a practical level we will often find it useful to compare "media reality" with "social reality"--that is, that view of the world that is socially derived, what society knows about itself. Our assessment of this social reality relies on numerous sources of information, including opinion polls, census surveys, historical records and other documents, all of which have their socially constructed qualities. But to the extent that media reality differs in systematic ways from these other forms of social self-knowledge, we can draw important conclusions about the structures underpinning these differences. Even if one were to accept the possibility of objectively portraying a "world out there," numerous studies over the years show that the media portray certain people, events, and ideas in ways that differ systematically from their occurrence in the "real world."

Viewed another way, media content is fundamentally a construction, and, as such, can never find its analog in some external benchmark, a "mirror" of reality. Media-constructed reality has taken its place alongside other social constructions, whether mental illness,

criminality, sexuality, gender, race, and other identities no longer considered self-evidently "natural." If content is a construction, then to understand its special quality it is essential to understand the "constructing." This realization assigns greater importance to the research in media sociology. Therefore, it is a basic premise of this approach, rather than some tentative theoretical perspective, that the media exert their own unique shaping power to the symbolic environment, a shaping that is open to explanation using various theoretical perspectives--which we combine into the hierarchy of influences model.

News content within the theoretical framework

Studies proliferated in the early communication field describing various features of news content but were largely unconnected and lacked any consistent theoretical framework. This largely descriptive content research made little attempt to connect across studies. Such studies often limited themselves to measuring the "number of" and "image of" (fill in the blank). Warren Breed and David Manning White were among the first scholars showing the influences on content in a more research-based mode, with their examinations of social control in the newsroom and the news "gatekeeper." But others did not follow their lead in communication until more recently (reviewed in REESE & BALLINGER, 2001).

Variable-analytic approach: It is helpful to consider media content within a variable analytic framework: treating it as a dependent variable with which a number of independent variables were related and could be said to produce an effect. But if the traditional field was marked by surveys and controlled experiments, isolating an effect of interest, the media sociology domain is much more diverse, messy, and ranges across many levels of analysis and research traditions.

Looking back we, of course, recognize that not all useful perspectives bearing on media sociology can be reduced to such straightforward linear relationships. Many of them are qualitative, interpretive, and naturally resistant to being described in more quantitative variable analytic terminology. Nevertheless, it seems more evident now that placing this messy area into a more clearly defined container--the stricter language of variables and influences--imposes a drive toward clarification, definitions, assumptions, empirical indicators,

and relationships that are the hallmark of useful investigation. That was our attempt, even if calling that container "theory" may sound rather grandiose and off-putting. Our goal was simply to begin to think seriously about assumptions, relationships, and ways of measuring. This makes it possible to draw connections, find similarities, and in short to "build theory".

Audience and effects theories have a longer tradition, are more finely drawn and focused, such as the social-psychological approaches to attitude change and, more recently, information processing. So, a claim to "theory" in the media sociology area may be premature. But at least it is easier to assemble previously disparate strands of research and hook up the audience and effects side of the field with the shaping and control of content--within a consistent style of explanation. That makes it easier to conceptualize the extension of the communication field into this less studied domain. For example, the intuitively appealing idea of agenda-setting suggests the powerful ability of the media to tell people what to "think about." Given the extensive body of research into this idea of how the media set the agenda for the public, it is an easy rhetorical step to ask an equally important question: "what sets the media's agenda?" Just by asking such a question within the framework of communication research gives it certain legitimacy (see Reese, 1991).

Levels of analysis approach: Factors affecting media content can be usefully classified at different levels of analysis, leading us to organize them into a model. The hierarchy of influences model organizes what have been laid out as various theoretical perspectives on the shaping of media content, including as follows the suggested categories of Gans (1979) and Gitlin (1980).

- Content is influenced by media workers' socialization and attitudes. This is a communicator-centered approach, emphasizing the psychological factors impinging on an individual's work: professional, personal, and political.
- Content is influenced by media organizations and routines. This approach argues that content emerges directly from the nature of how media work is organized. The organizational routines within which an individual operates form a structure, constraining action while also enabling it.

- Content is influenced by other social institutions and forces. This approach finds the major impact on content lying external to organizations and the communicator: economic, political, and cultural forces. Audience pressures can be found in the "market" explanation of "giving the public what it wants."
- Content is a function of ideological positions and maintains the status quo. The so-called hegemony approach locates the major influence on media content as the pressures to support the status quo, to support the interests of those in power in society.

Hierarchy of influences model

Thus, with these perspectives the "hierarchy of influences" model can be laid out containing five levels of influence: individual, routines, organizational, extramedia (institutional), and ideological (socio-cultural). I will specify these in more detail below but we can see that they range from the micro (or at least individual) to macro levels. In retrospect, simply setting out such a model has affected research by proposing important distinctions between levels of analysis, locating individuals within a web of organizational and ideological constraints.

Particularly for journalism, such a model helps to untangle many of the criticisms of press performance, identify their implicit normative and theoretical assumptions, and suggests appropriate kinds of evidence. For example, conservative media critics have located the source of bias with the individual journalist, calling for more balance in hiring practices and regularly scolding specific news anchors. Left-leaning critics, on the other hand, find fault more with the structure and ownership of the commercial media system, arguing for more public control and protections from the corruption of big advertisers. The irony is that journalists are more apt to give respectability to attacks from their right flank, which even if targeting them as individuals at least grants them the professional latitude to be to blame for bias in the first place. The left´s critiques are less professionally satisfying, given that it relegates journalists to mere tools of a larger corporate system. Both critiques can be more easily understood when we know from which level they are mainly conceived.

The utility of such a model also comes about in helping explicate key concepts on which research is based and unpack those multiple levels of meaning. For example, the concept of professionalism (whether journalistic or more broadly media) is a basic one within media

sociology, but one with widely varying aspects of meaning. It can be considered an individual value that is espoused, a trait of individuals indicating the extent to which they belong to a professional group that calls them to certain shared norms and outlooks. Alternatively, to the extent that it embodies a set of procedures on how to report a story professionalism is a routine-level phenomenon. What Tuchman (1978) calls a "strategic ritual" suggests that newsworkers are considered "professional" to the extent that they adhere to the procedures, the accepted practices of deadlines, and simply getting the work done. Following the procedures provides a useful fallback "professional" defense when challenged by audience members or other critics.

At the organizational level, professionalism is a negotiated set of values, worked out to satisfy the organization's needs. Concerns of individual bias and commercial ownership, for example, are rendered more manageable and defused, by invoking the buffering power of "professionalism." Here we would ask how professionalism is negotiated within an organization to facilitate both owner and journalistic needs. Media organizations selectively promote certain aspects of "professionalism," not all of which place a strong emphasis on individual freedom. Within the institutional relationships media find themselves in, professionalism takes different form depending on the nature of those relationships. Blumler and Gurevitch (1995), for example, contrast a "sacerdotal" role of journalists with a more pragmatic attitude. In the first, it is accepted that official institutions like Parliament have the right to be broadcast because of their "priestly" function in the society, as opposed to their actual newsworthiness. Thus, professionalism within the media institution is understood in relation to other key institutions in society. Ideologically, professionalism takes on still broader implication, that professional values must be consistent with the prevailing power structure.

The levels of analysis alert us to shifting meanings and implications in such important concepts. Of course, we are interested in human behavior so even the levels beyond the "individual" are still ways of conceptualizing the organized actions of people. Thus, no matter the level, we are still trying to explain human behavior and their organized creative products and relationships. Structures are abstractions that only become visible when we name them and begin to look for regularities and norms in human behavior. So, at the heart of this outlook is the interplay between structure and agency, between actions people take,

but not under conditions of their own making. They participate in a conversation that began before they arrived. Individuals work within social structures, which as they become more complicated place less emphasis on the specific situational choices--these become lost in the emphasis on larger macro structures. Thus, the distinction among these levels is not between people and non-people, individuals or non-individuals. It is between the immediate actions of specific individuals, and the more organized and historically situated actions of larger collections of people. Ideology, after all, is the meanings that people have become accustomed to attaching to certain interests of collectivities in control of significant social resources (i.e., power).

In laying out these levels, it is possible to prioritize their importance and sequence in different ways. We can certainly make a case for stepping through them in both directions: from micro to macro, or vice versa. Does everything begin with the individual, who is progressively hemmed in by more and more layers of constraint? (That is my tendency.) Or is the macro, socio-cultural context logically prior to any actions of its member individuals? These are matters of analytical emphasis and preference. Intuitively for many, the actions of individuals are closest at hand, most easily visualized and observed. Institutional and ideological forces, although their effects are readily seen, are intuitively more distant and more difficult to grasp analytically.

There is also the tendency in this model to view individuals as relatively more powerless as we view them as "constrained" by successive layers of influence. Job routines do limit individuals in what they can do. The teacher must conform to student expectations, usually involving a clear syllabus, stated exam dates, and requirements for class assignments. Every job, however, must have structure, and every creative activity is processed through certain structured rules. Mozart may have been constrained by the symphonic form, but it was also the enabling structure through which he expressed creativity. This is what Giddens refers to in the idea of "structuration," the sociological idea that structures can be both constraining and enabling. So, within this levels approach, the idea is that higher levels do not eliminate the influence of the level below, but require that we take it into account, that it sets certain boundaries within which other influences range.

Once researchers begin to understand their questions and studies within a levels-of-analysis framework, it becomes easier to compare them to other research, see connections among different levels, and

generally begin a much more systematic approach to a diverse area of the field. The model helps to organize an array of eclectic research by considering the level or perspective at which explanation is primarily sought. Researchers may implicitly recognize that media phenomena have a variety of causes, and that within a web of interconnected forces explanation is a matter of emphasis. Nevertheless, we as scholars naturally gravitate toward the explanation that fits our disciplinary and political leanings. Theoretically, we must ask which explanation is most parsimonious and best makes sense of what is going on. Empirically, this model suggests that one must determine under which conditions certain factors are most determinative and how they interact with each other. And it reminds us to make sure the evidence presented is most appropriate to the level of analysis. The policies of a media organization, for example, may not directly translate into knowing the political views of its employees.

International and global levels

As we consider the issues of journalism research across national boundaries, models like the "hierarchy of influences" may prove useful. Not only, I have suggested before, they help sort out comparisons of "things," but also structures, processes, and functions of seemingly different things. It is tempting to restrict comparative research to journalists as individuals in various countries. But a levels-of-analysis approach reminds us that the different routines may serve similar functions when compared across culture. For example, the Japanese kisha press club system in isolation seems like a quaint set of customs and norms that oblige reporters to become an integral part of a government minister´s life, following him around, even going out drinking at night to be assured of getting a story. Each official agency has a press club and only its members can attend press conferences it holds. But when we consider the function it serves, to get news, it is much the same as the "boys on the bus," the pack journalism routine followed by U.S. journalists. It is in the interest of the government official to restrict information and develop relationships with journalists who can demonstrate their trustworthiness over time. Although different in type, the press routines in Japan and the U.S. serve the same purpose, with similar complaints from foreign journalists in each setting about access.

Within the comparative project it is ultimately important to begin finding some empirical generalizations, rather than simply replicating case studies country by country. The current ICA encyclopedia project suggests some difficulties for conceptualizing journalism internationally. There has been a strong effort to make the project reflect an international group of scholars, consistent with the mission of the organization. (I was assigned as editor to the "Media production and content" subfield.) When it comes to entries such as "newspaper" however, authors become confused as to whether they should focus on their own national experience (mostly U.S.) or try to produce some findings that seem to be common across cultures. It is not practical to include research from every national experience and at some point we need to draw some generalizations. As comparative research becomes more common it is easier to do that. We might assume that journalism is more difficult to make summary conclusions about, given the multiplicity of forms across cultures. Easier perhaps is to do it for media effects, given the greater universality of psychological responses. But Shoemaker and colleagues, for example, have successfully shown that news has a number of common patterns across nations, rooted, as she argues, in socio-biological needs (SHOEMAKER & COHEN, 2006).

New styles of comparative research are emerging. Namdoo Kim (2006) has completed a study of how the Arab news service Al-Jazeera has been used and regarded by Western news organizations. In his case, rather than comparing news in one country with that in another, he compared at the organizational level two newspapers in the U.S. (New York Times and the Wall Street Journal) with two in the U.K. (Telegraph and Guardian), and their subject is a uniquely global phenomenon—a news organization with no country as such to report back to. The comparison is helpful given that both countries ostensibly adopted a similar policy regarding the Iraq war, although these papers differed in their editorial support of that policy. In many respects, the New York Times had more in common with the Guardian than with its fellow national organization. Pro-war newspapers (Journal and Telegraph) used Al-Jazeera less for as an information source. The anti-war papers (Times and Guardian) provided more depth in coverage of issues involving Al-Jazeera and were less likely to let their respective officials set the tone of that coverage. Thus, there are ideological and normative issues that do not easily track

national context and need to be addressed with effective research design. Indeed, the journalists within these organizations often have more in common with colleagues in other countries than with their compatriots, especially with those in news organizations with comparable policy, audience, and mission.

These comparisons become more fluid in the cyberspace environment. In a recent study of the Internet blogosphere (REESE, RUTIGLIANO, HYUN, AND JEONG, 2007) we began tracing the linking patterns of online news and political blogs. What began as an English language-based U.S. phenomenon has quickly spread around the world, although the linking patterns for obvious reasons are still largely intra-lingual. Blogs and the online world in general are not respecters of national boundaries, although they still draw their commentary from specific national discussions. Conceptually, we quickly realized that it would be difficult to isolate U.S. blogs, for example, and compare them with U.K. or French blogs. Although a blog may be managed by a U.S. citizen and discuss U.S. issues and link to U.S. news organizations, it need not be *in* the U.S. The location of the actual computer server is immaterial to the content focus of the blog.

As research in journalism moves to recognize influences of globalization I have considered how to conceptualize changes in this area (REESE, 2005, 2008). As I mentioned at the beginning, it is tempting for many to declare a "global" level—the ultimate "macro" level--that takes its place in the "hierarchy of influences," alongside the other levels of aggregated observations: individual, organizational, etc. It is important to proceed carefully with this conceptualization. To the extent that globalization has affected every social practice and institution in some way, we can say that journalism to varying degrees has become "globalized," disrupted from old relationships and reconfigured in ways not accounted for by the national. More specifically, it has created a "global news arena," in which information is more synchronized in space and time, news practices are more transparently open to world scrutiny and evaluated against more universally available normative standards. As news organizations work in greater global proximity, previous understandings of universal news norms will be revised. I define a practice of "global" journalism as one that is not necessarily gigantic but carried out in such a way that the producers, users, and subjects need not, and often do not, share a common national orientation.

The hierarchy of influences can be applied to issues of globalized journalism, by looking for spaces and cases where the influence of "the global" can be seen. Such places can include moments where a globally significant event takes place and is filtered through the national prisms of various news organizations (LEE, CHAN, PAN & SO, 2002) or locations where the world's journalists converge to cover the same event or institution. In another twist, Geertsema (2005) has examined how a globally operating news service (Inter Press Service) produces news explicitly intended to address women's issues in a more equitable way. It faces the same organizational-level issue of enforcing policy as faced by more mainstream outlets. Global changes in media ownership, new ways of carrying out gatekeeping across national boundaries, and emerging norms of professionalism all can be located within a levels of influence perspective to better sort out the important issues.

It is difficult enough within a single national context to clearly explicate concepts and discuss them within consistent levels of analysis. As research moves across national boundaries, to include comparative questions, this clarity becomes even more important (and challenging). With so much written about the process of economic and cultural globalization, it is easy to pull a few popular terms from the discourse and apply them loosely to journalism. The complexity and novelty of theorizing global phenomena make it the most challenging conceptual task to date, for which clear models are particularly needed. In any case, globalization means that journalism research cannot remain isolated within respective national settings, with the boundary-spanning, globe-trotting liaison scholars being the exception to the rule. Events in one country have more direct relationships with those in others, and so must research.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BLUMLER, J. & GUREVITCH, M. *The crisis of public communication*. London: Routledge, 1995.

GANS, H. *Deciding what's news*. New York: Vintage, 1979.

GITLIN, T. *Whole world is watching*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

GEERTSEMA, Margaretha.*Gender Mainstreaming in Globalized News: Cultural Globalization and the Inter Press Service*. Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2005.

KIM, Namdoo. *Making news out of Al-Jazeera: A comparative content analysis of American and British press coverage of events and issues involving the Arab media.* Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2006.

LEE, CC, CHAN, JM, PAN, Z, & SO, Clement. *Global media spectacle: news war over Hong Kong*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2002.

REESE, S. 'Setting the media agenda: A power balance perspective'. In J. ANDERSON (ed.) *Communication Yearbook 14*. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1991.

REESE, S. 'Globalized journalism in the public sphere,' paper presented to the International Communication Association, New York, 2005.

REESE, S. 'Theorizing a globalized journalism'. In M. LOEFFELHOLZ & D. WEAVER (eds.), *Global journalism research: Theories, methods, findings, future*. London: Blackwell, 2007.

REESE, S. 'Understanding the global journalist: a hierarchy of influences approach'. In *Journalism Studies*, 2(2),2001: 173-187.

REESE, S. and BALLINGER, J. 'Roots of a sociology of news: remembering Mr. Gates and social control in the newsroom'. In *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 78(4), 2001: 641-658.

REESE, S., LOU RUTIGLIANO, KIDEUK HYUN AND JAEKWAN JEONG. 'Mapping the blogosphere: Citizen-based media in the global news arena'. In *Journalism: Theory, Practice, Criticism*, 2007(3).

SHOEMAKER, P & REESE, S. *Mediating the message: Theories of influence on mass media content*. New York: Longman, 1996.

SHOEMAKER, P. & COHEN, A. *News around the world*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

TUCHMAN, G. *Making news.* New York: The Free Press, 1978.

Stephen D. Reese is a professor in the School of Journalism and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the College of Communication of University of Texas. His own articles and papers cited may be found on his webpage: http://journalism.utexas.edu/faculty/reese/index.html **Email:** steve.reese@mail.utexas.edu