Report of the tenth Käte Hamburger Lecture

The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered

with Professor Jeffrey Alexander

8 December 2014, Duisburg
During the 10th Käte Hamburger Lecture, which was organized by the Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research in cooperation with the Institute for Advanced Study in Humanities (KWI) in Essen, Jeffrey Alexander, Professor of Sociology at Yale University (USA) questioned the common belief that the profession of journalism is stuck in crisis due to the rise of destructive technology and increasing economic struggles.

In the opening remarks, Professor Volker Heins emphasized the added value of Alexander’s approach for the Centre. ‘Journalists’, Heins argued, ‘are specialists on issues of mutual understanding and cooperation in an increasingly complex and sometimes dangerous world.’

Jeffrey Alexander introduced his argument that for many scholars, most interpreters of modern journalism, and even journalists themselves, the crisis of journalism is an economic crisis. And indeed, many journalistic institutions had to face challenges caused by digital technology leading to staff reduction and re-organizations. While in his lecture, he did not deny these concerns, Alexander aimed to reconceptualize the crisis and drew attention to the cultural meanings of journalism.

For him, the crisis of journalism needs to be understood as a crisis of Western society at large. Journalists play an essential role in democracy, Alexander claimed. With their professional ethics at hand, namely ‘transparency, independence, responsibility, balance, accuracy’, journalists can speak truth to power. Many of these ethics overlap with what is perceived as democratic values. It gives them autonomy vis-à-vis to the state and markets. He concluded with a key question: ‘Is the autonomy of journalism itself threatened by the crisis?’

According to him, social change is endemic in modern society and thus journalism has always been in a crisis. ‘Journalists themselves are aware that their autonomous independence is never assured, but instead has to be struggled for continuously’, Alexander argued. In support of his argument he drew strong historical analogies: The rise of technologies, such as television and radio and later the transformation from network TV to cable TV in the U.S., was always perceived to be dangerous for the existence of journalism. But these concerns never came true. Instead, this anxiety led to an adaption and turned to pathways to save the democratic function of journalism.

Alexander continued by criticizing the previous research conducted on the crisis of journalism. As he said, there are many empirical studies with
different results. The problem here, according to Alexander, is not the availability of data but its reliability. Additionally, research results are strongly influenced by theoretical presuppositions about how societies work and what motivates social action. He criticized that research is driven by a technological and economic determinism. Alexander urged for a rethinking of what he perceives to be theoretical reductionism.

Internet is seen—and of course it is, as Alexander added—to be positioned centrally to the problems of journalism. But internet is more than just a mere technology; it is a narrative as an agent of change. Since its invention, internet was paired with radically utopian models of flat hierarchies, decentralized control and a harmonization of people. It is seen as a medium which allows everyone to become a journalist and where information is being spread for free.

Against this cultural mantra of free information, early attempts of traditional newspaper sites to generate a paywall failed or were put down quickly. News blogs were able to aggregate the fruits of news without having to pay for their production costs. The salvational techno-culture, seeing the salvation in the provision of free information, naturally tightened its grip around the established newspapers. Hence, a new organized form must replace newspapers.

This is the crisis of journalism Alexander tried to challenge by contending that these arguments do not meet the core. This reductionism, he continued, is the reason why the ‘end of press’ has been announced numerous times over the last few years. But the misleading empirical predictions have not happened yet, nor does it seem they will. Instead, journalism has pushed back.

According to Alexander, theoretical reductionism has overlooked the fact that journalists have built a wall between news making and business manager who are led by their economic concerns. The reductionism also fails to recognise the moral obligations of journalist profession that have existed over a century. Hence, journalism needs to be perceived as a form of civil art that allows solidarity, and not just as a form of business, Alexander noted.

Alexander referred to Jürgen Habermas and others who suggested that democracy is tied to publicness; and that the exchange of information is the key. In this sense, the Internet is a great democratic invention. But Alexander dismissed these assumptions and called for a broader approach. From the perspective of a cultural sociologist, ‘the public sphere is only a performative stage which both allows for bigoted
demagoguery as well as for civil forces of democracy’, he argued. Although the Internet, in his opinion, indeed provides a new communicative realm, there is nothing democratic about this.

He argued that neither democracy nor journalism is about letting more people have a say. Journalism is not only about the public and information exchange. Journalists, however, empowered by their professional ethics, are rather interpreters of information in a broader, more universal manner and can provide the context of social problems, interpretations, and topics.

Alexander concluded with a rather optimistic outlook. He stressed that despite a decade of ‘the end of journalism’, it has not been pushed aside, nor will it be pushed aside in the future. Even the ‘money-making machines of the Internet’, such as Google or Amazon, are compelled to support news production because otherwise, there would be no information to aggregate or to sell.

The final question, Alexander raised, was: Are private enterprises able to finance journalistic work in the future? There are some examples which are indicative for that. The New York Times has successfully managed to build an online paywall and is still the most visited news page on the Internet. The Wallstreet Journal has established its paywall in the end of the 1990s and nowadays has more than one million subscribers. The case of the Washington Post is different from the previous cases but may show a new development. The newspaper was bought by Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, who recently increased staff and infrastructure. It seems very likely, Alexander stated, that the money of Internet billionaires will replace the money of the old industrial elite.

On the other hand, Alexander continued, there will be less platforms of news. In the U.S., he explained, regional newspapers suffer the most from severe economic problems. Yet, how many well-financed platforms for serious news and journalism are necessary for the morals of professionalism to be sustained, in order to support a vital democracy?

For the future, Alexander predicted a drastic change. The informed reader will transform into an interpreting audience and the civic impact of journalism will become a matter of performativity. Indeed, the newspaper audience will eventually shrink down to a ‘news-junkie, opinion-leading core’. But, Alexander asked, whether this change matters. News, he concluded, has become a theatre regardless if the audience is small or large. Moreover, journalism can play the role of a watch dog, as long as people in power believe that people are reading the news.
The Lecture was followed by comments from Christoph Bieber, Welker Foundation Professor of Ethics in Society and Politics Management, University of Duisburg-Essen. In response to Alexander’s lecture, Bieber reflected on Alexander’s arguments within the German context. For instance, he raised the examples of two famous German newspaper publishers with different developments. On the one hand, the German symbol of ‘sacred journalism’, Der Spiegel, suffers under what Bieber framed as an identity crisis between online and offline editors. On the other hand, the publisher Springer seems to smoothly transform into a new media model and successfully installed a paywall on the website of their flagship tabloid newspaper Bild.

Responding to Alexander’s comments on the possibilities of future finance concepts of the media, Bieber brought in the German model of public service media, which is financed by an enforced licence fee paid by every household. This, Bieber suggested, in context of Alexander’s arguments, could be seen as a fee for a professional discourse, and might be seen as a finance model for other states as well.

Lastly, Bieber brought in the two recent cases where ‘truth to power’ was spoken: The case of WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden. Interestingly in both cases, the Internet was the instrument at hand in the first place, but later the protagonists went for help to traditional journalists. Since their newspapers were seen as the only possible way to gain more attention from the general public.

Later on, there was a vivid discussion among the audience. The raised questions focussed on the role of journalist as pragmatic interpreters as well as the role of formal media and alternatives to maintain and finance them.

Report written by Fentje Jacobsen and Patrick Clasen