

On the Roles of Journalists, the News Industry and Journalism in Assessing the Future of the Field: A Rejoinder to Tabe Bergman

Dr. Mark Deuze
University of Amsterdam
Amsterdam, Netherlands

In this paper, I respond to a critical analysis of my recent work on definitions of and approaches to journalism as a profession by Tabe Bergman. At the heart of our debate is the division between structure and agency, and what our focus should be in teaching and studying journalism. An argument is made to address structures (of political economy) through agency (of working journalists).

Journalism | Journalism Studies | Political Economy | Agency

It has been many years since my work was called 'dangerous'. The first time it happened was in the context of my dissertation on the profile of journalists in The Netherlands, where I not only interviewed reporters and editors working at venerable mainstream news organizations, but also those at the margins of the profession: the first generation of online journalists (I conducted my interviews in the period 1997 to 1999, the Internet had just entered newsrooms), journalists with a minority background, and those working in infotainment genres. Simply acknowledging that these professionals were also worthy of consideration within journalism studies was considered 'dangerous' by several Dutch critics at the time.

Fast forward twenty years, and I'm dangerous again: Tabe Bergman, in his critical take on a recent essay of mine where I reflect on my earlier analyses of journalism as a profession (which analyses at the time were based on my dissertation research), considers my statements as "irresponsible, even dangerous" and hopes I "will take the time to reconsider" my statements. This I hope to do in this rejoinder. Let me be clear: I welcome and applaud this criticism, in part because it makes me feel my work matters, and more importantly because our field does not do nearly enough to truly foster critical and agonistic debate. I am indebted to Bergman for his sincere engagement with my work, and would therefore like to take the opportunity to respond.

In what follows I will first briefly outline my position on the roles of journalists, the news industry and journalism in assessing the future of the field (of journalism as a profession and of journalism studies). Secondly, I will address the specific criticisms of Bergman in his earlier response as published in *Synaesthesia* (2019). From the outset I would like to recognize that his concerns with my assumptions about the presumed agency of individual journalists vis-à-vis the corporate 'creativity machine' that the news industry tends to be are entirely justified. Indeed, I am overly optimistic, and my research is biased toward finding hope in the actions and praxis of those at the margins or even outside the mainstream system of media production. And I have to acknowledge that in my work I have struggled with

the central issue of power – this critique has been levelled against my monographs *Media Work* (2007) and *Media Life* (2012) as well, and I am sure my recent co-authored book with Tamara Witschge (2020) on the working lives of journalists around the world who have opted to start their own business will encounter a similar challenge. Again, I think that social hope tends to get the better of me when I consider the powers that be. I hope that his rejoinder engages with the power question more deliberately.

What Journalism Is (Not)

In 2019, the open-access scholarly journal *Social Media + Society* started a series of regular special issues (under the section title '2K') aimed at publishing work that often does not make it into traditional academic publishing, including but not limited to stories of failed research and concepts and theories once believed, but requiring re-evaluation. The aim of this is to foster lively and timely conversation that can shape the ways scholars study media and technology, in a format that is accessible beyond their usual audiences (Powers & Russell, 2019). I was privileged to be able to contribute to the inaugural 2K issue, where I was invited to reflect on any belief I once held but now question, temper, or reject – in response to either developments in the world or shifts in their thinking about the nature and impact of technology. Among the first group of authors were many dear friends and esteemed colleagues – including Taina Bucher, Gina Masullo Chen, Zoe Hurley, Zizi Papacharissi, and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen – and I warmly recommend checking out all the inspiring contributions.¹ Our charge was to clearly identify: a) the belief once held, b) the reasons for questioning, tempering or rejecting that belief, and c) the conditions (i.e., scholarly, political, and cultural contexts) that enabled such a belief.

The point I chose to pursue in that brief essay (Deuze, 2019): the news industry as it has traditionally been organized is not necessary for journalism as an occupational ideology to survive and for the work of journalists to remain relevant to people's lives. This insight is inspired by a question that has informed my on-going research on media production and media work (see Deuze, 2007; 2012 and Deuze & Prenger, 2019 for book length overviews): what makes good – as in meaningful, contributing to the common good, autonomous, informative and inspiring – newswork possible?

At the heart of my argument is the notion that, up until the early 2000s in most countries around the world, journalists would work in newsroom environments, employed or contracted in some form by a news organization for the particular purpose of filling their pages, airtime, and sites with content of value to audiences. The dominant definition of journalism in the eyes of its practitioners could therefore be seen as constituted in and out of newsroom discussions and debates.

This also meant that the newsroom became the place where structural issues affecting the profession of journalism – such as technological transformation, the dual market of its industry (generally serving both audiences and advertisers at the same time), and the specific news culture of a country, region, and medium – got meaning in the decisions reporters and editors would make on a daily basis. Journalism, in other words, was always a delicate negotiation between the ideals of reporters and editors, the needs of the organization, and the demands of the institution (which was generally reliant on both the market and the state).

Over time, I realized that this assumption had become untenable given mass lay-offs (in most, if not all developed economies) of journalists, the rise of ‘atypical’ media work, and the overall casualization of labor. Correspondingly, the organization of newswork has become more fragmented and networked. The linkages between markets, policy and media institutions have become both more interdependent as they are fragile – as all these players are losing control over their constituencies, with consumers and citizens increasingly less likely to behave as more or less predictable packs or masses.

What journalism is today, is still very much constituted out of conversations – but those conversations can occur anywhere, involving many more role-players and voices. This does necessarily equal a ‘democratization’ of definitions of journalism, as precarity tends not to go hand in hand with a power to define. Furthermore, it has become quite clear that the news industry does not really care about discussions and debates about what journalism is, in part because it so clearly does not invest in its journalists (who more often than not do their work underpaid or unpaid, without protections and without any support or guarantee for future contracts or employment).

By personal preference and necessity (given my overall research question), the dominant unit (or level) of analysis I have consistently used in my work has been the individual. I want to make sense what the overall patterns and structures we find in our studies – of rampant commercialism and commodification of culture, of rationalized management and dehumanized bureaucracies, of negotiating the ideals and promise of professional autonomy and creative freedom in the cultural and creative industries with the often less-than-rosy industrial realities of precarious labor, clientelism, global production networks, and intersectional inequalities. My focus in this has always been the way individuals ‘make it work’ under such conditions. In doing so, I have made my work vulnerable to criticisms regarding its lack of identifying and explaining the source of power (or better: powerlessness) among media professionals. As Bergman (2019) sharply articulates, I have been able to “pull this off by consciously overlooking the central issue of power” (12).

Political Economy, Cultural Studies, and Sociology of Work

Power is, quite obviously, a tricky issue. From my perspective and level of analysis regarding the role of journalism, I tend to focus on the power to make more or less autonomous decisions in – for example – what stories to cover, in what way to cover these stories, and where and how to publish such stories. Autonomy is the one goal and value that anyone in the media, cultural and creative industries strives for. It is what motivates practitioners, what inspires their work. It tends to be curtailed by a host of issues, from one’s own personality and predilections, via peer communities and collegial environment, to working arrangements, material and managerial cultures, all the way up to ownership structures, sources of revenue, and policy frameworks.

So rather than explaining where the constraints on the autonomy of media workers – and their ability to do ‘good work’ – come from, I tend to take these limitations as a given, redirecting my attention from how things are to what can be done. Those coming from a cultural studies perspective tend to find the approach I prefer less than articulate when it comes to the various subject positions workers hold, too blind when it comes to the role of identity and intersectionality in the creative process, or scoff at what can be perceived as a rather a-theoretical and ‘applied’ version of media production studies. Students of political economy wonder where the (explanations for) structural sources of constraints, inequalities, and limitations on the actions and decisions of media workers have gone. They point to the case of cultural and creative industries as a capitalist project to commodify our culture – to put a “dollar sign on everything” as the brilliant US comedian Bill Hicks used to say – in the process never challenging the powers that be. Sociologists of work see in my research an omission of government policy and institutional structure as the key conditions that govern the relationships of the individual media practitioner with the overall system of media work.

The two deceptively straightforward responses to such critiques are, firstly, to quote Duffy, Nieborg, and Poell in their recent assessment of platform practices in the cultural industries: to “acknowledge that institutional structures are mutually articulated with the lived social experiences of producers and consumers in particular contexts” (2019: 2). Although an insistence on mutual articulation would be correct, it is also misleading: recursivity between institutions and cultural practices is not an equal two-way process, and very few media professionals have the power to change institutional governance. On the other hand, media institutions are not immovable objects, are often governed and managed in complex (if not internally contradictory) ways, and tend to be ‘inhabited’ by a wide variety of people in changing roles and positions. The role of policy and governance in this context is similarly less than uniform, with market values and public values (in some countries considered synonymous with the values of the state) both colluding and

competing (Flew, 2018). Assigning a hegemonic project to the actions of the practitioners in such environments would be problematic – even though the persistent pressure to provide a return on investment most certainly limits creative leeway and tends to delegate marginalized voices to separate products and channels rather than pursuing truly ‘multiperspectival’ news (Gans, 2011).

A second potential response would be that these are valid concerns, but belonging to different studies with different theoretical and methodological premises. That kind of deflection denies my role and responsibility as a scholar. As Bergman calls me out on this: I cannot deny that I have a privileged position because I happen to be an educated white man, working and living in a rich European country (that is, until we get flooded by rising sea levels), serving at a top ranked university and department, publishing with prestigious publishers. I have a voice, and with that comes responsibility. I may have my personal preferences to pursue an intellectual agenda informed and inspired by social hope (in the spirit of Richard Rorty, Zygmunt Bauman, and Sonia Livingstone), but my work is also grounded in broader concerns and insights that should be acknowledged and reviewed – including those of ethics, to which I would like to turn.

The Ethics of the Field

Bergman’s critique triggers three distinct ethical issues for me – issues that I have begun to address more deliberately in recent work. Let me briefly review these issues in order to take the kind of responsibility that Bergman would like me to.

1. How to help students of journalism and the media.

Beyond the particulars of the brief essay Bergman refers to, I have pursued in my publications and teaching on media work in general, and journalism in particular, the ways in which professionals ‘make it work’ in industries that are generally not conducive to diversity, equality, creative freedom, and professional autonomy. I take the institutional arrangements of the media as a given, and move on to focus on those on the inside (and on the outside, subcontracted and outsourced, or starting out on their own). Furthermore, I try to explain why these institutions function the way they do – by focusing on how the various theoretical explanations of media work interact, and what they mean to the professionals involved.

In short, I tend to review how cultural studies makes us keenly aware of the affective and emotional nature of media work – and how vulnerable that makes media professionals. How political economy forces us to ‘follow the money’ and take governance and policy seriously, making us understand how relative any celebration of creators’ ‘agency’ must be. How business and management studies help us understand and respect the unique nature of media management, how the demands of creativity and commerce can be contradictory, and why cutting costs in combination of mergers and

acquisitions are pretty much the only reliable source of income for many, if not most media companies in the context of a ‘nobody knows’ media economy. Media and cultural policy research make us appreciate the profound role subsidies, copyrights, and the tax system plays in global media production – quickly erasing any claim about a ‘free’ marketplace of ideas. Finally, economic and cultural geography explains the clustering of cultural industries and the rise of project ecologies to offset the precarity of labor across the media. All these themes are addressed in some depth throughout my work as a researcher and educator, and any of the theories on its own does not do justice to the complex and rich nature of media as a place of work.

2. How to ‘dewesternize’ work in media and communication.

Bergman makes an important point about how my work tends to depart from a more or less idealized view of western society. Even though media corporations are increasingly multinational in ownership and scope, and media production processes are increasingly part of global production networks and what Miller and Leger (2001) called an ‘international division of cultural labor’, it is crucial to articulate local, cultural and regional specificity to explanations and claims about media work.

The literature increasingly not just calls for ‘dewesternizing’ journalism, media and communication research, but actively includes voices, experiences, and research published outside of the western world. Furthermore, Waisbord and Mellado (2014) show, ‘dewesternization’ often has a different meaning and longer history outside of the United States and Europe, as it tends to be seen as “a necessary shift to reorient intellectual work against academic Eurocentrism”, rather than just to broaden perspectives, “shake up certainties grounded in a narrow set of cases and analytical perspectives, and to break away from the provincialism of scholarly research” (362). Similar arguments have been made toward universalizing media scholarship by way of integrating the worldviews, intellectual histories and trajectories from different parts of the world next to the dominant Western way of conceptualizing and theorizing. Many scholars, in particular those working in non-Western countries, advocate theories and methods that do not just react to the dominant approaches from the West, but build on indigenous or otherwise ‘native’ communication and media traditions (M’Bayo, Sunday and Amobi, 2012; Murthy, 2016; Jia, 2017).

Although progress is slow, it is clear from these fields of research that as much as there are similarities in theorizing about media, there are countless unique divergences. I am writing this to recognize and appreciate criticisms of a possible fetishization of mainstream western mega-corporations and their ways of working over more localized, particular and contextual readings of media management and production. For what it is worth: I recently edited, updated

and partly rewrote one of the seminal handbooks of our field, “McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory” (published in May 2020 as its seventh edition), and the paragraphs above have been lifted from that manuscript, showcasing a deliberate attempt to push the field toward more inclusivity and bringing a wider range of voices into conversation (rather than integration such work in order to maintain overall consistency).

3. How to move the field forward.

Finally, let me return to my appreciation of the fierce criticism of my work in the *Synaesthesia* essay by Tabé Bergman. Our field needs such debate. Sometimes, we are so proud of our own critical attitude that we do not reflect deeply enough on the impact and consequences of our work. I hope this rejoinder adds to the debate and helps to push the discussion a bit further. The media industries in general and journalism in particular are not going to be saved by a handful of savvy entrepreneurs and activist idealists, nor by the real or perceived agency of ‘free agents’ in a precarious context. I do feel that pointing out systemic faults and institutional failures requires some idea of what can be done – both from a macro level perspective, as from the viewpoint of the student who wants to ‘get in’ but who we hope will do so as an autonomous, critical, and independent thinker, working in a context that claims to cherish and embrace, yet feels deeply ambivalent about any such qualities.

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Bio

Mark Deuze is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam’s (UvA) Faculty of Humanities. Before that he worked as a journalist and academic in the United States, Germany and South Africa. He is also the bass player and singer of Skinflower. His most recent book is *Beyond Journalism* (Polity Press, 2020) co-authored with Tamara Witschge.

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¹ URL of 2K inaugural issue:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/page/sms/collections/special-issues/2k>