Folk theories of journalism: the many faces of a local newspaper

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Abstract

To understand journalism, we need to understand how people understand journalism. We need to examine what I define as "folk theories of journalism", actually-existing popular beliefs about what journalism is, what it does, and what it ought to do that people use to make sense of journalism across sources of news, means of accessing news, and ways of engaging with news. In this paper, I use data from interviews and focus groups to identify different and sometimes contradictory views of the role played by a local newspaper in Denmark to develop the notion of folk theories of journalism. I reconstruct three different folk theories in the case community around conceptions of relevance and place, one defining the local newspaper as relevant and local ("our newspaper"), a second defining it as relevant, but geographically or politically biased ("their newspaper"), and a third defining it as neither relevant nor local ("what newspaper?"). I show that the nominally "same" newspaper means different things to people depending on which folk theory they see it through and argue that journalism studies need to pay more attention to the different ways in which people interpret journalism to understand it.

Keywords

Folk theories of journalism, cultural approaches to journalism, journalism theory, local journalism, local news, audience research, qualitative methods, media ethnography

Word count: 5,000

Introduction

To understand journalism, we need to understand how people understand journalism. We need to examine what I define as "folk theories of journalism", actually-existing popular beliefs about what journalism is, what it does, and what it ought to do. In this paper, I draw on work in science and technology studies and on the sociologist Ann Swidler's idea of culture as a "toolkit" (Swidler 1986; 2001) to develop the concept of folk theories of journalism. I define folk theories of journalism as the culturally available symbolic resources that people use to make sense of journalism across different sources of news, ways of accessing news, and means of engaging with news.

The main purpose of the paper is to develop the notion of folk theories. To show how it can be deployed, I use data from interviews and focus groups to identify different and sometimes contradictory views of the role played by a local newspaper in a community in Denmark held by people of different backgrounds who all draw on a broadly speaking shared culture. I reconstruct three different folk theories in the case community—the many faces of the local newspaper—structured around notions of relevance and place (lay conceptions of what Kristy Hess (2013) has called "geo-social news"). The first folk theory defines the local newspaper as relevant and local ("our newspaper"), the second defines it as relevant, but not geographically or politically aligned with the locale ("their newspaper"), and the third defines it as neither relevant nor local ("what newspaper?"). I show that the nominally "same" newspaper, and one that is demonstrably by far the most important provider of news locally (Nielsen 2015) means different things to people depending on which folk theory they see it through, and argue that journalism studies need to pay more attention to the different ways in which people interpret, perceive, and understand journalism.

In the first part of the paper, I develop the notion of folk theories of journalism. In the second part of the paper, I outline the research design and data I draw on. In the third part, I present the three different folk theories that people in the case community use to make sense of the local newspaper. In the final part, I discuss the wider implications and possible applications of the notion of folk theories of journalism.

Folk theories of journalism

I take the notion of "folk theories" from research in science and technology studies on various kinds of "folk sciences", for example commonly accepted taxonomies of ecological systems ("folk biology"), taken-for-granted understandings of the physical world ("folk physics"), or widespread assumptions about how the human brain operates ("folk theories of the mind" (see for example Medin and Atran 1999; Heintz and Taraborelli, 2010; Carruthers and Smith 1996). Such theories are implicit parts of everyday life, and provide ways of thinking about and guides for acting upon the world around us. They can be more or less explicit, they can be shared or contentious, and they can be purely speculative, based on personal experience, and/or second-hand sources (Rip 2006).

Folk theories are in some respects theories in the same sense as scientific theories. They are generalized views of how the world works and conceptions of what it contains that are distinct from fact and practice, purport to capture patterns in what is happening, that are normally reflected upon when they encounter recurrent anomalies, but that are also often durable enough that no one individual experience or piece of evidence will decisively falsify them. They are

different in that they are folk theories, and thus not subject to the institutionalized forms of contention and communal evaluation that scientific theories are subject to, and in that they tend more towards enabling action than towards the accumulation of knowledge.

The distinction between folk theories and scientific theories is not tied to who holds a particular theory. Scientists are lay people too, and we all have folk theories (Rip 2006). As with scientific theories, some folk theories are, for lack of a better word, wrong. It can be difficult to judge in some cases, but not in others. Maybe I think the earth is flat. This is not true if I mean by "earth" and "flat" what we generally mean by those terms. Maybe I think that journalists are simply told by governments what to do. This is demonstrably not so in most countries.

Like scientific theories, folk theories—even folk theories held by the same individual on the same issue—need not form coherent wholes. Also as with scientific theories, folk theories need not cover everything, and not everyone will have a generalized view of any given issue or topic that can meaningfully be conceptualized as a folk theory. (Much of the world simply is, with no theoretical articulation, whether scientific or folk. Some of our individual views are idiosyncratic and not theories shared with others.)

Folk theories of specifically journalism (and by extension folk theories of other highly expressive and performative practices like mass entertainment, politics, and professional sports) are different from folk theories of science because they in a recursive fashion draw in part on journalists' professional self-presentation and meta-journalistic self-reflection (Carlson 2012). This is different from folk theories of biology or physics. In these areas, people may draw in part on scientific theories in formulating their folk theories, but what we call ecosystems or gravity do not articulate theories about themselves the way journalists continuously and publicly represents journalism itself.

We should see folk theories of journalism as rooted in wider cultures. What we mean by "culture" is, to say the least, a contentious conceptual issue in the humanities and social sciences (Patterson 2014). The strand of cultural theorizing that I draw on is the idea of culture as a "toolkit", developed by Ann Swidler (1986, 2001). In her work, she highlights how the idea of culture as one unified whole (as in the cultural anthropology of Clifford Geertz (e.g. 1973)) or society as defined by a few epochal discursive regimes (as in Michel Foucault's cultural analysis (e.g. 2002)) is hard to reconcile with the wide variety of actual practices we can observe every day, even by people who in every conventional sense of the word have a shared cultural background. To overcome this problem, Swidler suggests we focus less on what culture does to us and more on what we do with culture. In her view, culture should not be seen as one or more grand schemes that define our everyday life, but as a more or less shared "bag of tricks", a relatively wide repertoire or "toolkit" from which people put together a narrower range of "strategies for action" that they then actively deploy to navigate everyday life.

Like cultural anthropologists such as Geertz and cultural analysts like Foucault, Swidler sees culture primarily as symbolic, and as connected to action. She defines culture as "symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life" (Swidler 1986, 273). But unlike Geertz and Foucault's more structural approaches, she emphasizes the varying configurations people themselves create out of cultural resources to be able to handle and make sense of everyday life. All social scientific approaches to culture insist on both a structural component (culture as constituted) and a pragmatic component (culture in action) (Patterson 2014). The approach I draw on here emphasize the particular importance of the pragmatic component and of investigating cultural configurations that are more specific than

larger structures broadly shared by everyone in a particular setting. You and I can have the same cultural background in terms of, say, nationality and social class, but draw on these shared resources in ways that help us construct quite different views of the world, and informs different actual practices (Swidler 1986, 2001). Some of us have put together strategies of action drawing on available cultural tools ("journalism is superficial and silly" vs. "journalism is superficial but also integral to democracy"). These strategies of action in turn are likely to lead to different forms of practical engagement with journalism. This is a crucial point I take from Swidler: cultures' explanatory power lies not in defining the *ends* of actions, but in providing toolkits of symbolic resource from which we can construct strategies *for* action—folk theories of journalism are thus understandings of journalism that in turn shape engagement with journalism.

The notion of folk theories of journalism is meant to be a generative concept, a way of asking new questions that help us understand journalism. The idea of different folk theories of journalism, furnished in different contexts from culturally available symbolic resources, and in turn put into use by people in different ways in their everyday life can be operationalized in a number of ways. Like scientific theories, we can imagine folk theories articulated around a number of different questions: ontological ("what is journalism?"), procedural ("what do journalists do?"), epistemological ("what do journalists know and how do they know it?"), and of course ethical questions ("what is good journalism?"). Similarly, empirical analysis of folk theories can be designed around different overlapping issues. The questions include inductive questions ("which folk theories are there?"), explanatory questions ("why do people hold the folk theories that they hold?"), and questions about the consequences ("what do the folk theories that they hold mean for how they see and act in the world?").

In this paper, I analyze different folk theories on the basis of Kirsty Hess' (scientific) theoretical concept of "geo-social news" (Hess 2013) to illustrate how the concept can be put to use. On the basis of an analysis of small "local" newspapers in an increasingly digitized media environment where the kinds of territorial distinctions and geographic boundaries that used to be taken-for-granted parts of what made a local newspaper "local" are less self-evident, Hess argues that instead of assuming the connection between space and place implicit in categorizing a paper as "local", scholars should see these types of newspapers as engaged in the active construction of a certain sense of place as a "locale" by virtue of its definition of what is relevant and an area for which it is relevant. My specific argument here is simple—the actualization of geo-social news in Hess' sense is dependent upon how people understand the content (and news organization) in question. It is one of the many phenomena in journalism studies we can only understand if we also pay attention to how people understand journalism—to their folk theories of journalism. Many aspects of journalism and its role in society are contingent upon people's perception of journalism. To analyze these, we need to break with both our own and the people we study's "discourse of familiarity" (Bourdieu 1977) which so often leaves unexamined precisely the cultural and symbolic taken-for-granteds that are so important.

The basic empirical question in the rest of the paper is how people in the case community, drawing on a broadly speaking shared cultural repertoire, see the connections between a newspaper that very much sees itself and presents itself as the "local" newspaper, the news it publishes, the place it demarcates, and their own everyday life.

Research design

The data I draw on comes from a research project on local communities and political communication in a new media environment. Together with Nina Blom Andersen and Pernille Almlund from Roskilde University, I conducted a large-scale mixed-methods community study in a strategically selected case community in Denmark in 2013 to understand how people experience and engage with local politics today. Inspired by the community studies tradition associated with the Chicago School of Sociology and Robert Park as well as the early work of Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues in the Columbia School, we combined a survey with content analysis of local and regional media, monitoring of local social media accounts, three weeks of fieldwork in the community, as well as both elite interviews with local politicians, civil servants, and journalists, plus individual interviews and focus groups with a sample of ordinary citizens. The case community Næstved is a provincial municipality with a population of 81,000 centered around a mid-sized eponymous town of about 42,000 surrounded by smaller villages. The local daily newspaper, *Sjællandske*, has been published in Næstved since 1866. Originally associated with a center-right political party (Venstre) and competing with several other papers associated with other parties, it has since 1971 been the only local paper and has both editorially and commercially aimed to serve the whole community. In 2013, the daily print circulation was around 8,000 copies (down from 15,500 in 2003). In our survey, 32 percent of local citizens name the paper (in print or online) as an important or very important source of information about local politics (Nielsen 2015).

The data I use comes specifically from ten individual semi-structured interviews and five focus groups conducted with ordinary citizens in the municipality. Interviewees were recruited from four groups defined in terms of (a) their level of educational attainment (without or with a college degree) and (b) their level of local civic engagement (activity in local associations, political groups, etc.). Education was used for sampling as an indicator of socio-economic status, engagement in local civic life as an indicator of social capital. We thus recruited interviewees and focus group participants from four groups defined as (1) low formal education and low civic engagement, (2) high formal education and low civic engagement, (3) low formal education and high civic engagement, and (4) high formal education and high civic engagement. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted over the phone, typically lasting about 20 minutes. For the five focus groups, we recruited in part on the basis of the groups defined above, in part on the basis of geography, conducting three groups in smaller villages in rural areas and two focus groups in the urban center of Næstved itself. A total of 27 individuals took part in the focus groups.

The many faces of a local newspaper

This part of the article outlines the three main views identified in the interviews and focus groups. In each sub-section, I indicate which of Swidler's "symbolic vehicles of meaning" (beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, ceremonies, informal cultural practices, etc.) are used to make sense of the local paper. Throughout, beliefs about what the newspaper does or ought to do, as well as ritual and informal cultural practices embedded in daily life (routines of reading) are central parts of how people construct their relationship with the local paper.

The first view identified sees the paper as "our paper." The view is centrally associated with the perceived fit between the news it provides and local community life. Typically, this view is articulated around two cultural elements. First, a *belief* in the importance of being informed about local politics: "I subscribe to [the paper]. … That's the way in which you can

follow the local politicians and understand the local political process." *(*College-educated man, Interview*).* Second, an informal *ritual* of reading: "I read [the paper]. Moderator: "You read the paper?" "Yes, I always read it on my iPad, first thing in the morning." (Focus group.) But the view also comes with a much broader conception of the paper as playing a wider role as a civic institution, a belief in the collective, almost ceremonial function of the news as a way of tying together a community—as one college-educated woman in her forties puts it in a focus group discussion:

> "Then there is [the paper], which we have all mentioned here. I mean, this is when you realize how much it actually ties together the community. Whether you like it or not, there has to be someone who gives voice to the community, someone who serves to bring together things happening in our area. If you lived in a town like this, and there was no local newspaper... [Pause]. I mean, that would mean a lot, really, I think we would be even more alienated from the political processes. I think the newspaper is really, really important, the fact that it exists, even though I think a lot of young people don't read it."

Most of the focus group participants and interviewees who articulate the view of the paper as "our paper" have higher levels of education, are older, and have lived in the community longer. They are predominantly people who are active in local associations. The view is not confined to them, however. Again interpreting the paper through the belief that it is important to be informed about politics and aware of wider community events, a younger woman with a vocational degree who has only recently moved to town says:

> "We get [the paper] where I work. … I mean, they were really important, all the way up to the election. They were actually really good, it wasn't that there wasn't anything else, there were a lot of good stories, but they also made space for the election and really covered all sorts of things about it. In a way, I guess that is sort of necessary."

It is important to underline that though this view valorizes the newspaper as an important part of the local community, it needs not be an uncritical celebration of the paper. Praise is often tempered with qualifications. "I mean, it I'm sure there are better newspapers out there" (Focus group) and the like. "Our paper" is not necessarily a perfect paper.

The second view identified sees the paper as <u>"their paper."</u> This view is typically articulated around a belief that the content produced either (a) is not geographically proximate enough or (b) is politically biased. The perception that the newspaper and its content is geographically distant is especially prevalent in the smaller villages around Næstved itself, that, while routinely covered by the paper both in print and online, is subject to less coverage than the larger town.

> "The so-called "big paper", the daily, it isn't really worth much, because it covers a larger area including [names a couple of other towns] and the devil knows what else. I mean, they do have a couple of pages about us, but they don't cover everything happening here."
>
> *(College-educated man, Interview)*

As noted, the perception that the paper is for someone else, "their paper", is not only tied to geography. It is also articulated around a perceived political bias, a perception that can be found also amongst people who live in the main town of Næstved that most of the paper's coverage is focused on. Here, even people who care about politics distance themselves from the paper as a source of political information if they think it biased.

> "No, I'm sorry. I used to read the [local Social Democratic paper, closed decades ago]. I watch television and also read a lot on the internet. But [the local paper], that's a right-wing newspaper, I won't read it.
>
> *(Man in his seventies with vocational training, Interview)*

> "It [the paper] is a right-wing paper, so they don't want to hear any critical voices (Laughs) Oh, I didn't just say that, did I? (Laughs again.) I won't read it."
>
> *(College-educated man, Interview)*

The perception of *Sjællandske* as "their paper" is particularly interesting in that it directly engages with the paper's presentation of self as providing (geo-social) local and impartial news and rejects this by pointing to perceived geographic or political biases. While often critical of the paper, this view needs not be a wholesale dismissal. Many of the villagers who see the paper as "their paper" also acknowledges that its coverage of Næstved town "is pretty good" (as one put it) (Focus group). "Their paper" may be good, but it is not our paper, it is not good for us, here, because of its geographical focus or political bias. Given the dearth of alternative sources of local news in the community, this folk theory becomes a strategy for <u>inaction</u> rather than a strategy of <u>action</u>—the same people who distanced themselves from the local paper in interviews and focus groups would also often more generally highlight that they felt little genuinely local and relevant news were available for people like them and more often relied on a combination of national news (with no local coverage) and in some cases informal networks of social communication.

The third view identified is more the absence of a view, usually implicit. When explicit, it is a view that asks <u>"what paper?"</u> This can be associated with an absence of interest in local affairs and/or politics, but also in some cases simply the fact that people do not know of the existence of a paper that has covered the community for almost a 150 years.

> Man: I read the papers, you know, mostly online, but I don't really feel they cover [local politics] very much.
> Interviewer: What papers do you read?
> M: I read all of them, you know the big ones, also the little one you get through the mail [a free community weekly]. But it is hard, they don't really tell you anything.
> I: Do you read [the paper]?
> M: What paper?
>
> *(Man with vocational training, interview)*

> Man: "I have never seen that newspaper before"
>
> *(Focus Group 5)*

It is always hard to interpret absence, but it is noteworthy that of the total of 27 people who participated in the focus groups, a small number did not express any explicit views of the

paper, its content, or its role in the local community. In some cases, the absence of views is no doubt rooted in a wider lack of interest in news and current affairs coverage, but as in the first example above, the "what paper?" view sometimes goes hand-in-hand with interest in and engagement with national and international news, suggesting a particular problem at the local level. The interviewees and focus group participants who either explicitly articulated the "what paper?" view or who expressed no view at all were generally younger, had lower levels of formal educational attainment, and were rarely active in local civic life.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that to understand journalism, we need to understand how people understand journalism. Drawing on recent work in science and technology studies, I have developed the concept of folk theories of journalism as actually-existing popular beliefs about what journalism is, what it does, and what it ought to do that people use to make sense of news in their everyday life. Inspired by the cultural sociologist Ann Swidler (1986, 2001), I have suggested that people develop folk theories of journalism as strategies for action on the basis of broadly shared symbolic resources including the publicly available beliefs, rituals, and informal practices that surround news, and that a feature that sets folk theories of specifically journalism apart from folk theories of for example science is that people in a recursive way can draw on journalism's presentation of self when they interpret, perceive, and understand it.

To illustrate how the concept of folk theories of journalism can be used, I have analyzed how people in a homogenous community in Denmark talk about a local newspaper that is demonstrably by far the most important provider of local news (Nielsen 2015) and very explicitly presents itself as the preeminent provider of what Kristy Hess (2013) has called "geo-social news". Drawing on data from interviews and focus groups with a wide range of individuals with different backgrounds, I have identified three different views of the local newspaper, "our paper", "their paper" and "what paper?" With such different views identified in a relatively homogenous community covered by a newspaper that aims to provide news for the whole area, folk theories are likely to be even more diverse in more heterogeneous communities (especially with strong social cleavages) and in more unevenly covered communities where local media more explicitly target specific geographies (affluent suburbs, urban centers, etc.) or where multiple media position themselves in different ways (popular versus upmarket).

The present analysis is not focused on the consequences of each view, but it is likely that those who articulate the first view are more likely to routinely read the paper and, as previous research suggests, therefore likely to be more informed about local affairs, more active in local politics, and more engaged in civic life (e.g. Tichenor et al. 1980). Those who hold the second and third view seem less likely to engage with local news. Similarly, my aim here has not been to explain the origins of the views identified, though the overall findings suggest the importance of a more general social economy of cultural goods as well as the importance of associational involvement and spatial location in shaping how people see local news. Overall, and broadly in line with Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) idea that taste is deeply formed by social hierarchies, individuals with higher cultural and social capital accumulated through education and active engagement in local associations tended more towards the "our paper" view, while those with lower levels of overall cultural and social capital tended more towards the "what paper" view. Importantly, however, the "their paper" view generally seemed less associated with education

and engagement, and more with where people lived and with their politics. Generational differences as well as how long someone has lived in the community seemed to matter too.

The concept of folk theories of journalism is meant to be generative and part of a wider attempt to connect journalism studies with work in audience research and media ethnography and complement cultural analysis of journalists (Schudson 2003, Zelizer 2004) with cultural analysis of people's relation to journalism (Bird 2003, Costera Meijer 2013, Palmer 2013). The concept opens up a wide range of research questions, including what folk theories there are, why, and what their consequences are, just as the concept can be centered on folk theories of many different aspects of journalism, including what people think journalism is, what people think journalist do, what people think journalism means (for them, for society), and so on. Finally, in a time where the profession of journalism and the institutions that have sustained and constrained it are changing very rapidly, there is an open empirical question as to how actually-existing popular beliefs about journalism relate to the structural transformation underway, how folk theories of journalism relate to the professional and institutional realities of journalism.

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