

OBJECTIVITY



A SMALL MARKET NEWSROOM; SURVEYING THE FIELD

David Staton

University of Northern Colorado

Not long ago, I travelled to St. Petersburg, Russia. It was a swirl of color and cultures completely foreign to me. Shortly after I returned to my northern Colorado home, I began an “old guy” internship at a small-market TV station in a neighboring state. My work at the station was funded by a national organization, the National Association of Television Program Executives, as a faculty development grant that places educators back in real world, real work situations. For three weeks I made the drive from my home in Boulder County to the station to work and for three weeks it felt as foreign as the Russia trip.

I travelled from the firmly left-leaning county that is home to “The People’s Republic of Boulder” and a bevy of legal marijuana dispensaries to a small town that had recently held the first sanctioned bare knuckle fist fight in the United States in more than 120 years and where real cowboys roam real ranges. The din of cultures clashing was not just deafening, but defining. And that was just outside the newsroom. Within the newsroom, I was taken not just by the speed at which the news unfolds, but the pace at which it is told. I am a fan of interjecting myself into odd circumstance and foreign situations; it’s a

quality that helped me become a good reporter. But I believe we can cling to, or reflect on, some small familiar essence within those new and/or challenging circumstances and I was certain those long held associations I had with journalistic pursuit would rise to the surface. And so, perhaps most striking was the way in which asymmetrical power dynamics, in tandem with crushing economic realities, appeared to subvert objectivity. On those drives to and from the station, I gave this a great deal of thought and, as I always look to tether praxis and theory in the classroom, I found a framework that might comfortably “fit” the situation I was immersed in, Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory.

Bourdieu wrote in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) of *doxa*. *Doxa* is a sort of common sense that informs the decisions and distinctions we make about the world and our place in it. It, simply put, is the way things are or “the rules of the game.” *Doxa* might best explain our place within or relationship to fields, those competitive arenas in which people strive for reward such as professional workplaces like newsrooms, or politics and, of course, academics. Fields in turn have a mutual relationship with *habitus*, or the role or position played by the actors involved. And these positions are determined by varying structures of power, which Bourdieu dubbed capital. In overly

simplified manner, these components constitute Bourdieu's field theory. Whereas Bourdieu saw some fields as overlapping, he believed they generally remained autonomous. This runs counter to the overarching field of journalism or news-gathering in general for it is the nature of journalistic endeavor that it must interact with other fields or spheres in order to produce tangible content. Overlap, then, can decrease autonomy as one agent in a field is beholden to another to provide content. To my eyes, the reliance on such institutions i.e. law enforcement, may compromise objectivity. I witnessed officers (both police and emergency responders) stonewall reporters and evade direct questioning on occasion. There is decidedly an imbalance of power in the press-government dynamic that subverts the notion of hearing both sides of the story, otherwise known in journalistic circles as reportorial objectivity. Within the newsroom I observed, structures and practices have changed; and this reconstituted field is defined by the exigencies of speed and doing more with less. The one-person-band variety of television news is, of course, wide spread. In this scenario, a reporter is responsible for coordinating interviews, conducting the interview, and memorializing that process with complementary audio and video, which they edit. At minimum, reporters are expected to turn two packages a day, use those packages to record VO-SOTs, post three news items to social media, rewrite their stories for the channel's webpage, and do live shots (or go live anytime on Facebook for breaking news) when and where appropriate. They do this almost exclusively without editorial support; there are no additional eyes to catch mistakes. On numerous occasions I noted in my journal that the story product suffered as a result of time and staffing. As a group-owned station, management frowns strongly upon overtime and so some stories were either ignored or marginally reported.

When a gubernatorial candidate did not return telephone calls from a reporter, she was left out of the "equal time" scenario accorded to all

candidates because the piece had to air on schedule.

A piece on a local policeman who had discharged his weapon during a public event several days prior was met with resistance by a police spokesperson. What may have been a more substantive story, was turned into a much smaller one in order for it to make it to air in a "timely" fashion. Pressing the police for information in a small town does not come without drawbacks.

A number of phone calls come in one day: "There's something floating in the sky. What is it?" Reporting on this may stretch the limited of how news is defined, yet the community clearly was interested. The incident went unreported because there wasn't time, or a body, to report on it.

A news story involving some controversy took place about an hour's drive from the station. By the time the drive, the setup and breakdown of equipment, the interview, the shooting of b-roll, and the return drive took place, there was little time for the story to make it to air because the news director decided the piece would benefit from person-on-the-street reactions. Given that this story had taken place in another community, no-one in the station's home locality had interest in speaking on camera. Instead the reporter (a former student of mine) turned to the station's Facebook comments and gleaned some reactions, creating a graphic to accompany the story. Enterprising? Yes. Good journalism? Probably not. Again, time was too limited in order to present a balanced account of the story.

In a colossal understatement, things in newsrooms have changed. I brought what Bourdieu would call my present past to the contemporary arena. (When I was a reporter at a regional daily, the newspaper had a private jet at its disposal for news coverage, an investigative team, and staff reviewers of classical music, food, and fashion as well as layer upon layer of editorial oversight.) The logics and logistics of the *doxa*, writ large *habitus*, of the contemporary newsroom almost rules out the possibility of even-handed