

Bourdieu in Greenland: Elaborating the Field Dependencies of Post-colonial Journalism

Naimah Hussain

Abstract

The scarcely populated island of Greenland offers a unique opportunity both to study the complex dependencies and tensions of contemporary “global” or “trans-national” journalism and to test and develop the explanation power of one key theoretical framework, *field theory*. With only one (national and public) broadcaster and two weekly newspapers, the journalistic field in Greenland is small, exposed and vulnerable. It is embedded in the broader political, economic and professional field dynamics of Denmark, the former colonial power. For instance, the legislation and the organizational structure of the media are inherited and a flow of Danish visiting journalists and editors keep up the norms and the value system of the field. At the same time, Greenlandic journalism operates in a nation of its own with distinct characteristics: small size, politics of the bilingualism, tight local networks with a small elite and close ties between reporters and possible sources shape the field practically, professionally and socially (in a specific, local way). These tensions between the “global-colonial” and “local” capitals and capacities are negotiated and managed in the everyday practices of newsrooms. There is almost no previous research on Greenlandic media in general and journalism practice in particular. Mapping this small but contested field allows us to highlight some of the key analytical strengths of Bourdieu’s field theory and its ability to capture the dynamic actor relationships in such a complex, structured space. At the same time, however, the “post-colonial” realities of Greenlandic journalism can help us to pose some questions about the limits – or the need for further development – of Bourdieu’s initial sketch about the journalistic field. This chapter tests the analytical concepts of *capital* and *habitus* by putting them to empirical work through an ethnographic study of practices and structures of news making in Greenland.

Keywords Bourdieu, Greenland, Journalism Practice, News Values, Field Theory

1. Introduction

There is almost no academic research on Greenlandic media and journalism practice (Rygaard and Pedersen, 1999; Karlsson, 2008). However, the Greenlandic media system can be seen as a fruitful object of study for opening crucial contemporary practical and theoretical questions about the journalistic field. Due to its size, it is uniquely accessible for thorough empirical scrutiny. Due to its historical dependency from Denmark, it can be seen as an example of an emerging national field of its own, partly embedded in another, dominant national field – an example of postcolonial media context. This chapter argues that an analysis of the Greenlandic journalistic field – by applying Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory and its key concepts of *field*, *capital* and *habitus* – can open new insights on journalism practice and the workings of national media in Greenland. At the same time, putting these concepts into empirical work in a Greenlandic context offers a chance to reflect more generally on the interplay of journalistic, political and economic fields of the small and young nation thriving for independence. Greenland’s media system, understandably, is a small one. There is only one national radio and television station, the public service broadcaster *KNR (Kalaallit Nunaata Radioaa)*, providing daily radio news and TV news bulletins Monday through Friday. It also has an online platform, *knr.gl*, although not a very active one. The only other large actor – and the only real competitor for *KNR* – is *Sermitsiaq.AG*, a commercial media company publishing two independent weeklies, *Atuagagdliutit (AG)* on Wednesdays and *Sermitsiaq* on Fridays. It also runs the news website *sermitsiaq.ag*. The web outlet proudly calls itself “the most read news media in the country”. In addition to these two major actors, there are 17 local radio and 5 cable TV-companies, some of which have had news bulletins in the past, but now they mostly send music, quiz shows and very little journalistic content, primarily driven by local (non-trained) forces and financed through commercials. Currently *Nuuk TV* offers local daily news on weekdays from the city and the area of Nuuk and are planning to expand to other cities. Most other such actors, however, do not produce or distribute original journalistic content. Greenland has a long history of mass media or shared media, dating back to 1861, when *Atuagagdliutit* was first published (Stenbaek, 1992), and a strong tradition of small local newspapers often sporadically published by volunteers in the local communities. In the past there were up to 20 of these smaller publications (Karlsson, 2008; Stenbaek, 1992); at the moment, however, this number has fallen drastically. In this chapter I will uniquely draw on empirical examples of journalism practice at the three national media, primarily at the PBS-broadcaster *KNR*¹.

1 The empirical examples derive from the data collected for the author’s ongoing PhD-project with the working title “Media and journalism in Greenland – a study of journalism practice in a small, postcolonial society” (Roskilde University, planned submission).

Drawing upon the critical work of Pierre Bourdieu and journalism scholars that have followed his lead, I study journalism practice in Greenland in a field perspective. However, as the national Greenlandic field is partly embedded in the Danish, a central theme of this chapter is to think and to test *how the field theory approach is applicable in a double setting such as the Greenlandic*. One could perhaps talk about “a field within a field” (Benson, 1998; Benson and Neveu, 2005).

2. Bourdieu and field theory in journalism studies

Bourdieu did not publish much work directly discussing media. The much criticized (Benson and Neveu, 2005; Willig et al., 2015) *On television* (Bourdieu, 1998) and his contribution in Benson and Neveu (Bourdieu, 2005) are the clearest exceptions. However, his work on social practice and cultural production has proved useful in analysing media as it enables a nuanced empirical understanding of social practices and power (Willig et al., 2015). Thus, in my work, I draw inspiration from a host of journalism and media studies scholars that have applied Bourdieu’s theoretical framework (Benson, 1998; Benson and Neveu, 2005; Couldry, 2003; Couldry, 2005; Schultz, 2007; Willig, 2012; Willig et al., 2015; Hartley et al., 2011; Hess and Waller, 2016; Sjøvaag, 2013; see Willig, 2012 for extensive review). These scholars have shown that Bourdieu’s ideas are useful in analysing media, particularly when considering journalism as cultural production. His framework also helps us empirically understand media practices in the Greenlandic national media outlets. It suggests looking at these practices as part of a structured system of social relations and using Bourdieu’s key concepts of *capital* and *habitus* as analytical tools helps us in understanding how Greenlandic and Danish journalists in Greenland work, think and act.

As a starting point, the theory directs us to consider the journalistic field – or any field – as a micro cosmos. In the case of Greenland, this space is on the one hand a reflection of the local “national field” as such: the field of journalism reflects the logics and the structures of power that can be traced in the national field as well. However, the rules and values of this micro cosmos cannot simply be reduced to the national field and its broader relations of power. Thus, Bourdieu breaks with the deterministic tendency of social (class) theory and instead perceives society as structured into a range of differentiated, semi-autonomous fields – each with its relatively specific logic and set of rules. This means that for the actors each field consists of and is constituted by a *particular* hierarchy of rewards and forms of recognition. All fields direct actors to operate with a capital that is somehow specific to and unique to that field. Hence, the concept of field does not refer to a structure but to a *structuring* mechanism (Benson, 1998) where the struggles and competition between actors

within each field maintain the hierarchies (Schultz, 2007). As social agents are “playing the game” they are oriented not only to-wards winning but also in maintaining the existing hierarchy of the field (the rules of the game) which help them obtain and sustain a position according to the logics of the specific field. However, the re-wards of “playing the game” need to be desirable for the agents in order to close ranks (Willig et al., 2015). In the journalistic field the struggle to achieve the front page or an exclusive news story is for instance considered highly desirable (Schultz, 2007).

Field theory also assumes the existence of other fields as a necessary and structuring condition for the field that is analysed. This also highlights the facts that not all fields are equal. Some fields in society are more dominant than others – just as some agents are more dominant within a given field. In his broad sociology, Bourdieu argues that the logics of the economic field (and in some degree the political field) dominate the cultural field (Bourdieu, 1998; Benson and Neveu, 2005). The same argument also applies to journalism. Though we are interested in the journalistic field and its influence on journalistic work and practice, field theory demands us to understand this power (the rules and values of the journalistic field) as strongly structured and conditioned by the economic and political fields (Benson, 1998). A simple example of this would be the increase of influence of commercialization and the way “good journalists” – also increasingly in the eyes of their colleagues – are the ones who are able to attract large audiences. Another key way to assess the autonomy of the journalistic field would be to see to what extent journalists might refrain from taking a critical stance towards dominant political viewpoints. Thus, a key question for journalism is the relative of *autonomy* or *heteronomy* of their field. The autonomy of the field – the focus on the quality of the journalistic product itself – is never absolute, but to the degree that journalism is a field, it is somehow differentiated and recognizably distinct from the logics of the fields that condition it (Bourdieu, 1998; Benson, 1998: 470).

Looking at social practice via field theory, then, the concept of *capital* becomes crucial, as fields can be differentiated according to the specific combination of capitals (economic, political, cultural) whose significance is specifically ordered in a given field. For instance, the artistic field will acknowledge and value other forms and combinations of capital than the economic or the scientific field and so on (Benson, 1998). Thus, an actor’s position within a field is determined by the amount of capital, “*the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition*” that one holds (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 119).

Key insight into how capital translates into actor’s position and action opens up through Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*. It can be defined as personal dispositions on “*sensing, perceiving, thinking, acting according to models interiorized in the course*

of different processes of socialization” (Benson, 1998: 467; Bourdieu, 1984: 165-166). Habitus is not only based on the individual life experience but it is crucially also a product of societal standardization, division into social classes. As a “*structuring structure*” it is made of categories, standards and distinctions (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1984: 166). An actor’s habitus can be defined as a sense of one’s own position as well as a sense of others’ positions (Bourdieu, 2007). An actor in the field of journalism, for instance, acquires a “journalistic habitus” in order to identify why certain stories are chosen, why they are valued and why certain stories are written in a certain way. Becoming a journalist means mastering “*a specific, professional game in a specific professional field*” (Schultz, 2007: 193; Benson, 1998).

Even though agents have individual life stories and a self-perceived sense of independence, the notion of habitus underlines the sociological aspect: that is to say, social agents always act within the structures of the surrounding social space. Thus, social practice is never completely free but always structured. In order to do well in a given field, newcomers in a field have to try to adjust to the existing rules and to learn from the established agents in the field. While this underscores the power of the field over the actor, it also reminds us that habitus is not *unchangeable*. A habitus can develop and evolve. In general, scholars have shown that the journalistic field requires acceptance of the rules and values of the agents who are inclined to establish themselves, and so the agents will rather conserve or reproduce than challenge the logics of the field (Benson, 1998; Willig, 2012; Benson and Neveu, 2005)

A common critique of field theory has been that it is deterministic. This led Bourdieu, particularly in later discussions, to argue that field theory *does* leave space for individual agency and unpredictability – although this *possible* change or transformation of a field by new agents is still limited within the given structures at hand (Bourdieu, 2007). More clearly though, Bourdieu distanced himself from the narrow Marxist orthodoxy by claiming there *is* some autonomy *within* the fields. Field theory can thus provide us with an approach in analysing not the individual journalists, but rather *all* journalists or media organizations and the implicit codes and assumptions they share.

3. Journalistic habitus in Greenland: field notes

When applying field theory, one needs to bear in mind the historical and academic context of the sociology of the theory: French society of 1970s and 1980s and the debates about how to understand and explain modern society in that dominantly national context of a powerful European country with an imperial history. A question then arises as to (whether and) *how* it makes sense to apply Bourdieu’s conceptualizations in a context as different as today’s Greenland and its journalistic

field. This points to two directions. First, one must reframe the use of field theory in the light of the empirical data (Willig et al., 2015: 58), continuously ask questions and make qualitative inquiries into the field in question. Second, in addition to such empirical validity checks, re-contextualization of field theory to new contexts can also benefit from a dialogue with other strands of social theory. In the case of Greenland, I suggest that the empirical realities of Greenland can usefully point to discussing field theory in relation to the postcolonial theory.

Drawing on the analytical tools of *capital* and *habitus*, then, we can begin to ask questions concerning what kind of capital is acknowledged in the Greenlandic journalism field and what the “local” habitus of a Greenlandic journalist looks like.

Journalistic habitus is a complex empirical question. On one level, there is a deep, internalized understanding of what is considered good journalism and what is not proper in the space of the newsroom. The “news habitus” is then defined as “*a practical mastering of the news game involving a strong, bodily sense of news-worthiness*” (Schultz, 2007: 193). At the same time, there are some explicit values corresponding to the journalistic “professional” habitus. In a western-democratic media context, for instance, the notion of objectivity in reporting is central. Similarly, there are some clear journalistic hierarchies. For example, political and financial news are seen as more important than entertainment or gossip news (at least in media that consider themselves “serious”). At the same time, it is also important to see the forms of capital as dynamic. While a strict structuralist would argue that individuals are born and set into certain classes with certain habitus, seeing fields as spaces for *games* also emphasizes possibilities of mobility and change within these boundaries. Such negotiations in the everyday life of journalists also became visible in my own data collection at *KNR*, the Greenlandic PBS.

One of the key struggles emerging from the empirical data is the tension between a “local” and a “non-local” news habitus. Hess and Waller (2016) have also operationalized this question in their studies of three local newspapers serving small towns in Australia. They have identified a form of local knowledge (e.g. knowing “the direction the river flows”) immanent in the local journalist’s experience. This is a form of capital that the “fly-in-fly-out” journalists will never truly master, such as the local logic, people’s life stories, family relations, or the history of the geographical space. To be local, then, is to have “*a grounded connection with, and understanding of, a physical place and its social and cultural dimensions that is practical and embodied*” (Hess and Waller, 2016: 264). In a field-theory perspective, having a local news habitus implies commanding “*specialized knowledge and experience of what makes a place and the people within it ‘tick’*”. This is required to build legitimacy as an authoritative public voice and to meet the audience’s special information needs (Hess and Waller, 2016: 264).

In the case of Greenland, the question of local habitus is further complicated

by the fact of Greenland being a postcolonial society, with a history of 200 years of Danish rule. Empirically, one shortcut to understanding this condition would be to look at the ethnical differences between the local, Greenlandic population and the Danish immigrant population. However, this is an almost impossible task, since the two groups are so closely linked throughout 200 years of shared history and genetics. Thus, it quickly becomes difficult to define what it means to be “Greenlandic” or “Danish” in Greenland. A large number of the population are children of mixed marriages or relations, and they consider themselves a little of both or somewhere in between. All Greenlanders have Danish citizenship, and so residency statistics are not useful. Some have argued that mastering the Greenlandic language is an indication of belonging, but even this is a complex issue in Greenland, as there are ethnic Greenlanders (or Inuit) born and raised in Greenland who do not master the language due to for instance schooling.² These are all issues that need to be taken into account when looking at the specific field.

At the same time, one can elaborate the idea of power in the newsroom with the help of Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. A Danish editor might have more power and a better understanding of the newsroom values he guides the editorial work within.³ A newly arrived Danish reporter might rise in the profession quicker due to an internalized understanding of which values carry weight within the field. But such power hierarchies cannot be explained by ethnicity alone (which a strict post-colonial paradigm might argue). Rather, the habitus of the agent is formed by the personal, unique history as well. Has the reporter in question been trained at a local or a national media outlet during his or her professional education? Is he or she from a small town or a large city? For example, a Danish reporter residing in Greenland says in an interview⁴ that his insight into the small state issues of Greenland is deeper and better than the journalists coming from big cities, because he is originally from a small Danish town where everybody – like in Greenland – knows everybody (he himself, for instance, has personal ties with the town mayor of his home town). This personal trajectory, then, helps him understand the local reporters he is working with. Another example of how to question the explanatory power of ethnicity is whether the Greenlandic, local reporter is of a mixed Danish-Greenlandic background and fully bilingual or does he or she have Greenlandic as their mother tongue

2 Educational politics have changed now, but earlier it was considered a large advantage to master the Danish language in order to be able to take higher education in the (free) Danish system for Greenlanders.

3 All leading news editors are Danes at the moment, all though it is hard to make such an ethnic distinction, they are all born, raised and trained in Denmark at Danish news media, even though some of them have resided in Greenland for years.

4 The interview was conducted in September 2016 for my PhD-dissertation.

hence struggling in the newsroom during editorial meetings all held in Danish.

As a way of illustrating more concrete empirical aspects analysing the “post-colonial journalistic field” of Greenland, I want to briefly take up three preliminary findings from my ongoing field work. Rather than aiming to explain them, I offer these points to open questions related to the complexity of the “field within a field” I am studying.⁵

3.1 *The question of language*

The most striking evidence of the Greenlandic journalistic field being a “field within a field”, and closely intertwined with Danish norms and values, is the question of *language*. The dominating language in news work is Danish. Editorial meetings in newsrooms are for the most part conducted in Danish, the reporters are mainly working in Danish – except when interviewing with sources who only speak Greenlandic. This makes mastering the Danish language an absolutely essential skill and capital to hold (or achieve) in order to prosper as a journalist. At the same time, however, the bi-lingual reality is a controversial theme in the country as a whole. The quality of media language has created much debate over the years, most recently as a member of Parliament brought the subject to political debate by suggesting a political intervention in order to improve the status of the Greenlandic language in media (Karlsen, 2016). The Greenland Language Secretariat has also openly criticized the quality of the translations. This is a key question, as newspaper articles in the two weeklies are *first* written in Danish, edited and then versioned by professional translators, who are not journalists (Mediearbejdsgruppen, 2010).

During one of my interviews, a local journalist talked about her great love for the Greenlandic language. She considered the love of language being one of the main reasons for going into journalism in the first place. Ironically, however, she notes how this is not possible to carry out in practice, as all her work is written first in Danish (in order for the editor to proof read).⁶ Another reporter told me that he began his career working in both languages. This, however, took him twice the time as he was actually doing double work. In the end, he gave up on his high lan-

5 The data consists of field notes from observations studies at the national radio- and TV-station KNR, from 17 qualitative interviews with editors, reporters, interns, former reporters, the journalist union and more, from attendance at media seminars, informal conversations with journalists in Nuuk and Copenhagen, media debates in the public, and also from my own insight into the field as a former member of the journalistic field in Greenland (I’ve worked as a reporter and later as a journalism teacher in Greenland for 5 years before starting the official research).

6 The interview was conducted in September 2016 for my PhD-dissertation.

guage ambitions and began working only in Danish in order to get feedback from the editor, in full realization that his skills in his mother tongue would deteriorate in time. The same narrative came up in several conversations with journalists.

The role of language, however, is not restricted to writing and style. Some local reporters also find it difficult to partake in editorial meetings that aren't conducted in their mother tongue, as it is difficult to shift between the two very different languages. As one Greenlandic reporter puts it in an interview:

The Danish journalists and the Danes in general talk incredibly fast and a lot. They dominate a lot and talk a lot. So sometimes it can be hard to get a word in. Not because I have problems with it, because we take turns when talking about what we're working on. Sometimes I just don't say that much. Maybe it's a Greenlander-thing, that you don't just talk and talk and talk, like the Danes (laughs) but it doesn't give me any problems in terms of the work I'm doing.⁷

3.2. *Quoting stories*

A second example of post-colonial dependency of the Greenlandic "field within a field" being is the number of quoted stories from Danish media. Based on an earlier pilot study (Hussain, 2013) and observations, the use of Danish angles and Danish news sources in Greenlandic media is noticeable. There is a clear pattern of favouring quotations from Danish media (maybe because the editors are more oriented towards Danish media landscape and the dominant news stories in the Danish press) rather than, for instance, the neighbouring countries of Canada, USA or Iceland). Partly this orientation makes sense, as there are still very close political ties between the countries, just as there is the common language. But often the quoted news stories are not at all directly relevant to the Greenlandic public. For instance, a story on how many Danish athletes are competing in the Paralympics is quoted in the evening radio news (at *KNR* on September 19th 2016).

There are also examples of extensive use of Danish sources in the news. For instance, Danish experts on finances, municipal issues often presented in Danish media, are asked to analyse parallel Greenlandic issues without having prior knowledge of the distinct characteristics of the Greenlandic municipal or financial system. Nevertheless, the editors try to be consciously careful in not using too many Danish experts on Greenlandic relations. The editors – reflectively recognizing the way the postcolonial condition and heritage frames and structures their action – often share an assumption that the general public is sick and tired of listening to Danes telling them what is right and what is wrong.

7 The interview was conducted on September 20th 2016 for my PhD-dissertation, other interviews confirm.

3.3. *Local knowledge – local habitus*

Following Hess and Wallers (2016) idea of journalists with a “local habitus”, it is also interesting to study the demography of the agents of the Greenlandic journalistic field. At the moment, there are approximately 35 people working with full time news journalism in Greenland. Some of them have no formal professional journalism training.⁸ A number of these are trained Danish journalists who shift to Greenland to work as reporters – but usually only for a few years. The phenomenon of high staff turnover has existed for many years (and not only in journalism), and has been debated and criticized for just as many. For instance, when establishing a separate Greenlandic journalist education in late 1970s and early 1980s it was a distinct wish from the committee that Greenland could finally be “rid of the newcomers” from Denmark and instead fill the media positions with local labour with local knowledge, language skills and understanding of local customs and way of life (Lauritzen et al., 1981; Uju., 1981).

When my interviewees discussed the general differences between the “newcomers” and the “locals”,⁹ many prejudices and presumptions on both sides became visible. For instance that the “newcomers” or “outsiders” were seen as more aggressive and critical towards news sources, whilst the locals less so (for more see Hussain, 2018, forthcoming, and also Trøndheim, 2002; Wagner Sørensen, 1993). One Danish editor describes the cultural differences in these words:

There is sometimes a tendency that newcomers arrive on the four-o’clock-flight with a “know-it-all” attitude. Maybe they aren’t aware enough of the fact that they are taking the Greenlandic culture and squeezing it through their own Danish lens, where they see things in a very Danish way [...] It can be a real problem here in Greenland, where there are a lot of migrant professionals. We seem to overlook news stories, correlations, questions that would make sense for the Greenlandic audience, but don’t necessarily make sense for the Danish editor. Or he simply doesn’t see them, he doesn’t understand the context, or the cultural significance.¹⁰

8 4 journalists at each of the two weeklies, 2 at the web news desk *sermitsiaq.ag*, around 20 in total at the news outlets (radio news, TV news and web news) at KNR and 4 at Nuuk TV. The numbers are gathered through interviews with the managing editors of KNR and *Sermitsiaq* (June 2015) of *Atuagagdliutit* (June 2016) and web editor (September 2016).

9 This distinction is somewhat generic as some of the Danish reporters have resided in Greenland for more than a few years and they integrated into the local society, whilst others stay for only 1-2 years, just as Greenlandic journalists are of mixed backgrounds and some of them, for instance, have lived and worked in Denmark for some years.

10 Qualitative interview conducted in June 2015.

The same editor also described how the way of communicating in Greenland is different. Engaging in contact with sources, he especially notices, can be challenging to the newcomers: “*There are two very different cultures. They are not asking the right way, sometimes you need to ask your questions in a different manner*”. While conscious of these troubles, however, the same editor believed that the migrant reporters have better training and are more skilled than many of the locals. He ended up defending the practical need for Danish journalists in Greenland: “*They (the Danes) are more qualified, they see a complex report and quickly find the critical points*”.

5. Concluding remarks

The scarcely populated island of Greenland offers an inspiring opportunity both to the study the complex dependencies and tensions of contemporary “global” or “transnational” journalism and to test and develop the explanation power of one key theoretical framework, *field theory*. The journalistic field in Greenland is small, exposed and vulnerable, embedded in a broader political, economic and professional field dynamics of Denmark, the former colonial power. The legislation and organizational structure of the media are inherited from Denmark. A flow of Danish visiting journalists and Danish editors keep up the norms and the value system of the local field in Greenland.

At the same time, Greenlandic journalism operates in a nation of its own with distinct characteristics: small size, politics of the bilingualism, tight local networks with a small elite and close ties between reporters and possible sources. All these local contingencies also shape the field practically, professionally and socially (in a specific, local way), also opening up tensions between the “global-colonial” and “local” capitals and the habitus system of the field. These contradictions are negotiated and managed in the everyday practices of newsrooms. An in-depth empirical analysis of this small field can not only show its unique characteristics but also point to more general agenda of future journalism research in similar kinds of complex field conditions. In addition, it can suggest further need to how to apply, problematize and adjust field theory in the increasingly post- or transnational conditions.

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Biography

Naimah Hussain is a PhD Fellow at the Department of the Doctoral School of Communication and Arts at Roskilde University in Denmark. She is doing her PhD-dissertation in collaboration with Ilisimatusarfik (University of Greenland). The project is supervised by Professor (MSO) Ida Willig. Hussain is investigating the logics of journalism practice in a small, postcolonial society using Greenlandic national media as a case study, and she plans to hand in her dissertation in early 2018.

Email: naimah@ruc.dk or nahu@ti.uni.gl