Truce and Consequence. Indexing Theory and COP15 in the Danish Press.

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Abstract

The indexing theory is a theory about the relationship between media/journalism and politics with a focus on foreign policy issues, especially war. It states, that under particular circumstances where the national interests are at stake the media 'mirror' political power. It is a critical theory as it analyses the shortcomings of traditional/routine news journalism and its dependence on official sources. The indexing theory, therefore, is a challenge to traditional normative theory of the press, 'the fourth estate'. The paper consists of two parts: a short introduction to indexing theory and a discussion of its main theses on the basis of a Danish case, the coverage of COP15 in Copenhagen 2009 by the Danish media.

Keywords   News Institution, Objective Journalism, News Paradigm, Foreign Policy, COP15.

1.The indexing theory: Seminal works

Daniel C. Hallin published his seminal analysis of the coverage of the Vietnam War by the American media "The Uncensored War" in 1968. The media selected for analysis was the New York Times. Later network television news were added to the analysis (Hallin 1994). The analysis follows the war coverage from 1961 to 1973 where the US troops withdraw from South Vietnam. Because it was a limited war formally on behalf of the South Vietnamese government the access by journalists to the battlefield was almost unlimited, "uncensored".

The longitudinal study showed that the position of the media towards the engagement in Vietnam changed drastically in the period: Mostly supportive before the Tet-offensive in 1968 and critical after. In this last period of the war, the media documented the contradiction between what the US administration said and what reported by the journalists on the ground in Vietnam. Explaining these changes and contradictions is the centerpiece of the book and a central factor in the explanation is the ideology and practice of modern journalism, so-called objective journalism.

In the 1994-article, Hallin summarizes the study in terms of the state-media relation in this way:

> "…the case of Vietnam suggests that whether the media tend to be supporting or critical of government policies depends on the degree of consensus those policies enjoy, particularly within the political establishment. In a limited sense, the mirror analogy is correct. News content may not mirror the facts, but the media, as institutions, do reflect the prevailing pattern of political debate". (Hallin 1994: 68)

The argument is that main stream news media are dependent on official/government sources for 'validation' of their news stories, and what information the sources are willing to give the journalists are dependent on the present government policy on the one hand, and on the other hand on the degree of on consensus in the political environment.

Lance Bennett studied how the New York Times covered the US funding for the Nicaraguan contras, and came to a conclusion parallel to that of Hallin's study:

> "Mass media news professionals, from the boardroom to the beat, tend to "index" the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic. (…) Evidence supporting the indexing hypothesis would suggest that the news industry has ceded to government the task of policing itself and striking the democratic balance." (Bennett 1990: 106)

Piers Robinson summarized the relationship between policy and media in the following model:

Level of consensus	Media State Relationship	Role of the media
Elite consensus	Media operate within a 'sphere of consensus'	Media manufactures consent for official policy ('Megaphone role')
Elite dissensus	Media operate within a 'sphere of dissensus'	Media reflect elite dissensus ('Mirror role')
Elite dissensus plus policy uncertainty within government	Media take sides and become a participant in the debate	Media function to influence direction of government policy ('Partisan role')

In times when the media landscape undergoes rapid change and 'social media' seem to make the so-called legacy media less relevant than before, it is important to stress, that the indexing theory relates to the 'legacy media' or more precisely to main stream news media or the news institution. Furthermore, the indexing theory has most clearly shown its relevance in relation to foreign policy and security issues (Robinson 2010). Such enterprises, especially those of wars cannot succeed without a stable parliamentary consensus behind it. The political establishment must agree.

News in the tradition of objective journalism is dependent on sources, and a story, which cannot be documented by one or several sources is not a story. The value of news is also dependent on the status of the source so that the credibility of the story varies with the credibility of sources quoted. This means, that in the institutional set-up in a democracy the president or the prime minister has higher credibility than a majority member of parliament and a spokesperson for the government and more credibility that a spokesperson for the opposition.

What can a journalist do, when she or he is met with a massive wall of consensus among all official elite sources? The 'objective journalist' can only validate the story with the credible sources available, and if these sources are all in accord with government policy, the news story cannot avoid being pro-government. Within the paradigm of objective (news) journalism critique can only come in the form of opposing views from other credible sources, or outside the news pages that is as comment or editorial or the like. This is why the question of elite consensus is so important for political journalism. The question is, consequently: where does credible oppositional sources come from? Credible oppositional sources presupposes an effective political opposition. If such opposition is non-existent or ineffective "the press becomes a communication arm of government" (Bennett 2010: 108)

2. What is consensus?

Hallin defines elite consensus in the following way:

> "This is the region of motherhood and apple pie; in its bounds lie those social objects not regarded by journalists and by most of the society as controversial. Within this region journalists do not feel compelled to present opposing views, and indeed often feel it their responsibility to act as advocates or ceremonial protectors of consensus values." (Hallin 1994: 78)

Elite dissensus he describes this way: "This is the region where objective journalism reigns supreme: here neutrality and balance are the prime journalistic virtues." Dissensus is also described as the sphere of legitimate controversy in order to signal, that a sphere of illegitimate controversy exists, but will not be covered by the mainstream media. That sphere is characterised in this way:

> "Beyond the sphere of legitimate controversy lie those political actors and views which journalists and the political mainstream of the society rejects as unworthy of being heard. (…) Here neutrality (…) falls away and the media become, to borrow a phrase from Parsons, a 'boundary-maintaining mechanism,' they play the role of exposing, condemning, or excluding from the public agenda those who violate or challenge consensus values." (Hallin 1994: 69)

In Robinson's model of the policy and media interactions, we find a variant of enhanced dissensus. Here dissensus combines with uncertainty or outright confusion within government about what policy to pursue. In this case, the media take on a new role, they become autonomous actors in their own right within the triangle of political institutions of modern democracy: the political system, the public/electorate and the media.

In his study Hallin showed that the 'liberal' position of the media in the last phase of the Vietnam war, not so much was an effect of leftist journalists or liberal media as an effect of a change or breakdown of consensus in the Washington political elite reflecting a growing unease and disagreement with the government in the American public over the costs of the Vietnam engagement. This unease gradually seeped into the inner circles of the American political establishment producing policy uncertainty, which opened up the media for controversies, 'negative' or conflict stories. Once more, the media reflected the situation among the credible sources.

3. Theory and empirical evidence

The indexing theory is a critical theory of the function of mainstream news media particularly in relation to foreign policy issues. In passing it can be said that there are other critical theories studying media influence on foreign policy issues. A distinction can be made between theories that state that the media influences foreign policy (the CNN-effect (Robinson 2002)) and theories that state, that media generally mirror elite position (among others Herman and Chomsky 1988, and the indexing theory discussed here). A further discussion of the interrelations between these theories lies outside the scope of this small paper.

The indexing theory helps us understand the limitations of the ideology and praxis of so-called objective journalism, which developed in the beginning of the 20th Century (Høyer and Pöttker (eds) (2000)) and have dominated Western media for the rest of the century, but maybe has come to an end in the new millennium (Hallin 2004; Nerone 2015). This type of journalism works best in a climate of legitimate political controversy and it has problems if there are no sources or the sources are silent or if they all agrees upon a particular issue. In this situation, the media's option for criticism is to change journalistic genre, publishing a comment or an editorial instead of a news story, but these genres do not have the same public legitimacy as news stories: after all, they are just opinions! If all sources agree on a political issue, the news media will reflect the consensus and in practice function as an instrument of propaganda for the ruling elite.

The theory has been tested outside the USA and empirical evidence from several countries shows that it is solid (Germany: Maurer et al. 2005; Denmark: Kristensen and Ørsten 2007; Levin (2003) though, could not confirm the theory on the basis of Israeli material). The evidence in all cases mentioned relates to the foreign policy or security issues.

The theory raises questions about not only the function of standard news making procedures but also about the more general question about how media function in modern democracies. In the view of Bennett it is not so much a question about how the media works under reasonable normal democratic conditions, but "what happens when governing institutions fall to corruption, incompetence, political intimidation, deception, or deal making, and the range of official spin becomes a poor or misleading account of the events and issues in the news? What happens in these moments when an official opposition fails to arise to hold government accountable?" (Bennett 2010: 107)

Donald Trump is probably right when arguing, that the (mainstream) media was against him because the elite sources ('Washington') were unanimously critical of the 'twittering' candidate during the presidential election. How the media are going to handle the new anti-elite elite in the Trump administration and the fact

that he during the first two years of his presidency will have a republican majority behind him remains to be seen.

4. COP 15: a Danish case

COP15 was the 15. International summit on climate change organized by the UN. It took place in Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, in the period December 7. - December 18. 2009. It was the biggest international political event ever taking place in Denmark. Head of the negotiations was the Danish Prime minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen. The ambition of the Danish government was to land a new international agreement substituting the so-called Kyoto Protocol, and the government had as host put an enormous amount of time and resources into the preparation, so the expectation for success was high. The media coverage was extensive both nationally and internationally. Parallel to the UN conference an alternative conference for 'climate-sceptics' was organized by among others the right wing populist party in Denmark Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party). Massive demonstrations in the streets of Copenhagen were held in support of the poor countries and against the rich Western countries, that seemed to have the most to gain from a new protocol.

Many studies of the international media coverage of the summit has been conducted (see f.i. Painter 2010), but little has been done on the Danish media (Jørgensen et al. 2010). Barfod and Hansen (2010) undertook an analysis of how the Danish press covered the event. Three national Danish newspapers were selected for analysis, all three of them quality papers. Two of them leaning towards the right in the political spectrum and one center-left.

The empirical material for the content analysis was selected in such a way, that it covered three weeks before, two weeks during and three weeks after the conference. The sample analyzed in the three dailies was 1183 articles. From the Danish newspaper database Informedia all journalistic entities containing the word climate within the defined time period was selected. Further selection was carried out in order to avoid material not connected with the summit, 1183 in all. The sample was analysed quantitatively in order to calculate percentages of total coverage and in relation to the selected dailies. In a qualitative analysis all articled were read in order to identify critique of government and of Prime Minister Rasmussen as chairman of the summit by sources quoted and journalist opinion.

In order to understand the coverage of the summit by the Danish media it is necessary briefly to draw a map of the political system in Denmark at the time. The Danish parliamentary system is a multi-party system and governments are normally minority coalition governments. In 2009 seven political parties were represented

in parliament, and using the traditional left-right dichotomy three parties were to the left and four to the right. The government was a two-party government to the right supported by a third right wing party Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party). Together the three parties formed a majority.

The content analysis looked for voices critical of government articulated in the three newspapers critical news stories, critical sources and critical comments and editorials in relation to the government and to the prime minister as chair. The result of the analysis showed that before and during the conference criticism of the government and of the prime minister as chair were non-existent in all three newspapers in spite of an intensive coverage. After the conference, criticism by the political opposition was massive in all three papers stating that that the conference was a failure and the chair incompetent and responsible for the fiasco.

5. Truce and consequence

How to explain this very clear pattern in the press coverage of COP15? On the background of the results of the analysis of the three Danish newspapers, the spokespersons for environmental issues from all political parties in parliament were interviewed. The answers were revealing: In parliament, there had been a truce, a deal between five of the seven parties securing that the government and the prime minister as chair of the conference could not be criticised in the phase of preparation and during the conference. As one of the spokespersons (for The Socialist People's Party) put it: "We know the media: No conflict, no story!" (Barfod and Hansen 2010: 60 (my translation (MBA))). In order to protect the government from criticism of a project of national importance, a conference expected to figure as dressing window for the progressive environment policy of Denmark, export options for the windmill industry and so on, the national press were cut off and left with government spin. Immediately after the conference hell broke out, all three newspapers irrespective of their political affiliation jumped on the prime minister and blamed him for the very modest results of the conference negotiations. After the conference, the credible oppositional voices were available, and the media were back on track within a sphere of legitimate controversies.

The results of this small study are in line with the general indexing theory although the scope of the study calls for an extension in order to include the tabloids and the public service media. It is therefore not possible to conclude that all Danish media yielded to the truce. More detailed results raise questions worth discussing. First, not all spokespersons recognized that they had been part of the truce. The party on the right organizing the alternative conference for 'climate sceptics' was not part of the truce. Neither were the party on the far left, Enhedslisten (The

United Nomination List). The political parties that entered into the temporary consensus of truce was a majority and consisted of 'the old parties' in the Danish parliament in political language often called 'the responsible majority'. Second, the fact that there were parties outside the truce agreed upon meant, that there were sources which under normal political conditions would be considered credible and legitimate. That goes especially for Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party) as it was for all practical reasons part of the government coalition although not directly part of government. At the same time, this party organized an alternative conference and therefore giving the media a host of opportunities for alternative and oppositional view on the climate issues negotiated at the UN conference. Third, COP15 in Copenhagen was covered by international media and it was an international scandal when the Danish chair leaked the finishing conference document to the British newspaper The Guardian. The Danish newspapers analyzed kept silent on the oppositional viewpoints and criticisms in spite of the fact, that there was a host of possibilities for conflict stories that might have been validated by sources normally considered legitimate. The political situation was not normal, though.

More analysis is needed, but at this point the following preliminary conclusion seem justified: The differences between two-party and multi-party political systems should be taken into consideration when studying the indexing theory. The indexing theory seem to be relevant in relation to a broad spectrum of political issues of national importance. War and other security issues is only some of them. Mainstream news media seem to define source legitimacy according to strong majority rule in parliament when covering issues defined as of vital national importance by this majority. Source legitimacy for the media in this way becomes a kind of thermostat value regulated by the level of temperature of the political issues or in other words parliamentary majority consensus seem to define what is legitimate and what is not and thereby define the frame within which mainstream media operate. Political parties can under particular circumstances and for a limited period of time suspend the mechanisms of mediatization because they know these mechanisms and know how to utilize them.

Here we should recall Hallin's remark on the unworthy discourses outside legitimacy. What he in the American context is referring to is the more or less permanent exclusion of for instance communist discourses from the public sphere. The Danish case studied relates to a temporary consensus and a temporary exclusion of otherwise legitimate voices in the mainstream news media. Parliamentary majorities seem to have the capacity to under certain conditions to de-legitimize particular viewpoints and the press follow and put its fourth-estate-ideology and pratice on hold.

The question why the media comply with the political majority in spite of a wealth of sources normally considered credible and legitimate inside and outside parliament is still unanswered. We need to know more about how the media, editors

and journalists see this mechanism and in the light of this how we are to understand the question of media accountability. What the case indicates is apart from the earlier mentioned shortcoming of mainstream news journalism that is not necessarily the availability of sources as such, which determines what the media will cover but the 'editorial tradition of respect' for majority rule and for the procedures in democratic decision making. During events of vital national importance, elite consensus seems to equate a parliamentarian majority protecting its government. The mainstream media seem to be thinking: give the government a brake for a moment!

In the new media landscape, the close connection between the news media and political power cannot continue to be the same. The so-called social media do not draw the same borderline between national and international voices and cannot do without all kinds of (normally) illegitimate voices and unworthy discourses. With the twittering president Trump the media-power nexus seems to be turned upside-down with mainstream media representing the unworthy discourse. That is another story.

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