

Professors and Scholars as Experts: Problem Setting and Methodological Considerations for the Examination of Newspaper Articles

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ABSTRACT: Even if new media like wikis obtain some attention, classical media (radio, television, newspapers) still are important sources of information for the informed public, e.g. the public that is interested in what is happening in his/her environment and the world, and wants to understand events and situations. Authority still comes with specific media that have kept on establishing their credibility. But journalists themselves also need reliable sources of information, and they require regularly University professors and similar Scholars in renowned institutions. This allows them to include precisions and richer background in their papers to inform and help understand complex phenomena. After presenting the general context and the problem setting of this research both as a knowledge question and as a social issue, a few short articles will be examined in detail to see how this works in specific examples.

KEYWORDS: professors; experts; press; media; public opinion; newspaper articles; authority.

1. INTRODUCTION

It might be relevant to recall here in what research context this particular study is situated. It fits within the goal of a larger scope project that I aim of doing in the longer run. I collected systematically an important quantity of articles published during the year 2009 in three important Quebec newspapers, respectively *La Presse* (Montreal), *Le Devoir* (Montreal), *Le Soleil* (Québec city). With a competent research assistant, I found no less than 2400 occurrences, in the whole year of 2009, or precise references to professors giving opinions or information in the material content of the articles on different issues; these newspapers are published 6 days a week, for a possible sum of 302 issues per year, which means 906 issues total, without taking into accounts holiday breaks; this gives us roughly speaking a mean of 2.7 occurrences of professors by issue! These pieces all involve university professors, or similar research people at the same level, that are called to and intervene for discussing complex issues that sometimes are about policy controversies. We did not do a longitudinal study, only a brief verification outside of 2009; we saw a small decline of the total number of occurrences compared to the year 2004, of the order of 10%, but this would have to be looked at much more extensively to be decisive. At this point, the most we can say is that there is still a significantly important presence of professors in newspaper articles in recent years, even though there might be a slight decline in their use.

2. NEWSPAPERS AND PUBLIC OPINION

The newspapers and other media are obviously on the front scene of the relationship between scientists and citizens; and for any given problem or discussion, there is a university professor to be searched for and interviewed, that represents something akin to “scientific information” on a given issue. In the Quebec data at least, the thematic scope of their interventions is extremely large. Given the scope and complexity of this data set, it seemed to me probably preferable to furnish here a preliminary discussion establishing in particular the terms of the discussion, if this research is to be meaningful at all. After this discussion, it will be possible to look at a few newspaper articles to get a better grasp of what can actually be done.

In the past, I have been interested in the theory of the formation of public opinions, which goes far beyond opinion polls, since these processes of formation include a variety of factors, among which are basic education and continued processes of education, social circles, and also media material use, that all play an important part. When we look at specific pieces for expressing opinions, for instance opinion articles, we find specific elements that can be identified as contributing potentially to a process of formation of the opinion of persons. This process can be efficient or not, or to a degree; I have not invested myself into the process of trying to find how efficient or how convincing a message actually is by looking at the recipients of messages, for instance by trying to see in which way they were influenced or not by the media content. Even if I expressed in the past a proximity to cultivation analysis in general as a perspective for treating media effects, before considering this there is a basic general element that has been acquired by years of research in philosophy and social sciences since the linguistic turn. We understand more and more that thought comes in and through communication. It follows that a message with cognitive, performative or normative content can come to us with relative force, can be echoed also with force and importance by and through others; it can be seen by us as convincing or not, complete or not, sufficient or not to build an opinion. If it is relevant for our purpose and needs, the information available can be selected and become part of the process of reflection and decision making; of course its absence will deter any effect it might have had if it would have been available (Miller, 2005; Gerbner, 1998). Therefore, without denying the importance of looking at the receiver’s end of the process, it is relevant and controllable to look at the actual messages that are produced, to see how they are structured, what is their relative force, how do they function as argumentative devices. And what is specifically interesting with newspaper articles is precisely their diversity, the way they mobilize a plurality of opinions and find a certain closure even if in many cases, this closure is uncertainty and the absence of decision. The simple fact that there is this significant number of articles and other media interventions of professors certainly “cultivates” the fact they have something to say on different matters; they are part of the debate.

Even if new media like wikis obtain lots of attention and get what we can call a good proportion of the whole of media uses, classical media (radio, television, newspapers) still are important sources of information. In any case, they are still so for the *informed* public, e.g., the public that is interested in what is happening in his/her environment and the world, and wants to understand events and situations. There is, in many measurements, reference to a regression of the number of readers of newspapers since 1990; the numbers differ from country to country, and in some cases the regression is quite important. But in some cases the free newspapers distributed in the metro station contribute to a bigger number of people reading the press everyday, which is the situation in Montreal between 2001 and 2011 (Université Laval, 2011, p. 4). The most important paying newspapers see their numbers declining while the free

ones climb. And it seems that users of the internet edition of the newspaper generally speaking are still readers of the paper edition. On the business side, generally speaking in Quebec at least, the beneficiary margin for the published newspaper has diminished in recent years, losing between 2 and 3%, but they are currently around 10% of benefit margins. Even if the decline of the paying press is well- documented, it does not have to be equated with an upcoming disappearance of the written media or irreversible decline.

2.1 The continuation of the authority phenomena in the press

There are a few important elements here, onto which stress has to be placed: first, in the process of recognizing the role of the so-called new media, we have this tendency to underestimate the role and importance of what we can call in contrast the classical or already old media. We also miss the fact that in the process of the world wide web development, the classical media can and do seize the opportunity of asserting themselves as serious organizations, worthy of the attention and following of people. They develop while becoming integrative platforms with multimedia resources at the disposal of a mouse click for the interested reader or viewer. Second, we have a tendency to consider “the public” as a whole, as if there were no differences between publics, or as if there was a unity between the whole of the people considered as “the” public. Fragmentation of publics does not have to be equated with lack of strength of the publics; this impression sometimes goes with the nostalgia of the “one public” of which we could dream when there were very few media available. After the criticism of Habermas’ first theory (1962/1990) about “the public” of the enlightenment period, the new situation of pluralism that has developed has yet to be fully accepted.

One possible way of constructing collective groupings of people is to group them in function of questions of perceived common interest. Some people do have a permanent interest into public affairs. We can wonder, in the enlarged discussion opened by the Lippman-Dewey controversy, to what point a critical discussion involving “the public” in a democratic life implying participation is realistically possible, considering the specialization required and the different types of expertise that are necessary to be able to validly discuss complex issues. But if we turn our backs on “the public” in general to consider instead the case of a very large diversity of publics sometimes regrouped around specific interests, we can also have specialization at the level of the different publics, and constitution of valid but limited publics.

As James R. Taylor explained in recent communications, there is still very little published work on authority as a communicative phenomenon (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Taylor, 2012). Authority still comes with specific media that have kept on establishing their credibility. Even after the rise of the internet and Google, we still go back to classical media that are recognized as valid sources to get information, whether it be the *New York Times*, the *Economist*, and other written media that more and more include in their web versions videos and films that contribute to closing the gap that had separated them for some publics, from reputed TV networks. The text thus integrates images and filmed narratives, an element that for now is rarer on TV programming (even though with the WWW television, texts might also be available for reading through that medium). In the actual context, we can say that the written media that has successfully crossed over to the internet by introducing and using a rich array of media, is certainly in way of reviving its credibility and importance in the public life.

For all the classical media, including of course *El País*, *Die Welt*, *Le Monde* and many others including *Le Devoir*, *La Presse* or *The Globe and Mail*, authority has been established

and is the result of years of journalistic work, and this does not mean that these journalists and media people can satisfy themselves with their reputation and not re-establish it continuously by keeping on doing a good job. But journalists need reliable sources of information, and they require regularly University professors and similar scholars in renowned institutions for getting precisions and richer background to understand complex phenomena. This contribution becomes then part of the larger phenomena that is the newspaper article. I propose to understand the newspaper article as a chorus of voices, among which we can count the journalist, important sources, actors, bystanders, but also knowledge experts that, most of the time, come from the scholarly world one way or another. Regarding the professors, for me what is interesting is to identify the importance of their contribution in the article, especially asking to what point what they say actually is the main message or part of the main message that is forwarded by the article in question. Being able to verify this would mean that they contribute strongly to the article's meaning and potential effect on eventual readers.

As we will see, this can happen and does happen in newspapers articles or other news media; let us think of debates on television with experts from renowned institutions, some of the times universities, some of the times similar venues; in the USA, PBS is the obvious example, but it is not to say that the other, private big media do not emulate them. Of course, some of the times neutralization of experts will also potentially take place (with people from both sides face to face, a phenomenon that is present). The situation is obviously always specific to the different countries, but this phenomenon (the professors used as expert sources by the media) is largely present at the international level and not limited to one country or province. In some countries, like France, the “intellectual” can be quite detached from the University, at least in some cases, but not always (Torck, 2012). Media actors, especially journalists, need reliable sources; the university professors in principle, but not in every instance, represent in principle the interest of being independent. At least they furnish the appearance of independence, even though in some cases this could be an illusion.

3. SPECIFIC QUESTIONS WITH ECONOMICAL DIMENSIONS

Before entering in the discussion of actual content, I would like to stress the fact that, in the Quebec province at least, professors and/or their employer, the universities which have a strong tendency to run deficits each year, do not receive compensation on a regular basis for their participation to media outlets, which has now been documented for the first time that I know of. Quite frankly here, I do not see the need for the professor to receive monetary compensation, even though in some cases of persons without tenure-track employment, the question could be seriously discussed. But with our universities struggling to get more money, the question arises of the price of this expertise that is freely offered by professors. One obvious trade-off that takes place is expertise for visibility, both for the institutions that see their credibility reaffirmed and for the professor. And a free participation to the public debate might be justified on the basis of the fact that, for the most part at least in Canada, it is public money that funds the universities, so it can be understood that this free service is part of what is required of them to justify publicly their very existence. Then again, some colleagues insist that this is not a necessary part of their workload as professors; it has to be a free contribution, not something mandatory. We can also express that we could compare ourselves to public and free access venues of knowledge like Wikipedia for instance, even though some would argue that universities are much more serious and important sources of knowledge! Others would say

that there is a price for what we do and that price should be assumed, especially if it is for private profit (as in the private media). The discussion might stay at that level if there were no rights of access to pay for treating publicly and in published form newspaper articles, for instance. For the ends of this article, I submitted to the *New York Times* a request for the rights to use a very long quote from an article, just for having knowledge of the situation that would apply if I were to actually include such an extensive quote, e.g., how many rights would I have to pay; the answer referred me back to number of copies and extension of the distribution of the published work-to-come. The situation is obviously different for every newspaper in every country; in Canada, one of the authors in a book I am currently editing on this very same topic had to pay (I contributed) around \$350 Canadian for a partial reproduction of an article from the newspaper *la Presse*, that publishes around 400,000 copies a day. The cost of using an entire article has a cost, and even to fully access the content sometimes is not free. There is in many cases the notion of fair use (among other elements, if no copying occurs and no revenue will be obtained). If the Universities were to apply a commercial kind of logic for dispensing public knowledge in newspapers, they would have to identify the number of uses of one of their personnel's expertise each year and charge the media for it...A possibility that should be considered more carefully. It might backfire and become an argument for further private uses of information!

It probably could be interesting to give a sampling of the work on the Québec newspaper articles, but with difficulties. Of course for the English-speaking hearer or reader to enter into the actual content of the analysis, this would require a translation of the articles. In fact, the actual treatment of the data accumulated is not completed as of yet, so it is not possible to just publish the result of the whole study. It is then preferable here to see what questions arise by looking at articles in English, published in well-known newspapers, and to discuss and show how they can be treated in a significant and enlightening way. Our point of view is argument-centered; we are mostly interested in how newspapers are using professors as sources of authoritative information, and how this might be in the long run, especially for decision makers, an important element to arrive to policy making. With a whole corpus thoroughly analyzed, if that were possible, it would be interesting to see what is the mean proportion of articles of which we can say that they give the opinion presented by the professor(s) called as expert(s) as the main opinion(s) on the topic presented by the article. What we can do here is to verify that this question can find a positive answer in one or two case studies. Some more specific studies can also be pursued later on, for instance to situate what can be said about the interventions by professors on environmental governance issues in particular, in communication technology issues, etc. One relevant question is to what point professors are only sources of relevant information that does have weight, or if they are really opinion makers by expressing positions on difficult issues; both situations exist (Schuetze, 2012; Lyall, 2012).

4. SOME INTERESTING ARTICLES

A first article can be looked at more closely; since we are freely giving publicity to this famous newspaper, as a subscriber I share only the analysis of this document with colleagues and graduate students doing research, for discussion. The selected newspaper article, published in the *New York Times* and then republished in the *International Herald Tribune* for people living abroad, is treating costs for the upcoming summer Olympics in London, more precisely the

British discussion that is going on about the price tag involved by this big event, scheduled between July 27 and August 12 in 2012. This happens of course in the context of the British government's recent budgetary rigour and deep cuts. The newspaper article can be seen as a series of quotes by different sources, which are also different opinions or data on the subject (Lyll, 2012, p. B10). The article is particularly rich, referring and using quite diversified sources. As for the University or independent researchers that are called into play, there are two of them; they come towards the end of the article and their opinion can easily be seen here as closing the discussion that was opened by the article in the beginning and intermediary part of the text.

The paper starts with two paragraphs recalling the costs of the last London Olympics, in 1948, and the poverty at that period is stressed, contrasting the £760,000 budget of the time (which was paid by sponsors) with the “£9.3 billion (and counting)” (Lyll, 2012, p. 1) that is estimated at the present moment, of course before the Olympics. The first source mentioned is then-prime minister Clement Attlee; the numbers given, for instance the fact that there is a 8.4 percent unemployment rate in Great Britain in 2012, “the highest in 17 years,” are given without referring to sources. Sources quoted in the government are actual Prime Minister David Cameron, with the desire expressed in November 2011 to “showcase the best of Britain to a massive audience” (Lyll, 2012, p. 1), then Jeremy Hunt, Culture Secretary, who talks of the event as an opportunity to harness in a time of crisis. To support the article's claim that this expected high cost “has not been universally popular” (Lyll, 2012, p. 1) in a place where the government wants a solution to the financial crisis in terms of deep cuts, the paper refers to an article in *The Guardian* by Richard Williams; in the web edition, it provides a direct link to the article. As quoted in the *New York Times* article, Williams comments on the addition of budget that was given to the person responsible for the opening event, Danny Boyle, famous for realising *Trainspotting* and more recently the celebrated *Slumdog Millionaire*. Here the article potentially touches the film amateur and cultural critic's interest for high-level media culture. The three next paragraphs of the article refer to other countries' difficulties and criticism towards their own Olympics and what were the costs: Barcelona, Athens, Montreal, then two paragraphs are given to the present Italian government's attitude; considering to apply for the 2020 games, they decided not to; here the quote is given to Mario Monti, Prime Minister of Italy who said so much. In a movement in the opposing direction, two paragraphs are then again given to the British Government's justifications in this dire economic context, and here it is Hugh Robertson, the Sports Minister, that is quoted: the decision to hold the Olympics was taken before the recent cuts, and they are presenting London not as a superpower but as a place where it is good to come to spend money (Lyll, 2012, p. 2). It is after all this that the professor is called in, as we might say. Let us take then a closer look introducing and giving the contribution of the University professor, called as an expert to discuss the issue for the public of the *NY Times* (a thing he probably did for free, as most professors do).

Tony Travers, a professor in the government department at the London School of Economics, said that it would take decades before the long-term financial implications of the Olympics became clear. But, he said, the great Olympic-related achievement has been the regeneration of a huge tract of derelict urban land in East London, site of the Olympic village, into a viable community with enough housing and infrastructure to carry it forward.

Planning and building have been carried out with ruthless efficiency, he said, so that an effort that would normally have taken decades has been achieved in little more than five years. After a string of construction embarrassments like Wembley Stadium and the Millenium Dome,

both of which were marred by trouble and went wildly over budget, the project will help transform Britain's reputation abroad, he said.

"The advertisement for British planning, architecture, design, project management and building is extraordinarily good," Travers said. "This will undoubtedly send a message that Britain is good at delivering big projects on time." (Lyll, 2012, p. 2)

Clearly, here the professor gives the limelight to two sets of very positive side effects of the Olympic process. One is very recent, and it gets us out of the discussion focusing only on costs too high in the context of cost-cutting everywhere else from the government. He is asserting that some very important social goods derive or will derive from all this investment, which is clearly a positive element in the evaluation, even though he expresses some reservations as to what will be the actual cost of all that. One positive side effect is expected in the future: this will be excellent for the businesses of Britain and for their reputation, another enviable side effect of the upcoming games. These games will then have both public investment and private investment positive side effects; what could be better!

Let us continue to review the article, towards its conclusion now. This positive assertion from the professor is rapidly put in question again, with another series of interventions from a diversity of sources. A discussion of pre-games grumbling as something that was there from the start is asserted, this time with the support of an article published in the Bagehot column of the *Economist*. Here again, an important hyperlink leads us directly to this other publication. The article is recalled in the *New York Times* as showing both the project as "a juggernaut controlled by an unaccountable sporting elite," and as opening the possibility that will give Britons to "feel only pride at hosting a spending games, fueling new confidence in Britain's future," while asserting that for now, the discussion is more about money than about glory (Lyll, 2012, p. 2). Many other critics are listed then: some have compared the logo to badly drawn male genitalia; the American comedian Jackie Mason, summarising the national mood, said that is all a question of if you don't mind paying higher taxes for ten years; and Leon McCluskey, an important union leader, uttered a menace of a strike during the Olympics, on the basis that the idea to see people celebrating these wonderful Olympic games in those dire economic moments "is unthinkable"; we learn then that these menaces have been then criticized as unpatriotic (Lyll, 2012, p.2).

It is interesting to note that here, at the very end of the article, the University professor has an ally (or a competitor, depending on how you see it) as an authoritative source that comes to close the debate in a way. It is worth another longest quote:

Meanwhile, Joe Twyman, director of political and social research at YouGov, a polling organization, said that griping is almost second nature in Britain. Britons were not particularly positive before the royal wedding last year, he said, but changed their mind once they saw how well it went. He predicted that the same thing would happen with the Olympics.

"It's one of those things that you would describe as 'being British,'" Twyman said in an interview. "People don't get massively enthusiastic until the time comes, and even if the whole country's not on board, enough people are enthusiastic enough to make it a memorable event." (Lyll, 2012, p. 2)

This other source is asserted by the article itself as being of the "research" kind; this "director of political and social research," comes to give the *coup de grâce* to the critics; it is only a national mood, the spirits of the Britons are taken by regular griping phases, but they get over it, as they did with the royal wedding. We then have good reason to think, after having reviewed a series of criticisms and complaints, that it will probably be a positive experience, so

it is asserted under and by the authority of the professor and of the private researcher! The article as such does not take position; it can let the experts do the job, but the questionings that surface in the first half of the article, and that sustains probably the interest of the reader, do find some positive resolution and answers by the professor and expert's contribution.

We have relatively simple cases where (again) the university professor or equivalent sets the tone (in a recent paper on oil price increases, where, as in the case just reviewed, one private research institute and a university professor are both placed in the forefront), among cases where their contribution is more anecdotal or complementary to the main content of the article (Davidson, 2012).¹ But sometimes things can also become complicated, when an important number of expert sources of different kinds come into play. Even then, a thorough analysis might surprise us by its results.

In some settings, professors do not get a very important exposure in the context of the articles; their institution, name and sometimes title is mentioned. But with the internet links, in some cases now we can find explicit links to pages on the experts quoted in the articles, which permits to the reader to help him assess the value of the expert in question, at least minimally. An example of this is in an extended recent article about the BRICS, concerning this alliance of countries that still have some growth in their economy, namely Brazil, Russia, India, China and the more recently added South Africa (Yardley, 2012). A number of important scholars are quoted here in an article that is essentially a presentation and a political analysis of what BRICS is and what it is not, e.g., the diversity and lack of unity between its members, qualified of being a “photo op” by one of the experts. Successively we see intervening Brahma Chellaney, of the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi, Yahend Huan, professor of global economics and management at MIT. There is also C. Raja Mohan, presented as “a leading strategic affairs analyst in New Delhi” (Yardley, 2012, p. A4), but when we follow the internet link furnished in the article, we learn he previously was named for 2009 the Henry Alfred Kissinger Scholar in the John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress; we also learn that a Goldman Sachs economist, Jim O'Neill, is the person that first identified with the acronym (BRIC at the time) this group of fast growing countries. There is also Sreeram Chaulia, who “teaches at the Jindal School of International Affairs in Sonipat, India” (Yardley, 2012, p. 2). In that piece, as can be verified, the most relevant and strategic information is given at the end, by the MIT professor Huand and by Chellaney, from the Centre from New Delhi, a research hub (it certainly could be qualified as a think thank) that has both private and public sources of financing, and has ex-government officials or private researchers on its board. The first argues that BRICS is first and foremost China's way of getting closer to natural resources in Africa and Brazil, whereas Chellaney argues that each of the countries of the BRICS group has its most important business relationship as a country with the United States. This article is interesting obviously by the number of resources mobilized, their diversity of origins and for the portrait they are helping the journalist to give of an uncommon alliance between very diverse countries. But it still showcases a professor and a scholarly “independent” expert as being the most relevant sources for the reader to make him/herself an opinion on a given issue.

¹ Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/magazine/rising-gas-prices-dont-actually-affect-americans-behavior.html>. The online editions gives the following detail: “A version of this article appeared in print on April 1, 2012, on page MM12 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: The Real Oil Shock”; the experts called here are “the economists Lutz Kilian at the University of Michigan and Paul Edelstein of the consulting firm IHS Global Insight.”

5. CONCLUSION

If we get back to the previous discussion about costs, here the simple fact, in the last example, that a link is given inside the newspaper-internet article to the web page of the professor or expert, gives some better and more detailed publicity and information in exchange for the participation by the professor to the debate and article information, considered as an opinion-building process. This audience giving is much richer than the simple reference to the name and University of the colleague. In a context where budget cuts are everywhere, universities in many cases come to depend more and more on private funds to operate; here we have uses of university resources that might be better recognized; in some cases at least, they get a good advertisement in exchange for their services, but is it enough considering the value of the service rendered? In many places we see young people fighting to keep an access to university services for less cost for themselves and their children (for instance, the recent protests (since February 2012 and continuing to this date but seeming to be slowing, June 2012) in Quebec province's southern cities. That was the case of students on strike against the government's decision to augment the fees; these kinds of protests are certainly not limited to that place, let us recall recently the UK). And in the perspective of keeping the quality of what can be offered without sacrificing the freedom of research, it might be appropriate to rethink the relationship of universities as public bodies that need to stay that way, with private firms who sell information. Obviously, we would need a very large sample of articles to verify the relatively important exposure of professors in the media of different countries, and ask ourselves more broadly what is the authority game that they are actually playing; here we just saw a few examples that at least in some cases in a prestigious United States newspaper (and the documentation about the Quebec case abounds in the same direction), they do play an important part in building the meaning of the articles themselves at least in specific cases and probably much more often, when their intervention is not giving its whole direction to the opinion piece.

If a professor with little media exposure like myself managed to be interviewed 14 times in something like 17 years of career, by generalizing the example we can arrive at striking and important numbers; of course, there again, broader empirical studies would be required. I do not see why as members of a well-known and respected profession we should ignore those kinds of facts; it is certainly required that a collective reflection come into play at one point on those issues.

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