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A Study of Journalist-source Interaction

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A study of journalist-source interaction**

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**The negotiation of business news:
a study of journalist-source interaction**

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Introduction

In recent years there has been intense public interest in the professionalization of communication. The development of public relations and 'spin-doctoring' has caused considerable concern and has spawned several diagnoses concerning the power of sources vis-à-vis the media (e.g. Manheim 1998; Curtin & Rhodenbaugh 2001). In the field of business journalism, the professionalization of public relations has been described as a story of how cunning media strategists effectively control the media agenda (e.g. Davis 2000). However, despite the urgency of the discussion, there are not many empirical studies of the organization of media-source relations outside the American context. Furthermore the existing studies tend to focus on parliamentary politics and political news and not on business and business news. Finally, the relatively few existing studies of media source-relations tend to emphasize the role of organizational and inter-organizational constraints on journalistic work. The conception of power found in these studies is one that emphasizes power as a question of resources in a given set of relations.

In this article we want to take a first step towards a different way of conceiving of sources in business news. Rather than thinking in terms of given relations we wish to explore the notion of *negotiation* as a means to understand how journalists and sources interact in the daily practice of making news. By emphasizing negotiation we wish to underline how interactions with sources involve questions of power (and conflict), but at the same time how source status, and ultimately source power, is 'in play' in the process of producing business news.

We develop our argument on the basis of a case study of business news production at a large national newspaper in Denmark. On one hand the case study emphasizes the daily life of a newsmaking organization in order to capture the particular routines and rhythms of producing news about business and economy. On the other hand our study focuses on the interaction with sources in the course of making concrete news stories in order to grasp the multiple ways in which newsmakers encounter and deal with sources. By emphasizing processes of news production, i.e. the daily workflow and the flow of individual stories, we hope to show how sources and journalists engage in negotiations both with respect to mutual status, the contribution of sources to news content, and even the broader terms of the interaction.

The article consists of three sections. In the following we discuss how media-source relations have been dealt with in media sociology thus far. In the second section, we present our study of the National Newspaper where we first describe a day's newswork as seen from the business and economy Desk of the newspaper. We then describe the making of four news stories about business and economy, two "hard" and two "soft" news stories. In the third section we discuss how the term of negotiation may capture the particular characteristics of journalist-source interactions, and we briefly consider the implications of our study with respect to questions of power.

1. Journalists and sources - from censorship to negotiation

Sources, in the world of media production, are "the actors whom journalists observe or interview, including interviewees who appear on the air or who are quoted in...articles, and those who only supply information or story suggestions" (Shoemaker & Reese 1996: 186, citing Gans 1979). While the definition may have analytical limitations,¹ it does capture the meaning of the term as both practitioners and most media sociologists commonly use it. It highlights how sources are a key aspect of journalistic work as sources of information and ideas, and how sources operate both on a front stage where they act and speak as part of news stories, and on a back stage where they engage in more informal interactions with journalists.

The influence of sources on news content has been discussed since the early days of modern news journalism, initially as a question of external control or even direct censorship.² This conception of sources was strongly influenced by ideals of journalistic professionalism and by debates on the freedom of the press after World War II. Influences on journalistic work have been seen as largely coming from the outside, e.g. from powerful sources, from regulators, from owners, or from advertisers that had the ability to intervene directly in the media. Powerful sources are external "gatekeepers" (Carter 1958)³ that just like gatekeepers inside news organizations select the information that become part of the news. Media organizations have also been studied as embedded in a broader political economy of media production in which outside interests directly or indirectly

¹ E.g. in its disregard of non-human sources, ranging from archives to web-sites that also play an important role in journalistic work.

² An overview of the debate on sources in media sociology is found in Shoemaker & Reese (1996), especially chapters 6 and 8.

³ Carter's article on "Newspaper "Gatekeepers" and the Sources of News" is an interesting early but somehow "misplaced" contribution to research on source-media interaction. It emphasizes the importance of looking at mutual expectations, goal differences, the social context of both sources and journalists, the consequences of frequent contacts etc.

influence both editorial policy and journalistic choices (e.g. Murdoch & Golding 1974; McManus 1994). In support of this hypothesis numerous content analysis have shown how the distribution of sources represented in actual news content is persistently biased in favor of social, economic and political elites.

Since the 1970's, this external view has been supplemented by a "production of culture-perspective" that focuses on the sociology of work, drawing on various forms of newsroom ethnography and participant-observation. Here attention has shifted from external to internal constraints on "newswork" or "newsmaking". These studies have tended to challenge the ideal of journalistic professionalism that often was left unquestioned in earlier studies of censorship, gatekeeping and external control, which seemed to assume that journalists left to their own devices would produce objective news stories about the important events and issues of the day.

Several themes relevant to the question of sources have been studied from the "inside". One theme has been the role of (media-) organizational structures and routines in relation to sources. Sigal (1973), Tuchman (1978) and others have emphasized the importance of the newsbeat. The newsbeat describes the routine allocation of reporters to particular sites where news can be expected to occur (courts, parliaments, ministries etc.), leading to a selection of news and sources that is not so much determined by political or economic control or professional ideals as by organizational constraints. Newsbeat reporters, several studies contend, have access to "cheap" information readily provided by official sources but may also become dependent on maintaining good relations to information providers.

Tuchman (1972; 1973; 1978) and Gans (1979) have also emphasized the significance of interpretative routines. Journalists are "workers called upon to give accounts...of a wide variety of disasters - unexpected events - on a routine basis" (Tuchman 1973: 111), working under severe time constraints and norms of rationality. Tuchman's studies of "rituals of objectivity" (1972) and classifications of news (1973) describe the role of journalistic classifications of reality in the handling of sources, and how newswriters develop a set of shorthand strategies that ritualistically enact objectivity or reduce complexity. Gans (1979) examined news content in large American media outlets and found an overwhelming dominance of official sources and well-known people, and explained this official bias in terms of in terms of journalistic routines for coping with the

demand for efficiency - and in terms of the resources of official sources who have the man power, the time and the skills needed to supply journalists with information or leads on a regular basis. However, he also emphasized how official sources offer not only cheap and accessible information but also lend authority to news stories (Gamson et al 1992). Rather than laboriously and with no certainty of success working out a government policy by examining it from below - through the experiences of clients or street level bureaucrats, the reporter turns to the top official in charge for an authoritative statement of policy. Gans and other researchers have also noted the role of "product considerations" in newsmaking, i.e. how newswriters do not just adhere to general ideals of news value and relevance but also think in terms of narrative and visual qualities that make for attractive news stories (see also Cook 1998: 81, 98ff)

These two perspectives emphasizing external and the internal constraints on media work have been supplemented by a new perspective in recent years, namely a perspective emphasizing source-journalist negotiation (e.g. Blumler & Gurevitch 1995; Cook 1989; Cook 1998; Berkowitz and TerKeust 1999). A key contribution comes from political scientist, Timothy Cook who criticize earlier research on media sources for taking for granted a journalistic perspective, not only in how one looks at sources per se, but also in how one thinks about what is at stake when reporters and sources interact:

"...the literature is asymmetrical, with many more journalist's-eye views of the process than perspectives from the politician's side. Leon Sigal has written that "sources make the news." So why do these sources complain as much as they do about the coverage they garner?" (Cook 1998: 12).

Rather than just looking at the media end of the relation, Cook suggests that we focus on the interaction, in his case the "co-production" of the political agenda:

"...newsmaking and its place in the political system is best conceived not as a linear, unidirectional process but as interactive and interdependent, the result of what I have elsewhere termed the *negotiation of newsworthiness*. Political actors and journalists (and only occasionally citizens) interact in a constant but implicit series of negotiations over who controls the agenda, what can be asked, where and how, and what a suitable answer will be." (Cook 1998: 12)

Although in some ways, Cook's suggestion seems modest, it changes the fundamental ways in which the question of source power is addressed - away from a perspective basically informed by an elitist conception of power (e.g. Mills 1956) attempting to show the elite bias of modern mass

society - towards a conception that looks at institutional power, governance etc. Such a perspective could even be useful in a study of business news because it challenges some of the taken for granted roles and images in the debate about journalism and public relations. Most renditions of media power or "PR-power" in the field almost by reflex assume the perspective and values of one of the parties involved, be it democracy (or objectivity) or efficiency. A negotiation perspective allows us to see how there is both mutual dependence and competing ways of defining the other - and how the two parties may be engaged not just in a struggle for control but in a process of governance through the medium of newsmaking.

Cook does explicitly define the term "negotiation", but he does provide clues to a conceptualization. Negotiation is not a singular event but on-going multi-level interaction; it is institutionalized to a certain degree providing for a civilized struggle between parties with opposing perspectives; and perhaps most importantly, it is an encounter between autonomous actors, each possessing key resources, but also dependent on the other for success:

"...official sources may instigate the news and direct the attention of the reporter toward particular events and issues, without controlling the ultimate story. Each side relies on the other in the negotiation of newsworthiness, and neither fully dominates, because officials and reporters alike hail from at least partially independent institutions that command important and unique resources." (Cook 1998: 105)

Cook distinguishes between two fundamental types of negotiation: 1) negotiation of the *process* of newsmaking. Here sources (officials) have an advantage since they can often define settings for the interaction, take initiatives (make events happen), and influence access, but within certain limitations so as not to alienate reporters; 2) negotiation of *content* where reporters have the advantage in their weaving or assembling of stories from events, comments etc., with a view both to "production values" (narrative qualities) and professional norms. Furthermore Cook distinguishes between three levels of negotiation: a) battles over forums in which interaction will occur; b) the explicit interactions within these forums; and c) indirect and implicit negotiation "out of sight of the other - as sources anticipate what will make news and as reporters go back to their home organizations with the raw material and reshape it into a coherent news account" (Cook 1998: 102).

Cook's empirical generalizations about the interactions of reporters and officials in the highly publicized and institutionalized settings of the White House Press Room or Capitol Hill are not

likely to have direct relevance to the study of the somewhat more mundane daily production of business news in Denmark. However, if one maintains that negotiation provides a useful clue to the study of source relations, then clearly questions of who interacts, what they interact about and the extent to which interactions have been institutionalized will have to be considered in concrete empirical analyses. Thus the following analysis is not a test of Cook's "model" but rather a first attempt to interpret media-source relations as negotiations, and accordingly many of the particular categories or dimensions of negotiation will have to be developed inductively as we engage in the analysis. However, we will return to some of Cook's propositions concerning levels and types of negotiation towards the end of our discussion to consider similarities and differences.

2. Business news and sources relations - case study

Our study of the negotiation of source relations builds on a small field study of the business and economy group at a national newspaper. The field study is part of a larger research design, involving among other things an analysis of changes in news content and a round of interviews with experienced business journalists and PR-professionals. The fieldwork was conducted in May 2003 at a large Danish newspaper where we were allowed to observe work in the business and economy newsroom for two days, and conduct 8 interviews with editors and reporters. The interviews lasted from 30-35 minutes and up to 60 minutes each, and focussed on current news stories either from the day of the interview or from the preceding week. We specifically asked informants about the interaction with sources, but they were also encouraged to reflect on broader aspects of business news.

Given the scope of our empirical data, the analysis in the following must be seen as a first mapping of a field that has barely been studied before in the Danish context.⁴ There is a need for further field studies both of our selected site and of other media outlets. Also, to live up to Cook's idea of looking at both ends of the relationship, studies of journalistic work should be supplemented by field studies of how companies and pr-consultancies organize "their" newswork. For the moment, our point of entry still is the world of journalism.

⁴ See Kjaer & Langer (2002) for a broad introduction to the field of business journalism. See also Tienari et al. (2002), and Slaatta (forthcoming) for related studies of business journalism.

Our case study proceeds in three steps: First we outline how a day of newswork is structured at the National Newspaper - as viewed from the business and economy desk. The function of this section is both to provide a background for the analyses of concrete news stories in the following and to point out the different ways in which sources are part of daily newswork. Second, we describe how four different news stories have been produced with an emphasis on concrete work processes and encounters with sources but also with regard to the final presentation of news content. Third, we compare the four news stories in terms of source interactions and attempt to characterize them with regard to what sources are drawn upon, what contributions the sources provide and what the terms of interaction seem to be.

A day's newswork

The National Newspaper is a daily newspaper with a circulation of more than 200.000 copies. It introduced a regular business section more than 20 years ago and thus has been a forerunner in the field of business news. The business and economy group of the national newspaper comprises about 25 journalists, some of which work out of the newspapers' main office while others are stationed in the field at various local offices. The self-esteem of the business group is high, and when we first meet the group we were told that the other sections of the newspapers were simply the 'wrapping' for the business pages. The high self-esteem partly reflects the economic importance of business news to the National Newspaper in terms of maintaining readership and capturing advertisement market shares. Another indicator of the self esteem was a remark by the business editor suggesting that getting a business story on the front page of the National Newspaper was, in fact, not necessarily a criteria of success for the business reporters since that entailed that they write their stories to meet the popular demands of the general readership as opposed to the more specialized demands of the readers of the business section.

Journalists and editors come to work between eight and ten in the morning. Their first activity is to screen a number of information sources, such as other mass media, Internet websites, e-mails etc. in order to identify events or issues, which later might be developed into news stories. The daily screening of media sources cover both other Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, British and American dailies and weeklies and information received from news agencies such as Ritzau, Reuters and Dow Jones, as well as the business section on BBC's internet-site and radio/TV-news. In addition to providing leads for potential stories, the screening of media sources also help editors form an

impression of how the National Newspaper performs in the "media landscape", including even an identification of histories or angles that one "missed" in the past 24 hours.

At ten the business and economy group meets in the office of the business editor. Here, in an informal atmosphere, the business editor and his news editor (a role that two editors take turns at) discuss possible stories with the staff reporters. A reporter from the largest local office participates in the meeting via a telephone placed on the conference table. Each reporter presents the stories he or she is currently working on or expects to be working on. Colleagues come with suggestions in terms of angles, possible sources and sometimes also in terms of earlier coverage. At one meeting a news item thus began as a story describing a revised economic forecast by a major bank (that had been leaked to a reporter in return for the journalists' promise not to publish information from the report, before the official press meeting a couple of days later). Following comments from the business editor, the news editor and the reporter dealing with foreign business news, it became a story that was linked to the changing standing of the Euro vis-a-vis the dollar. This entailed not only a different framing of the original piece on the bank forecast but also a possible contact with the EU-correspondent of the national newspaper. The business editor or the news editor also makes sure that important leads are followed up and that announced events are covered.

While the reporters return to their offices and desks to work on their stories, the business editor and his news editor attend the general editors' meeting at ten thirty. Here in a somewhat more formal atmosphere, representatives from the various desks discuss today and tomorrow's newspapers. The first fifteen minutes of the meeting is used by the 'newspaper maker' of the day, i.e. the editor in charge of editing tomorrow's newspaper, to comment on today's newspaper. Comments deal with the selection of stories, the angle of individual stories and with more specific issues such as spelling, layout and print quality. Thus one news story on the travel expenses of a parliamentary committee is criticized for signaling that the National Newspaper is narrow-minded, and the general editor suggests that the story should never have been carried. Another story is criticized for being a "system story", angled and written so as to represent an official or bureaucratic perspective on the issue of immigrants having limited access to good translators when going to the courts. A third story is lauded for being well written but ruined by bad printing or layout errors. The last fifteen minutes are spent on getting an overview of the main stories from the various desks: national news, international news, culture, opinion pages and business and economy. There is some debate in the

course of the presentation, sometimes raising the question of whether one should prioritize a particular story, sometimes suggesting angles on a particular story or discussing photo opportunities with the photo editor.

After the meeting the editors return to their places of work. Positive and negative evaluations are fed back to individual reporters, reporters check up on individual stories, etc. The reporters generally work out of their offices, first seeking information in the archives of the national newspaper and on the Internet and then calling various sources for information and comments. Some reporters attend press meetings or go out to companies or other sites to do interviews but according to our informants the weight of on-the-spot reporting has been decreasing in recent years.

As each journalist tends to work on several stories simultaneously, both for today's edition and for weekend editions or special supplements, the priority between stories may change in the course of a day. This may in turn involve brief talks with the news editor to discuss the space allocated to an individual story.

By mid-afternoon, the news editor of the group will have a general impression not only of the stories in process but also of which stories and visuals to put on the front page of the business and economy section. At half past four, there is another general editors' meeting where news editors inform on how the different stories that had been announced at the morning meeting have progressed in the course of the day. Again, the participants discuss different angles and (alternative) sources for some of the stories. The editor of the day announces, which stories, photos and graphics will be displayed on the front page.

Meanwhile, the different journalists go on writing their stories. As soon as they submit these stories to their news editors, the stories are edited, revised, placed and layouted on page formulas on the editors' screens. Unless there is a need for major changes in content, language or length, the writers of the stories can feel free to leave work. However, if there is such a need, the news editors will try to contact the respective journalists and negotiate on the necessary changes.

With the final deadline around nine PM, the editorial work is over. However, beside the news editors, there still are a few journalists at work. These journalists are on night duty – a kind of

emergency team that is supposed to cover unexpected events that might happen after “normal closing time”. If there are no such events, the night duty usually works on other stories planned for next days’ newspaper or special sections.

A day's newswork at the National Newspaper thus comprises at least four rather distinct phases: 1) An *orientation* phase which is the early stage in which potential stories are identified and discussed, usually before the ten o'clock meeting. 2) A *research and writing* phase that lasts until late afternoon, during which selected stories are developed. 3) An *editing* phase lasting from late afternoon until deadline during which final changes in stories are made and decisions are made concerning position and layout. 4) A *feedback and evaluation* phase starting after the publication of the news story and lasting at least until comments from the editors have been relayed to the individual journalists. The making of business news usually conforms to this daily rhythm, especially with respect to what may be termed ‘stories of the day’, while other stories, e.g. preplanned stories for special supplements or more thematic in-depth stories usually take longer to produce. Most journalists work under strong time constraints and often have to file several feature stories each day. Also, time constraints become more acute the closer one gets to deadline, something that naturally puts limitations on the amount of research etc. that can be invested in stories or story angles that emerge late in the day. In such cases, journalists usually “slice” their stories and provide the first part of information in one article that meets the deadline and then writing a follow up article the following day.

The question of sources is dealt with several times in the course of the day, but in very different ways: In the orientation phase, reporters and editors sort through large amounts of emails, letters etc. with story suggestions. The business and economy desk receives between 50 and 100 e-mails a day plus numerous faxes, letters and phone calls. In addition to this each individual reporter receives a large amount of direct correspondence. Most is thrown out or dismissed but some pieces survive: announcements of important upcoming events, key press releases, other story leads that are deemed newsworthy. In the research and writing phase sources are contacted directly, most commonly on the telephone, or information is retrieved via other means (e.g. the internet). Also journalists begin transforming story leads and source information, including commentary, into text which sometime involves further source contacts to fill holes or follow up on new angles. In the editing phase, journalists and editors (depending on the location of the news item in the newspaper)

do a final evaluation of the story, something which may involve a debate about the reliability of particular sources (and a last minute check up) and, in the case of "one-source stories" perhaps decisions about the need for more sources. In the evaluation phase, the use of sources in news items are discussed but there may also be feedback from readers or directly from named sources.

Hard news and soft news

The business and economy section of the national newspaper consists of sixteen pages. Each day the staff writes about thirty full-length news stories. In addition to this, there are notes and shorter news items from Danish and foreign news services, and stock and currency lists. Furthermore the news staff is responsible for the writing of stories for special supplements. Since the supplements are usually dominated by advertisements, there are fewer (and longer) feature stories, often less than 10 in each supplement.

The typical stories cover a large variety of issues ranging from national and international economic affairs and economic policy over finance to coverage of individual firms or particular business and economy issues such as human resources, taxation, and private investment.

The profile of the business section is dominated by what is termed 'hard news'. 'Hard news' is news about current developments in the national (or international) economy and about individual firms and businesses, focussing on economic (financial) performance and problems and conflicts related to performance. Outside 'hard news' one finds a variety of news articles ranging from human-interest stories, thematic stories about particular problems or issues, consumer oriented stories etc. In the following we refer to these stories as 'soft news', bearing in mind, however, that our informants did not use this term.⁵

When we asked editors if they thought there were particular news values pertaining to business and economy news, they first talked of stories as having to have broad relevance in terms of how many people were affected or in terms of other indices of social or economic relevance. When asked for more operational criteria they all made a sharp distinction between joint stock companies whose stocks were traded publicly and privately held companies. A clear priority was given to 'public' corporations in this particular sense of the term as they had a widely distributed ownership and also

were subject to particular formal/legal demands in terms of information. 'Private corporations' were less interesting in and of themselves unless particular problems or issues were involved, i.e. issues pertaining to widely known consumers' goods, conflicts with labor, etc.⁶ Thus the business reporting of the National Newspaper is informed by a financial perspective on business that not only governs which firms are deemed interesting but also the predominant angles on potential stories.

We now discuss in more detail the two types of news stories mentioned above, i.e. hard news and soft news, and in particular how sources are dealt with in the context of the two types of stories.

Hard news stories

The front page of the National Newspaper ran the following economy and business stories in the week preceding our visit: Labor market problems for people with long-term illnesses; the economic performance of a Danish pharmaceutical corporation; restructuring of the large shipping conglomerate A P Møller [Maersk]; competition in the postal service; problems with the Danish credit card "Dankort"; economic crisis in the Copenhagen Metro corporation; the risks involved in purchasing a new home; economic setback in the Danish telecom corporation TDC. With the possible exception of the stories on people with long-term illnesses and on the problems of buying a new home, all the featured stories were hard news. Similarly, most top stories in the business section were hard news: the struggle for control in a Danish IT-corporation; new figures on national unemployment; Shell enters the windmill industry; the spring quarter results of Carlsberg, etc.

In our interviews we focused on two 'hard news' items: the issue of government intervention in the face of rising unemployment; and an ownership conflict in the shipping industry.⁷

The story on government intervention, which was published in the Friday business and economy section was written by JJ, a political journalist, and KK, an experienced business journalist who had

⁵ Tuchman 1973 described how "hard news" and "soft news" were key "typifications" of news items in the media organizations she studied.

⁶ Also, our informants reported that retrieving information about 'private' companies can be much more difficult and time-consuming than with respect to 'public' corporations (i.e. companies traded on the stock exchange), since only the latter are obliged by law to make vital information available to shareholders.

⁷ As it were, a number of that week's top stories were written by reporters that were not stationed at the main office.

specialized in national economy. In our interview with KK, we asked him to describe how the news item had been selected.

KK: “JJ had a story in the Thursday edition about the new unemployment figures from the National Bureau of Statistics. At the Thursday morning meeting of the B&E-group we had a round about the unemployment figures, and I suggested we took a look at who was affected by unemployment. There were seven of us around the table, and none of us knew who was affected. I said: ‘Shouldn’t we go deeper into this?’ After the meeting I just sat down and started to put unemployment figures into an Excel spreadsheet, looking at a number of occupational groups, and simply seeing what the unemployment rate was half a year ago and what it was today. I found the statistics on the National Bureau of Statistics homepage (...) We actually did not know exactly what the angle would be. JJ had written the story the day before. Someone had leaked the unemployment figures and we were there to run the story. Now he was working on a second article focussing on political reactions, and I started calling economic experts for comments. Then our editor suggested we did something together so both angles were covered.”

We then asked more specifically about the sources and especially the economic experts who were all economists employed by major Danish banks.

KK: “These are people I often talk to. Whenever something happens they send out small commentaries on the e-mail. They want to be quoted. They want to be in the newspaper. They are measured in terms of the number of quotes they get in the news. Of course, there are also problems involved in this, but in this case it was fine. Calling university or business school economists would not work because they are not updated to the extent that they can comment on breaking news stories. Even the ‘Wise men’ of the National Economic Advisory Council [DØR] don’t follow developments on a day-to-day basis. However, I use different experts for different stories so that people won’t get tired of seeing the same experts over and over again, and also for the sake of credibility. I can’t just write the necessary comments myself, even though I probably often would be able to do it. I need someone to pin it on. I am not a pope of public opinion (...) Anyway, I call around until a pattern emerges, and I feel confident about it. Sometimes it just takes two calls, but when I feel uncertain, it may require more. I need comments that are comprehensible and to the point, and I don’t mind if they are a bit extreme, and use strong images. Still, sometimes I have to translate things...”

The unemployment story, filling almost an entire page, was entitled: “Economists speak out against intervention”, and emphasized how, despite growing unemployment, economists and the government do not think there is a need for government intervention. The main article, written by JJ and KK, consisted of comments from three bank economists, the minister of Finance and the minister of Employment, all of which rejected calls for intervention, and a critical comment from the speaker of the Social Democrats, who challenged the passive stance of the right wing government. A large graphics section described aggregate unemployment development, regional

differences and differences among various occupational groups. A small adjoining article, written by KK, explained how unemployment struck unevenly in terms of geography and occupation.

According to KK the history was a typical example of how he dealt with national economic issues: it had a clear point, it was economically informed and expert oriented and used authoritative sources, and yet at the same time made a point of spelling out or translating complex figures and connections into words and tables that can be read by everybody. In fact, KK saw it as part of his 'mission' to be a pedagogue or a mediator between economic expertise and lay people, although he claimed that today people in general know much more than 20 years ago about the fundamentals of economics and economic policy.⁸ It is interesting to note that the unemployment story began as a rather soft news item on the social consequences of unemployment but developed into a piece of hard news focussing on the conflicting views about government intervention.

The shipping industry story was written by AA, an experienced business journalist who has specialized in the shipping business. A large portion of shares in a Danish shipping firm had been purchased from a Greek owner by a Norwegian investor, the R-group. A dispute had arisen over the deal between the Greek and the Norwegian investor and now a trial was on its way. Meanwhile the value of the stocks of the shipping firm was going up. AA did not disclose how the story was first brought to her attention, but focussed on process of finding relevant information.

AA: "The hardest thing was finding the man [the CEO of the R-group] and the picture. Pictures are extremely important to me. I used to be a TV-reporter and I know that pictures are much better than words. Well, I had been at this story a couple of times before but it was very difficult finding the accounts [of the R-group]. Then I got an idea. There had to be a local newspaper in the city in which R-group was located, and it turned out the National Newspaper has a collaboration arrangement with somebody up there. So I get a contact, some information and a photo from up there. Look at that picture. That sends an important signal about that man."

We went on to inquire about the search for information in a case like this.

AA: "My first impulse is my personal computer. I search through our article archive and then I search widely on the Internet. I never call before I have done a proper and thorough search, so that I am well prepared. I have to say that our knowledge has improved tenfold today compared to earlier on due to the potentials for information search. You don't have to ask them about their most recent presentation of accounts, about factual things, affiliates, dates and so on. In

general one expects that the National Newspaper is better informed. The sources demand that we are informed - except, of course, when you have to find something just before deadline..."

AA also reflected on the importance of having good personal connections with her sources, noting that having worked for almost a decade with the shipping business had earned her a high degree of trust vis-à-vis key sources in the field. However, just moving a little outside that field, had demonstrated to her the importance of personal rapport:

AA: "The other night I worked the night shift, and I had to do a SAS-story, which EE usually does. I called a representative of the cabin employee union, and I completely went wrong in that interview. He simply did not care for me, but if EE had been there he would have had a completely different relationship to him..."

The shipping story was the main Finance story of the day, under the headline of "[The shipping firm's] stocks in a trial". The story first outlines the conflict between the owners and the looming trial, but then went on to inquire into the intentions of the R-group. The main source of the article is the CEO of the R-group who talks about the conflict and about the question of whether the R-group intends to take over the entire shipping firm. The last section is a historical overview of the R-group, and a review of the financial strength of the group quoting both last year's accounts and an anonymous Norwegian analyst.

This story differs from the unemployment story by emphasizing a single firm, by focussing on conflict of interests between economic actors, and on the strategies and intentions of the key players. It also focuses on a particular person, namely the R-group CEO. AA saw the story as a hard news story, but at the same time she also emphasized her intention to bring out the people in stories. An indication of this was the large picture (1/4 of a page) of the Norwegian CEO accompanying the news story. The photo shows a senior executive, sitting by a desk gesturing forcefully, with framed pictures of freight vessels at sea on the wall behind him.

Soft news stories

Most hard news articles are related to the events of the day (or week) and are developed on a day-to-day basis. In contrast, soft news stories are often developed over several days, if not weeks, and

⁸ Another informant related the increased economic 'literacy' of readers to the educating effects of business journalism.

tend to relate to themes that lack the immediacy of hard news: consumer issues, advice on investment, or taxation, etc. Typically, such articles are written for the special supplements.

WW, who is a trainee reporter in the Business and Economy group, talked of two of his recent stories for special supplements: a story on unconventional management training courses, and a story on the fees of real estate agents. He described his perspective as follows:

WW: “My role is to get things down “at eye level” and develop the odd angles: Harley Davidson as part of management training or the price of selling your home”.

With respect to the process of collecting information, WW described his interaction with informants who were often readers:

WW: “When you are writing for the special supplements you can do bigger pieces. Sometimes I have managed to get my informants to help me directly in my research – by getting them to call around to real estate agents to check prices. Obviously if I call, from the National Newspaper, they’ll say something completely different. But I am also very much into on-the-spot reporting, joining the ‘suits’ on their management-training course. Otherwise the story about the course had become too filled with clichés.”

Having worked 6 months with local news at the newspaper, WW reflected on the differences between business news and local news:

WW: “It’s much more expert oriented. Business is expert stories compared to [local section] where I worked before. That was very much local news. [Interviewer: Is it harder here?] It often is, but then I always know whom to turn to. But often when I start a new story I start from scratch. The difference is also that here something is definitely at stake in relation to our sources. Look what I just got, seven or eight press releases. They quickly figure out who you are and where you are located. Some of it, I throw out immediately but that still a judgement you have to make”.

Thus some stories are inspired by the press releases while others are developed on the basis of contacts from readers or from more recurrent contacts to the WW’s nascent web of sources.

BB, an experienced business journalist writing stories on taxation issues and editing a weekly correspondence column in the special supplement on money and investment, also described the interaction with readers and sources. Having to answer questions from readers on private

investment made it pivotal for BB to have access to expert opinions, mostly from accountants and lawyers, to support his own advice:

BB: "We all have close relations to some sources. Nursing your sources is the Alfa and Omega. But I have never become involved with them privately. One always has to be aware that even though you are nice and friendly, one day you may have to write a negative story. It's hard but if you can't handle it, you may have to let someone else do it. I knew a director of a local tax authority. We had a great relationship, but then he did something very stupid and I gave him the same treatment as everybody else. And he still calls me (...) It's a game that one plays, where you are neither in somebody's pocket or a stupid ass. But sometimes somebody's going to take a beating".

Just like WW, he noted the interaction with readers in developing stories and referred to his ambition of writing "for the common man". He thus often followed up on letters with personal meetings and sometimes even further contacts, on behalf of readers, with local tax administrations.

WW's story on management training was published in the Wednesday supplement and was entitled "Training on a Chopper". The story itself covers almost half a page while the other half is a large photograph of participants riding motorcycles in the countryside. Writing in a new journalism style, the article quotes a talk given by a consultant and then describes the joy of riding a Harley, intermingled with comments and endorsements from two participants. A small "Facts" box describes the company offering the program. The story is "people"-oriented, e.g. focussing on the experiences and life styles of, if not common people, then at least potential readers. There is little tension or conflict in the story, except perhaps the implied tension between our expectations in terms of management training and the 'odd' approach of the course in question.

WW's other story, on the fees of real estate agents, entitled "Real estate trade: Huge differences in fees", was published some weeks before on the front page of the "Career and money"-supplement. Focussing on the experiences of a Copenhagen couple selling their apartment and getting very different prices from real estate agents, the story mingles quotes from the 'victims' with comments from two real estate agents, one at the expensive end and one at the cheaper end of the scale. Here the story clearly entails a direct conflict between customer and agent – and to some extent also between the two agents, but at the same time the story emphasizes the consumer/people angle.

Varieties of source interactions

The news stories described above involve a variety of different sources that become part of news stories in different ways. We now briefly how the stories draw on different sources, what the sources contribute to the stories, and finally, what the terms of interaction in each story seems to be.

In the unemployment story, the sources are, in order: the National Bureau of Statistics, a story in yesterday's paper, bank economists, government- and opposition representatives. The contribution of the sources varies in the course of the evolution of the story: First, the National Bureau of Statistics supplies "hard facts". Second, at the morning meeting of the business and economy group, one searches for and decides on an angle on the unemployment figures – leading to further search for unemployment figures (on the Internet) and to a need for expert and political reactions on the 'intervention'-angle. Third, economic experts and selected politicians supply their comments on the phone – “until a pattern emerges”. Considering the terms of the interaction between journalists and sources, it should first be noted that all sources are known beforehand by the reporter, and it seems that the reporter also has a fairly good idea of what different sources will contribute to the story. Also, the roles and intentions of the various players seem to be quite obvious, even to the degree that the economic experts rely directly on being quoted in the news. Finally, the reporter orchestrates sources both to fit the particular government intervention angle but also to fill in what seems to be fundamental narrative positions in the news story: perhaps some sources do not contribute with substantially new information, but “somebody” has to say these things, if the reporter is not to be seen as a “pope of public opinion”.

The shipping industry story involves an undisclosed “first” source leading AA to work on the story. The other sources were factual information found in newspaper archives and on the Internet, the Norwegian reporter, the Norwegian CEO and an anonymous analyst.⁹ The contribution of the sources differ somewhat from those of the unemployment story in the sense that the story attempts to reveal information that is not readily available. Thus the reporter engages in a more open search on the Internet for facts about the parties, especially the Norwegian group, involved in the conflict. AA also draws on various personal (or organizational) connections to locate and identify the main source, the CEO, who is then interviewed on the phone on his business strategy. The anonymous analyst is quoted for an assessment of the financial prospects of the Norwegian group. In this story

the terms of journalist-source interaction seem somewhat more open-ended. The reporter lays a background based on both ‘library’ sources and media sources, both to gain access to her key source and to live up to sources’ expectations in terms of having command of basic facts and figures. In connecting with the CEO, she is keenly aware of the importance of engendering a basic sense of trust, and in her account, the story therefore appears to have posed particular problems that she does not usually encounter in her regular, year-long coverage of the shipping business.

The ‘soft’ management training story involves an element of on-the-spot reporting thus drawing directly on the reporter’s own observations, the other sources being a consultant (whose lecture is quoted), and two participants. In contrast, the real estate story is not a on-the-spot report, but involves two ordinary customers and two real estate agents, representing two different firms. The contribution of sources also differ in some respects: the management training story in a very fundamental sense relies on the reporter being given direct access to follow the training program, which suggests that the story could have originated in an initial contact from the consultancy firm or at least that the firm was open to being ‘inspected’ by the young reporter. The two participants provide evaluations, representing the discriminate customer (both being identified by name and organization). In the real estate story, the customers, who could have been the initiators of the story, apparently collaborated with the reporter in getting different prices from real estate agents, and supply both this factual information and their accounts of their experiences in the real estate market. The two real estate agents represent the business, and attempt to rationalize the fee-practices. In both stories, the terms of the reporter-source relationship are not given in advance. In both stories lay people play the roles of critical consumers, who had particular experiences with a product but who could have been substituted by others. Similarly, the real estate agents were ‘caught on the spot’, and contacts to them did not seem to build on previous connections. At the same time, recalling the interview with the more experienced BB, even the more consumer-oriented reporter depends on nursing more long-term relations to informants. In fact, BB also noted that when using contacts with ‘common people’ as a starting point for consumer oriented stories, face to face contact or “looking them in the eye” was important to access the trustworthiness of sources and to avoid being involved in conflicts that are strictly personal.

⁹ The business editor stated that the use of anonymous sources is rare and avoided as a ground-rule. However, there are exceptions, e.g. when the analyst has a very close relation to the topic – which exactly makes him an expert.

The four stories described above display a great deal of variation both in the selection of sources, in the contribution of sources and in what may be concluded about the “rules of engagement”.

However, there are also some common themes, such as the role of location, the role of timing, the role of news angle and narrative, the role of trust or trustworthiness, and the role of reporter and others’ basic conception of news making.

Location was important to several of our informers who noted how physical presence made a difference both in terms of evaluating sources and source information and in terms of being able to make direct observations. Some also noted the importance of concrete interaction with sources in engendering long-term contacts (see below). However, there seemed to be a tendency towards downplaying on-the-spot reports, partly because of costs and because of the emphasis on hard news. Instead there was a tendency to work out of the office using telephone and Internet.

Timing is important in source interaction, in the sense that some sources or source contributions seem to be important at an early stage in the production process, e.g. leaks, official announcements etc. in the orientation phase, while others are important in the research and writing phase, e.g. direct contacts, commentaries. Also timing entails different constraints on reporters in terms of their possibilities for information retrieval, checking of data etc.

The *angle* or news *narrative* plays a key role in source relations: the angle may lead to particular requirements in terms of sources, and may involve a preference for particular types of statements, while the news narrative places or orchestrates sources in dramatic oppositions etc. Even need for visuals, which constituted a key “product consideration” (Gans 1979) at least to some of our informants, had implications for source relations.

Trust was a recurring theme in all interviews, both conceived as an immediate concern about trustworthiness on both sides in a concrete contact (is the source reliable, does the reporter seem well prepared, etc?), and as a more long term concern involving long standing relationships, mutual awareness, recurrent contacts, and circulation of information and commentary.

Finally, reporters – and even some sources (e.g. publicly traded companies and pr-consultancies), seem to draw on some *basic conceptions* about the nature of news. Reporters, sources and readers

evaluate news stories according to conceptions of news value or relevance and more or less shared criteria of validity, in part derived from the notion of “objectivity”: exactitude in details, use of multiple sources, disguising the reporter in the news story (implicitly in on the spot reporting taking on the role of the observer or explicitly in the use of expert commentary).¹⁰

At the very least these observations indicate that source interactions need to be considered in context, both the immediate context of time, space and news narrative, and the background context of "trust" and understandings of news and news value.¹¹ In the following, we attempt to take this argument one step further and suggest that source interactions cannot simply be ‘read off’ from a particular context but relies on on-going negotiation.

3. Discussion: Negotiated interactions

To view interaction as negotiation entails that we highlight how interactions are neither smooth nor predetermined. On one hand, we should not expect that interactions are carried out smoothly regardless of context. On the other hand we should not expect that a given context automatically translates into particular outcomes. Rather we should look for games of determination, i.e. those instances where the participants together or separately attempt work out the content and context of newsmaking. In other words, we should translate the themes identified above into propositions about games, look for the games that sources and reporters play, and consider who plays and how they play.

Games of location occur when participants have to work out where and how to get in touch with each other. Written materials from sources are usually invitations to further contacts, and a first indirect negotiation occurs over such initial proposals. Sources consider the presentation of information and whom it should be sent to, while journalists and editors work out routines for identifying relevant contacts. Direct contacts entail another game both in terms of defining the type of encounter: press meeting, informal personal interview, telephone interview - and in terms of defining who the journalist will have access to. In some cases, pr-departments in corporations will

¹⁰ Another basic conception often referred to by journalists in their discussions is the audience. When discussing a particular topic, source or angle, they often express expectations about readers’ opinions and preferences.

¹¹ In some ways these observations on the context of interaction are consistent with Carter’s (1958) propositions about key aspects of source-reporter interaction. However, Carter also stressed the importance of how sources (e.g. doctors or school administrators) and reporters respectively were situated in their own field of operation, i.e. how colleagues

filter journalists, but in other cases they serve as sources of particular kinds of information, while experienced reporters are often able to go directly to the CEO. In a case that received quite a lot of attention during our visit to the National Newspaper, a large retail corporation had announced a surprising wage increase for a portion of the lowly paid workers of the corporation, but then only allowed the National Newspaper to interview a hand-picked spokesperson for the employees, something which resulted in a very critical editorial in the newspaper.

Games of timing usually relate to the work processes of the newspaper. Thus sources may leak information to one medium or reporter before everybody else. Here journalists make a sharp distinction (at least in principle) between planned leaks which they are highly critical of (e.g. attempts by ministries to feed particular information to selected newspapers), and spontaneous leaks in the regular contacts with certain sources. Sometimes leaks entail implicit or explicit agreement on when a story may be publicized - and on whether the sources can be named or not. In the case of a leak in connection the revised economic forecast of the major bank (see above), this was one concern. Another concern is the question of insider knowledge, which sometimes makes leaks highly contentious matter. In such cases, the business editor may decide to publish information counter to the agreement with sources. This decision, he argued, is particularly important when dealing with 'public' corporations, to avoid all charges of being part of insider trading or of keeping vital information hidden from the investors. Another game of timing is when information is exchanged late in the day, when sources may hope for more lenient treatment or reporters are forced to bypass ordinary procedures for source contact.

Games of angle and narrative in many ways are implicit games in which sources hope for particular types of coverage. The professional communicators may even offer story or angle suggestions, but our study suggests that angles and story lines are typically the outcome of personal or editorial decisions or resulting from suggestions from colleagues. Overt attempts by sources to influence story or angle are generally viewed as illegitimate: something that cynical pr-people may attempt to pull off with newcomers and trainees¹², but even more experienced journalists reported how sources - post hoc - would criticize (or praise) particular story angles.

would view and react to engagements with 'the other side'. For a somewhat related observation concerning the importance of 'interpretive communities', see Berkowitz & TerKeust (1999).

¹² Thus WW told us how a former journalist working as a public relations officer in a company WW was writing a critical story about had called him and insisted that the story was really a waste of time and merely worth a small note.

Games of trust are the various ways in which sources and reporters work to establish trustworthiness and long term relations to each other. Both sources and journalists face the problem of making information and stories trustworthy. While our study did not give any clear indications of what sources do in that respect, it became clear how journalists need authoritative sources for stories to work, and used different approaches to establish that authority: official position (party spokesperson, CEO), professional expertise (economic expert) or personal experience (customers). However, trust was also a key preoccupation in the development and maintenance of source networks. Here journalists and sources consciously build long term relations, in which information may be exchanged in what most informants referred to as a quid pro quo-game. Several things have to be dealt with: How to recognize and respect each other's interests in the relations, how to define the boundary between private and professional relationships, or how to deal with "bad stories". One informant noted how certain pr-companies were trying desperately to "sell" a story about a customer, while other informants noted as a matter of fact how sources always had a particular motive. Similarly, an editor noted the importance of having expert journalists who knew their companies by heart, while at the same time he was prepared to move a journalist away from a company if he or she got too closely involved, and as the experienced journalist BB stressed above, it was important not to get too personally involved. Finally, several informants agreed that the ability to live with both positive and negative stories on the side of sources was a key to long term relationships.

Games of news perspectives are perhaps harder to envision but could be seen as on-going attempts to synchronize expectations in terms of what constitutes news, newsworthiness, objectivity etc. We only have a few indications of how sources and journalists deal with these more abstract problems: one editor stressed to us that it was important that sources were not surprised when they read the story, although they were entitled to get angry over it. Other informants noted how many pr-professionals and some CEO's in large companies were quite aware of what news production was all about and what was required of a story for it to be newsworthy. Therefore professionalization of communication on the side of sources was not just seen as a problem but also as a process in which sources develop a professional understanding of the media and the requirements of news stories.

If we condense these preliminary observations into Cook's three levels of negotiations: negotiation over forums, concrete interactions, and negotiation of expectations, we find all three aspects to be relevant in our case. There is an ongoing implicit negotiation about the time and place of interaction, there is negotiation involved in concrete interactions, and there is a more long-term negotiated synchronization of expectations, both by building source network and by developing shared conceptions of newsmaking. However, we should not conclude that relations are as highly institutionalized as in the American context. Rather it seems that a 'dual economy' is developing, in which there is a more institutionalized arena of "hard news" and professionalized companies and an arena of mixed expectations: general assignment journalists operating on the border-line between hard and soft news - and companies, executives and consumers who also occasionally become part of newsmaking and who may not subscribe to the negotiated rules of source interaction informing the former arena (see also Gamson et al 1992).

We began this article by raising the question of the power of sources. In Cook's argument the power of sources depends on the ongoing negotiations but at the same time he suggests that there are strategic advantages in various fields: sources generally have an advantage in defining process, whereas journalists have an advantage in defining content. Put differently, in defining the time and space (and object) of interaction, sources have the upper hand, while in defining news narratives journalists are on top.

Our study seems to support this, but it also shows how the "process"-power of sources may be challenged by the diminishing use of direct interaction in favor of virtual sources, but, perhaps strengthened by journalists' need to get to the top of companies, to talk to the CEO. The "content"-power of journalists might be challenged by the increased professionalization of communication efforts in private and public organizations, but at the same time the development of shared conceptions of news and news making that also result from professionalization may also reinforce the power of journalists.

However, both in the case of process and content, power is no longer exercised by any actor exclusively. Rather it works across the boundary between source and journalist: news assessments are made by people in a multiplicity of organizations in- and outside the media - and considerations about where and how to present events, facts or comments are similarly a distributed capacity. It is

exactly because of this that we may consider moving away from thinking about news making simply as a question of communicating and controlling information towards thinking about the emergent order of news communication as a form of governance, as a form of economic or political coordination (see also Cook 1998: 164ff; Pedersen et al: 274ff; Ekecrantz & Olsson 1994).

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