

From Journalist to Communicologist: Doing Journalism in Social Science Way

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Abstract

Communication is the process of establishing meaning and so found in all social situations. Social scientists, in general, are very much concerned with the communication process. So, communication studies and journalism has increasingly become established as a field of inquiry in its own right. The present study inquires into the philosophical concerns of the communication studies, using biographical histories of two important scholars namely Max Weber, the German Sociologist and K E Eapen, an academic of Indian journalism, as narrative threads.

Keywords

Max Weber, K E Eapen, communication studies

Introduction

Oxford Dictionary of Sociology defines communication as 'the process of establishing meaning, found in all social situations, and hence a very wide-ranging concerns of social scientists generally'. Commenting on the origin and development of the field/discipline, the definition continues, that communication studies has been 'conventionally studied by social psychologists, semiologists, students of mass media, and linguists and has increasingly become established as a field of inquiry in its own right and is often allied to culture studies'. This definition as well as the description provide an interesting starting point for one to inquire into the philosophical concerns of the communication studies and to develop a historical approach of the origin and development of journalism as a

profession and communication studies as a discipline. In order to raise these questions here, I will use biographical histories of two important scholars namely Max Weber, the German Sociologist and K E Eapen, an academic of Indian journalism, as narrative threads.

Historiography of media studies

Proposing the need to develop a “proper historiography of our field”, Loblich and Matthias Scheu in their article titled 'Writing the history of communication studies: a sociology of science approach' summarizes the criticism that the recent attempts to 'write and reconsider the history of the field of communication studies' levelled against the traditional historiography of communication studies as follow; (traditional historiography of communication studies) continue to perpetuate myths and are lacking social perspectives, the field was not interested in its own past, they look like thin hagiography and an airbrushed and whiggish and are notably unreflective. This lack of systematic ways of studying the past of communication studies and the problem the communication studies has in relating to its historical identity, according to them owes to its short tradition as an academic discipline, the external influences coming from the media industry and the state, its legitimacy deficit, its diffuse research topic “communication”, the heterogeneous academic backgrounds of its scholars, and the fact of being “scattered” all over places at universities.

To overcome these constrains, Weaver and Maxwell E McCombs in their attempt to trace the major historical antecedents of the evolving relationship between journalism and social science argue for an increased communication and cooperation between journalism and social science and to historically view the similarities and differences between roles, perspectives and interests between them. In his book titled *Social Theories of the Press: Constituents of Communication Research 1890s- 1929s*, Hanno Hardt also makes the same argument by stating that though between the end of the 19th and the middle of the 20th century, newspapers and journalists were under the spotlight as never before, comprehensive reviews of the theories of the press do not acknowledge the thought of the period and its development into 'the social theories of the press' and (any) analyses and comparative reviews of conceptualization of communication and media must recognize their roots of sociological thought to understand their own historical condition. In order to do that both the studies attempt to understand the ways in which social science findings and methods have found their way into journalism education.

Beatriz Marocco finds such kind of exceptional studies of journalistic practices in the studies of journalism and society conducted by scholars like M. Weber, R. Park and W. Lippmann and their social theories have promoted a precise and clear approximation to their journalistic practices. He also argues that we need to restore these exogenous theories, which were born bound to the social science, to modern journalism to make journalistic practices an object of dense epistemic texture and

thus achieve a social perspective to the studies on journalism practices. Marocco also suggests that Foucaultian sense of archaeology is the most appropriate way of exploring the characteristics of journalism and the unfolding that took place at the time, either through the social theories of the press or the relation between journalism and a certain thought structure from which it would be impossible to escape at the time.

Journalism and social sciences

But there are contrasting perspectives on the relationship between journalists and social scientists as well. Max Weber, who was particularly interested in the roles and functions of journalists particularly because he worked as a journalist and valued the combination of roles of journalist and social scientist in his own life, saw two rather distinctive roles for the journalists and the social scientists; the former should be a political activists and leader and the latter should be more concerned with the systematic acquisition of knowledge through empirical methods. Karl Bucher, another German social scientist- journalist also perceived a distinction between these two roles, but recommended training in the social sciences for political journalists and included a comprehensive course of social science studies in the curriculum he designed for the education of journalist at the University of Leipzig. Walter Lippman, an American scholar also argued that news and truth are two different things, so is the role of a journalist and social scientist. The former's role is to signalize an event and latter's role is to bring to light the hidden facts. Agreeing with Lippmann, Robert Ezra Park, journalist and founder of the Chicago School of Sociology asserted that news is a very elementary form of knowledge and viewed it as an acquaintance with some things rather than knowledge about something.

Contrary to the above assumption, many of the early American journalists did not see any difference between what they did and what social scientist did. Robert Hutchins in his recommendation to the US government as the chairman of the Commission on Freedom of the Press, said that journalists should go beyond simply orienting people to their world to providing them with information and knowledge about things and thus reject the distinctions drawn between journalists and social scientists. Philip Meyer who strongly argued that the roles of the social scientist and journalist should become more similar than it used to be and to cope with acceleration of social change in today's world, journalism must become social science in hurry.

Max Weber as a journalist/social scientist

Weber, the renewed German social scientist and the founder of modern sociology who not only worked as a journalist, but also attempted at understanding the role of media as public authority and as vehicle for the dissemination of social and political thought. Hardt opines that Weber's social and political writings reflect not only his intimate knowledge about political problems but also his continuous participation

in public life. So, Weber's desire for political engagement found an outlet in his journalistic writings. Thus he combined the life of what he calls 'a responsible journalist' with an academic interest in social science and compared action as an expression of political power (journalist) and knowledge as a goal of social inquiry (social scientist).

Weber invented and insisted on a systematic, scientific treatment of the press from a social scientific perspective to replace mere political curiosity and speculation with scholarly earnestness and scientific hypothesis. He thought that social scientific study of the press would yield valuable insights into relationship between the practice of newspapers and conduct of society. Weber's suggestion to conduct an empirical study of German press was, according to Hardt, to reinforce public consideration of the press must receive appropriate attention from social scientific community.

Weber had long recognized the central role of the press in the political milieu of democratic society and as an important instrument of social and political change. In his 1909 lecture at German Sociological Association conference, he proposed an empirical research study of German press as he considered press as a significant and powerful institution in modern society. Weber introduced the framework of his investigation in the following broader form/questions; what does press contribute the making of modern man?, how are the objective, supra individual cultural values influenced, what shift occur, what is destroyed and newly created of the beliefs and hopes of the masses, what is forever destroyed and newly created of the potential point of view?. The preliminary report of the survey of sociology of newspaper, a report he prepared for study proposes that 'a survey of the newspaper systems must be aimed at addressing significant contemporary cultural problems: one, the ways in which press is organized as one of the means of forging the subjective character of modern man and two, the press as a component of the objective character of modern culture.

K E Eapen as journalism academic

K E Eapen was a distinguished Indian communication scholar and educator and the founder of India's one of the oldest communication departments at Bangalore University. Prof. Eapen who is credited for establishing a separate subject panel for journalism and mass communication in Indian academic settings attempted at developing journalism trainings from a mere apprenticeship to technical skills to a wider spectrum and visualized a journalist as a specialist who's broadly and liberally educated. He saw media and media practices beyond its functions as an extension tool and considered communication as a social process in which future communication specialists must learn not only the vocational aspects, but also the inter disciplinary aspects and approaches. While distinguishing between training for journalism and education for communication, the former aimed at offering how-to-do type courses and the latter aimed at providing sensitization to the reality that the process of communication does not occur in vacuum, he conceptualized

communicologist as the need for the time. Communicologist for Eapen was: '(the one who) contrasted with the traditional journalist, is thus a specialist in the use of the wide spectrum of the media of communications (traditional and modern) and in the social process of communication. He is one who has had at least some media training and exposure to the inter disciplinary expertise that goes to make up the growing discipline of communication'.

In the process of defining communicology, Eapen also making a distinction between communication and communications where the former is seen as the process by which a bit of information or an idea is transferred from one individual or institution to another and latter is seen as the means by which this is achieved indicating the socio-cultural context in which communication takes place. Eapen wanted the communications to be the guiding principle for communication. Projecting developed media infrastructure as an index of a modernized society, Eapen ask the concerned authorities to make judicious recruitment and efficient training for India's potential 'communic(ation techn)ologists'.

In the absence of needful number of communicologist in India and communication training and research facilities of an international standard and also in the context of the Kothari Commission on Education recommended to develop major centres to undertake first class post-graduate work and research of international standard Eapen proposes for the establishment of an action and problem oriented Centre for Advanced Study in Communication. This centre, according to him will not be a place 'imparting the mechanics of subediting or sharing the wisdom on Press laws. It has mainly to be the headquarters of a team of rural sociologists, social anthropologists, linguists, extensionists, developmental economists, political scientists, statisticians, computerists and others challenged by the role of media, traditional and modern, in social change'. At a centre of this kind, Eapen continues:

'Education for communication involves two basic approaches. One is to give full-time vocational training to those who will write the headline or radio script, or for those who will take pictures to tell a story or draw illustrations for the neo-literates. The other is to produce the idea men, the theoreticians, conversant with the vigour of social sciences and rigor of research methodology traditional and modern channels'.

Eapen was also concerned about the composition of media professionals in Indian media organization in terms of their socio-economic status. He says that any sociological examination of people working in the Indian media's would show that most of them have elite, urban, upper class background. 'If modern channels of communication are to be truly mass media and national systems, the professional system should began to reflect the people in their totality. He considers it as an important element as he considers communication as a form of power and sharing of such organized power is needed to cement the Indian democratic experiment.

Conclusion

While Weber attempt to demarcate the distinction between a journalist and social scientists and by that emphasizes on the differences between two and to make the disciplinary boundaries more tight and rigid, Eapan seems to point out the need to go beyond the discipline in order to make it open ended. Though Weber valued the combination of roles of journalist and social scientist in his own life, he saw its value more on studying journalism using empirical social science modes, than making journalism itself as a social science enterprise. So journalism/press was an another object of study for social science that will make the social science discipline once again epistemologically loaded. In that sense, we may have to assume that in such cases, the academic discourse about journalism didn't inform/improve the journalistic knowledge.

Whereas Eapen's attempt was to make the journalistic knowledge open ended and by reworking on its structure of thought. One of the strongest suggestions that emerges from the work of social scientist was that a theory of society must be based on an understanding of communication as a basic social process and both Weber and Eapen saw it as a form of power. While Eapen thought bringing social science will help to undo this power, Weber would still be interested in seeing the role of press as public authority and vehicle for the dissemination of social and political thought.

Weber thought that being a political journalist will give him a charismatic authority to write, but as a social theorist, charismatic leadership is danger to individual freedom and liberty. That's to say that social scientist in Weber is not being translated into the journalists in him, as Eapen would want to see him. So a Weber would not be the model for responsible journalist for Eapen.

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