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Spiral of cynicism: Are media researchers mere observers?

Not only journalists, but also media researchers may be contributing to cynicism in political life by depicting reality in ways that tend to be self-fulfilling. Assumptions about politics and journalism, likely to be conducive to cynicism in journalism and politics, seem to be common in current mainstream media and communication research. Thus, journalists and media researchers alike share an ethical responsibility for self-critical reflection concerning their functions as observers who cannot escape participation in human affairs and the ethical challenges that relate to it. The first task is that of avoiding the trap of unrecognized participation.

Key words: Cynicism, media research ethics, journalism ethics, participation, dichotomies, praxis

Media researchers have claimed that political and democratic life is being undermined by current mainstream journalism (Cappela and Jamieson 1997; Iyengar 1991; Patterson 2000). The core of the argument can be summarized in the claim that journalists are co-producers of a political reality that they think they are merely observing and describing from the outside: the journalistic framings of political life tend to be self-fulfilling. A similar kind of reasoning may be applicable to the interplay between journalism and media research. Media researchers may be co-producers of varieties of journalism that the researchers think they are merely observing and describing from the outside: social scientific framing of journalism may tend to be self-fulfilling. To a large extent current mainstream media research seems to be based on fundamental assumptions about journalism, the public, and politics that may, inadvertently, serve to reproduce cynical journalism and cynicism in political life. This, then, is an ethical challenge shared by journalists and media researchers.

Ethics, we take it, is related to action; that is, to responsibility for action to be undertaken. Ethical concerns, belonging to the world of human affairs, are concerns about rightful action and what that should be taken to mean. To the pure observer ethical concerns would be irrelevant. Participation in societal life, on the other hand, entails ethical concerns. Narration with the aim of depicting reality is an instance of such participation. Spoken and written words have consequences and, more often than not, those consequences do not coincide with the intentions of the speakers or writers. That basic fact is a source of ethical challenges which, if recognized, may somehow be dealt with.

Challenges originating in unrecognized action, however, performed by participants who believe themselves to be no more than outside observers, are unlikely to be recognized and dealt with. The possible contribution to cynicism in politics, made by journalism and media research, probably belong to the latter category and is related to the idea of a fundamental dichotomy of 'observation versus participation'. The possible significance of that idea to the self-image of journalists and media researchers and to cynical assumptions about politics, constitutes the main thread of the argumentation below.

Mode of argumentation
Taking for granted that media research, like journalism, is a kind of participation in the world of human affairs, the case to be made concerns *how* current mainstream media research participates, namely: in ways that may be conducive to cynicism in journalism and politics. Illustration is drawn from a collection of 50 papers and 150 abstracts prepared and accepted for presentation at the 2006 International Communication Association (ICA) conference.

The point to be illustrated and discussed is the dominance of a set of fundamental understandings of the relationship between journalism and political life, understandings that may well be questioned, but appear to have become naturalized. To this purpose of illustration and critique, understandings, explicit or implicit, of journalism, the public, representation, and politics in the body of texts (hereafter

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referred to as the ICA texts) are looked into and briefly compared to the scope of possible interpretations of those notions with respect to cynicism. The basis for comparison is provided by conceptual analyses, aimed at indicating the interpretative scope of the notions (Koselleck 1979), as it appears in English and German interpretations, and in so far as it is of relevance to the issue of cynicism.

The concepts to be looked into may be characterized as crucial conceptual building blocks of the modern and the Western world. Historically, all of them somehow originate in Greek and/or Latin and have travelled via French, arriving in other parts of Europe at different times. The reception and (re)interpretation of the concepts in many different contexts have provided them with a wide interpretative scope. The papers and abstracts of the ICA texts have been selected and closely read with a view to identifying basic assumptions in current mainstream media research about journalism and its role in political life. Ten paper-sessions – on citizen engagement, citizenship, election coverage, the EU, critical analysis, discourse and dialogue, ethics, and popular culture – were fully covered. By basic assumptions we mean a priori assumptions about the natural order of things, forming the foundation of enquiries and lines of reasoning – visible to observers who do not share them, but use other assumptional platforms, other pre-judgments (Gadamer 1989) as their points of departure.

Assumed dichotomies are of particular interest for two reasons. Firstly: dichotomies – as possible instances of archetypes of 'good versus evil' or 'light versus darkness' or '1 versus 0' – tend to work, at the same time, as assumptions about how things are and how they ought to be. Thereby, dichotomic schemes of thought may serve to disguise normative judgments, turning all claims into truth claims. Secondly: dichotomies have a twin potential for fuelling polarization at one level of understanding – within the framework of the assumed dichotomy – while blinding the combatants to the existence of that very framework of shared premises. Both features, thus, may impede reflection and exchange that go beyond the dichotomic schemes. The function of basic assumptions as premises rather than objects of enquiry implies that they are likely to be reinforced rather than revised by enquiries, which have taken them for granted. We consider this to be a problem only in so far as all or almost all enquiries in a field are based on similar assumptions, meaning that those assumptions are excepted from enquiry and reflection.

Conclusions are drawn at a general level from the reading and interpretations of the ICA texts, stressing some overall trends – and, thus, the possible overall impact of those trends – with only a few references to individual items of particular interest to journalism and with no attempts being made to prove anybody wrong or, indeed, to dish out blame or praise. There is no claim that the conclusions represent conclusive evidence, only that they represent a thorough, systematic and intellectually honest attempt to understand, from a specific perspective, some dominant ways of thinking in current media research.

The ICA texts should not be considered 'data' in a strict scientific sense, and the close reading should not be confused with 'empirical methods', applied in order to test or develop a 'theory' – notions appropriate to the endeavour of outside observation aimed at understanding the mechanisms and structures of objects. The reading of texts to identify basic assumptions can only be conducted by persons making use of their own ways of thinking to identify other ways of thinking. Thus, it presupposes a position within rather than outside the world of human affairs: the human world of limits, diversity and uncertainty (Arendt 1958), and characterized by shades of grey rather than by exactness. Moderation is required. The appropriate terminology – akin, actually, to the terminology of the Aristotelean category of the political speech, aimed at deliberation on action – is one of illustration and exemplification, and of reasoning and argumentation, based on interpretation and judgment, intellectual restraint and truthfulness. The main outcome to be hoped for is the opening of questions for reflection.

Illustration: assumptions in media research

The journalist, as she/he appears in the ICA texts, is a reporter. The norms and ideals of the reporter traditions of journalism, generally taken to be universal norms of journalism, inform discussions about journalistic limitations and restrictions. Accordingly, the case is made, that in order to be or appear to be objective, journalism must stay away from issues and confine itself to the reporting of events.

In a paper on the coverage of the elections to the Senate of the USA in 2004 the case is argued like this: 'Writing about an issue requires that the reporter engage the topic, opening up opportunities for accusations of bias or questions about credibility' (Love and

Fico). Another paper, concerned with reporter norms and routines, states: '...reporters focus on events rather than on issues because events can more easily be described with pure facts while issues usually are muddied with interpretation' (Gilligan). Other papers – concerned, respectively, with multiculturalism and with the history of interviewing in Sweden – argue that the same idea of objectivity prevents the reporter from engaging in interviews as substantial exchanges with sources (Dreher; Ekström).

These and related statements are made as matter-of-fact statements about certain restrictions in journalism and do not seem to be offered as critique: the authors do not appear to be making the case that those restrictions within the reporter tradition may be counter-productive. Rather, they seem to be pointing to the restrictions as aspects of the natural order of journalism. This may be compared to the critique offered by Capella and Jamieson (1997), Iyengar (1991) and Patterson (2000) who share – across other differences – the critical point that journalists tend to depict politics as no more than game and powerplay, but ought to focus on political substance and issues. But reporters, it appears from the ICA texts, are not up to that task. The reporter framework does not allow them to concern themselves with substance. And the reporter framework constitutes – or so it seems from this selection of current mainstream media research – the epitome of journalism.

News criteria of proximity and sensation, and the dramatization of factual reports, suited to a mass audience, appear to be naturalized (Johansson). And because future events cannot be reported, one paper, using the fact that journalism is frequently concerned with the future as its point of departure, takes this to be dubious and mysterious and related to speculation rather than truth (Neiger). Stark dichotomies, more or less directly connected to the assumed dichotomy of 'observation versus participation' or 'detachment versus partisanship', abound in the ICA texts, which are densely populated by 'ordinary' and 'average' citizens, confronting an array of intellectual and political elites. References to elites are negative. Elites are assumed to be cynical – or the assumptions about elites are cynical – and quite a few papers appear to be sharing the partisan ethos of investigative reporting towards cynical holders of power. A public of equals only appears as an example of an exception from the normal in a paper on art journal-

ism (Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen). The political role of the public, like that of journalists, is generally confined to that of controlling political elites and demanding accountability. Voting is generally taken to constitute the essence of citizenship, and the terms of the public and audience are used as synonyms.

The notion of partisanship is widely used as something to be avoided, while democratic participation is depicted as difficult to obtain and tends to be linked to shared values and community affiliations (Strachan; Duffy). In a few papers, almost exclusively of continental European origin, references are made to public debate, but these references seem to be made merely in passing. The papers do not reflect upon the logic of public discussion as a democratic institution and whether, how and to which extent this may or may not be combined with other concepts they are using – concepts that may not be available in the mother tongues of the authors. This absence of conceptual reflection may be due to the authors believing that commitment to public discussion is universal and, therefore, that they are merely stating the obvious. In effect, however, the references appear as symbolic gestures, disconnected from rather than integrated into lines of reasoning.

In some instances deliberation is presented as a kind of technical device that might be applied to democratic processes. Disagreement and the occurrence of discussions relating to substantial disagreement, on the other hand, appear as a democratic problem (Craig, David; Craig, Robert; Gilligan), and endless discussion is understood to be a sign of impotence (Craig, Geoffrey). There is a marked tendency to regard differences between citizens as a democratic problem (McKenna and van Kasteren) and even to link this specifically to multicultural societies (Dreher).

Democracy seems to be taken, as a rule, to be synonymous with the increase of the autonomy of individual citizens or local communities. Thus 'democracy' is generally taken to be connoting a striving to achieve an ideal situation where nobody makes decisions (or judgments) on behalf of others. More often than not a dichotomy of representation versus participation seems to be assumed, and now and again this is directly related to the understanding of proper democracy as direct democracy (Rennie).

The ICA texts as a whole are pervaded, firstly, by

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the assumed dichotomies of 'observation versus participation' and 'the mass(es) versus the elite(s)', secondly, by understandings of politics as suspicious, thirdly, by understandings of journalists as reporters. This does not make the papers all alike. There is, indeed, scope for differences and disagreement on top of these understandings. Other perspectives on the texts and the use of other analytical approaches might highlight differences between, for instance, papers or authors of Asian, American, Australian and European origin, but that is not what we have chosen to look for. What matters here is some seemingly widely shared basic assumptions about journalism and political life, rather than possible differences or polarization, evolving on top of those assumptions.

In order to connect the traits of the ICA texts that we have chosen to focus on, to the issue of cynicism in and towards journalism and politics, we will now briefly unfold the concept of cynicism and explore how cynical assumptions may inform understandings of journalism and politics and the possible relations between the two.

What is cynicism?

The concept of cynicism originates in the name of a Greek philosophical school of the fourth century BC and, probably, in the Greek term for dog. Thus, a cynic may be taken to be, or to attempt to be, dog-like or, wider, animal-like, and this may refer to at least two characteristics (Duden 2007) that appear, although at first glance they seem very different, to be connected in a rejection of – even contempt for (and perhaps disappointment with) – the understanding of the human world as distinct from the animal world. One is a stress on an ascetic way of life, turning the back on the material pleasures and comfort of the human world. Another is the denial of an ethical dimension in the human world; it is the claim that ethics has no place in the world of men living together.

In classical thinking on politics, as it appears in the writings of Aristotle, the celebration of politics was closely linked to a distinction between animals (nature), human beings (distinguished from other animals by being political) and gods (cosmos, the universe). Human life and the specifically human sphere, the world, was characterized by *praxis*: action, including reflection on action. Politics was praxis. Ethical reflection on rightful action was essential to praxis. There is, then, an ancient connection between cynicism and contempt for

politics as an essential feature of the human world, and it is no mere coincidence when a dictionary exemplifies cynicism with a reference to politics: '"They've grown rather cynical about democracy" (i.e. no longer believe that it is an honest system)' (Hornby 1995).

The meanings of contempt for ethics – as something that has no place in human reality – and of suspicion towards persons has been preserved in a variety of ways in the word as it is used today. In English a cynic is 'a person who believes that people do not do things for good, sincere or noble reason, but only for their own advantage' (Hornby 1995). Cynicism signifies an idea of the nature of human beings, or suspicion towards (other) people. In German, a cynic is a person behaving in a contemptful way towards others or who displays no consideration for other people's feelings, interests and rights (Duden 2002).

While adopting the assumption of a specifically human sphere, we use the term 'cynicism' as a signifier of a pervasive distrust in and suspicion towards human beings in general with respect to motives – an idea about human reality that takes self-interest to be the only driver of men while references to other motives are considered mere veils, such as in the statement: '[I]t is so true as to be mere tautology that "self-interest" determines opinion' (Lippmann 1997: 112), or in the statement: 'Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind' (Orwell 2004) or, indeed, in Veblen's understanding of politics as tied to a predatory instinct of man (Veblen 1899). The notion of *Realpolitik* becomes a cynical one only when this is the idea of reality.

In a dichotomic scheme of thought the opposite of cynicism – and its only real alternative – would be the complete absence of suspicion regarding people's motives, and an idea that self-interest should and might be completely eradicated as a driver in politics and of actions in general. There would be no room for a reasonable mix of trust and distrust in the motives of other people or, for that matter, for discussing what should be considered a reasonable mix.

Dichotomic schemes of thought, using mathematical logic, share important features with cynicism. The cynical rejection of (the idea of) the human world is, in effect, an idea of a two-sided reality. We are left with only animals and gods; or animals *versus* gods. Cynicism and

dichotomic thinking share, in others words, the feature of being unworldly. And the application of a dichotomic logic of absolute (universal) standards to the human world – where absolute standards are unattainable – can be seen not only as an element of totalitarian thinking (Arendt 2004: 606-610), but may also inspire cynicism in idealists in the above sense. Therefore, the very best of intentions, unconditioned by realism, may be conducive to cynicism.

The concepts
Cynicism and the concept of politics
The classical concept of politics, originating in the Greek term for city or city-state (*polis*), is intimately linked to the classical notion of citizen (*polítes*). The classical citizen was expected to take part in public affairs by giving judgment and holding office (Aristotle 1992: 11275a22) on equal footing – in or out of office as it happened – with other citizens, neither being ruled nor a ruler. Citizenship and responsibility could not be separated. Political reason was practical reason (*phronesis*) and was related to speech and action (as distinct from production and universal contemplation).

The ancient understanding of politics as tied to the human world of uncertainty and limits has to some extent been preserved in, for instance, the Weberian distinction between two varieties of ethics: an ethics of ultimate ends, typical of and fitting in religion, and an ethics of responsibility (not to be confused with blame), fitting in political life (Weber 1992: 70).

During the course of time, and travelling from place to place, the concept – which may in current usage(s) refer to government, to political parties, to other associations or broadly to public affairs in general – has acquired negative connotations, appearing to be pronounced in particular in English. The negative connotations, forming part of the interpretative scope of the concept, are linked to the acquisition and exercise of power. Thus, 'political' may be used today as a term of abuse, referring to calculative behaviour, even by writers outraged by cynical attitudes to politics (Capella and Jamieson 1997: 15). The notion of partisanship as a signifier of participation in politics – and, as a rule, as something that ought to be avoided – appears on the other hand to refer to untempered behaviour, to the ruthless persuance of self-interest. While at one level calculative and untempered behaviour appear to be different, almost opposite, in kind; at another level they are connected: both sorts of behaviour warrant the suspicion that they are driven by self-interest.

Crucial to modern understandings of politics, and to tensions between different understandings of the concept, is the demarcation between politics and science. The negative connotations of politics, connected to the identification of politics with the acquisition and exercise of power, make sense if power is taken to constitute the dark side in an assumed dichotomy of power versus truth – and of politics versus science; and of partisanship versus objectivity; and of participation versus observation. Within the framework of those and related dichotomies, the understanding of politics easily acquires the mark of cynicism.

The proper relationship between conflict and consensus have been a focal point in modern discussions about the understanding of politics, mirroring the ancient disagreement between Plato and Aristotle on the question of unity in a polis. Too much unity would degrade the polis into no more than a household, Aristotle argued (Aristotle 1992: 1261a10, 1263a40). In modern discussions conflict and consensus has frequently been taken to constitute a dichotomy. Consensus – or unity – has been linked to communites of supposedly shared values and interests. There has been a marked fear of conflict as a possible precursor of civil wars, conducted by partisans or by Hobbesian wild human beasts. That fear of conflict can be seen as a fear or rejection, not only of modern societies of strangers, but more basically as a rejection of a human world of diversity and disagreement.

Political life has, on the other hand, also been connected to, and even celebrated as, the civilized expression of disagreement, the exchange between conflicting points of view (Sabine and Thorson 1973). Public discussion (as distinct from dialogue) has been seen as a framework for the living together and the sharing of responsibility in a society (neither community nor market) of diverse strangers. In this context 'controversy' – and, indeed, the German notion of *Streitkultur* (*Streit* translates into argument, quarrel or fight) – acquire positive rather than negative connotations.

The main difference between these understandings of politics – those marked by fear of conflict and taking consensus to be the only alternative, and those marked by the acceptance or even celebration of disagreement – may be that the latter combines ethical reflection and intellectual argument (Rathgeb 2005: 12) while the former operates on an assumed dichotomy

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between the moral and the intellectual and seem to be taking ethical values and principles to originate outside the world of human affairs. This difference may be seen, for instance, in different understandings of 'rule by law', either as 'rule by law, not by men' (Porter 1995: 74) or as 'rule by law, not by God's command or by the customs of history' (Arendt 2004: 369) – the latter implying that rule by law is precisely a human responsibility.

Cynicism and the concepts of representation and the public

Ideas about politics and about democracy may be taken to be interrelated in a straightforward way: democracy means that all citizens are co-responsible for and may contribute to – participate in – political life. In a representative democracy participation may mean: giving judgment on public affairs, holding office and voting. In this understanding, there is the most intimate of links between politics and democracy. Things get more complicated, however, in a context combining the celebration of democracy and democratic participation with suspicion towards political participation as partisanship. The difference, we take it, is related to different understandings of representation and the public.

The Latin terms for adult population (*pubes*) and the people (*populus*) form the background of the public as a term denoting the people (of a nation or a state) as a whole or in general: everybody. The term normally used in German (*Öffentlichkeit*) is related to the term for 'open'. The older German term of *Allgemeinheit* (Habermas 1962) refers to what is common or shared, while the direct relative of 'public' – *Publikum* – roughly corresponds to 'audience' in English. This provides a clue to tensions between different understandings of the idea of the public: Does it stand for something active or passive? Does it signify 'all citizens' or 'the whole audience'? To what extent should citizens be regarded as active or passive? Are citizens, or the public, responsible participants in political life, or are they merely being exposed and subjected to political acts performed by others – acts which citizens can only observe from the outside? Do those others, then, not form part of the public?

The idea of the public (or citizens) as an audience, or as mere subjects cum observers, is radically different from the classical idea of the citizen as neither ruled nor ruler, and as co-responsible for public affairs in a public of equals. Instead, we get the idea of a mass

public as a mass audience of undistinguished citizens or common wo/men, the *plebs* of ordinary unimportant people (Hornby 1995) – or of political and cultural have-nots (Enzensberger 1964: 176) – facing and being ruled by elites: another dichotomy. This particular dichotomy, radically separating the public from political responsibility, tends to be followed by the equally radical separation of morality, ascribed to the mass(es) of the people, and political responsibility, ascribed to elites. The elites, then, cannot avoid cynicism, and the public in representative democracies is left with no other possibility for exercising co-responsibility than that of more or less futile attempts to control the cynical rulers by voting and demanding accountability. Representative democracy comes to be seen as 'rule by groups distant from the ordinary voter' (Giddens 1994: 112).

The concept of representation is in itself almost empty, referring simply to the present tense in Latin: re-present, meaning to make something present or 'to place before' (Barnhart 2006). Political representation means that somebody has been elected and authorized to speak or otherwise act on behalf of others: the actual electors, or the public at large. The representative may be regarded as an impersonal (but sadly unreliable) instrument of the electors, expected to think and feel like them (Morgan 1989: 272, 304) and thus, to be, as far as possible, a one-to-one imprint of the actual electorate or, eventually, of the general public. Against this background, politicians may be seen as representatives of particular interests, and may be distrusted not only in that capacity, but also because they will not be able to achieve the one-to-one representation and are assumed to be intent on furthering their own interests only. The representative may, on the other hand, also be elected exactly *as* a person who is answerable only to her/his own conscience and is expected to rely on her/his own judgment and integrity. This obviously presupposes the belief that representatives are equipped with a conscience.

Accordingly, the interpretative scope of the notion leaves room for 'politician' to denote a statesman, or a trusted deputy, or a cynical, shrewd and unreliable person. Suspicion towards representatives – and representation – makes sense on the assumption that people act only to further self-interest. Participation in politics, then, has to be ruthless partisanship or calculation. At the same time, participation becomes of utmost importance to every indi-

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vidual citizen as a means of protecting her/his autonomy towards the partisanship of others. Participation enters into a dichotomy of participation versus representation (Giddens 1994: 112) which may easily be extended to other groups than formally elected political representatives and to any kind of judgments, interpretations or decisions made by persons on behalf of other persons.

Almost inevitably, representative democracy then appears as a poor substitute for direct democracy where every wo/man may speak for her/himself. This is old. The idea that real democracy is direct democracy – and, as such, is suited only to small communities – has been a staple in modern thinking since the late seventeenth century (Ashley 1967: 165) and is evident for instance in Thomas Paine's influential pamphlet *Common Sense*, published in 1776. Paine noted that 'Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence', and he assumed that, when looking back upon human history, in the 'first parliament every man by natural right will have a seat' (Paine 1995: 442-443).

Generalized distrust in and suspicion towards political representatives may have a particular history of its own and does not have to be pervasive in modern societies. Thus, participation and representation do not have to be seen as the two sides of a dichotomy. Arguments in favour of a 'fruitful living-together of civil society and state' (Nida-Rümelin 2006: 157) are clearly based on the assumption that representation and participation are complementary rather than contradictory. To this understanding, the institution of public discussion provides a link between the two, between participation and representation, and between the ruled and the rulers, dissolving the dichotomies, while maintaining the distinctions.

Cynicism and the concept of journalism
Like the term of representation, the term of journalism is in itself almost empty. Journal, journalism and journalist originate in the Latin, French and Italian words for day. Journalism is about writing in journals, now extended to radio, television and the Internet. And a journalist – the term entered English and German from French in the seventeenth century – does journalism, that is 'the work of collecting, writing and publishing material in newspapers and magazines or on television and radio' (Hornby 1995). In German, however, the term journalist may signify not only a person publishing in the media, but also a person who is '*publizistisch tätig*' (Duden 2007). *Publizist* is a term denot-

ing an 'author, journalist, in particular in the area of current [political] affairs' (Duden 2007). At the same time, the term reporter – entering German from English in the nineteenth century – may be used as a synonym for journalist in German (Duden 2002).

The tension in the concept of journalism can actually be seen as a tension between the reporter and the publicist. The assumption of a dichotomy of observation versus participation (as partisanship) forms the background of the demands that the reporter should report on events as an impersonal, non-partisan observer. This applies also to investigative journalism, the avant garde variety of the reporter traditions with ideals of acting as a watchdog, making authorites accountable to the public, and disclosing elite abuses of power; although in this case outside observation and partisanship seem to be fusing.

The publicist, on the other hand, is expected to participate as a non-partisan in political life and to feed into public discussions on public affairs, concerning her/himself with issues for discussion. This includes, but is not confined to, the reporting of events. Weber's understanding of journalism as the epitome of a political profession, linked to political influence and responsibility (Weber 1992: 36-37) is connected to this framework of thought on journalism. In more recent times the journalism of a proposed North and Central European media model has been connected to 'the use of the press as an instrument for diffusing ideas and organizing civil society' (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 196).

The above tension, in short, relates to the position of journalism with respect to political life – and that again relates to assumptions about whether or not (participation in) political life should be taken to be suspicious. An assumed dichotomy of observation versus participation (as partisanship), seen by us as a marker of cynical understandings of politics, is apparent in the idea of the reporter, but absent in the idea of the publicist: Frameworks of thought on journalism may actually be seen as models en *miniature* of different assumptions about politics.

Conclusions: The trap of unrecognized participation
The interpretative scope of the concepts of politics, the public, representation and journalism include not only cynical understandings – based on the tacit assumption that (participation in) political life is fundamentally suspicious – but also non-cynical understandings. This scope,

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however, does not seem to be reflected in the ICA texts which appear to be dominated by understandings that are likely to be conducive to cynicism towards politics (and politicians) in journalism. How can this be?

It might be just as well to recognize that modern democracy was born with ambivalence towards politics – the ambivalence which is made so acutely visible in the widespread distrust of (political) partisanship and the equally widespread celebration of (democratic) participation. This ambivalence – the origins of which may even be traced back to the classical polis (Arendt 1958) – is unlikely ever to go away, and may be assumed to be present among citizens at large, among politicians, in journalism and in media research; probably even in media research using concerns about cynicism in politics and journalism as its point of departure. If unrecognized, suspicion may easily evolve into full-blown cynicism. This is a particular danger to media researchers (and other social scientists) because they, in society at large, are widely considered and trusted to represent (impersonal) observation as the opposite of participation and, thus, somehow to be immune to personal assumptions.

Given the authority of social scientists as certified observers and describers of reality, depictions of journalism and political life made by media and communication researchers, disseminated for instance to young journalists during education, are likely to impact on how journalists think about and practise their profession. Moreover, such depictions – widely taken to represent realism and evidence as opposed to idealism and speculation – might even serve to paralyze independent journalistic reflection (as unrealistic speculation) on alternatives to mainstream journalism. Empirical investigation has increasingly been linked to realism, not only as one of several valid ways of, but as *the* golden standard for understanding reality. Empirical artefacts have come to be seen not only as illuminating and useful to a variety of purposes, but as the epitome of reality. Consequently, as the notion of 'media reality' has gained momentum, reflection transcending the mode of empirical investigation – as reflection on action inevitably does – has become increasingly difficult to defend. And social scientific framings of journalism are likely to be particularly difficult to transcend by journalists and students of journalism, to whom media research represents the academic authority of their particular sphere of work. Assumptions about journalism and politics that are widely prevalent in media research are

likely to be reproduced in journalism.

Problems regarding reflection are also apparent *within* media research and relate to reflection on concepts and at the level of basic assumptions. Decades of deconstructing ideas of objectivity may have had less effect than might be expected. Researchers themselves may, unthinkingly, take themselves to be mere outside observers, only depicting what can be seen from the outside, and therefore – like reporters – not in need of examining their owns assumptions. Curiously, that may be so even when attempts are made to deconstruct the very idea of objectivity, and may even be combined with partisan approaches.

Both problems – that of preventing and that of abstaining from reflection – may be connected to the trap of unrecognized participation. A first precaution in order to avoid the trap may be to recognize that epistemic and ethical questions cannot be neatly separated from each other. Rather, attempts to radically separate 'is' and 'ought to' – knowledge and values – may result in exactly the opposite: the unrecognized (con)fusion of the two in seemingly purely factual accounts, by reporters, by media researchers, or by other non-fiction narrators. The recognition that knowledge and value judgment (and observation and participation) are not complete opposites – and thus that they are different activities rather than two sides of one phenomenon – may be the precondition for maintaining the distinctions and preventing partisanship, while facilitating reflection on responsible participatory observation.

To this purpose, the classical, Aristotelian notion of *praxis* is likely to be helpful. Founded, as it is, on the assumption that human reality – the world, as distinct from the universe and nature – is marked by the absence of absolutes, purity and certainty, this understanding resists dichotomic frameworks of thought. Therefore, it provides a perspective that may be used to prevent critique of one extreme from somersaulting into a celebration of the opposite extreme. Moreover, the notion – again because it assumes human reality to be characterized by the absence of absolutes, purity and certainty – is linked to ideas and ideals about the continuous exercise of judgment and what proper and reasonable judgment might and should be taken to mean. The understanding of the exercise of judgment as a task, rather than as something which ought to be avoided or concealed, provides a perspective that is very different from the academic science tradition and the reporter tradition of journalism. Exactly

because of that quality, the notion may be more helpful to the self-critical endeavours of social scientists and reporters than science-on-science approaches.

Thinking *in* journalism and thinking *on* journalism are interrelated and may hand in hand enter into spirals of cynicism. Therefore, journalists and media researchers alike may be needing a license – and some prompting – to re-think basic assumptions. Thinking cannot be forced, but may be prompted and provided with input. That has been the purpose of this article, and much more prompting would probably be possible. We have argued that the rehabilitation of the Aristotelian notion of *praxis* might support re-thinking. Enquiries into the particular history of concepts and notions (like those of the reporter and of partisanship) might be other possible prompters, and enquiries concerning the dominance of American ways of thinking (Hanitzsch 2007), evident in the field from the very beginning (Merton 1968), may serve to throw light on those concepts and ways of thinking as no more, but also no less than understandings to be reckoned with among other understandings.

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Gitte Meyer and Anker Brink Lund

Rennie, Ellie: Community Media and Direct Representation

Strachan, J.Cherie: An Argument for Deliberative Civic Education in Oral Discourse Requirements

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