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Care, Values and an Uncaring Media

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Evidence of 'dissemination' is now seen as part of research delivery by grant-giving bodies such as the ESRC and Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Drawing on the growing body of research into media sources (Manning 2001, Davis, 2000) and relating it to debates on the public sphere (Habermas 1989), the paper will ask what (if anything) researchers have to gain from involvement with the mass media and whether specialised help can assist in bringing social policy research from the margins into the mainstream of media discourse. It will look in particular at the special difficulties of disseminating 'fuzzy' qualitative research findings which do not lend themselves to obviously eye-catching headlines. The paper will draw on an ESRC funded experiment at the University of Leeds as a case study with which to explore these issues.

Introduction

Social Science researchers contemplating their relationship with the media must first ask themselves why such a relationship might be useful before going on to consider whether, and under what conditions, it may be possible. This paper addresses first the much-debated question of whether there is a real possibility of public debate, via the mass media, in what Habermas (1989) referred to as the re-fuedalised society of the late modern era? If such a debate is possible and worthwhile how then should social scientists engage with the mass media and, using the example of the CAVA research, how the very particular difficulties of disseminating findings from 'fuzzy' qualitative research might be addressed?

Why engage at all?

In Habermas's idealised vision of democracy there would be a public space in which free people could debate and arrive at reasoned consensus about the organisation of public life. It is against this ideal that he describes the position in the late modern era in which the public is; 'split apart into minorities of specialists (e.g. lawyers and academics) who put their reason to use non publicly and the great mass of consumers whose responsiveness is public, but uncritical' (Habermas, 1989: 175).

Critics of his formulation are many, and yet the ideal of a 'public sphere' in which ideas can be debated and policy adapted, is something against which we continue to assess the corrupted and unequal means that we have at our disposal for disseminating ideas. As Nancy Fraser says in her essay 'Rethinking the public sphere' (1997: 124):

> The idea of the public sphere also functions here and now as a norm of democratic interaction that we use to criticise the limitations of actually existing public sphere. The point here is that

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> even the revisionist story and the Gramscian story that cause us to doubt the value of the public sphere are themselves only possible because of it.

Fraser suggests a new conception of the public sphere in which 'subaltern' spheres provide opportunities for debate amongst people with common interests and in which minority voices are not silenced. Nevertheless she also maintains that:

> To interact discursively as a member of the public, subaltern or otherwise, is to aspire to disseminate one's discourse to ever widening arenas. (pp. 109–142)

Indeed she suggests that it is in 'the dialectic between these functions [the subaltern and the wider public] that emancipatory potential resides'.

How then, to meet that aspiration to disseminate one's discourse? Some social researchers may argue that debate generated, without commercial (mass) media intervention and outside the corridors of power via discussions, conferences, teaching and alternative internet sites, more closely resembles the 'communicative action' which Habermas described as the key to democratic decision making. But there is a real danger that this becomes merely a debate between elite groups with ideas remaining confined within the academic community and never realising their 'emancipatory potential'. Ideas which could be entering public debate, actually end up resting quietly in the pages of journals, rarely impinging at all on even a subaltern public sphere, let alone realising their 'emancipatory potential'.

Any suggestion that all academic work should be immediately relevant to public discussion and decision would be patently counter-productive and corrosive of those very freedoms upon which the concept of a public sphere ultimately rests. After all, we would not have had a body of research into, for example, fathering, if, during the 1970s and 1980s, researchers had been interested only in what was currently newsworthy. Nevertheless, where research does have a relationship to current debates should there not be an obligation, in a democracy, to make such thinking and research available for public discussion beyond the confines of the academic community?

If so, in the absence of an active social movement eager to disseminate the fruits of academic labour, there seems to be little alternative to at least attempting to address ones ideas to the mass media.

How should academics engage?

Interacting with the media requires that academics should have some knowledge of how it works and make an intelligent assessment of where, with whom, and under what circumstances they attempt to work with it. Major difficulties arise from a lack of understanding (often on both sides) of the very different discourses of academia and journalism.

Who gets heard?

All journalists are trained to rely primarily on sources who are reliable, whose stories are easily verified and who are easily available. Academics should have a head start over other individuals because they carry the badge of respectability conferred by their institutions. They are however often overlooked as sources, perhaps partly because there

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is a perception that they are hard to contact, and unwilling to explain their findings in lay-persons language. They may also be invisible. Journalists are not great readers of academic journals. Academics who are eminent in their field may be unknown to them. The universities are merely one of a number of possible sources of information. Non-governmental organisations, and think tanks are often much easier to contact in a hurry and, as Ericson observes:

> The reality of news is embedded in the type of social and cultural relations that develop between journalists and their sources. (Ericson *et al*., 1989: 377)

News production

At the most basic level it helps to understand that journalists are heavily constrained by practical considerations of space, time and access (Schlesinger, 1978) as well as conceptions of what is news (Golding and Elliott, 1979). What journalists think of as 'news values' are in reality a set of codes, based on accepted understandings of what is 'normal'; and what is abnormal. News stories are mapped on to an already existing understanding of what matters. Things that do not fit within the map of what is known and understood as news will be ignored or relegated to a discursive space further down the news agenda (Hall, 1980).

So, for example, an individual researcher working on a small qualitative study is very unlikely to be given airtime on a major, networked news programme which has space for, at best, ten stories in an evening and a whole world of stories which fit into the existing understanding of news to choose from. Unless, of course, that research suddenly becomes relevant to a bigger story (see CAVA coverage below). However that same researcher may well find that the area they are working on is of enormous interest to a journalist on a specialist magazine working in that field, or a specialist journalist working on a national.

There is a news food chain. Local and specialist newspapers may be the minnows of the market place but the big fish are always on the look out for minnows and a good local story will often be taken up by larger circulation newspapers and radio or television. So, to take the UK for example, an article written by a specialist on the *Guardian* or the *Independent* newspapers will be read by thousands, rather than the millions who read the tabloids but may well be picked up by radio or television, which will massively increase its audience. Just one reference in a national newspaper can spawn a multitude of media contacts because reporters use back issues of national dailies as a research resource.

Different newspapers also have different working methods. British tabloids are heavily controlled from the top (Phillips, 2003) whereas broad-sheet reporters have rather more independence both in the stories they follow and the way in which they are written. General reporters working on a daily newspaper or TV programme might have to pursue several stories in a day and have little time to do more than report what is in front of them. For these reporters time and access is everything. If you are not there when they call they will move on to the next person on the list. They do not have any other option.

Specialists and feature writers will also have to produce work very quickly, but will often return to sources they have encountered and take time to discuss context as well as immediate content. But always keep in mind that journalists work within different conventions. The question of attribution is a case in point. For academics, correct and full attribution is critical. For journalists who have to write to a particular word length (often as little as 300–400 words), a full attribution feels like a waste of space that could

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be used to provide details of the research. Attribution is there to provide authority for the evidence, not to provide credit to the writer. If the source is not authoritative it may be left out altogether – as is often the case with a 'cuttings job' when a journalists puts together a report based largely on cuttings or press releases. Crediting another journalist is practically unheard of although they are probably the most significant secondary source of all. Working practices are only a part of the story however. Another factor is ownership and political positions. While all media outlets tend to a position which favours the status quo (Gitlin, 1980), and TV in the UK is legally bound to produce 'balance', newspapers are always more likely to report research (if at all) in a way which favours their own world view. Yet even these are not iron laws. A newspaper with a large employed, female readership, may be conservative on many issues and yet be open to debates about childcare and working practices which actually emerge from a more progressive tradition.

Although it may seem contradictory (in view of the above) academics often fail to appreciate that journalists really do prize their 'independence'. Research into the way in which news is presented often presents journalists as dupes of a system, which values objectivity only as a 'strategic ritual' (Tuchman, 1973), and who are pretty much in thrall to a handful of sources usually deeply embedded within the ruling elite (see for example: Golding and Elliott, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Hall, 1978). On the whole, however, even though their work may be presented with a political angle, they prize their right to ask questions and to be critical. Academic research is not exempt from this and academic researchers may sometimes find that years of painstaking work is dismissed in a couple of sentences, or (as they see it) taken completely out of context.

Perhaps ironically it is the inability to control what a journalist writes which academics often feel most concerned about. At a personal level it is not an unreasonable fear. There are scores of anecdotes about tabloid stories which mis-interpret research findings. Even some stories of academics being pursued personally because of something they may have said. Researchers are also, understandably, protective of those they research. They will go to great lengths to protect their privacy and quite rightly so. There is no doubt that, where there is a salacious, or 'shocking', way of presenting research, journalists will find it. But at a broader level the fear is often blown up out of all proportion to the likely harm by those who overlook the audience's capacity for 'interpreting' events.

The concern is that negative press coverage of emerging practices and patterns serves to demonise such practises. Nevertheless, work by David Morley into media audiences (1980), started a long seam of research (De Certeau, 1984; Fiske, 1992, 1996) into the ways in which people actually interact with media and found that people read stories in a way which tends to confirm their own experience. Thus stories about minority practices, even if they are reported negatively, signal to those who engage in them (and their friends and family) that they are not alone and, in a relatively diverse media environment, counter arguments will almost always emerge. There is not always a debate within newspapers but there is often a fierce debate *between* newspapers on such issues such as race, gender and sexuality. Thirty years ago that debate would not have reached into the readership but today readers are far less loyal to 'their' newspapers than their parents were.

It could therefore be argued that it is worth getting new ideas into circulation, even if they are initially represented in a less than positive light, because the more a new phenomenon is discussed the more likely it is to be 'normalised'. This is not to say that there is no risk involved in releasing information which could be misinterpreted and used to fuel homophobia or racism, but to point out that we cannot control the way in which

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information is either disseminated or interpreted and that it may be better to be part of the debate than not. It is worth noting, for example, that, while racism in British newspapers during the 1980s (Van Dijk, 1991) and the newspaper campaigns against asylum seekers more recently may have exacerbated racism amongst a minority, attitudes in the general population have become more sympathetic to minority groups (in particular amongst the younger age groups):

> When asked to say what had changed for the better in Britain, respondents cited . . . tolerance of homosexuality (76%) and opportunities for minority groups (71%) (Haste, 2000).

Working with CAVA

In the Summer of 2003 I was asked by the Economic and Social Research Council to work with the University of Leeds as part of the ESRC Research Group for the Study of Care, Values and the Future of Welfare, as a Media Fellow. My role was to establish a media strategy which would work with this particular kind of research.

Research at CAVA was clearly not going to yield neat headlines. It is quite hard to think of a way of making something accessible and media friendly out of 'moral negotiating in post modernity'. I decided that, rather than relying on the press releasing of individual pieces of research, I would evolve a strategy of 'intervention' in the flow of news. That meant finding ways of using existing news events as coat-hangers on which to hang fragments of CAVA thinking.

However it did also inject a contradiction into my own personal situation. As a journalist (rather than a press officer) I also cling to the principle of independence. I could not simply act as an advocate for CAVA if I was to be able to write about the work myself. I had to find a way of being attached to the project but also independent of it. It is a problematic position and I am well aware of its contradictions. When I write articles myself I try to maintain my position as an outsider and do not, for example, ask the relevant researchers to read the copy before publication (which can be difficult for the academics involved who feel a loss of control of their work). My argument to myself is that the work CAVA are doing is close to my own interests and I would have been writing about it any way. I welcome suggestions from researchers but I do not feel obligated to write about individual pieces of research. My role is to help them disseminate their work, and, when our interests coincide, I will write about it myself.

The first intervention came when British Airways counter staff went on strike in the middle of the holiday season thus bringing down on their heads the wrath of every newspaper in the land. The dispute started on 17 July 2003 and, with the honourable exception of the *Financial Times*, practically none of the news coverage drew attention to the real issue behind the dispute – the concern that new clocking on arrangements would rob female workers of the flexibility required to manage childcare arrangements. The Guardian summarised the general feeling afterwards of: 'bafflement that this has broken out over such a piffling issue' (*Guardian*, 30 July 2003).

It is instructive in view of the feminist critiques of the Habermasian concept of the public sphere (Benhabib, 1997) that this was an example of women's voices simply being ignored. The (female) trades union officials and the strikers themselves were clear and articulate about the issues. The men who represented them at the negotiating table and the men who reported the debate could not hear them. The discussion within the public

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sphere virtually ignored the questions of 'doing the right thing' which really concerned the strikers.

Hearing a passing mention of the concern about childcare arrangements on a daytime radio programme, it occurred to me that this would be the perfect vehicle through which to introduce Simon Duncan's research on 'gendered moral rationalities', which explores the different ways in which groups of women understand their responsibilities as mothers and the way in which they therefore negotiate decisions around work outside their homes. There were several possible ways of intervening in the flow of news which, by this time, had determined a universal view that this was an old-fashioned dispute about new technology (*Daily Telegraph*, 19 July, p. 10; *Independent*, 23 July, p. 4; *Guardian*, 23 July, p. 7).

One possible way would have been to suggest that a concerned researcher contact a newspaper direct to offer a piece for a 'comment' page. This would have run into three major, though not insurmountable, problems. The first is that many of the people who staff comment desks would share the dominant view of the strike and might not be open to a rather more nuanced alternative view. It was necessary to know which editor would be open to the idea. Here again a monolithic view of the news media, as always in favour of the status quo, is unhelpful. Individual journalists (and editors) have their own strongly held convictions and are often prepared to argue for alternative views (Phillips, 2003). The question for us was to find the right people.

The second problem is that academic writing and journalism are very different disciplines. Being able to write a journal article is not the same as being able to write for a mass audience. Editors are loath to make use of a writer whose work they do not know unless they have plenty of time to negotiate changes and rewrites. So, although academics do contribute to newspapers, no editor will assume (without evidence) that they will have the correct skills to do so, and they are unlikely to risk experimenting at short notice.

The third problem is that there is a big difference in the understanding of time in these two very different worlds. For academics, publication may come years after work on a project is completed. Journalists are used to writing for a deadline which is just hours away, knowing that much of what they have written will anyway be washed away tomorrow in the great tide of daily news. In order to intervene in the news it is necessary to work to the timetable of the news media, and few academics are happy (or able) to work under that kind of pressure.

Another option would have been to produce a press release and then leave the rest to the journalists themselves. This might have picked up more than one reference in a range of newspapers, but it would have been very hard to get the thinking behind the research across in a headline and introductory paragraph (which is all the opportunity a press release has to make a mark). In this instance we were explaining to labour correspondents that they had missed the kernel of a major issue. The chances are they would have thought; 'who do you think you are to tell me how to do my job?' and binned it.

In the end I felt that the fastest and most efficient means of getting the story out was to write it myself. As a regular contributor to the *Guardian* I had the opportunity to talk directly to a sympathetic editor and explain why this new twist to the story would be worth publishing. Like a pebble dropped into a pool, it caused ripples. There were 15 calls to the CAVA office and follow up on the *BBC Six-O-Clock News* with interest from the *Today* Programme. Subsequently the issue has started to appear in other comment

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pieces, not necessarily with the CAVA name attached. Madeleine Bunting, writing later in the *Guardian* referred to the BA dispute as an important symbol of the value that mothers place on their caring role:

> Until a few years ago, unions were pretty sniffy about 'work–life balance' as something for the ladies, and in the thick of battles over redundancies and the decline of manufacturing jobs in the 90s, the issue didn't get much of a hearing. That's all changing now. The strike of BA's check-in desk staff in the summer was a sign of things to come. The dispute, which took both management and union aback, was not over pay but time. (Bunting, 2003)

Already that one pebble in the news stream has very slightly changed the flow of thinking away from a straightforward 'rationality' assumption about women and work to a more nuanced view in which the other concerns that women have about work and childcare can legitimately be aired.

Similarly, CAVA research into the experiences of children after divorce was ready and available at the moment when the demands of divorced fathers for 50/50 care of children literally hit the streets in a series of high profile stunts. To start with, as the debate (started by the celebrity intervention of Bob Geldoff) kicked off, I had written a feature for the more personal space of the *Guardian* Parent's page. Then the organisation Fathers4Justice started a campaign of direct action and the story started to move rapidly up the news agenda so I switched my article on to the Comment pages which has an explicitly political agenda. The Fathers4Justice organisation had used a time-honoured way of getting listened to. We simply hitched a ride on the back of it. Once again the story attracted follow up from journalists eager to contact the researchers.

The third story was the only one which was set up in advance and was not a reaction to the news. In this case we used a device which any editor or freelance journalist utilises regularly. Seasonal events (Christmas, Valentines Day, Easter) and diary events (such as anniversaries) are times when issues of the 'Life world' leak more easily into the public sphere. These moments, which are all about the celebration of normative values, also provide opportunities for pointing out changes and contradictions in those values. A study (by Sasha Roseneil) which focussed on the way in which family bonds are (to some extent) being replaced by the bonds of friendship made a perfect Christmas story. Forward planning meant that, on this occasion, the academic involved with the research, was able to write an article for the Christmas edition of the *New Statesman* (a British weekly magazine) and there was also a piece in the *Guardian*.

Conclusion

CAVA's research is an attempt to theorise that part of life which has often been left out of public debate. It tackles the unquantifiable, focussing on how people 'do the right thing' in the context of changing norms and (often) unchanging values. It is not the kind of research which fits easily into the existing framework of what are seen by journalists as 'news values', nor does it fit well within the existing paradigm of debate about moral values (which is relentlessly negative). Nevertheless it has been possible both to trigger new debates and participate in existing ones.

The experience of CAVA seems to have demonstrated that involvement with the media is both possible and useful and that specialised assistance has helped in developing this involvement. As journalists working in the field become conscious of CAVA as a credible

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source which can be relatively easily accessed, their ideas have started to move out beyond the tight circles of academic conferences into the public domain where there is some chance that they will indeed release what Nancy Fraser (1997) described as their 'emancipatory potential'.

However social scientists, and in particular feminist researchers, who are investigating questions which have long been abandoned to the undifferentiated 'private' sphere will not necessarily find it easy to bring their research to the attention of journalists. News values are constructed within a shared discourse (Hall, 1980). Stories have to be located within or assimilated to shared 'codes' if they are to make sense. Research, which falls outside these 'codes', will not be easy to 'sell'. In the 1970s and 1980s the existence of a mass feminist movement, using direct action, forced new ideas into public consciousness. Domestic violence, date rape and sexual harassment are concepts for which new codes had to be invented. In the absence of a mass movement to force new ideas into public consciousness, researchers must find other ways of intervening and opening up the debate. For them, the experience of CAVA may be of some help.

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