

Sociologists in the Press

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Abstract Stimulated by debates on public sociology in the recent years I studied contributions of sociologists in daily newspapers in Austria. Although sociologists are rather present in the Austrian press, I argue this remains without noticeable effects on public opinion formation; the topics sociologists write and talk about are rather arbitrary and they lack factual content. Although my data refers to sociologists in the Austrian press, the study's conclusions might be true to the wider sociological community: Through such exposure, a public profile of sociology cannot evolve. Furthermore, the article discusses criteria that prevent and complicate the relationship between sociologists and the press: avoidance of publicity, the problem of values and ideology, incompatibilities of language-games, divergence of relevance criteria, and deficient cultural empathy.

Keywords Public sociology · Public intellectuals · Austria · Media

The public sociology debate (in the following abbreviated PSD) didn't start with but was put forward most effectively by Michael Burawoy. Immediately after his presidential address at the 2004 meeting of the American Sociological Society (ASA) (Burawoy 2005) it has been discussed in some major journals—among them *The American Sociological Review* (70), *The British Journal of Sociology* (56, 3), *Social Forces* (82, 4), *Critical Sociology* (31, 3), and *The American Sociologist* (36, 3–4). The authors followed up on Burawoy's theoretical and historical discussion of the discipline, argued about division of sociological labor he proposed, and/or presented case studies of successful public sociologies. All in all there was a

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broad consensus *that* sociology needs to engage more with different publics. Yet the *how* was a matter of controversy. The comments made by numerous distinguished sociologists inspired me to provide the debate with some empirical data about sociologists in news media and to discuss the problematic relationship between academics and the press. I did this on the basis of the Austrian situation, which might serve as a test case for sociology elsewhere: Sociologists are quite involved in the Austrian press, however I want to question the effectiveness of their involvement and argue for its improbability.

Examining a Meager Media Landscape

The data I use are sociologist's contributions printed in daily newspapers. One advantage of studying this particular realm of the public sphere is the easy accessibility of its products, which allows for a comprehensive analysis. Furthermore, the advantage to conduct such a research in Austria is that its media landscape is relatively easy to grasp, since in Austria there is an incomparable concentration of media companies and low diversity of media. On the print market there are only 17 daily newspapers (16 before 2006) for instance. Many post-communist European countries show equal or higher, other Western and especially Northern European countries much higher diversity (Table 1).

As regards to media concentration, apart from the fact that three media companies control the lion's share of newspapers and broadcast companies in Austria, the daily newspaper *Kronen Zeitung* reaches almost 50% of all newspaper readers in Austria. In the list of the largest newspapers of the world it is ranked 45 with a circulation of 1.009 million and it even exceeds *L.A. Times* or *Washington Post* in numbers. (World Association of Newspapers 2005) In terms of coverage it is the most successful newspaper in the world.

Table 1 Number of daily newspapers in some exemplary European countries

	Daily newspapers freq	Population m	Diversity dailies/ m pop.
Austria	17	8,0	2,1
Croatia	15	4,5	3,3
Germany	359	82,3	4,4
Norway	74	4,7	15,7
Romania	70+	21,5	3,3+
Slovakia	9	5,4	1,7
Sweden	79	9,2	8,6
Switzerland	57	7,5	7,6

Croatia: (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2006) Germany: (Kleinstueber and Thomass 2006); Norway, Sweden: (NORDICOM 2007); Romania: (EJC 2007); Slovakia: (Školkay 2005); Switzerland (daily newspapers that appear more than once weekly in the German speaking part of Switzerland only): (Media Trend Journal 2007)

In the digital media archive of the *Austrian Press Agency* I surveyed¹ all articles in daily newspapers with sociological content in a period of two years. I presumed in this context public sociology is only public *sociology* if it is actually labeled *sociology*. One reason for this approach is that one aspect of public sociology is to improve the reputation of the discipline outside the scientific context and for this end it has to be clearly labeled as such. Of 3,253 retrieved articles, 1,119 contained sociologists, 962 of these I defined as *public sociology* contributions, the rest being society news and biographical articles. The term public sociology contribution is to be taken non-normatively, meaning it does not say anything about the sociological content of these contributions. It means (a) articles that quote sociologists and/or their written work, (b) interviews with sociologists (both labeled *expert*), or (c) texts written by sociologists themselves. 97 belong to the latter category (c) and I will refer to them as *authored* texts.

Amongst thematic (101 categories) and other criteria, I differentiated the articles according to factual content. One type contains *hard facts* only. In these contributions sociologists present evidence from their own research, statistical information from other sources, or historical data without criticizing, interpreting it in a normative way, or drawing conclusions towards political measures to be taken. In my data set this rather pure form of expertise only appears in quotation, not in self-written texts. Another category is the opposite; they *only interpret* (not necessarily value), criticize, or demand change. If based on expertise, this did not become apparent in these articles.² The third type is a *mixture* of facts and interpretation.

Regarding sociologists (130 Austrian, 61 non-Austrian), in Austria there is no outstanding public figure in the discipline and therefore no distinctive “star” is distorting the overall dataset significantly. Additionally two of the most present sociologists in Austrian media often don’t label themselves sociologists and as a result are underrepresented in my data set. Bernd Marin frequently calls himself “social scientist” (*Sozialwissenschaftler*) and is also being labeled as an expert for questions regarding retirement (*Pensionsexperte*), or “demographer” (*Demograph*). Roland Girtler names himself “tramping cultural scientist” (*vagabundierender Kulturwissenschaftler*) in a series, which is published weekly in *Kronen Zeitung*, the widest distributed paper in Austria. Indeed they both identify more with their field of expertise than with their academic belonging to sociology. This again can be perceived as indication for the low public standing of sociology in Austria.

In addition to the qualitative content analysis, interviews with journalists (4) and some of the most medially active sociologists (10) were conducted.³ Furthermore I incorporated what I learned about news media in my own experiences working as a

¹ The search routine was “*soziolog*” (the German equivalent to “*sociolog*”), the search-period ranged from December 17th 2003 to December 17th 2005. The result was a raw material of 3,253 articles and an analysis of 1,119 articles. Most of the articles had to be sorted out because they were no contributions by sociologists, but event notes, bulletin announcements of graduations, texts that mentioned something being “sociologically proven”, etc.

² In the case of sociologists being quoted by journalists, the lack of facts can also be attributed to the journalists of course.

³ Data collection was a collaborative effort and I want to thank my colleagues Matthias Aberer, Lina Janes, Andrea Koch, Melanie Steiner, and Claudia Zimmermann.

journalist in various news outlets—through observations of and conversations with colleagues. Thus I am able to explore the subject from both sides, academia and media.

Being Present is not Good Enough

In the PSD the relationship between sociology and the press is hardly a matter of discussion. Mostly the debate regards the problem of active engagement with civil society—what Burawoy calls *organic public sociology*—and doing research on issues of public concern, writing it down in an accessible fashion—*traditional public sociology*. Appearing in news media belongs to the latter, nonetheless an analysis of the problematic relationship between academic and journalistic fields is missing in this context, which inspired this paper.

Regarding the Austrian case, one cannot speak of a leading role of sociology in public debate, but at least a supporting role: (1) Sociologists are *fairly present* in the Austrian press, but their contributions (Fig. 1) (2) as a whole *don't concern delimitable subject matters* that would unveil definable areas of *sociological expertise* to the public, (3) *lack hard facts*, and (4) *remain without noticeable effects* and barely stimulate visible debate⁴, meaning they hardly entail quotation, responses or letters to the editor.

- (1) In order to determine the presence of sociology in Austrian media compared to other disciplines, I counted their frequency of mentioning in a period of six years. Compared to many other disciplines sociologists loose the race in absolute number of mentioning, in other words: The word *sociologist* doesn't appear as often as, say, *psychologist*. However in disciplines like psychology academics are complemented by a group of non-academic professionals with the same name, which is not the case with sociology. If a sociologist works outside academia, he or she is hardly ever called “sociologist” but rather “labor market researcher”, “opinion researcher”, etc. However there is also a difference in supply that contributes to the underrepresentation of sociologists. Faculty sizes in sociology in Austria are far smaller than other social or behavioral science, except anthropology. With that in mind sociologists are more present as it seems on first sight. When it comes to commenting on political issues, sociologist's biggest contenders are political scientists, but in daily newspapers they are not so far ahead as one would assume (especially on TV political scientists are omnipresent).
- (2) The variety of topics sociologists speak out on or are asked about is wide, and goes along with the various subject matters sociologists are involved in. Accordingly sociologists are represented in all sections of newspapers, not likewise though. The most common section is the opinion section followed by the metro section (called “Chronik” in German, a mixture of crime and

⁴ Michael Burawoy pointed out, that, what he calls, traditional public sociology writes for “invisible” publics beyond academia and if this instigates public debate, “he or she might not actually participate in them” (Burawoy 2005).

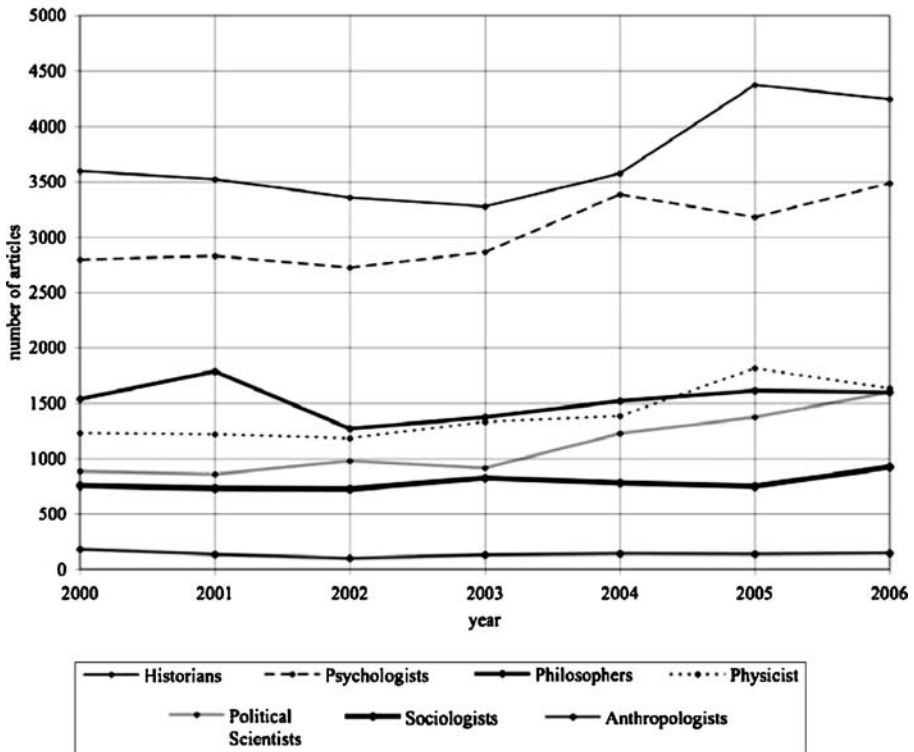


Fig. 1 Presence of intellectuals of exemplary academic disciplines in Austrian dailies (surveyed of the electronic press archive with individual-related search routines (e.g. “sociologist”, in German the female and male form—“soziologe” and “soziologin”))

catastrophes, sometimes also local- and entertainment news), foreign politics, local news and domestic policy. Sociologists talk mostly about (in this order of appearance) inequalities caused by the penal system (43 contributions) and the education system (40), European Union (26), aging, Austrian culture (both 20), sports (19) and the pension system (16). Most of them correlated with topicality, meaning that those topics had high coverage anyways and thus provided experts from different disciplines with an opportunity to speak out. Hence, there are no definite realms of sociology apparent in the content analysis and in my conclusion I will argue that this would be necessary to improve the visibility, public standing, and impact of sociology in the public sphere.

- (3) It is needless to say how difficult or rather impossible it often is for scholars to come up with profound expertise on emerging issues, with statements that are based on research they have done on the particular issue. In rare cases current questions coincide with on-hand factual know-how and in the fast moving business of news media there is hardly time to wait for more substantiated answers. At best the issue is related to the field of a particular expert, which still leaves much space for vagueness. In many cases journalists don't ask for more than assumptions or hypotheses; either their descriptive perspective of

(seeming) objectivity disallows assumptions, they can't or don't have to come up with them for themselves, or they intend to upvalue their article with a scholarly polish. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as assumptions stay assumptions and are not turned into pseudo-facts by journalistic rhetoric and framing. Despite this residual risk, in Austria there is an ample supply of sociologists who willingly provide their views on issues, as we can see in Table 2. In an interview the chief editor of an Austrian newspaper called sociologists *opinionators*. According to him, sociologists are intellectuals overly willing to advance opinions, which he accounted to their capacity to formulate hypotheses.

Authored contributions are most significant, since they can be predominantly attributed to the initiative of sociologists. Furthermore, they are immediate in a sense that—despite small tweaks by the editorial staff—they are independent of journalistic framing. They mostly appeared in Op-Ed sections. The fact that no pure hard facts articles were written is not surprising. Op-Ed texts require commenting by definition; hence a mere presentation of facts would be out of place. The outcome of only 24 mixtures of interpretation and hard facts is noteworthy though. There *is* more research being done by sociologists that could matter in public or political discourse. One can see this just by looking at articles where journalists mention research results of sociologists. Why don't they write Op-Ed pieces when their research becomes newsworthy, i.e. when current public debate relates to it? I will come back to this question of avoidance of publicity later on. As for authored articles, only four newspapers offer a platform, only two have a daily Op-Ed section. One of them, *Der Standard*, published 39 articles from sociologists in the period of examination. Despite the fact that 1.6 articles per month is a fair average, *Der Standard* is interesting because of its orientation to a famous American newspaper. The paper's publisher Oscar Bronner spent notable time in New York and afterwards founded a newspaper in Austria that should follow the model of the *New York Times* (NYT). One central point of the modeling was the Op-Ed section, which resembles the editorial concept of its American counterpart. Going through the electronic archive of the NYT I was surprised that I could hardly find Op-Ed pieces by sociologists, in my research period (December 17th, 2003—December 17th, 2005) I found none! I doubt if this has to do with the willingness of American sociologists to supply texts. Institutional differences of university systems in the U.S. and Austria might explain the difference. Tenured scholars in Austria are not forced to be very productive, to put it frankly. They have much less on their

Table 2 Factual content

	Public sociology		Expert		Authored	
	freq	perc	freq	perc	freq	perc
Hard Facts	99	10,3	99	11,4	0	0,0
Mixture	203	21,1	179	20,7	24	23,7
Interpretation	660	68,6	587	67,9	73	75,3
Total	962	100,0	865	100,0	97	100,0

plates; time for grant application work, writing of recommendation letters, and administrative work is not as immense as in the U.S. Hence, they have potentially more time available to communicate through news media. This is true for some people in my analysis; however, most sociologists who are active in mass media are diligently publishing academically as well. Moreover, competition in Austrian Op-Ed sections might not be as harsh as in the U.S. One indication for this is that the two papers with Op-Eds regularly publish purchased articles from *Project Syndicate*. This is an international agency for articles of well-known public intellectuals, which are translated and disseminated in 133 countries. I suppose acquiring these articles for their quality explains only part of the story; the other part is that either the supply of (eligible) Op-Ed pieces by guest commentators is insufficient or belated. I asked the head of the Op-Ed section at *Der Standard* about this issue and he agreed, except that only occasionally syndicated pieces are bought as stand-in, he claims. According to his estimations one third of all Op-Eds are bought from *Project Syndicate*, the rejection quota of submitted Op-Eds being at least fifty percent. Most probably the NYT receives more Op-Eds and accordingly rejects more. Yet, if this is true, it remains perplexing that NYT seems to reject Op-Eds from sociologists, since I am confident there are sociologists who try. The NYT certainly has more freedom to choose texts according to topicality and sociologists correspondingly have less freedom to write what burns *their* souls at a certain moment.

- (4) The final conclusion of my content analysis I want to address here is that sociologist's engagement in the Austrian press largely remains without impact. With this I don't mean public response; I did not do a media influence study. What I want to point out is that statements made by sociologists are hardly quoted, and only in one instance led to letters to the editor and responses. Furthermore, and this refers to (2), there are hardly sociological thematic realms and specialized experts for specific subjects perceivable. Why would this be important? Discursive power: If a discipline builds thematic monopolies in public discourse, it gains privilege of interpretation of certain issues. I would argue that a discipline, especially one as fragmented as sociology, can only leave a sustainable impression on media audiences if its members call attention (not in a boulevard sense) and/or continually expresses their voice, favorably but not exclusively concerning their specialties (Table 3).

To assess this empirically I took a closer look on those Austrian sociologists who appeared most often within the two-years period. Ten sociologists appeared more than ten times. I classified them according to their variety of topics in specialists and all-rounders. *Specialists* inform journalists and write articles about particular issues, which correspond to their field of research. *All-rounders* on the other hand deal with many different kinds of topics, but their conduct of publicity: Whereas *busy* all-rounders frequently serve as experts and/or author of articles, *efficient* all-rounders either write Op-Ed pieces when they feel instigated to take up "corrective action" or publicize their research, making use of press agencies for greater dissemination.

The group of *specialists* consists of six persons. Only one of them appears frequently (ranked third overall) and in the most specialized manner of all, since he contributes to one topic only: crime and penal system. Just the name of Arno Pilgram's institute, which translates "institute for criminal sociology and sociology

Table 3 Visibility of the top ten Austrian public sociologists

	Sociologist	Expert freq	Authored freq	Total freq	Topics
All-rounders	Prisching	37	15	52	19
	Girtler	51	0	51	18
	Fleck	13	8	21	7
	Haller	13	7	20	10
	Knoll	19	1	20	10
Specialists	Pilgram	39	1	40	1
	Marin	15	0	15	2
	Bacher	13	0	13	3
	Kolland	11	0	11	4
	Weiss O.	10	1	11	3

of law”, contributes to the fact that journalists ask him solely research-specific questions. The other specialists appear too rarely and not as specialized to be actually considered experts on a certain area, I would argue.

Busy all-rounders live up best to the label “opinionators” mentioned above. They are the most present sociologists; the leaders of the pack are Manfred Prisching and Roland Girtler. Girtler is without any doubt the most well known sociologist in the Austrian public. He willingly shares his opinions and thoughts with the press and the public and often does this in a humorous manner. Additionally, he teaches at the department of communications at the University of Vienna and thus has good contacts with journalists. Prisching writes political commentaries and additionally came into a special situation in the time-period: He arrived in New Orleans as a visiting professor right before the Katrina catastrophe. Subsequently he wrote reportage pieces about the disaster for three different newspapers, and later on continued writing articles about American society for one of them.

I classified two sociologists as *efficient all-rounders*, although they are efficient by different means. Max Haller makes use of the *Austrian Press Agency* to take out press releases for him when he has finished a research project. Best case scenario is that, several newspapers reproduce these in articles (in the investigation period there were two successful press releases). Moreover, Haller occasionally writes Op-Eds. The other efficient all-rounder is Christian Fleck. He was not interviewed by journalists, but wrote Op-Eds only, which doesn’t seem very efficient at first site. However, he did this in such polemic manner that his contributions often entailed reactions. His articles were the only ones people felt obliged to answer to in the data set, which is not very common generally. Sometimes commentary pieces are followed by, letters to the editor, but hardly ever response commentaries. Especially one text ensued debate: When the British Holocaust-denier David Irving was taken into custody in Austria, Fleck defended free speech. Irving was arrested according to a law, which prohibits denying the Holocaust. Fleck argued that detaining this man is only giving him attention he doesn’t deserve; the prohibition law had its legitimacy

after the war, but is now obsolete. Free speech is an imperative value of Western societies, he concluded. A debate followed and continued for weeks. Intellectuals from other disciplines participated and wrote replies that mostly disagreed with Fleck. The debate quickened interest by international media and suddenly he saw himself in the role of the Austrian advocate for free speech.⁵ *Efficient* here means touching sensitive issues that could, presumably intentional, upset some people and letting yourself be talked about. Thus media presence is sustained with comparable little effort. However, in this rare case, the text was not distinctively sociological but rather historical.

In the following sections I would like to address some issues that complicate or even prevent the communicative exchange between academics and news media. These issues stem from the fact that many sociologists do not partake in public discourse, statements by sociologists in the PSD and interviews, comments by journalists, and my own journalistic experience.

Avoidance of Publicity

What becomes evident in my study is that hardly any sociologists proactively publicize research results in news media in Austria and many don't deal with media at all. With *publicity* I subsume all forms of engagement with news media—providing background information and statements for journalists, giving interviews, writing essays and Op-Eds, taking out press releases, or holding press conferences. I interviewed journalists and sociologists—mostly medially active sociologists in one way or the other—about this issue and their assessment why so many avoid the press entirely. Additionally I make use of my professional experiences in academia and media. The following motives for avoidance of publicity are not empirically tested and should thus be taken as hypotheses to be tested:

- (1) Sociological research is often lacking public *relevance* or the researcher does not recognize it. Therefore they don't even try to publicize it in mass media.
- (2) Publicity is *irrelevant* for the academic career. Accordingly many scholars have no inducement to dedicate their time to it.
- (3) Many academics bear *resentments* against the press and journalists in particular. Media speculate, opionate, and are for a great part driven by political and market forces. The impetus of science by and large is to find truth or to *extend certified knowledge*, to speak with Merton (1996). Furthermore, the media's way of framing issues conflicts with a scientific outlook; besides informing they have to tell exciting stories; they hypostasize from particularities rather than deduce from universalities; they are highlighting, as Herbert Gans (2004) put it, more than differentiating. Most of my interviewees from the realm of sociology told me of unpleasant experiences with journalists: Misquotation,

⁵ For instance, in a *New York Times* article by Richard Bernstein in the November 26th, 2005, issue it said: "Mr. Irving's arrest has provoked debate here, with some Austrians arguing that however objectionable his views, he ought to be allowed to express them. Christian Fleck, an Austrian sociologist, wrote a long article in *Der Standard*, a Viennese daily, on Wednesday saying that Mr. Irving had committed 'an opinion offense against which it is not appropriate to evoke the danger of the resurrection' of the Nazi Party."

stupid questions, disproportion between duration of questioning and representation of statements in the article (if any) and decline of voluntarily submitted texts. Besides, in Austria the professionalization of journalism is still in its beginning. Many older and accordingly more influential journalists are university drop-outs and the journalistic occupation still has a reputation of dilettantism.

- (4) A central motive that keeps sociologists from engaging with mass media is *fear*. There are several partly interconnected causes of fear, the first two apply to passive media engagement — being questioned—the last one to active engagement—writing articles. The others relate to both:

Fear of *embarrassment* deters sociologists from answering journalist's question. Time is precious in news media and mostly ad hoc answers are demanded. Especially if scholars are asked about issues outside of their expertise their answers might sound ad-lib, undiscerning, or unimaginative. Another closely related aspect is the fear of *being considered an expert*. When sociologists speak out in the media they might be perceived as an expert by journalists and therefore being bombarded with questions whenever the issue or issue-related questions come up again. Avoidance here takes place, because they simply don't want to be bothered, or don't want to repeatedly admit they don't have an answer.

The fear of *loss of reputation in front of peers* also prevents publicity. Especially public sociologists I referred to as busy all-rounders are often looked down on by colleagues, since they comment on a wide array of issues mostly without expert knowledge at hand. Journalists love them; fellow sociologists see them as a disgrace and threat for the discipline (however, part of their resentments might also be driven by jealousy). The ultimate form of distancing themselves from these media darlings is to avoid publicity altogether.

Fear of political ascription: This can happen unintentionally when statements take on a meaning of their own and this is of special significance in Austria, since people in the public eye are quickly categorized along the lines of party affiliation. First, when experts answer questions they run the risk of letting journalists contextualize their statements. For this reason experts are generally very careful when they talk to journalist. Speaking from my own journalistic experience, most of the time when I interviewed experts about politically relevant issues they insist on authorizing their statements before they get published—a service daily newspapers mostly cannot provide. Second, statements can be contextualized ex post, depending on the topic, if and how a discussion around it is carried on in the press, and how interest groups position themselves to it. This also affects entirely self-determined publicity, i.e. Op-Ed pieces. In course of a media debate intellectuals may become unintended allies of, in their view, ideologically disagreeable groups and the bigger the issue gets in the media, the greater the risk of political ascription.

Some are afraid of the *exposition* connected with publicity. They fear a loss of prestigiousness as academics, not being taken seriously, when they venture out of their safe environment. This is especially a problem of young scholars who at first wish to stand out because of their academic work rather than media attention. They

are not yet acquainted with the field of sociology sufficiently to agitate within it self-confidently. Furthermore, their historic horizon does not go back long enough to assess many problems with adequate depth.

Some don't try to become active, because they fear *rejection*. This motive is stronger if they have already experienced rejection by mass media. On the one hand, there is a practical reason behind it: Writing an article takes time, especially if there is linguistic adaptation involved, and this time is at risk of being wasted. On the other hand being rejected hurts, especially if rejection emanates from an institution considered inferior, although rhetoric construction of inferiority may also be used as a coping strategy.

The Problem of Values and Ideology

Amitai Etzioni (2005) argues, that every public sociologists takes a normative position. What he means, is that everything we say in public is at risk of being instrumentalized by disagreeable groups—what I referred to above as *unintended allies*. This may not be taken as an impediment but rather as consideration for reflection before a statement is made, i.e. estimating subsequent political positioning on the issue under discussion. “Which ideology do I support, which do I invalidate by this argument?” could be asked for instance.

I would like to tie up to a point I made above when I stated “lack of hard facts”. Herewith I don't mean to condemn sociological comments without factual content; the opposite is true. Some are much stricter on this issue. Jonathan H. Turner (2005) for example drew a clear line between, if I may say so, good and bad public sociology: Good here means works that *may* influence policy making by presenting verified facts, bad being everything else that doesn't fit this criteria: (moral) judgments without evidence, especially in politically or ideologically relevant discussions. Turner fears a loss of credibility for sociologists who indulge in the latter. Whereas the claim for omitting moral and ideological evaluations is beyond question, as for sociology in media discourse the line cannot be drawn on the basis of facts alone:

First, it is possible to analyze arguments with no empirical evidence at hand and without judging morally. The analytic ability and sensibility of academics in general enables them to get involved in discussions where this analytic ability and sensibility is missing. More often than not this is true for journalistic framing of issues (let alone political rhetoric), which is not necessarily a result of journalist's inaptitude, but may often be a function of time pressure and the mere impossibility to think through and investigate sufficiently. Thus it is plausible that sociologists, who deal more than most other academics with current political and social affairs, intervene as critical authority.

Second, if readers don't recognize the scientific foundation of a statement doesn't mean it is not there. If sociologists speak out in mass media, they have to adapt to media discourse. Thus the impetus behind ensuing statements that are sometimes condensed or polemic might not become clear and be mistaken as driven by ideology rather than sociological insights. We may not like it, but if

we choose to communicate with publics through other communication channels than our own we have no other choice than adapting, since the respective medium sets the rules of communication. At times, depending on the subject, this may require abbreviating and leaving sociological or scientific discourse and applying a more journalistic form of writing texts or phrasing statements. At any rate, journalists have more pull in this instance; if they don't like what or how we say or write they can choose not to publish it.

I will come back to the problem of adaption to media discourse later on. For now let me emphasize again that the conclusion of lacking hard facts I drew earlier is not a normative claim. As I have argued, sociologists can also make useful contributions to public discourse without having empirical data at hand. What I'm asking is: Why do so many who collected relevant facts omit conveying them to broader audiences?

Divergence of Relevance Criteria

There is a discrepancy of questions raised in media discourse compared to academic discourse in respect to relevance and answers academics can possibly provide to these questions. Intellectuals might see the criteria of relevance (and communication)—the gateways to mass media—as corrupting scientific knowledge. As Richard Ericson (2005:365) put it: “there is often loss of sociological autonomy and influence as the analysis translates into the criteria of relevance and communication logic of the institution concerned.” This suggests an either-or-relationship: in adapting to other frames of reference we have to give up our own. What usually happens when we exchange information with others is that we find a common ground of discourse. Take the classroom for instance, which can be understood as a specific medium of academic discourse. Teachers, if they are good at what they do, translate and extract problems suitable for student audiences. Nobody would argue though that in doing this they are losing their intellectual authority.

But what does sociological autonomy mean anyways? Does it mean dissociated from the outside world? As C. Wright Mills put it, one role of social science is that of a *public intelligence apparatus* that does *not* have an understanding of itself “as some autonomous being standing ‘outside society.’ [...] No one is ‘outside society’; the question is where each stands within it.” (2000:184) Therefore, Mills continues, social scientists have to intellectually transcend and expose the connections between “personal troubles” and its structural causes to audiences. However, there is definitely an abdication of communicative autonomy involved in media engagement, but not of sociological autonomy per se. Concerning relevance criteria, no transeunt autonomy losses occur beyond that. However, there are incongruous relevance criteria of journalists and sociologists that have to be considered; they regard: *specificity*, *topicality*, and *novelty*.

Many journalistic questions are too large and complex to receive scientifically founded answers, not in a book, let alone in a news interview. Alternatively, sociological findings are often too *specific*, and their relevance for public discourse is difficult to establish. But there are definitely intersections. It requires an

understanding about how stories are narrated in the news to find these intersections and to convey ones own research with the right level of specificity.

Topicality for journalists inherently depends on what others do, other media in this instance, which is frequently called “the pack” in this context. Therefore an issue a sociologist wants to launch has little room. Topicality can be regarded as mainstream news coverage. Beyond that there are niches for other information also—investigative and enterprise stories—at varying degree in different media. In these niches topical constraints are not as decisive for whether a story gets chosen or not. However, with journalists, topicality is always a punchy argument. Speaking from my own experience and efforts trying to get my stories through at editorial gatekeepers, if sociologists want to publish an article the first thing to do is to ask ones subject according to topical implications. When promoting the story in conversation with an editor, a one-track manner of arguing according to these implications and a condensed and narrative style of presentation will definitely help. A journalist might moreover not consider a new sociological finding a *novelty*, especially, and this also relates to specificity, if it is located in a sub-category of questions that have been dealt with sufficiently. Once again, how the story is narrated and being sold to journalists can accomplish a lot. The optimum is to stretch a frame from the finding to the bigger question that opens a new perspective on the issue of concern for media audiences. Besides, applying a different frame of reference can reveal aspects we don’t see inside our own.

Deficient Cultural Empathy

From my understanding, one of the missions of sociology is to conceive dynamics of social institutions. Therefore one asset a sociologist should bring along at any rate is some degree of cultural empathy, even if the object of concern is located in a field outside our own. Yet, when some sociologists talk about mass media in the context of public sociology, this empathy is often missing.

Some are hurt when their efforts don’t correspond with the ensuing media presentation or rather with the lines of texts, which can be attributed to them. I discovered this in several interviews with sociologists and it also reflects in statements made in the PSD, like that by Jonathan Turner (2005:32): “I have been amazed at the outcomes of my own interviews with the media; what may have been a one-half to full-hour interview becomes a few sentences in a newspaper.” From my experience as a journalist this can have several reasons. First, academics often fail to communicatively adapt in conversations with journalist. Although journalists try hard to compel another (their) frame of reference in rephrasing questions, statements don’t get to the point and are not applicable for quotation. At best they are incorporated implicitly or by indirect speech. Second, a rule of writing a journalistic article suggests that one has to know more about an issue than what gets actually written about it. Ideally, also researchers know more about their research topic than what they write down about it. Many times questions by journalists aim at gathering background information and context knowledge about a subject that enters the article implicitly. They may sometimes fail to properly convey the purpose of the interview

to their sources, academics in this case. Third, in many cases there only one “puzzle stone” left in a journalistic story. In this instance a journalist may need one specific statement from an intellectual.

Furthermore, it seems that many academics think the world circles around them and such a conception is easily disappointed when reaching out of ones universe, especially in the fast moving world of news media. This, again, might be abated by a better definition of the situation by journalists. Reporters in addition need to acknowledge that academics often have limited understanding of their reality, even sociologists, who should be closer to what matters in public discourse than, say, classical philologists.

Incompatibilities of Language-Games

The majority of contributors of PSD at least acknowledge the fact that some kind of translation effort has to be invested when academics communicate through news media. Some though seem to think that sociological *language-games*—closed systems of communication according to Ludwig Wittgenstein (1967) within which sentences function as gambits that have no meaning outside of the game—is the only appropriate way of expression and that it is the reader’s job to learn the rules of this game. David Boyns and Jesse Fletcher believe the public is innately skeptical towards sociology and can best be reached by professional sociology: “[S]cience and the pragmatic problem solving it engenders is the most likely avenue through which a convincing set of insights about the social world can be offered”. (2005:20) Most probably the public is indifferent about sociology rather than skeptical. Besides, there might be other, more pivotal factors for appraising comments by scholars than their disciplinary label: actuality, novelty, language, degree of critique and affirmation of ideological convictions and personal beliefs. Moreover, the author’s professional label doesn’t determine the appraisal of the content as much as the content determines the appraisal of the label, or the academic discipline in this instance. It is true that scholar’s basic analytical capacity can enrich public debates, however this alone won’t be enough. The belief that employing our own language-game will be of use for wider publics is naive. Admittedly, American sociologists tend to apply a more comprehensible language in scientific publications and the gap between writing professionally and for mass media is not as wide as in particular parts of Europe. Hence, the problem of “translation” might not be as pressing as it is e.g. in the German culture, but it definitely exists there also.

When we discuss how our statements effectively reach publics through mass media, *language* and *substance* are sometimes mixed up. In the request for translation Saskia Sassen senses an underestimation of the public’s intellectual ability. “Why do we have to adapt/adjust our public sociology speech acts”, she asks, “we can engage our publics in the work of theorizing as seeing (without using arcane languages).” (2005:402–403) To the latter point I agree. Comprehension is a matter of theoretical concepts of the world first and foremost. But there is an inert contradiction in theses statements: *Precisely because* there are many sociologists that use “arcane languages”, their speech acts need adaptation to become suitable for the public. Furthermore, discursive adaptation—or playing different language-games

alternatively—doesn't have to do with intellectual underestimation of recipients, but with finding a common ground of understanding each other. A text can be incomprehensible and nevertheless theoretically undemanding, or intellectually challenging even if it is rhetorically simplified. My understanding of translation is to get rid of disciplinary jargon and circuitous formulation and trying to be as precise as possible. In news media, theoretical concepts have to be explained. The limited space necessitates parsimony of concepts if a point is to be made. Moreover, most sociological problems are multidimensional; sociologists master in dissecting and differentiating these problems. But in a news media context it might be a better idea to elaborate more on fewer dimensions. To quote a chief editor of a Austrian daily newspaper: "I know that the world is complicated, I don't need a sociologist to tell me that."

All the more irritating is the statement by John Scott who believes that sociological texts *are* accessible, but "publics do not want to read them" and therefore "[a] key element in a strategy of public sociology must be to persuade publics that engagement with professional sociology is worth the effort." (2005:408) Following Everett Hughes (1984), publics are to be understood as potential clients and sociologists are professionals who provide a *service* for these clients, not the other way around. Furthermore, through unilateral communication in mass media the potential for persuasiveness of that kind is limited. Media consumers are habituated to a certain language-game and if the presented text violates their expectation, they might as well ignore it. Educating publics in professional sociology through mass media is doomed to failure therefore. Personal interaction between sociologist and non-sociologists or not-yet-sociologists—in collaboration with publics or in the classroom—might be a better way to instigate outsiders to engage with sociology.

Conclusion

"From defense to offense", a reporter succinctly said when I asked him which message he would like me to convey to sociologists. From his perspective there is great demand for analysis of social trends in the press, but unfortunately sociologists lack initiative. I argue that sociologists have a responsibility to get involved with mass media. If the self-conception of a discipline emerges from enlightenment and a desideratum to detect and balance social inequalities, it should make sure that it gets itself a voice. And as I argued above, if it acquires the privilege of interpretation of specific social issues in public discourse, this can be a way towards being heard and stimulating change.

It is expected that public relations—the antagonist of detached public information—will become more powerful and efficient than it already is; more financial resources will be invested for it and further refinement of its techniques are to be anticipated. As economic and political pressure on the journalistic field and from within media organizations increases, journalistic autonomy is likely to further degrade. The demand for critical authorities, such as public sociologists, grows correspondingly.

The practice of intervention in the public sphere will remain controversial. Beneath the discussion floats the Weberian claim for value freedom, but this sociological credo doesn't have to be jeopardized when involving in public debate. I strongly agree to Pepper Schwartz' suggestion "to frame the debate, by creating and interpreting the data more polemically, earlier in the game—or later, with the

possibility of more complete information and contemplation.” (1998) With such a program sociologists won’t have to violate their credo. We have to adapt, not to alter. It is not required to learn the trade of news media, instead we should try to understand how information is conveyed in media. As Herbert Gans put it: “Public sociologists should not try to be journalists, but they can write or speak clearly, concisely, with examples, but without scholarly qualification.” (2002)

Finally, low expectations about the effects public involvement will be helpful, or in more optimistic words: appreciation of small changes. In my view, even if a handful of people that follow ones thoughts can be convinced or enriched by another perspective, the endeavor can be considered a success.

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