

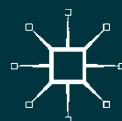
CULTURAL  
SOCIOLOGY

# Contemporary Journalism in the US and Germany

Agents of Accountability



Matthias Revers



# Cultural Sociology

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*Für meinen Adam*

## SERIES EDITOR PREFACE

Journalism has all too rarely been a topic for contemporary sociology, which is quite extraordinary given its vital importance in contemporary societies. Sociologists seem to take it for granted that journalism provides information, for the institutions, movements and associations that form the usual topics of their study. In his deeply researched and elegantly theorized comparative study, however, Matthias Revers shows this is hardly the case. The factual status of journalism is sociologically constructed. It is rooted in deep cultural structures that must be continuously performed in public and in private, so that influential audiences will “see” the factual status as true.

To maintain the mythology of objectivity, Revers suggests, journalists devote themselves, not just to reporting and interpreting news but also to cultivating and sustaining the boundaries of their professional ethics and organizations. Even as they usually maintain cordiality, they strive to separate themselves from the social powers upon whose actions and motives they report and from the sources upon whose information they depend. Maintaining boundaries is not about money but about meaning, about sustaining a moral community against fragmentation, conflict, and despair.

To study journalism in this manner one must practice a particular sort of cultural sociology.

At the core of the practice of independence Revers finds the idea of journalism as a sacred profession, one whose mythology celebrates heroes who have struggled courageously to reveal truth in the face of daunting, punishing and sometimes even physically dangerous conditions. Journalism that sustains autonomy is revered and storied as the foundation

of democracy; journalism that betrays autonomy is polluted and narrated as insidiously anti-civil. Upholding professional ethics and civil morals is not just pragmatic, something practical, but a symbolic performance, projected to other reporters and the public at large.

Journalists must continuously work to properly situate themselves, their research, their stories, and their reactions to the reactions to their stories—inside the sacred myths that portray professional purity. The boundaries of professional journalism are porous, the lines separating it from outside pressures and organizations uncertain. Maintaining boundaries requires continuous symbolic work, framing descriptions of, and declarations about, news reporters and their stories in frames that appeal to professional heroes and mythological imaginaries. When journalists succeed in aligning text, performer, and audience, Revers shows, they have the sense that they are making the broader moral community whole.

Comparative social scientists have sometimes described US journalism as quite alone in its insistence on professional autonomy. Revers confirms the more overtly political identities animating German reporting, but he finds deep concerns for independence as well. The question is not whether autonomy is valued, but how it is imagined differently in the national context. Separation, boundaries, and autonomy are sacred on both sides of the Atlantic, the distinctive mythology of contemporary journalism widely shared.

New Haven, CT, USA

Jeffrey C. Alexander



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I was blessed throughout my sociological education with invaluable and unconditional mentoring. Three individuals deserve most credit. In chronological order: (1) Christian Fleck was my teacher in my first semester when I was studying sociology as an undergraduate student and was the first one who let me know that I had some talent for it. His relentlessly critical attitude towards the social (and especially academic) world not only inspired me but sustainably changed my outlook on life itself. He also materially nourished my sociological existence by employing me or getting me jobs at various points. Ever since my academic foci and inclinations moved in directions different from his, he also became a great intellectual sparring partner. (2) Meeting and talking to Robert Jackall in person inspired me to do ethnography, more than any book ever could have. He also gave me confidence in my abilities and advice for applying for a Fulbright scholarship, which eventually brought me to the USA. While I was on the East Coast, Bob was always my go-to person for field research advice. I always left these conversations smarter and more determined than before.

(3) I met Ronald Jacobs for the first time in January 2008 on a campus visit at SUNY-Albany. I could immediately imagine working with him but did not fathom the extent of what I would learn from him. While I had a rudimentary affinity towards theory before, he showed me, beyond mere text exegesis, what *thinking theoretically* means. Ron's ability to see the wood for the trees while in the thicket of empirical details blows my mind to this day. Despite its patriarchal undertone, the German term *Doktorvater* (doctor father) captures something about this relationship

which “doctoral adviser” or “chair” does not, and I could not have asked for a better one. As a committed father, Ron also served as a role model for how to balance family and professional life.

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