The Analytical Model of Transnational Journalism Culture

The hardest part is trying to find the truth. They [politicians] always try to manipulate you. For example, they are organizing a press conference, but this does not mean that they try to tell you the truth but that they are trying to bring their political program across the media, to the public. You have to be very, very careful. What you get will be what they want you to get.

—Foreign correspondent, personal communication, Washington, DC, January 2012

US and foreign correspondents in DC attempt to perform their job (i.e., reporting the truth) guided by their professional ideology (i.e., finding the truth). Performing journalism according to professional ideals is the most challenging part of the journalism profession—and still more challenging for foreign correspondents than for US correspondents. While the news-gathering environment in Washington, DC is structured by transnational principles, the interaction with politicians is still much defined by national borders: politicians guarantee more access to journalists reporting for a national audience than foreign correspondents reporting for an international audience. Globalization has affected the way journalists are connected to sources and has opened new communication networks apart from geographical nation-state borders. Correspondents in DC are working in the capital together but are connected to their home countries through a variety of networks. While the question of access has yielded little change with foreign correspondents still struggling to gain access to important policy makers,
the three levels of transnational journalism culture (i.e., the cognitive, performative, and evaluative) explain the need to think differently when conceptualizing news gathering in Washington, DC.

Most importantly, outlining the relationship between correspondents and sources based on the three levels challenges Western normative ideas of source access among correspondents. Access was long believed to be the indicator of success for journalists across the globe (Willnat and Weaver, 2003), but the results showed that access was not the only means to the truth.

This conclusion proposes new ways of thinking about transnational journalism. It first synthesizes disaggregate parts of what is known about journalism culture and then proposes a new framework of transnational journalism cultures. The proposed model of transnational journalism culture is based on the theoretical assumptions of journalism culture (Hanitzsch, 2007a). It explains why it is important to conceptualize the source-correspondent relationship based on those levels that shape a transnational journalism culture.

The Importance of the Three Levels

For the cognitive level, perception and interpretation explain how cultural similarity matters in how correspondents perceive politicians. For the evaluative level, professional roles and ideologies explain how correspondents aim to interact with politicians and which sources they value. Finally, the performative level explains how the performance of correspondents is constrained as well as encouraged by specific news-gathering structures in the capital, such as access rules for US and foreign correspondents. The model presented here outlines the linkage between levels. How do correspondents’ perceptions matter for their interaction (i.e., combining the cognitive with the performative level)? How do different truth-telling ideologies manifest in correspondents’ sourcing choices (i.e., explaining the performative level with the evaluative level)?

The results represent a rich description of what constitutes the field of journalism in Washington, DC. Furthermore, an investigation of the three levels of journalism culture offers a fresh examination of journalism as a profession using a social-psychological analysis (Donsbach, 2004). The idea of journalists providing value or meaning to a story has long been neglected, particularly in a Western context. However, as this study shows, interpretation and perception