Conversation: a metaphor and a method for better journalism?

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ABSTRACT *"Conversation" has become a fashionable metaphor for thinking about journalism and its role in social life, particularly with the rise of the public journalism movement. This article reports the findings from an experiment in which the metaphor was taken as a practical model for producing more citizen-oriented content for reporting. Experiences from citizen focus groups acting as the source of reporting are analysed and their challenges for journalistic practice are highlighted. The article concludes by comparing the lessons of using the "conversational method" with some recent scholarly reflections about the role of conversation in journalism.*

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I had rather my son should learn to speak in the taverns than in the schools of speech. (Michel de Montaigne, *Of the Art of Conversing*).

At least since James Carey (1987) coined the term "journalism of conversation", a lively debate has raged around this metaphor and the prospects if offers for informing better journalism. In the 1990s, the public or civic journalism movement turned this conceptual question into an experimental and empirical one.[1]

In these debates, the term "conversation" assumes many roles. As a metaphor, it challenges a one-way transmission view of communication and news journalism. As a method, "conversation" suggests a model by which journalism (in public journalism experiments, in talk shows, in interactive program formats, etc.) can begin to work its way towards more engaging and participatory forms. As a goal, "conversation" (or dialogue) offers ideas about how to evaluate the stories of journalism and the consequences of those stories. To complete a conceptual circle, as a context for better journalism, viable conversation about common public problems is the context that (public) journalism tries to create for itself—in a way paradoxically—in order to be able to draw its strength from that very same consequence.

This article seeks to connect conceptual considerations about "conversation" with some empirical experiences of actual journalistic practice. I begin with a short reading of John Dewey's idea that a dialogical (conversational) method of knowing social reality is a necessary condition for viable public life. After this methodological introduction I will tell a story about a journalistic experiment that relied on the notion of conversation. In an attempt to generalise some of the findings of the experiment, I will return to the ongoing conversation about the

dialogical foundations and preconditions of better journalism.

The Methodological Problem of Publics

The theoretical bible of most public journalism thinkers and practitioners is, of course, John Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* (1927/1991). More often than not, Carey (1989, 1997) has acted as the contemporary guide to Dewey, while the necessary contrast has been provided by the figure of Walter Lippmann (1920, 1922/1965).[2] It may not be humanly possible to add anything substantially new to this body of literature, but to highlight a particular perspective I want to emphasize a couple of Dewey's points. The public for Dewey assuredly has two intertwined roots, both of which derive their sustenance from one of his other key concepts: problems.

1. A public comes into existence when people in their everyday lives recognise that their actions (or someone else's actions) have indirect consequences beyond the immediate scope (or life world) of the actors themselves. These often problematic consequences call for wider discussion and action; they call for taking others into account. Common problems, by producing a particular kind of interaction (critical discussions) between people, actually (re)create society in a particular form.[3] Even though some problems in modern societies have been recognized as so persistent that they call for permanent and institutional solution mechanisms, the impulse and origin of a public lies outside the apparatuses. In this sense, Dewey's theory of the public—despite its sometimes somewhat nostalgic formulations—is not historical

at all:[4] publics emerge continuously as people recognise common problems in different ways and argue about them.

2. Defined in this manner, a public is always intimately connected to the ways in which the common problems are recognised. Ultimately, then, the problems of public have to do with problems of language. If the apparatuses of society define and propose solutions to a set of problems with a language that is alien to the people (or parts of the people), no genuine public will emerge: people are not able to talk meaningfully about the problems raised. If the machinery and expertise of society do not hear, understand and remain sensitive to the languages in which people talk and think about their lives, the public will remain in an eclipse. This is why conversation, face-to-face interaction, is so important. Conversation serves as a measure for the relevance of the problems identified (and the validity of the way in which they recognised). If people do not seem to be talking about the same problems as the experts, it is the experts that have been alienated from the actual problems or the relevant ways of defining them.[5]

Starting from these two points, "the problem of the public" is to a great extent a methodological one. The problem concerns our institutionally underdeveloped ways of knowing, our inability to be sensitive to the emerging definitions of problems that fuel public life. It is true that Dewey's sketch for a "solution"—for a better method—is far from clear. But whatever it may be, it must be fundamentally dialogical or conversational. On the one hand, there has to be dialogue between the institutional ways of knowing and "real life": good science is a contextually

confident dialogue with its object, a dialogue after which neither is quite the same as before (you might call this a form of experimentalism[6]). On the other hand, this kind of genuine dialogue is impossible without a viable culture in which people openly discuss their everyday problems, where they develop their common vocabularies and subvocabularies, their attachment to their peers, communities and so on. Without such a culture, the "institutional" inquirers will not be able to listen to the relevant problems nor to interpret them usefully—nor to suggest any kinds of fruitful working hypotheses for their solutions.

For Dewey, the relationship between journalism and the problems of the public did not articulate itself in a very detailed manner. Concerning the potentials of journalism, he seemed to agree to a large extent with the pessimistic analysis of Lippmann.[7] Both thought that the problems of journalism could not be overcome without overcoming the problems of knowing in the institutions producing much of the content or "facts" for journalism. Thus, the hope for progress in the 1920s was seen more in the direction of other institutions than journalism.[8] Now, on the threshold of the new century, it is has become self-evident that journalism itself is a particular way of knowing, that it adds a method of its own to the production of public knowledge. In an increasingly mediated society journalism's way of seeing has become an increasingly important discourse, a discourse that defines some of the key public competencies and frames the space of actions for other institutions. Therefore Dewey's emphasis on methodology is such a compelling way of defining the current position and problems of journalism.[9] The question, then, is: can the metaphor of conversation or dialogue offer insights into a more useful method of journalism?

Excerpts from an Experiment: The Budget Jury

Taking Dewey's idea of a more conversational and public method seriously means acting according to it and finding out what sort of consequences and insights this type of action will yield. In order to do this, I will tell a story about a journalistic experiment conducted in the fall of 1997 in Tampere, Finland, a town of some 200,000 inhabitants. The experiment was a part of a larger, two-year research project, a cooperative venture between researchers and students from the local university (University of Tampere, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication) and the local newspaper (*Aamulehti*).[10]

We collected 12 citizens into a discussion group that met regularly (six times) during the fall of 1997 while the budget for the city of Tampere was discussed and prepared in the bureaucracy and representational organs of local government. I moderated the sessions myself, a reporter from the newspaper wrote the stories, and a colleague of mine stood by to give advice.[11] We negotiated everything all the way. (So your storyteller here is by no means an innocent bystander in his adventure.)

The following were some of the questions we had in mind: What sort of conversations about the common finances of the town would a heterogeneous group of 12 citizens produce? What kind of perspectives and insights could their contribution offer to a journalist writing about the budget? Could such a conversational method of producing knowledge and ideas about the city budget also enable the journalist to write new kinds of stories, perhaps stories that would also be more dialogical and engaging for the readers?

The discussion in the group—the "budget jury" as the group began to refer to itself–were framed and (supposedly) supported by two important factors:

1. The discussion aimed at being "public" in several senses of the word. First, all the sessions were recorded, and everything was said under the assumption that it was "on the record": anything anyone said could be used in the stories written about the jury. Second, the members of the group represented a diversity of ages, occupations, education, etc.:[12] the assumption was that there would be a number of differences in the perspectives and vocabularies, that there would be critical disagreements (a defining characteristic of Blumer's public, for instance (see Blumer, 1946/1961, p. 373)). Third, we decided to invite to the sessions any guests the group wanted to meet: consequently various official, bureaucratic experts, local politicians and others provided a connection to the institutionalised ways of thinking and deciding about the budget. Despite these potentially conflicting characteristics, the conversations were extremely modestly moderated. No strict formal rules were set from the beginning—other than that everyone should be allowed to speak, that the moderator would try to keep the discussion focused on one issue at a time, and that at points (to serve the reporting) the moderator would be allowed ask everybody's views on a given question. The group needed very little guidance in any of these.
2. The budget discussions were also a collective effort. First, this refers to the obvious fact that in focus groups people talk together: we assumed that the respective contributions of the participants would yield more insights and ideas about the budget than would individual interviews (for instance). Such a "collective interview" has not been a widely applied genre in journalism, at least before the conversational turn of the 1990s,[13] but lately at least theoretical references in journalism studies to Michael Sandel's idea of knowing "a good in common that we cannot know alone" (Sandel, 1998, p. 183) have become almost a cliché.[14] Second, it is important to emphasise the idea that this was an effort to appear to the public as a kind of model of a public and for a public: that is, instead of merely finding out what people thought, the group was supposed to be a forum where ideas could be developed and put forward.[15] Third, the collective nature of the experiment also means that participants were committed to the experiment: for the citizens this meant taking part continuously in the sessions for more than three months, for the reporter it meant extra effort and care in writing (all the participants were allowed to review the stories before they were published), and for the research team it meant trying to provide the resources for the group: guests, and background information for the discussions. All in all, this commitment was intended to assess citizens' voices as something more than mere "symbol-persons" (cf. Tuchman, 1978, 121–24).

Consequently, the experiment tried to test how the usefulness of a public focus group might work as a source for journalism. In this sense the "budget jury"—and many other public journalism experiments[16]—combined some of the more recent experiences in qualitative media studies with theorizing about the particular nature of publics. By so

doing, it drew all the participants in the experiment away from their traditional roles. The "people" were not merely members of the audience who actively (in their minds) interpreted public discussions, they were members of a particular group in conversation, they talked back into the public sphere and to each other. The researcher was not merely someone who designed and studied what took place in the experiment, he became a participant in the creation of common public reality that tried to have effects outside the "laboratory" itself. The reporter, as we can see below, did not merely remain an observer or spectator of public life. Finally—we all hoped– the journalism produced out of this would also situate the readers differently by offering a different model of the relationship between ordinary people and the common, public problems we face from different perspectives.

In the spirit of Dewey's "experimentalism"[17] it should be pointed out that we did not know what to expect. At some points the conversational context of the group offered positive surprises, at other points the experiment exposed concretely some of the problems of the method. Within the limits of this presentation, I want briefly to tackle five overlapping themes about the discussions, the stories written about them and the experiences of the participants. These five points are:

1. the group's insistence on talking about values;
2. the diversity of ways in which the participants constructed roles for themselves in the group;
3. the effects of the "public" nature of the group discussion;
4. the problems of writing stories about these conversations;
5. the strengths that the participants gained from the group.

My analysis below is based on a reading of three kinds of material: the taped versions of the sessions, the stories that appeared in the newspaper, and individual feedback interviews with participants.[18]

Value Talk

It was clear from the very beginning that participants were eager to discuss the city budget in a framework of values. Many of them said they knew too little about the financial situation and logic of the city; thus they felt they were not well enough informed. But at the same time they argued that it is impossible to discuss and evaluate the budget choices without talking about the particular values on which the common policies are based. Although there appeared to be immediate tensions concerning the identity of those values worth supporting, the group seemed to agree from the outset that values and the "facts" of the public economy are intimately connected.

At first sight, the strength of value talk is that it is an attempt to level the field for participation. "Values" is something about which everyone can be an expert. As a way of bracketing knowledge, expertise and factual competencies, then, the move to value talk is understandable and important. But such a move comes with a price tag. When we start to talk about "values" we often move to a rather abstract level of talk, and through this move appears a danger of self-marginalisation: the distinction between the "general" value talk and "concrete" situations and decisions is strengthened and whatever is said is detached from the actual problems at hand.

The working of the group made both the strengths and difficulties of value talk obvious. On the one hand members were able to evaluate budget choices despite lack of factual knowl-

edge: consequently, they brought an important critical voice to the budget discussion. But on the other hand, since they rehearsed their competence at this level, their confrontations with city officials were rather uneven. The bureaucratic logic and the "hard facts" of the officials were often able to over-run the serious and fundamental con-siderations of the group. This, of course, is not the fault of the people in the group, but rather reflects the failure of those of us who organised the ex-periment.

The group argued against the view that it was essential to pay attention to the distinction between values and facts. They did not want to discuss merely values. The fact (!) that the dis-tinction between facts and values is so solid and strong in various institutional discourses (in journalism, for in-stance[19]) is not the fault of the citizen group.

In any case, the concrete tendency of value talk in the group suggests that a group conversation is at least poten-tially a site where common questions and concrete problems can be tackled together and at least potentially some of the inequalities in terms of factual knowledge can be challenged.

Self-Constructed Roles

The participants managed—while talk-ing to each other—to define their own identities within the group: people "told (about) themselves" very differently and by doing this they created different roles and positions for participation. When discussing the issues, then, they seemed to lean on these self-presenta-tions as a source of legitimation for their views. It was as if they defined their own competencies from which to tackle the issues.

Some participants presented them-selves through a personal narrative,

through their own experiences, remi-niscenses (for instance, how things were when they were younger). Some leaned more on their professional ca-reers and competences. Others saw themselves in terms of "representing" a particular group of people or a branch of life (the unemployed, the workers, the retired, etc.). There were also a couple of participants who were mainly interested in how the group functioned; they made explicit the "experimental" nature of what was going on. The group proved to be very tolerant and accepted of various ways of participat-ing. However, the identities were—just like value talk—both an asset and a source of problems.

The positive side of various identities was reflected in the diversity of experi-ences that these roles transmitted to the group and its deliberations. Particu-larly the "professionals" in the group were able to ask challenging and difficult questions (for instance: how should we compare the money spent on the everyday care of old people to the investments on their specialised medical treatment). Also, those who committed themselves more to the "representational" role, were eager to evaluate issues from their own per-spectives and remind the others about things that were not visible in the bud-get choices (for instance: budget cuts and rationalisation in the public sector mean an increasing workload for those that still work). These questions often tended to challenge the bureaucratic categorisations in interesting ways. De-spite their potential, we were not able to sustain their challenge in the local public discussion. This, however, refers more to the limitations of journalism and its routines than the quality of the questions themselves.

The negative side of the self-con-structed roles made itself visible in the different levels of activity by different participants. The most active ones

were those who built their competence on the "experimental" or "personal narrative" roles. The "professionals" and the "representatives" were also quite active, but in a more restricted field of questions (relating to their role)—they also felt themselves that they had been very active. The more quiet (not necessarily passive) speakers were also "representatives", but they felt that they would have needed some kind of peer support (in the group) in order to be able to talk more confidently. Interestingly enough, these quieter members (the youngest and oldest in the group) seemed to have sensed that although they "represented" someone they represented the minorities. Their relative silence—which bears traces of the spiral of silence—points to a huge challenge.

Therefore, while the self-constructed identities of the group offered an important connection to new kinds (less public and less visible) of knowledge and experience, the fact that these identities were often built through the logic of representation tied them to a number of common sense or ideological meanings. To put it briefly: those who were able to "tell themselves" as representatives of active people—taxpaying, working, etc.—had more strength to talk.

The construction of identities and the participants' ways of drawing on those self-constructed competencies testify to the ability of a relatively unmoderated continuous conversation to articulate various experiences into the public arena. This is a fundamentally important point: if journalists set themselves the task of not merely reflecting the existing and already well-articulated (powerful) experiences and logics, they need new locations in which these kinds of experiences can be formulated. Our experiment suggests that a diverse, heterogeneous group (and perhaps just that) can serve as a useful place for such articulation.

Combining the lessons of both value talk and the roles people assumed, one must emphasise the potential in the observations. They both show that in a discussion group the possibilities for asking new kinds of questions or framing issues in different ways can be seen or sensed. However, these initiatives need support in order to be taken further. It is precisely the power of journalism to demand publicly that they be taken seriously that a more fully and seriously dialogical public sphere requires. Creating a reasonable interaction between citizens and experts or politicians demands that journalism equals out the balance of power by offering its own resources and skills for the use of the citizens.

"Public" Nature of the Discussions

Being aware of the public nature of the talk brought with it two sorts of "responsibility" to the group. First, there was a clear tendency to work towards a consensus: most members tried to present their views in a common language, perhaps more moderately than in other contexts. They also realised that their views on certain issues had changed during the discussions. This is how one participant talked about it later:

> Maybe the consensus thing has to do with the fact that you pay more attention to what the other person means and not merely to what that person is saying (feedback interview).

Thus, the commitment to the group leads people to articulate their own viewpoints differently, and in this sense the group did not so much reflect realities as actually define them. This articulation took place in a special

intersection: with the presence of real persons and with an acknowledgement of the attention of a larger audience. In this way the "public" nature of the talk brought an element of deliberation to the group.

Second, the pressure of this "publicity" also gave some people the motive actively—at some points almost aggressively—to take up the perspectives and issues that they felt were really pressing. At some points, all the inherently civilising tendencies of face-to-face encounter were pushed aside when a place and space for one's own agenda was needed. But since these interventions were made by people known to the other discussants (and from roles that people had themselves defined), there were virtually no negative or deconstructive confrontations. People not only understood their fellow members' points, but even if they did not accept their views they could appreciate their motives and the sense of urgency of others' experiences.

While thinking about the effects of the public nature of the talk, one should not forget the uneven distribution of speech in the group. Also, one might suspect that the sense of publicity also increased some of the pressures to submit to the official wisdom and prevailing common sense and thus inhibited the imagination of the group. The following extract from a feedback interview illustrates these contradictory tendencies brilliantly. One of the participants says,

In the beginning we disagreed a lot, but then we started to agree more. A group like that is rather consensus oriented … one reason is the dynamics of the group and another factor is that you begin to see the realities, or so called realities. There emerges a sense of what is possible and what is not. This does not necessarily have anything to do with reality in the sense that something else might be possible as well, you know … in discussions like these you should always be able to retain the idea that there really are alternatives, that you really can do something completely different (feedback interview).

Writing the Stories: Missing Genres?

Creating stories out of group discussions was hard. There are a number for reasons for this, but the most significant seems to be that in its current form journalism is not well equipped with modes of stories to report a conversation. There are genres for talk shows and interviews, but little tradition of forms of writing about a developing, deliberative conversation.

The content themes of the stories written about the budget jury usually revolved around one specific issue. Partly the themes reflected the fields and expertise of the "guests" that the jury wanted to meet, partly there were attempts to write more overarching stories on the values of budget choices. Interestingly, these two themes echo the identities that the participants created (see point (3) above). And in retrospect it seems that the themes in which there was some sort of "representative" or "professional (knowledge)" connection inside the group were more easily turned into stories. This points to a deep-seated connection of journalism to a modern, representative "logic" (in both the epistemological and political senses of the term). It seemed easy to use the group as a vehicle for carrying over such challenges to the public sphere. While this is, I think, a valuable contribution in itself, it points to more challenging questions. How to learn to "use" the value-driven deliberative process of the group itself? How to report the conversation and not just the views and experiences of its participants?

The feedback interviews offer some further ideas for answering these questions. The participants felt that the published stories were generally good and fair, but their criticism revealed two interesting points: they thought the stories could have emphasised the differences and tensions inside the group more, and some of the quotes (in the final stories) felt slightly out of context. Both are useful hints for more conversational journalism.

First, the stories might have played up the tensions in the group. This does not mean that confrontations in themselves make good journalism. However, provided that the newsroom makes an effort and remains committed to the reactions and further contributions of the public discussion, a rougher and less consensus-oriented approach might work better. A good deal of work is required to consider how a particular question and issue can be sustained and developed in the rhythm of daily journalism and how sensible plots (or narratives) of public discussion could be kept alive from day to day.

Second, there were some problems in transferring the speech of the people to the news stories. Again, a participant in a feedback interview is pleasingly analytical:

There were extremely good conversations. People made wonderful contributions. But when there is so little room in the story, it is a shame how little gets in even if you do the story well … what was written was extremely well condensed in terms of the things covered, but compared to the whole … a citation of a couple of sentences is no good, it gives you a sense that now you are making a *performance*, even if it is in a couple of lines. (feedback interview, emphasis added).

A good conversation is rarely about performance; it is more about trusting that the other party will make an attempt to understand. That is why the change of context (from the conversation to the page of a newspaper) is so radical. However, the quotation above also reveals a deeper problem. That is, why do we spontaneously think of public appearance mainly in terms of performance, manipulation and showing off. One of the really serious challenges of more conversational methods of journalism would be, then, for us all (journalists, readers, experts, etc.) to learn to question this assumption. Perhaps the trouble here lies not so much in the modes of communication themselves as in the historical and cultural connotations we attach to these forms.

The Empowering Group

Finally, the group turned out to be a source of energy and power in itself, in at least two ways. First, it offered its participants an experience of joy and happiness. Second, the group encouraged its members to speak out in public.

The sense of enjoyment and pleasure was easy to sense in the sessions of the group itself. We often met for three hours instead of the intended two and people invested their time and energy without complaints. Even in the feedback interviews—half a year after the experiment—many of them remembered the jury with a sense of pleasure.

It was exciting. Particularly since you did not exactly know beforehand, I mean we saw the pre-versions and you could tell how it would turn out, but it was nice for you to read it in the paper, and you get this feeling "wow!" Was my sentence really so good that it gets to be printed word by word. It creates this peculiar sense that you have been noticed and that you get to say your piece in a noteworthy medium, that decision makers will read it.

There are a number of examples of sensing this "public happiness" in the materials. Indeed, one wonders if this might be a feeling one can never quite reach in the private realm but only at the particular intersection of personal participation in a public situation. One should not overestimate this, but these traces of pleasure point to one important thing: although "feelings" are something we are used to referring to the private realm (pleasure, enjoyment, etc.), they may be there not out of necessity but because we position them there. Also, "public happiness" offers an example of a possibly poorly recognised source of energy that a more conversationalist journalism could draw on.[20]

More concretely, the group encouraged some of its members to speak out on matters that would otherwise have been difficult to speak about. The most striking example of this came when a participant (a nurse) came forward in one of the stories and boldly asked a question about the rationality of cutting funds for the everyday care of chronically ill older people. She argued that more money should be spent on making their lives more worth living (in terms of basic care like feeding, washing, etc.) and perhaps less money should be spent in acute, specialised but expensive intensive care. She argued that this was a question of honouring the "natural" life span of people and allowing for a dignified old age even for those who are taken care of in institutions. The fact that she had talked about this on many occasions in the group and had found understanding and support for her point of view and the fact that she had learned to trust the reporter (and learned to work with her) finally encouraged her to take the initiative. Also, during the jury's work she had had many discussions with her colleagues (and with doctors) at her workplace. All this added up to the feeling of empowerment and courage to speak up. Now, posing a question like this might seem like a small thing, but in fact for an ordinary person working in such a hierarchical institution (of expert knowledge) as the hospital, to question the basic logic of the system is actually rather courageous. The way in which the support of the jury and the heightened sense of being able to say meaningful things formed the base for her action is well illustrated in her feedback interview:

I have to say that for a moment I thought that it [the story] should be changed … but the reporter … I was so satisfied with her, she had time and energy, I called like a number of times and wanted to change this or that. … she took me very well … we read the part again and again. I kind of thought that I went too far there and that I was too blunt. And she was very good in formulating that and taking into account my ideas. … and we also at the work place, there was the head nurse and doctor on call and others and we thought about it … and even the doctors that I was criticising said that you should have said more now that for once you had the chance. But they would not do it themselves in their own names (feedback interview).

Against and Beyond Common Sense about Public Conversation

Within media studies, Michael Schudson has questioned the fashionable use of "conversation". According to him, the current romance with the notion is not merely confusing and misleading, but might turn out to be a dangerous avenue to take in social theory (1997, 297). Turning against Dewey's old formulation, he argues that "improvement of the methods and

conditions of debate and persuasion" (Dewey 1927/1991, 208) is not the key problem of democracy.

Schudson's text raises some important issues and points to the noteworthy lack of clarity in our many uses of the notion of conversation. Here, however, I will critique his essay and use it as a mirror in which features of our common sense about the potentials of conversation can be observed. My starting point is that some of these common-sense presuppositions may actually prevent us from seeing and thus realising the potentials of "conversation" in and for journalism.[21] In order to expose these problems, I want to identify four overlapping key arguments in Schudson's attack on the conversationalists. In order to further interpret the experiences of the budget jury, I will see what kinds of evidence and what sorts of lessons the experiment provided for the more general debate about conversation, journalism and democracy.[22]

Two Ideals, Two Sets of Competencies

Schudson argues that when we call on "conversation" to save this or that (usually something grand like democracy, truth, journalism and the like), we often confuse two distinct ideals of conversation. By referring to "conversation" we refer to a vision of a sociable conversation, a spontaneous, enjoyable, free flow of speech, a flow that it is easy to step into. However, we are actually in need of (as the foundations of democracy) rule-governed (not spontaneous), problem-solving (not oriented primarily to being sociable) and in some ways always uncomfortable discussion. Sociable conversations favour different competencies than do problem-solving conversations. In a sociable conversation, skills like verbal facility, wit, and sociability itself are

useful, whereas the key capacities of problem solvers are civility, reasonableness and the willingness to "listen seriously to a range of views" and "to set forth one"s own views intelligibly and candidly as the basis of a politics of persuasion" (Schudson, 1997, 300). To put it briefly, the danger in romanticising conversation (for Schudson) lies first in our tendency to transfer the connotations and qualities of the sociable conversation ideal to the situations where a problem-solving conversation is needed. By doing this, he says, we deny ourselves the perception of the real challenges of a democratically useful conversation.

This makes sense. We sometimes get away with rather vague ways of referring to "discussion", "dialogue" and "conversation".[23] At first glance, then, Schudson seems to be arguing that our use of the term "conversation" is just too abstract. But instead of then arguing that we should pay more attention to concrete conversations and their problems and possibilities, Schudson keeps on thinking about definitions and distinctions. In fact, it seems to me that, although he writes that we mix two ideals of conversations (the sociable and the problem-solving), he seems to be more concerned that we at the same time confuse the real situations described by these ideals. The two suggested ideals are taken as representations of real conversational situations. In a slightly paradoxical move, then, the ideals seem to turn into evidence that proves exaggeration regarding the democratic virtues of conversation (in general).

I see two problems in this line of argument. Firstly, the implication that real conversations actually fall even roughly into these categories obstructs us from seeing that the ways in which we think about (or attach nametags to) conversation has consequences for the role that conversation

has (in public life, journalism, democracy, etc.). Secondly, the tendency to start (and end) with ideals—which proves that these categories are essential and almost given—blocks us from inventing new and perhaps democratically more useful modes of conversation.

The budget jury experiment suggests not only that sociability can be a part of public conversation but also that in a public conversation a participant can sometimes in an important way themselves define the positions and competencies from which they speak. Furthermore it suggests that the boundaries between sociability and problem-solving orientation are—particularly in a continuing public conversation—much more fluid and changing and that the strength of such a conversation lies mostly in its ability to cross these boundaries.

Democracy Equals Fair Play?

Schudson also argues that conversation itself offers no guarantees that its cooperative potentials are actualised: only where there are rules governing the exchange can there be such guarantees—and even then it is difficult to say anything for certain. A game cannot be fair unless it has common rules, the rules bind all participants, and everyone must be able to appeal to them. A spontaneous and "free" conversation is—almost by definition—devoid of any rules, and thus cannot promise much for democratic problem solving.

Talking about the rules of conversation takes us to a problematic terrain. Schudson emphasises the role that the rules play in making participation more equal and the exchange more widely accessible: "The larger the group, the more I want rules of engagement because I am slow of speech" (1997,

p. 307), he writes. When the rules of conversation are the same for all, nobody can take advantage of their personal or institutional resources. Schudson seems to be more afraid of the former (facility of speech, wit, etc.), but I assume the idea could also be extended to the latter as well. In a sense, then, good rules for a democratic conversation will rule out all social, cultural, personal, etc. inequalities. Good rules will demand that only the arguments—and not their presenters with their roles and authority—weigh in the outcome. Paradoxically, then, the rules make the democratic conversation free from "real life". They constitute a kind of fictional space outside society, and although Schudson counters Habermas by saying that rules can never arise from the conversation itself, his definition of these rules comes pretty close to Habermas.

What makes democratic conversation is not free, equal and spontaneous expression, but equal access to the floor, equal participation in setting the ground rules of the discussion, and a set of ground rules designed to encourage pertinent speaking, attentive listening, appropriate simplifications and widely appropriate speaking rights (Schudson 1997, 306).[24]

In fact, Fraser's (1992) critique of Habermas applies rather well here. Firstly, one should ask, are these rules not (huge) abstractions which always, whenever invoked, demand a considerable amount of interpretation and application. And if (or since) this is so, one has to ask whether the rules will in fact give an advantage to some of the participants, and maybe even act as a means of excluding others. Think of the term "appropriate simplifications" for instance. Who or what decides what is "appropriate"?[25] Secondly, is there not a real danger that the supposed brack-

eting of (individual) differences of competence makes it more and more difficult to tackle these differences publicly? And thirdly, the formulation seems conveniently to bypass the question about how the ground rules are agreed on—it seems to me that, analytically speaking, there must have been a previous discussion or conversation in which they were agreed on.

The budget jury experiment suggests that fruitful public conversations on which journalism could indeed be built are in need of some kinds of rules but that these rules need to be constructed from a perspective that favours the ordinary citizen's position. Rules are needed, not so much because there needs to be a level field but because some of the interaction between experts, decision makers and citizens will need to be forced. As for the idea of bracketing differences, the lessons of the experiment are contradictory. On the one hand the tendency to talk about values suggests that something of this kind was attempted. However, the verdict—at least for me—is that a lot of the potential of the group actually lay in the determination to deny the bracketing tendencies: it was the idea of combining fact and values that the group became enthusiastic about and, most importantly, it was the individual roles (people presenting themselves publicly with their own life histories etc.) that fuelled a lot of the challenging discussions. So, in retrospect, by their actions the participants of the jury denied the virtues of bracketing competencies.

Democratic Conversation: A Holy and Hollow Practice?

Schudson also challenges the "romantics" by reminding us that in public conversation we always expose ourselves to the possibility of feeling ashamed and becoming a target of ridi-cule. Thus, conversation is not just a site for self-consummation and glory, but also a scene of embarrassment. This is yet another problem where Schudson believes rules can help us. In order to emphasise this point, he introduces another distinction: between homogeneous and heterogeneous conversations. The former are nice and safe and take place in enjoyable settings were "people talk primarily with others who share their values and they expect that conversation will reinforce them in the views they already share" (1997, p. 302). This kind of talk is important to people, for they are able to rehearse their opinions in a friendly context. But the real, public, and truly democratic conversations, Schudson argues, belong to the latter variant, the heterogeneous situations. In heterogeneous conversations, you can no longer "experiment" with your ideas, because "there are penalties for expressing uncertainty and doubt, rewards for speaking with conviction and certainty. Tempers may flare and working partnerships may be frayed or severed" (1997, p. 302).

It is a question in itself whether this description of conversational realities has more to do with Schudson's argument than with the kinds of conversations we all take part in. Whether we could somehow find a better way of representing that would reflect our current conversational realities; but that is beside the point here. It is, I think, more important to focus on the potential consequences of such conceptualisations. Let me use the vocabulary provided by Schudson himself to illustrate what I mean.

So far, we have learned about two distinctions: sociable versus problem-solving and homogeneous versus heterogeneous. Let us assume for a moment that these are similar kinds of abstractions. Let us assume they are not any kind of pure "ideals" nor any

| | | Participants in the conversation | |
		Heterogeneous	Homogeneous
Orientation of the conversation	Problem-solving	(1) Genuine democratic	(4) Reproducing power hierarchies
	Sociable	(2) Role play, chat, learning to know others	(3) Identity, performing yourself

Figure 1. Types of conversation situations

sort of terms with a simple correspondence to reality, and pretend that they are merely words with which we make sense, plan and partly orient or direct our actions and thoughts. Let us then cross-tabulate these terms, and see what we get (Figure 1).

The result is an interesting common-sense map of different forms of conversational situations. Without showing this map, but in a terrain represented by it, Schudson builds his argument on the idea that the democratic contribution of these different interactive situations varies a good deal. The most important variant for him would seem to be that in the figure's upper left corner, i.e. the heterogeneous and problem-solving kind of interaction (1). At first glance this is convincing, because it is easy to see that the upper left corner must also be the most challenging and difficult form of conversation.

However, the figure also allows us to see the fundamental argument of some of the people that Schudson sees as "romantic" conversationalists. In a nutshell: the viability of the upper left corner is dependent on the viability and richness of the other forms of conversation distinguished in this simplistic figure. Without the sociable level of easy-going role play, curiosity about different people (2), without the always only relatively safe talks among people of the same subculture or group (3), neither the competencies of talking in the "higher" sphere of problem solving nor the articulation of the problems in a

relevant manner would be possible. And without the sociable level, our ability to keep on trying to distinguish whether our public conversations are more about democracy than about reproducing the existing hierarchies of power (4) will be seriously impaired. So, even if we accept this simplistic and in many ways ideological view that separates "the lower level" of "grassroots" everyday culture from the more lofty ("celestial", "free" and "rule-governed") forms of public behaviour, we see that if conversation on the "higher" level is to be democratic, it has to be fed by the more mundane and ritual levels of talk. Without both heterogeneous and homogeneous sociable conversation there would not be the "almost ponderously solemn …conversation oriented to the highest common ends and operating by the most rigorous norms of public morality" which Schudson praises (1997, p. 303).

Crossing these distinctions, emphasising their interconnectedness and functional interdependence, testing them—and finally getting rid of them— is what Dewey's public method would be based on. Face-to-face conversation is able to feed into the public discussions and to keep up and renew people's ability to evaluate and discriminate the contents and forms of public discussions, claims Dewey. That is why he places his faith in face-to-face conversation as the "true medium" of a viable public life and claims that face-to-face interaction is a precondi-

tion for the public to come out of the eclipse (Dewey, 1927/1991, 218). It is easy to agree with Schudson when he writes that the virtues of conversation "lie as much in the preparation for the conversation as much as anything that might spontaneously arise within it, certainly anything that might be consummated within discussion itself" (Schudson, 1997, p. 303). But this preparation often takes place precisely in those variants of conversation that Schudson deems democratically less essential. The foundation for a democratic (problem-solving) conversation is not only learning something about the subject you are dealing with but is also about discovering the ways different people talk about it and about themselves in relation to it. Conversations throughout our everyday life build our public competence by teaching us what sort of social creatures we are and what sort of creatures other people are or pretend to be. These forms of conversation are an important basis for the construction of citizenship, and not merely talk "among inmates" or "among strangers".

Finally, and most importantly, the four variants of conversation shown in Figure 1 should not be taken as real. In reality, we do not have purely "homogeneous and sociable" talk that would be a safe haven from power structures (3); nor do we have merely playful, heterogeneous confrontations of wit (2); nor do we have pure, genuine and democratic (rule-governed) discussions (1). It is precisely by virtue of the blurring and collapsing of these boundaries—and by our virtuosity in so doing—that we have fewer situations that are totally to be reduced to the reproduction of power (4). Our actual conversations are peculiar blends of these and other dimensions, and it is important to pay attention to how we interpret our conversations, for our interpretations have real effects on our

conversations. That is why it is important to resist the temptation of talking about easy "sociability": if we deem it democratically less essential, we simultaneously make it more so. If we deem only certain kinds of conversations democratically virtuous, we run the risk of uprooting democratic interaction from its cultural settings, and glorifying something that is at the same time in great danger of becoming irrelevant and hollow.

The budget jury's experiences resonate interestingly with some of these points. Firstly, the group's discussions are in themselves a counter-example of the idea that heterogeneous conversations simplify presentations and obstruct thought experiments. Secondly, the "public pleasure" of the participants is an important (preliminary) piece of evidence against the categorical idea of the uncomfortable and dangerous nature of public conversations. Indeed, the whole strength and functionality of the jury would have to be based on a different set of distinctions: the fact that the jury functioned was based on the ability of the people to cross with ease the landscape of Figure 1.

Democracy and the Printed Word

The fourth and final theme that emerges from Schudson's discussion on conversation concerns the relationship between face-to-face interaction and mass-communicated messages. Again, in Schudson's eyes Dewey seems to have made a mistake by trying to save the primacy of the spoken word in a world where mass-mediated "textual" messages are a necessity. When discussing the problems of the public, Dewey made the point that without viable, face-to-face communication, without the "spoken word", the public would remain in eclipse, and communi-

cation would remain "broken". Against this point, Schudson argues that

> [d]emocratic conversation is in part dependent on, parasitic on, the prior existence of a public world, often available in print (1997, p. 304).

> Democracies put great store in the power of writing to secure, verify, and make public. Democracies need public memories, writing greatly enhances the capacity of public memory. So talk in democracy is civil, public, and oriented to explicit, available, transferable communications found in print and broadcasting rather than face-to-face conversation (1997, p. 305)

It seems to me a rather unreasonable reading to claim that Dewey's mission in *The Public and Its Problems* really was to argue that face-to-face communication is somehow better than the written word or other mass-mediated forms of communication. Instead, I think Dewey tries to argue that face-to-face conversation is the paradigmatic example of a context (or a metaphor to describe a context) for a meaningful interpretative community to arise. It is possible, probable and preferable that different kinds of interpretative communities emerge without the actual, physical, face-to-face interaction that Dewey seems to be referring to, but, however these communities emerge, without these (however imaginative they might be), media become mass media, messages distributed to a more or less silent and lonely crowd.

Here, I think that reading Dewey with the emphasis on methodology is helpful. Dewey's argument calls for a sense of community of interests as the necessary quality of a reader becoming a part of a public. It is the sense of being able to read the words and signs of the media against the signs of your own words that creates the dialogical

readings needed for a public to emerge from its eclipse. The media's language, in this reading, is always from one point or another, a "foreign" language, one constrained with various institutionalised power relations and a language emphasising particular "preferred meanings". Dewey's line of argument, then, suggests to us that there are indeed things we might do to make the media's language serve better the emergence of self-conscious public identities (we might, for instance, argue that the presentation techniques of "objectivity" should be dropped in order to let the perspective of a news story be more recognisable or we might suggest new forms of interviews or discussion programmes). But there is only so much you can do by shaping the words or the textual genres towards more "polyphonic" modes. The ability of the reader to read a text in a context provided by his or her own language, vocabularies or experiences is what turns the text into a living message. I take this to be the idea that Carey has in mind when he writes, "the printing press, television, the Internet—do not so much create communities as *remind* us of our communities elsewhere embodied in the first-order ritual and conversation" (1997, 314–15, emphasis added). Conversation between people serves more as a distinguishing feature between a potentially democratic society and between a mass society directed from above. For Schudson, mass communication is in a sense naturally the primary medium of mass democracy. But for Dewey "mass democracy" (if we take the notion of mass analytically enough) would have been a contradiction in terms.

Again, the lessons of the budget jury experiment address these questions. Our difficulties in imagining the generic forms in which a good group conversation could be turned into a news

story are indeed evidence of the different nature of face-to-face spoken communication and mass-communicated messages. But as our participants suggested, searching for more dialogical (or conversational) forms of presentation should not confine itself to the task of merely re-presenting what went on in the group. It is essential that the call for a dialogue be extended into two directions: firstly a dialogical story should challenge the reader, draw the audience from its "spectator-position into a position inside the ongoing conversation", and secondly dialogical journalism should attempt to develop public plots (or narratives) of the issues it raises and thus the dialogical merits of journalism should be evaluated on a diachronic dimension. In both these respects, the stories written about the budget jury leave much to be desired. But working and experimenting towards these goals might help to develop models and genres in which ordinary citizens could recognise the places and positions in which to participate in public conversation. Today, the roles are often far too limited and they tend to categorise public actors too much: into *ad hoc vox populi* on the one hand and experts on the other hand, into "example persons" (or symbol persons) on the one hand and decision makers on the other hand, etc.[26]

Towards Further Conversation

The success of the notion of "conversation" is remarkable. Hardly anyone believes any more that social (or any other) reality finally will someday reveal itself to a hard working inquirer, nor that our cultural tastes will ultimately fall into even a relatively permanent and widely acceptable order. Modern science, philosophy and cultural criticism have become very conscious of the limits of the knowing.

Hence, our debates very often conclude with the obvious: "the best we can do is to have an open discussion or dialogue about this".

The popularity and confusion around the notions of dialogue, conversation or discussion are partly due to the fact that the role designed for this miraculous practice varies so much. Take for instance, Habermas (1992, p. 442), who believes there is a "potential rationality intrinsic in everyday communication", a rationality from which we can generalise "the preconditions for communication that have to be fulfilled in the various forms of rational debate and in negotiations if the results of such discourses are to be presumed rational" (1992, p. 448). Habermas, then, wants to save democracy by focusing on questions about the process. Rorty, on the other hand (to pick another "conversationalist") suggests conversation is not a means to an end but rather a good metaphor for the human condition: "there are no constraints on inquiry save the conversational ones—no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers" (1982, p. 165). In Rorty's radically contingent world we would have to understand that "to accept the contingency of our starting points is to accept our inheritance from and our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance" (1981, p. 166). Even though Rorty has repeatedly (1989, 1998) emphasised his (political) agreement with Habermas, their use of the term "conversation" differs. For Habermas the value of a good conversation is in our ability to argue well, whereas for Rorty it is more important to be able to talk differently. For Habermas, solidarity (emerging from communication) is an ability to understand the perspective of others, whereas for Rorty it is

the skill of tolerating different ways of talking (about oneself). In between and above these figures one might situate Fraser (1991, 1992). For her, Habermas's insistence on the rules is a potential danger, because "a discourse of publicity touting accessibility, rationality and the suspension of status hierarchies is itself deployed as a strategy of distinction" (Fraser, 1992, p. 115). But the seemingly tolerant view of Rorty is (at least) equally unsatisfactory, because in Rorty's stubborn distinction between the private and the public there remains "no place ... for political motivations for the invention of new idioms, no place for idioms to overcome the enforced silencing or muting of disadvantaged social groups. Similarly, there is no place for collective non liberal discourses, hence, no place for radical discourse communities that contest dominant discourses" (Fraser 1991, pp. 54–55). Thus, to overcome the problems of Habermas, Fraser supports a model of multiple public spheres in which a variety of criteria ensure the articulation of different experiences. And to overcome the problems of Rorty, she urges us to recognise the artificiality of the private/ public distinction. By overcoming these barriers, public discussion could gain more political importance and relevance. Ultimately, then, even Fraser's cure for the troublesome definitions of "conversation" is to a great degree a conversationalist one.

As a method and a metaphor for a new emphasis in journalism's epistemological and practical commitments, the notion of "conversation" perhaps raises more problems than provides lasting or definitive answers. The five points (above) emerging from the budget jury experiment could in fact serve as preliminary inventory list of future challenges.

Firstly, the lessons about value talk are clear but very challenging. The kind of value talk we need is not the abstracted lofty one that tries to bracket off knowledge and facts from a discussion of values. Conversational journalism needs the skills of how to make values part of the mundane, everyday business of journalism, a legitimate part of journalism's and the people's public vocabulary. What this leads to is a difficult terrain where the role of the neutral "gatekeeper" or the "referee" is even less possible than it is today. Everyone, including journalists, will increasingly explicitly be drawn into the tension between facts and values. This, I think, is a fundamental challenge for public journalism, a challenge it has defined itself but to which it has not always been eager to respond (cf. Glasser, 1999). Journalists, too, will face the difficult task of local, particular evaluation instead of the task of applying these or those principles (cf. Keane, 1998, also Toulmin, 1990)

The questions raised by the identities and competencies of speech are even more demanding. Journalism should learn to allow different communities and groups to "tell themselves" and to define the competencies worthy of being considered in public. In our small group there were clear dangers related to this: prevailing common sense or dominating identities etc. were in danger of dominating the discussion. Yet, however hegemonic some of these identities are, I see few alternatives. There is no "authentic" or "pure" channel of representation, but even the "dirty" and interest-driven ones can serve as a way of bringing important new experiences into the public. Also, in a broader framework, this suggests that journalism should be aware of how easily it can turn various identities (in an increasingly multicultural environment) into commodities. Identities are not, our small experiment suggests, merely masks or points of identification, they are also a source of acting com-

petence. Bearing this in mind when writing about various groups and people is one of the tasks of more conversational journalism. Even when the "others" are not speaking, our public representations of them define their competencies of participation. It is an increasingly burning question to ask: who is allowed to tell my story? (cf. Katz, 1998).

The effects of publicity were, as was to be expected, moderating: in front of the public at large one exercises one's reason and words differently. But at the same time, the sense of publicity and the chance of making a difference create a need to represent one's own interests more vigorously. The lesson here is, perhaps, that this cannot and should not be denied and stopped. For it is precisely the interests that keep the public in existence. Perhaps the tendency towards consensus was in fact a tendency to restrict one's social imagination and to submit to a hegemonic common sense and vocabulary. Perhaps we just do not see the interest articulated in this common sense? The lesson might be, then, that journalism is always used by someone, and that it would be high time to think what journalism's value would be if we gave up the idea (or ideal) of its "purity". This is an avenue of thought rather alien to professional news journalism, and it would lead to a serious reconsideration of some of its commitments. But it is the way that Dewey's method actually suggests. When writing about human deliberation, he concluded, that "reasonableness is in fact a quality of an effective relationship among desires rather than a thing opposed to desire" (Dewey, 1922, p. 195). Perhaps our notions of what a public is and how it functions might benefit from a consideration of Dewey's conclusion:[27]

The conclusion is not that the emotional, passionate phase of action can be or should be eliminated on behalf of a bloodless reason. More "passions", not fever is the answer. …"Reason" as a noun signifies the happy cooperation of a multitude of dispositions, such as sympathy, curiosity, exploration, experimentation, frankness, pursuit—to follow things through—circumspection, to look about at the context, etc. (1922, p. 196)

The difficulties in writing the stories in our experiment suggest that on the way towards more conversational practices journalism has more to learn from the people than vice versa. Journalism's abilities to develop its modes of reporting and formulas for stories are crucial here, because—realistically speaking—these genres define and rank the competencies journalists need. Also, genres are a key to the relatively predictable relationships between the sources (e.g. the citizens) and the newsrooms. Whatever lies ahead in this direction is not clear but our experiment points to one fundamental thing. Perhaps the precondition for developing the genres is that there will be new kinds of "extratextual" situations in which the citizens, journalists, politicians and experts meet and are exposed to each other in new ways. For, if one believes for instance Bakhtin (cf. 1986, 1991), the situations and contexts of real life lie underneath our developing conventions of representation. In this sense, the practices of using focus groups in public journalism projects, for instance, could perhaps slowly build the ground for changes in the textual conventions of journalism.

The empowerment provided by the group to its participants points in yet one more direction. It shows that there is a growing need in journalism (and journalism theory) to take into account the lessons of (critical) cultural studies in order to understand both the various forms of knowing and the different

forms of interaction and organisation in societies. The enjoyment experienced in the group might serve as a bridge for linking theories of individual (progressive) pleasure in horizontal power relationships (cf. Fiske, 1993) to notions about "public happiness" that some theorists of the public sphere talk about (cf. Arendt, 1958). Perhaps a notion of public pleasure would be an example of the kind of "perspective by incongruity" (Burke, 1935/1954) we require to give new strength to our imagination while travelling on the way of conversation.[28] Another interesting questions is, of course, how this pleasure is connected to value talk and self-representation. And finally, I think the experiences from the experiment suggest that a group can empower its members to cross some of the institutionalised limits to free speech in modern society and thereby make more room for the dialogical method to work.

Moving ahead on the way of conversation would mean looking for practical answers to these kinds of questions. Answers to these challenges are very much needed if journalism wants to move out of the way of public conversations, from being an obstacle to being a resource in public discussion.

As always, there is a fair chance that history will make one look like a fool. It may very well be that all this theorising is a paradigmatic example of ideological thinking. Perhaps such talk about the potentials of conversation will turn out to be the target of a ruthlessly analytical diagnosis entitled "The Critique of Dialogical Theory of Democracy". Sure enough, I have here turned my attention away from the many contextual (material) problems that are nicely formulated by Fraser's slogan "no recognition without redistribution" (Fraser, 1997) or by Gitlin's (1998, p. 173) fear that in the absence of "rough equivalence" of resources "we continue to travel away from the public square, circling and circling in centrifugal motion".

These are problems at least as fundamental as the ones I have addressed here. Until they are solved, however, it is absolutely worthwhile to take Dewey's experimental working hypotheses of the public seriously. That way one is forced into a conversation with reality and one might find that sometimes conversation serves as a wonderful method with which to work towards a de-abstraction of the structural problems we face.

Thus, as a metaphor and method towards developing journalism, "conversation" offers considerable potential. However, the work to be undertaken lies not so much in debating about the qualities of an ideal of conversation but in researching, experimenting with and learning to understand actually existing public conversations and their limits and possibilities. Conversation might not be, as Michael Schudson (1997) rightly argues, "the soul of democracy". But perhaps without conversation (as a practice, a method and a metaphor), democratic journalism will have no body.

Notes

[1]   Public journalism is defined, explained and also criticized in a number of fairly recent books (Merritt, 1995; Rosen et al., 1997; Lambeth et al., 1998; Glasser, 1999; Rosen, 1999) as well as in debate in the last issue of this journal (*Journalism Studies* 1(4)).

[2]   The Lippmann–Dewey debate seems to continue to provoke further writing. Jay Rosen's (1994, 1996) formulations of public journalism grew largely out of this debate. A number of media practicioners (cf. Fallows, 1995; Campbell, 1999) have used it to make sense of the current situation. The list of academic literature

referring to it is too long to cite here, but Bybee (1999) and Bergzel (1999) are some of the most recent contributions.

3   For Dewey's definition of society in this sense, see, for example, Dewey (1929). By saying society is nothing but forms of actual interaction (and not institutions), Dewey follows Simmel.

4   Park (1904/1972) and particulary Blumer (1946/1961) develop this ahistorical, analytic understanding of the public as one particular form of collective action.

5   The possible dangers of such an "occupational psychosis" are illustrated in Kenneth Burke's work (1935/1954, 1938/1984), where he develops the idea of language both as a source of "terministic screens" which serve as obstacles of alternative understanding as well as a source of hope because of its poetic possibilities.

6   See, for instance, Rosen et al. (1997). This is the point at which Dewey's ideas on methodology and democracy overlap.

7   For a useful reminder of how Lippmann's ideas have been turned upside down to offer support for the current practices of journalism, see Pauly (1999, pp. 134–35).

8   One reason for Dewey's unwillingness to talk more directly about the faults of journalism may be the notoriously unsuccessful project of *Thought News* from the 1890s. At least judging from secondary sources, the project aimed to see philosophy as a tool for interpretation of current events and facts (Dewey, 1892, cited in Ryan, 1995, pp. 108–9). As Ryan points out, it remains unclear how this could have been done with a 12–16 page monthly newspaper edited by three people in the Michigan University philosophy department.

9   What distinguishes Dewey and Lippmann in their views is Dewey's coherence. Dewey looked at "science" and scientific inquirers in the same terms as all other people whereas Lippmann's visions for solving the troubles of stereotypes and other human constraints suggested that some people, in some institutions—in the scientific observatories of society—could rise above such limitations. This is why it is not in fact very surprising that Lippmann never really commented on the problem that "specialists also have pictures in their heads" (Curtis, 1999, p. xix).

10 For a more comprehensive presentation of the whole project and its other various subprojects, see Kunelius (1999).

11 Leena Itkonen (Aamulehti) wrote the stories and Mika Renvall (Journalism Research Centre, University of Tampere, Finland) gave the advice.

12 The participants were recruited using a rough "snowball method". The organisers came up with a list of people from different walks of life, called them and asked them to name candidates. Then we would call these candidates and sometimes ask for another round of names. Finally, the people invited were chosen from this second or third level; they where unknown to each other and to the organisers. We expected that many people would turn down the invitation because it demanded a considerable amount of time and permanent commitment. The first result of the experiment, then, was the surprise that all the 12 first people enthusiastically agreed to participate.

13 There is a rich literature on the question of whether to use group or individual interviews in qualitative audience research (cf. Ridell, 1998, pp. 116–21). For instance, Morley (1992, p. 96) argues that individual interviews atomise respondents too much, and Jordin and Brunt (1988, pp. 231, 240–41) remind us that groups are not to be seen as representing real sociodemographic groups but instead as social units in their own right. Both these remarks can be used as arguments for the method selected in this experiment. For the development of focus group methodology in general, see for instance Lunt and Livingstone (1996).

14 For a concise treatment of the theoretical issues around communication, liberalism and communitarianism, see Glasser (1991).

15 Such active "talk back" has been almost non-existent in audience studies; see, however, Jensen's experiment with "future workshops" (1995). Kitzinger's (1993) work with the "news-play" method also seems to allow more room for critical reflection on the content of public issues.

16 Indeed, one could suggest that "public journalism" and its methods are yet another example of how the epistemological commitments of journalism are framed by those in social sciences. Although a lot of what goes on in journalism can still be understood in the framework of "hard", social sciences, there are also signs of indirect inspiration drawn from the lessons of postmodernism (say, for instance the use of irony, cf. Glasser and Ettema 1993) and qualitative audience studies. The question of how philosophical and other "scientific" discourses frame journalistic practices is beyond the scope of this article.

17 Dewey himself offers various formulations of the traits of the "experimental method". One of the more explicit ones can be found in his *Quest for Certainty* (1929; Dewey, 1939, pp. 318ff): (1) experimentation involves overt doing, the making of definite changes in the environment or our relation to it; (2) an experiment is directed by ideas that meet the conditions set by the need of the problem inducing the active inquiry; and finally (3) the outcome of the experiment is the construction of a new empirical situation in which objects are situated differently to one another and the consequences of the operations form objects that have the property of being known.

18 I have studied this material here mainly according to the logic that people "know" what they are talking about, i.e. I have not gone into a detailed discourse analysis of the discussions. In order to get a relatively independent evaluation of the experiment, these interviews were conducted by a researcher who was not involved in the actual experiment itself. Thanks to Seija Ridell for this contribution.

[19] For a discussion on this, see Ettema and Glasser (1998).

[20] In addition to these practical questions, theoretical and disciplinary ones emerge. In order to recognize the potentials and limits of public pleasures, more cross-disciplinary thinking, research and theorizing is needed among those who work with theories of the "public sphere" and those who work more in the field of (critical) cultural studies.

[21] I am not so much arguing against Schudson himself as I am using his arguments to develop a different position and to try to illustrate some tendencies that I find troublesome in his thinking. My reading, then, must inevitably be a strategic one. I also want to thank Professor Schudson for kindly reading through an earlier version of this paper, not only commenting on it but encouraging me to continue to work on it.

[22] Elsewhere Schudson has applied his position in his criticism of public journalism. There he has taken a very constructive position, arguing that we need to think more about "where and in what manner expert knowledge fits into the democratic process" (although we still have to rely on that a lot, he argues) and to look for a "language of public life that reconciles democracy and expertise" (1999a). His criticism of the potential conservatism of the "community" (1999b) referred to in public journalism is another parallel argument.

[23] For instance the distinction whether we refer to discussion or open dialogue as something taking place between individuals or between ideas (content) has far-reaching consequences for what a good discussion might be like. For worthwhile recent elaboration of this, see Glasser (1999, pp. 7–16). The confusion itself may be caused by the very centrality of the notion in a lot of political and social theory. In this sense, "conversation" resembles "communication", whose "popularity has exceeded its clarity" because "it has become the property of politicians and bureaucrats, technologists and therapists, all eager to demonstrate their rectitude as good communicators" (Peters, 1999a, p. 6)

[24] Elsewhere in the same essay Schudson (1997, p. 298), writes, "the more talk is among equals, the more it fails to make assumptions clear, fails to state premises, fails to be accessible to all, lapses into silence". So, "equals" here means homogeneous, whereas above it must mean equality created by the rules despite the heterogenous nature of the group.

[25] There is an interesting tension in Schudson's writings concerning this theme. On the one hand he has been consistent in criticizing people (Putnam, Habermas, Carey) for repeating and taking seriously the kinds of narrative that vision a "once upon a time" where public life was more viable than today (1997, p. 298; 1996; 1992). On the other hand his own description of a democratic set of rules of conversation comes close to the same sort of imagined past that these writers evoke. It may not be a coincidence that the example of rule-governed and challenging democratic conversation Schudson uses dates back to the framers of the US constitution. Schudson (1996, p. 541) has agreed with the need for Habermasian "rational discourse" in the public sphere and tried to answer Fraser's critique of Habermas. Here again, the dispute is about ways of thinking and their consequences. When people like Carey (1997, p. 331) argue for a need for "a more usable history" for journalism, the point is clear: it is the consequences of our narratives of the past (of journalism) that is at stake.

[26] There are very few studies in communication research which describe in a detailed and empirical manner journalism as an ongoing public discussion (Pietilä, 2000; see, however, Renvall, 2000), although the idea of acting like this is prominently presented in the principles of public journalism (cf. Charity, 1995, pp. 82f). For a very good definition of good conversational journalism which includes this point, see Anderson et al. (1994, pp. 140–41).

[27] For a useful criticism on the distinction between deliberation and dialogue, see Pauly (1999, pp. 148–49).

[28] On the perspective opened by the notion of play (enjoyment and pleasure) for our understanding of journalism, see Glasser (2000). For a criticism of the narrow, rationalist tendency in public journalism theory, see Peters (1999b)

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