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# News agency and news mediation in the digital era

This paper explores the work of news agency journalism, an increasingly important node in circuits of news communication across the world. My ethnographic site is a medium-sized news agency office in Germany and I focus especially on 'slotwork', a rotating role in the editorial collective where one editor is responsible for coordinating incoming news streams, for determining which stories are of substantial news value, for distributing stories to newswriters on shift and editing their work, and for monitoring and synchronising the agency's news output with the streams of key competitors and clients. In the spirit of the special issue, I discuss how digital information technologies, professional editorial practices and powerful praxiological and mediological discourses on the character of slotwork define the daily life of newsmaking. I am particularly interested in news journalists' epistemic and practical strategies for dampening the dense informational mediation of digital news in order to retain a sense of professional and practical agency in the face of many contingencies.

**Key words** journalism, information technology, professionalism, temporality, attentional practices

## Screens

There is no way to begin talking about slotting without talking about the screens. They are the centrepoint of a slotter's work, the alpha and omega as the Germans would say. To be sure, the taskscape of slotting is manifold and its interruptions and distractions are many – the news ticker scrolling across the large television monitor above, a query from one of the writers, a phone call, what just was disgorged by the fax machine or the printer, the radio blaring out the top of the hour news. Observing slotters at work, I tracked an average of 97 different discrete activities every hour. That meant a change in focus or medium roughly every 37 seconds. But, even so, no matter where the slotter's attention roams, it always returns to the screens in a magnetic, almost devotional way. When the slotter loses focus, just for a moment, he or she instinctively looks to the screens for cues as to how to resynchronise him or herself with the newsflow. All of the other activities of slotting deviate from this norm of remaining poised, inclined slightly forward in one's desk chair, focusing in on one of the screens.

At the Associated Press office in Frankfurt (the headquarters of AP *Deutscher Dienst*, or simply, AP-DD) where I did fieldwork in 2008,<sup>1</sup> the slotter screens

1 Beginning in 2005, I visited the AP-DD headquarters in Frankfurt on average twice per year to interview journalists and to arrange research access for an observational study. In May and June 2008, I spent approximately 60 hours over a period of several weeks observing slotters at work at

came<sup>2</sup> in rows of three, occupying the spatial centrepoint of each slot desk, oases of order above shifting stacks of paper, ringing phones, rows of idle reference manuals, and the remains of whatever food or drink the slotter managed to find the time to gulp down during the shift. AP-DD had three slot desks (one for international news, one for national news and one for business news) that were arranged as the sides of an equilateral triangle, creating in their centres a smaller triangle of nine screens. The *Slotinsel* (slot island), as it was once described to me, sat in one corner of AP-DD's U-shaped newsroom where it had excellent sight- and shoutlines to several rows of desks where writers on shift worked at their single screens. Likewise, the slot island was positioned near to the glass-walled offices of the editor-in-chief and assistant editor-in-chief of AP-DD located at the same end of the 'U', and they occasionally emerged from their own assignments to discuss events and coverage with the slotters. Overall, the newsroom was deceptively quiet and office-like. I made dozens of hours of tapes of the ambient sonic environment of the newsroom and these are dominated by the quiet click-click of dozens of hands wordprocessing. Except for the phone calls. Except for a slotter shouting out a work assignment and a writer announcing s/he's sent a text in. Except for the automated 'AP news alert!' which sounds when an *Eilmeldung* (the most urgent class of news bulletin) comes across the wire. Except for the quiet chatting between colleagues, mostly to coordinate and to comment on works in progress. Except for the not infrequent joke or ironic comment made by one of the slotters to break the work tension. Except for the chief editor taking one of his many strolls through the newsroom, commenting on the themes of the day, egging on the troops.

Technologically speaking, the screens were ordinary flat panel LCD displays, 40 centimetres diagonal. In each set of three slot screens, there was a centre screen that the slotter used for wordprocessing, for receiving, editing, spellchecking and sending news reports *auf dem Draht* (on the wire), for sending emails and instant messages to their colleagues in AP-DD's other bureaux. There was a left screen which was known as the 'smurf' screen because it contained several colour-coded continuously updating message feeds called 'smurfs' by their whimsical (American) programmer: a blue smurf for *Pressemitteilungen* (press releases) from the police, a green smurf for all other releases which incorporated a news ticker, *News Aktuell*,<sup>3</sup> and a red smurf for AP's own output. And then there was the right screen that each slotter used somewhat idiosyncratically but which was normally reserved for open browser windows to the

AP-DD. AP-DD was founded in 1931 and organised as an independent for-profit daughter corporation (GmbH) of the Associated Press in New York. By December 2009, AP-DD had become AP's second largest European news service with approximately 110 full and part-time employees and was widely viewed as the second most important news agency in Germany after market leader, dpa. AP-Frankfurt was the main office of AP-DD and employed 30 *Redakteure* (editors/journalists) on site. I audiorecorded my observational sessions and kept close written and photographic records of the slotters' activities. In addition, I conducted lengthy post facto interviews with eight of the slotters whom I observed at work.

2 I occasionally use the past tense in this article to reflect the Associated Press's sale of AP-DD to German news agency competitor ddp in December 2009. The two news agencies were later incorporated as a new agency, dapd (<http://www.dapd.de>). Although the former AP-Frankfurt office still exists and likely operates in a similar manner to my portrait here, I have not been able to visit the Frankfurt office since October 2009 and thus have little information about post-sale continuities and transformations of organisational routines.

3 <http://www.newsaktuell.de/>

websites of AP-DD's major news clients and competitors like Spiegel.de, n-tv, bild.de, and the newsticker of dpa, Germany's largest news agency. These were counted among the *Leitmedien*, lead media, that powerfully influenced *die Tagesthemen* (themes of the day) in German national and international news. These windows refreshed every minute or so, guaranteeing that the slotter knew exactly what content and messages were moving through the news channels that surrounded and interconnected with the work of the slot desk.

Together, the screens operated equivalently as panoptica, as messaging and filtering devices, as search instruments, as workspaces for articulation and correction. They were operationally flexible interfaces, allowing the slotter to track, organise and engage a multiplicity of information feeds if not precisely in the 'real-time' so valorised today as a hallmark of the digital era then at least on a very fast-time basis indeed. We could call this confluence of information feeds – which instantly sends analysts, this analyst included, running for every aquatic metaphor imaginable – 'the news'. If news does flow like water, then slotters, for reasons I will explain in a moment, are some of the news' most influential riverfolk and some of contemporary newsflow's most skilled navigators. But, although the question might seem disingenuous in the era of computerisation, we might still ask why screens centre their craft. Georg S, a junior but exceedingly talented slotter at AP, explained to me that *die normale Slotarbeit*, normal slotwork, was the simultaneous combination of *Sichten* (screening), *Beaufsichtigen* (observing, surveillance) and *Texte rausgeben* (sending out texts). *Sichten* and *Beaufsichtigen* both find their nominal root in the Old High German *sibt*, which is not coincidentally also the root of the English word, 'sight'. Visual attention is enormously important in slotwork. The vast majority of the cues for engaging fast-time newsflow are organised visually. Indeed, slotters typically described the normative ideal of slotting as *Überblick zu haben* (having an overview), as being positioned somehow panoramically above the torrent below. *Überblick*, any slotter would tell you, is however at best a fragile, fleeting condition, won only through concentrated multi-attentionality and easily lost in the constant distractions of practice. Which is why the digital co-location of incoming and outgoing newsfeeds on the slot screens is the best material approximation of *Überblick*, making the screens into the slotter's primary attentional compass and navigational equipment as they chart a course through the fast-moving waters of the news. If newsmaking today confronts the outside observer as a dizzying spectacle of circulation and flow, in other words, if it appears as a space of intense informational *mediation*, screenwork was surely one of the slotters' most reliable techniques of *immediating* newsflow into forms susceptible to their professional agency.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I explore how news journalists today utilise information practices and technologies to help secure and maintain a sense of agency in a complex fast-moving ecology of digital information. As we will see, this is no easy or always successful matter. At AP-DD, I would often sit near the slot island – staring over shoulders at the clutter of overlaid smurfs, web browser windows, wordprocessing windows, and instant message windows – and find myself thinking that three screens were almost too few.<sup>5</sup>

4 For anthropological discussions of the relationship between 'immediation' and 'mediation', see Mazzarella (2006), Boyer (2007), Eisenlohr (2009) and Keane (2009).

5 On the transformation of information practices and technologies of news journalism in the digital era see, e.g. Boczkowski (2009), Klinenberg (2005) and Paterson and Domingo (2008).

## The nodal importance of slotting in contemporary news

The terms ‘slotter’ and ‘slotting’ are material metaphors themselves. They reference a pre-digital division of labour in newsmaking in which an editor distributed writing assignments by putting sheets of paper into wooden boxes, pigeonholes or ‘slots’. In print journalism this was a relatively low status form of editorial activity often lumped in with copyediting. And, in the digital era of print and broadcast journalism, ‘slotting’ has dwindled into a terminological archaism. But, in news agency journalism, the role took on greater significance because of the pressure to manage breaking news on a fast-time basis. Slotters operated as coordinating editors whose job it was to survey incoming news, to assign tasks to their shift’s writers, to edit their draft *Meldungen* (reports) and to send these out on the agency wire. As agency news practitioner and analyst Peter Zschunke explains, ‘with the order to send out a report, the slotter creates the possibility for millionfold distribution. Given the immense responsibility the slotter has over news-output during his shift, he also inherits a correspondingly far-reaching decisional authority. Reuters’ maxim, “the slot is always right”, captures this well. And, no less important than sending out reports is the slotter’s constant supervision over the general news scene [*Nachrichtenlage*] and the organization of the real-time news production.’<sup>6</sup>

The decisional authority of the slotter is amplified far beyond the confines of the news agency as well. News media organisations have long relied upon news agencies like AP, Reuters and dpa to deliver maximally accurate, maximally fast, maximally factual information. Indeed, news agencies developed historically in the 1830s and 1840s as newspaper cooperatives (like AP) or as private service agencies (like Reuters) sought to share the significant costs of foreign correspondence and to extend the scope of their international news coverage beyond what especially smaller news organisations could reasonably afford. By the mid-1860s, with the laying of transatlantic telegraphic cable that reduced message communication speeds from days to minutes, the business in international correspondence boomed and news agencies thrived in both Europe and North America. News agencies have thus long been important nodes in the production and distribution of facts and messages from afar.<sup>7</sup> But, in our current era of European and North American news, which has been marked above all by the powerful intersection of digital information technology and global (neo)liberalism since the 1980s, the core role of news agencies has, in certain respects, expanded.

I asked Friedrich H, the head of AP-DD’s national news desk, to reflect on the changing position of news agencies in the 20 years he had worked in news journalism:

DB: Can you say more about how news agency work has changed in the time you’ve been at AP?

FH: Our *Themen* (themes, stories) used to be clearer or better defined somehow. The division of labour between the news desks was clearer and it was clearer what was worthy of being reported (*berichtenswert*) and what wasn’t. The role of the news agency was also clearer. People didn’t demand so much analysis, so many background stories, or service pieces. It was just expected that we would go to the press conferences and write reports about them. And

6 Zschunke (2000: 250–1).

7 See <http://www.ap.org/pages/about/history/history.html>; also, Read (1999).

that has *clearly* changed. . . . In the old days, we just reported a political event in the style, ‘On Tuesday, the Federal Government in Bonn made this or that decision. . .’. Today we write about the consequences of those decisions for consumers.

DB: So, has that changed the importance of the news agencies in the news industry today? I mean, the fact that you’re not just offering short news-bulletins anymore but longer texts with more context?

FH: I would say that the news agencies are becoming ever more important. On the other hand in Germany we have what I believe is the most competitive news market worldwide. And this puts all newsmedia into a slightly crisis-prone and shaky situation. So I would say, yes, the news agencies are gaining ever greater significance but what I don’t know is whether our clients are actually ready to appreciate that significance and to pay for it. News agencies are becoming more important quite simply because almost all media organisations today right up to the big online media like Spiegel online and Focus online are operating with fewer employees. And so it’s increasingly important for them to have the good news agency texts with their broad coverage. Look at a news agency like AP which has a correspondent in every federal state in Germany and that has excellent foreign coverage, with the largest correspondent network world-wide. That’s something that no media organisation can afford.

DB: So your clients’ need for your service is growing but you don’t feel that they are admitting that they need you?

FH: Our role is getting bigger but the tendency among our client base is to deny that ever more fiercely. For example, there are quite a few newspapers here that understand themselves as *auteur*-papers and they simply deny that news agencies are a very very important foundation (*Grundlage*) for them. They think of us simply as a form of back-up. But when you look closely in these newspapers, the ones that operate overwhelmingly with their own bylines, you’ll still find a huge amount of agency material that they are simply not acknowledging as a source.

Echoing elements of Friedrich’s description, many news agency journalists both at AP-DD and elsewhere told me that they felt their importance in the news industry was growing even though dependency upon agency journalism was rarely openly recognised. They explained this relative silence as related to the fact a news agency’s clients are under pains to present their own client-consumers with what they will regard as an original news product. News agency material is, by contrast, broadly available and thus difficult to claim as an original news product unless it is subtly rewritten and repurposed under an author’s byline. It is very difficult to estimate just how extensive and frequent the unacknowledged sourcing of news agency material might be, however. What is easily verifiable is that news agencies are delivering more reports, longer reports and more textually-finished and publishable reports than they did in the past. German news researcher Jürgen Wilke calculates that, since 1989, the four largest international news agencies have increased their total news output by 50% to a combined average of over 1,500 *Meldungen* (reports, bulletins) per day. The average length of an agency report meanwhile increased from 189 to 220 words during the same period, reflecting the rise in demand for analysis and background material that Friedrich noted.<sup>8</sup> Moreover,

8 See Wilke (1997).

one finds many news organisations, especially smaller ones in North America, that very openly rely on news agency material not only for basic news information but also for publication-ready texts.

This has, of course, much to do with the institutionalisation of digital information and communication technology, with the growing expectation for fast-time coverage, and with the ubiquity of digital news content management systems. In the ten newsrooms that I visited between 2008 and 2010, every one of their digital content management systems included access to at least one and usually to several news agency wires. Moreover, digital wordprocessing software makes it exceptionally easy for journalists to cut and paste news agency text (usually a paragraph or less) into their stories, a technique that saves time even when the practice results in uncanny duplications of content and form across news media. On the other hand, as Friedrich noted, there are also pressing financial reasons for rising news agency dependency. News agencies maintain broad correspondent networks that would be largely unaffordable to individual news organisations, particularly in an era in which the vast majority of news organisations are shedding staff.

Technical and commercial forces have deeply intertwined in driving news journalism toward what many practitioners and analysts have described to varying degrees as a crisis situation over the past 15 years.<sup>9</sup> Although many news organisations remain handsomely profitable, all are affected by the shifting character of news content in the digital era. If a 19th- or even 20th-century news organisation with a correspondent in a remote location could hope to have a monopoly on reports from that location for days or even weeks, the synchronisation and translocal interconnectedness of digital news have drastically reduced these advantages to a matter of minutes and often only seconds. One could thus argue that the marginal value of original news content has diminished across the news industry since it circulates so quickly and is republicised so easily elsewhere, a condition that the recent rise of online news aggregators like google news has only exacerbated. Responses to this condition have been various: newspaper markets both in Europe and in the United States are becoming less competitive as second and third newspapers are succumbing to more obviously profitable monopolies and their news economies-of-scale. Broadcast and print news organisations have also reacted by emphasising user service, local coverage, spectacle-laden boulevard journalism or a particular political orientation in which they feel they can specialise most efficiently and distinctively. Finally, news organisations that imagine themselves to be more elite, particularly in print media, have moved away from breaking news reporting and toward offering news analysis and background coverage.

Some of these reactions have been passed along to news agencies in the form of rising pressure to provide more distinctive, often longer and more client-tailored forms of news, for example, deep background reports and interactive multimedia. The slotters I observed at AP-DD all mentioned fielding daily phone calls from newspapers clients with a variety of coverage requests ranging from follow-up reports to graphics. As the assistant chief editor at AP-DD, Paul Z, explained to me, clients are now also requesting

9 Testimonials on the contemporary crisis of news journalism are appearing with increasing frequency. For recent and informative glimpses into this discourse see, e.g., the 2010 Pew Foundation State of the News Media Report (<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1523/state-of-the-news-media-2010?src=prc-latest&proj=peoplepress>); also, Bollinger (2010), Cortell (2010), Fuller (2010) and posts at <http://www.savethenews.org>

ever more finished forms of text and image bundles that with new digital layout systems can simply be pasted into print or online layouts without further editorial intervention.

In sum, the nodal importance of slotting within circuits of news mediation is strong and rising. Slotters decide, on a fast-time basis, what stories news agencies will send out and how they will cover them. And agency clients increasingly rely upon news agencies both to obtain a continuous fast-time conduit of breaking news content, especially vital for 24/7 broadcast news and online news media, and to reduce their own production costs for background, analysis and image content.

## At the edge of chaos: learning the slot

The heart of AP-DD's news work was the slot island. Given their status but also their stresses, the three slot positions at AP-DD were shared and rotated among the more senior members of the editorial collective (*Redaktion*). Slotwork was considered to be so taxing that the collective's last labour contract stipulated that an editor could spend no more than 5 hours consecutively in a slot. Friedrich explained to me during an interview:

FH: When I started here [in 1993] we used to schedule the slot shifts for 7 or 8 hours but now we've capped them at 5 hours maximum because there is such an overflow of stimulation (*Reizüberflutung*), because it's not just the electronic press releases you have to go through, but also, at the same time, you are watching the newsticker, and keeping an eye on the competition. You have to go through the videotexts, and pay attention to what is scrolling above on the big news television stations like n-tv and n24. Then there are still the printed press releases, the faxes, and then you may be on call to do the back-up for a big press conference at 8 pm and if there's a news bulletin in that, then you're going to have to do that here. As the central office for both the AP national and international news desks, you have to be ready to field queries from all the other bureaux across the country. [pauses, shaking his head] And that is such an overflow of information, so much juggling of parallel assignments, that it's often the case that a slotter here has two or three projects (*Arbeiten*) opened on his desktop at the same time but then has to push those to the side and open a fourth window because there's an *Eilmeldung* that has to be immediately edited and sent out. And then go right back to one of three remaining *Baustellen* [workspaces, construction sites]. It really pushes you to the limit in a way that not every journalist can manage, it really takes a very special profile to do this work.

DB: The problem is that you have to juggle so many tasks at once?

FH: Exactly. You have to make decisions. That's the main thing. It's the kind of work that permanently demands that you make immediate decisions (*eine Arbeit dass permanent sofort eine Entscheidung erfordert*). Because if you defer a decision, if you say to yourself, hold on, I'm not quite sure, you are going to lose the whole *Überblick* and you will sink into the chaos. That's why the slotter must constantly click through these smurfs and feeds and he has to decide immediately, do we need this, do I need to inform one of the other bureaux about it, do I need something from them, or, can I just throw this one out. You reassure your colleagues, you're making so many decisions, some of them are bound to be wrong ones. The most important thing is to be decisive. Otherwise, the slotter will just sink into the chaos (*Ansonsten versinkt er halt ins Chaos*).

Unsurprisingly, learning the practice of fast-time decision-making was daunting to say the least. Isidora S, a slotter on the national desk, explained to me over coffee one day that slotting was a responsibility for which new journalists had to be extensively mentored before they were allowed to take it on. It was the informal rule at AP-DD that a journalist had to work as a writer for at least six months to learn techniques and rhythm of news agency journalism before being integrated into the slot rotation. A slotter on the international desk, Anke H, explained that new slotters always started on the night shift because the newsflow was so much slower then. ‘It’s such a huge rearrangement (*Umstellung*), when you are sitting here alone in the centre of things, you just have to give yourself over to it.’

Isidora confessed to me how terrified she had been during her first solo shift. The first four times you do it, someone else is there with you and then you do it for the first time alone by yourself. And when you sit there in the slot you realise, “I am the Associated Press-Germany” and it’s terrible [laughs]. You’re afraid to make an error. You’re afraid you’ve left something out. You realise that for the first time you are going to send out texts that go straight to the clients and that no one else is going to check them over first . . . I didn’t sleep well the night after my first shift, and not for many months afterward. Honestly, it took at least two or three years before that feeling went away altogether, until you felt you had things pretty well in hand, that you had an *Überblick*. . . . Actually, when I did the early slot I used to come home and go right to sleep. At one in the afternoon [laughs]. After only five hours work because I was completely exhausted.

At some point in the process of learning slotwork, terror gave way to a sense of pleasure or at least confidence in being able to master the speed of newsflow. All the slotters seemed to take genuine pride in their ability to maintain *Überblick* in the face of the dizzying flows and eddies of news. All told me at some point that ‘this work wasn’t for everyone’, that it required remarkable poise and stamina, the capacity for decisive accurate judgement, and a feeling for the *Aktualität* (timeliness, see below) of news, qualities which by extension were understood as central to the jurisdiction and expertise of news agency journalism. One journalist, although not himself *reif* (ready, mature) enough for slotting, compared an internship experience at a newspaper with his work at AP and said that he felt as though the acceleration of all news journalism probably had less of an impact at the news agencies because ‘they have always worked in this real-time [*Echtzeit*] mode’. Georg commented, ‘The thing that fascinates me about slotwork is its unusual speed [*unheimliche Schnelligkeit*]. I think you find that with a lot of us here, we need that “kick” [laughs].’

### **Echtzeit: attentions, transactions and distractions in normal slotwork**

Conveying a sense of ‘normal’ slotwork is difficult in part because the slotters assured me on many occasions that there is no ‘average news day’. Nor are there average slot shifts in that the morning and afternoon shifts (8 am–6 pm) were invariably busier at AP-DD than the evening and night shifts. Moreover, the national and international slots, where the majority of my observations took place, each had distinct work rhythms and routines. Finally, and most importantly from an ethnographic perspective, so much of slotwork is silent and individual, a matter of what the slotter is thinking about and

paying attention to, that it is only partially accessible to visual observation and to real-time querying. I could observe, for example, where the slotter was looking and what s/he was typing but could only guess at how these corresponded to his/her internal thought process. I could and did ask the slotters as many questions as I felt I could about why they were doing what they were doing. Yet, pressures and distractions abounded and even when slotters were so inclined as to interrupt their practice to externalise their thinking and decisions for the benefit of a further distraction, me, they were often pulled away in mid sentence by the need to listen to one of the other slotters, to field a query from a writer, to answer a phone call or by some fresh piece of electronic information that demanded their immediate attention. Given its norm of silent concentration, slotwork seems highly phenomenological to me and, in important respects, a 'blackbox' to observational engagement. But I will nevertheless reproduce here my impressions of one of the slot shifts at which I was present.

Monday, June 23rd, 2008. National desk. 17:57. It has been a relatively tedious shift for Georg on the national slot, a slow news day with no breaking news of obviously strong appeal. The office has been humming with the German national football's team's success in the European Cup but today even that coverage has lulled. So most of the day's production has been occupied with relatively minor reports with titles like 'Saxony's CDU Strengthens its Position in By-Elections' and 'Subway Attackers Confess and Express Regret.' Georg seems to me to be spending more time than usual trying to find titles that make the *Meldungen* more attention-getting before he sends them out on the wire. 'Data Leaks Now in Germany Too' becomes 'Personal Data of 500,000 Citizens Available in the Internet' before finally being sent out as 'Embarrassing Data Leaks in the Internet'. Early in the afternoon, he struck out on his own a bit to see if he could generate a couple of more interesting story ideas through Internet research. Unfortunately, of the two ideas he came up with, it happened that one was already being done by the Berlin office and the other had to be put on hold because no one could immediately track down figure skater Katarina Witt's unlisted phone number. Meanwhile, the *Laufband* (treadmill) of slotwork rolled on. In the past four hours, Georg has edited or written 18 *Meldungen*, he has made or received 14 phone calls, read nine faxes, scrolled the latest news reports on Spiegel online and dpa's newsticker five times, listened to the radio news four times, glanced at the television screen playing n-tv twice, sent out 28 emails and instant messages, and checked his smurfs 34 times and printed and read dozens of press releases. This is to say nothing of the frequent chats with writers and his fellow slotters to coordinate works in progress, to fact check or to simply react to the newsflow. Georg, I have to confess, seems implacable, even good-natured, in the face of all this. When he talks to his fellow slotters and writers he slides quickly into witty banter. But he is almost constantly managing several tasks and exchanges simultaneously. He rarely chats or speaks on the phone without typing or scrolling through smurfs or the dpa newsticker at the same time. He reaches for his litre bottle of Coke Zero and brings it to his lips without ever breaking his concentration on the screens. His word-processing program has remained open on the centre screen the entire time, usually with two or three open windows for *Meldungen*, a spellcheck program window, a window for Google for fact-checking, and a window for AP's internal search engine to access previously filed stories and his queue of *Meldungen* for editing. But despite his general good humour, I get the feeling that the shift has been wearing on him. Some of his emails have been a little testy and the shift has elicited one or two deep sighs from him as

well as a rare admission to me that he sometimes wishes he had finished his thesis in American Studies. Shortly thereafter, he received a friendly but blunt dressing-down from the chief editor who came out of his office with an evaluation of the weekend's news production and was perturbed that 27 reports were sent out on only 11 topics, some of which were, in his judgement, 'completely unnecessary. Health care reform? I mean, nothing even happened. Why do we have three summaries on it then?' It took him almost ten minutes to determine the gender of the 'Francoise' in one *Meldung* he was editing. Just as Georg is sending the final instant message of his shift to one of his writers, the chief editor walks by with a water can and remarks to me, 'I'm sure you're wondering who waters the plants. It's me, I have to do it. We need the plants. Because the people spend so much time here that you want to give them a pleasant environment to be in. It actually raises production. I spend, I don't know, 60 hours a week here, certainly more time than I spend at home. So you want the place to feel *heimisch* [homey].' Not looking away from his typing, Georg quips to him, 'Quick question: Does that mean I can wear shorts in summer then?' The chief editor and I both laugh and the chief editor replies, 'That, of course, you *can't* do.' His spirits just a little higher, Georg logs off the slot, checks his datebook, and makes way for the next shift.

The instrumentarium of slotting is complicated and its taskscape multilayered. I noted above the importance of visual attention for slotwork. More specifically, I would say that the craft of slotting is defined by disciplined attentional practices, both visual and aural, by methods of managing attention and concentration within a fast-moving field of information feeds, collegial exchanges and interruptions and of various environmental distractions (including, of course, the work of colleagues). I was impressed by the slotters' ability to remain deeply focused on their centre screen projects while ambiently multi-attentional to what was happening on their left and right screens, to other information feeds in the proximity of their desks (TV, radio, wires), and to verbal interactions with their colleagues. It was, no doubt, tiring to hold focus for such long periods of time and they could only be selectively multi-attentional to their contexts. Screen-based information feeds and screenwork dominated slotters' attentional practices and non-screen informational feeds (with the partial exception of phone calls) were typically treated with secondary interest as distractions or amusements.

The *Slotinsel* could be viewed, in this sense, as literally an 'island' of concentrated visual and aural attentions set within a sea of transactions and distractions. This sea extends, of course, far beyond the immediate inlet of a newsroom. Although all of the AP-DD slotters and writers with whom I spoke maintained a normative orientation toward engaging spheres of information and politics far beyond the slot island and AP-DD, the intensity and organisation of their labour made it seem to me that their most efficacious and reliable connections to the outside world were digital: the internal AP archives and feeds, the smurfs and newstickers, the search engines and the websites of clients and competitors. The interfaces of the slot island were thus insulated from a certainly overwhelming and possibly chaotic world of events outside the newsroom by a technical, institutional and practical organisation of digital information that made slotting something like a manageable task even if it remained, to be sure, a taxing one. Insulation was, however, a double-edged sword as the slotters were well aware; what made the digital *Echtzeit* of slotting possible also left it prone to becoming locked into the orbit of fast-time information feeds processed by other news journalists, making

the outside world of events often seem remote and secondary to the circuits of news journalism itself. Of the many challenges that slotters faced, perhaps one of the greatest, was how to extend their *Überblick* above and beyond the slot island and to think about what was actually worthy of being reported and circulated in the news. Slotters are by no means alone in this challenge; they are simply paradigmatic of a general challenge facing all news journalists working in the era of digital information. The density of informational channels that news journalists are expected to engage today leaves them with their senses and perhaps minds brimming with what appears on their screens and desks alone. With such a wealth (and burden) of information always already at their disposal, it has become exceedingly difficult to look away from their screens.

## Deciding news value

The scale of slotters' information management is indeed impressive. On average, AP-DD produced approximately 280–300 *Meldungen* of its own per day, with approximately a third of those originating from the international slot and the other two-thirds from the national and business slots. But these reports represented only a fraction of the possible available storylines in a given day's news flow. What fraction precisely is difficult to determine. No one could tell me exactly how many *Informationen* (pieces of information) a slotter had to process in a given shift. Friedrich estimated that the national news slot received anywhere between 1,500 and 1,800 press releases in the 15 hours that it was active. Add to that thousands more *Meldungen* from AP's news agency competitors (dpa alone, for example, releases approximately 800 *Meldungen* a day<sup>10</sup>) and from other *Leitmedien*. Some of these *Meldungen* recapitulated press release material and some did not. Add to these radio reports, the television news tickers, the occasional faxes and telexes, and information received by phone and email, and the entire number of *Informationen* a single slotter would probably be closer to 4,000 to 5,000 per day (although, again, certain stories always generated multiple *Informationen* across different circuits). It is also difficult for me to say exactly by what factor this information volume has expanded in the digital era. But older slotters who remembered the pre-electronic era of news journalism were uniform in their opinion that the quantity and diversity of *Informationen* had expanded dramatically since the days when telex, fax and phone were the main channels of news information. Shaking his head, Friedrich answered me, 'I can't tell you precisely. But the amount of information has increased massively (*massiv zugenommen*). There was just less news back in those days.'

Even were we to assume that each of AP-DD's 300 reports focused on an individual story (knowing that a *Topthema* might actually generate several *Meldungen* across a day), we might fairly estimate that that AP-DD was able to cover perhaps 1 in 10 of the stories that reached it. Perhaps less. Georg informally estimated to me that 95% of what slotters receive 'is just thrown away [*einfach weggeworfen*] because it's not important enough for us'. And it is important to note that this 95% was already cleared of spam, junk mail, pranks, threats and all the other signal noise of the digital era by the slotters' technical assistants (RTAs) before it was allowed to reach the interfaces of the *Slotinsel*. Georg was clear that the remaining 5% did not all make it to the wire in the form of

10 <http://www.dpa.de/dpa-Text.164.0.html>

reports but that these *Informationen* were judged at least to contain content worthy of more serious evaluation.

So what were the evaluative criteria at AP-DD? When I asked, for example, whether it made a difference who was sitting in the slot as to what reports would be sent out that shift all the slotters invoked professional standards. Isidora said, 'there are *allgemeine Regeln* [general rules]' and Georg confirmed that there was something like a *kollektive Vorstellung* (collective perception) of what was and was not *Meldung* (report) material. Although Georg noted that these rules were not codified anywhere in writing, nor were they even explicitly discussed among the editors. The *Gefühl* (feeling) for newsworthiness, he said, was intuitive and one acquired the proper intuitions only through *Erfahrung* (experience) on the job.

In my interviews, five filtering principles were commonly invoked by the slotters. First, national relevance: since AP is oriented to servicing the entire German national news market, slotters feel they do not have the labour power to send out reports on events judged of only regional or local interest. Second, social prominence: given news agencies' frequent engagement of press releases and attendance at press conferences, the perceived prominence of a speaking subject became a key principle for filtering. The slotters explained that the more prominent the politician, public figure or expert in question, the more likely their public statements would be made into *Meldungen*. The federal chancellor would always be covered, for example, but even the pronouncements of various ministers might or might not be, depending on how politically powerful and relevant they happened to be at a given moment. The third principle, timeliness (*Aktualität*), was also decisive here. If an event or statement seemed to be temporally or discursively askew, in other words if it seemed to lack a certain presence in the news already, it was less likely to be *aufgenommen* (taken up) by the agency. The fourth principle, spectacularity (*Spektakularität*), was connected explicitly to accidents and disasters. The slotters were hilariously blunt, for example, about how many corpses were required to make an accident worthy of being reported. Georg explained, 'If there's a car crash somewhere, one person dead, we rarely do it, two dead people, no, with three dead people, then OK, you look at it to see whether we can convert this into a *Meldung*. With five dead people then that's something, that's something we would certainly do.' The fifth principle, extraordinariness (*Ausserordentlichkeit*), was the most miscellaneous, and used to legitimate reporting on stories that would have been judged *unwichtig* (unimportant) according to other relevance criteria. 'Like the recent story about a porcupine that a driver saw wandering across the street in Hamm of all places. The police were called in to look for the porcupine [laughs], not something that happens in Germany every day', one slotter reminded me, 'that story was probably inconsequential to the public according to the standard criteria we learned in school *aber es ist einfach eine schöne Geschichte* [but it is just a nice story]. We'll do those too sometimes, what's curious, what's bizarre, what's funny.'

Doubts concerning newsworthiness did, of course, surface and these were often the catalyst for brief exchanges of opinions among the slotters or among the slotters and the writers. The five principles were also activated variously in different situations of evaluation and never fully integrated with one another. But there was something like a dominant meta-principle that intervened in all decisions over news value in the practice of slotting. One slotter remarked that he and his colleagues would frequently ask themselves, '*Was ist gerade Thema?*' (What is an issue right now?) both in the context of fast-time decision-making and in the context of daily news planning. In this

way, it became perhaps *the* dominant principle of news value, at least the one that could trump any of the others. *Thema* signalled, at least at AP-DD slotwork, both what issues were under public discussion at a given time (and thus worthy of news interest) as well as what issues were judged to already be present in news circulation. In most cases, the latter was allowed to stand in for the former since the slotters' main opportunities to judge newsworthiness came through their constant surveillance of what *Themen* other *Leitmedien* were publicising and in the post-facto evaluation of which of AP-DD's own reports their clients chose to republicise. Some *Themen* were considered to be powerful but transient and possessing a short life span (a victory of the German national soccer team) whereas others were considered to be *dauerbrenner* (slow-burners), sometimes quiet but always ready to quickly reignite, like Iraq or conflicts in the Middle East. *Thema* was a quality that certain issues inherited and that others needed to earn. More importantly, *Thema* was presented to me as a consensus condition in the newsroom. Journalists could certainly differ in their estimation of the importance of particular *Themen*, but whether something was a *Thema* or not, in other words whether a topic was a subject of news mediation and/or public discussion, was treated as a more factual condition. *Themen*, needless to say, were not likely to be ignored by slotters. Once a topic was collectively judged to be a *Thema*, that status normally operated as a legitimating factor to support further reporting on it.

When I asked slotters how they could tell *was gerade Thema ist*, some eyed me curiously or simply shrugged at the obviousness of the condition as though I had asked them how I knew I was sitting on a chair. Others however spoke to their parallel observation of other news media, to their past experience reporting on similar issues, and to their gut sense of what would interest an average citizen (often epitomised in the form of an older family member or non-journalist friend). Because of the significance that other news media (especially clients and competitors) were said to play in determining *Thema*, I asked Isidora whether she ever worried that there was a gap between actual public interests and what was circulating in news media. Could news media, in other words, constitute their own version of publicity through coordinated action? She saw what I was getting at right away:

You mean this situation where one of us elevates [*hochbringt*] a *Thema* and then we all go and do it? Although it is perhaps not a *Thema* at all? Yes, that happens and I find it very concerning because there are times when one creates an artificial *Aktualität*. Simply through our communication with one another. All the media people are revolving around themselves and forgetting for whom they are actually doing this job. We're very influenced by each other. You go out in the morning, walk by the newsstand and the *Thema* is there. You turn on the TV and the *Thema* is there. Then you come to the office and do that *Thema* yourself. The question is how you can withdraw from that. *Should* one even try to withdraw from that? Because if the *Thema* is everywhere, then we actually have to be in on it too.'

A sense of the inevitability and ubiquity of *Themen* in news, as well as a sense of the inevitability that slotters would have to authorise reports on *Themen* that they felt were being overplayed or even truly insignificant, was widely shared throughout the *Redaktion*. I asked Georg about the lifespan of *Themen* and how he knew when a *Thema* was on its way out. He replied,

You just notice after a while that the media are losing interest in it, when you see something appearing on page 5 instead of the front page, then you know a *Thema* is beginning to slowly die off. . . . But the biggest consideration here is whether a *Thema* interests our clients or not. You can't protect yourself from that and sometimes it isn't pretty. You can feel like you've chewed through [*durchgekaut*] a *Thema*, but if our clients disagree then we have to find something more to offer them whether we think it's sensible or not.

Indeed, most slotters agreed that they tended to err on the side of republicising stories already in news circulation in order to avoid the embarrassing situation of not sending out reports on *Themen* that continued to be of interest.

### **Craft or treadmill? How slotters understand their agency**

Once upon a time, in the first generation of sociological ethnographies of news journalism, the brilliant works of Gaye Tuchman and others,<sup>11</sup> it seemed relatively clear who made news: journalists. And perhaps needless to say it seemed clear that news was a crafted object, some *thing* brought into being by human agency, thus 'made', and then subjected to further human operations. Tuchman and her colleagues had no illusions about the powerful institutional forces that influenced news journalism or about the fact that news journalism was governed, like all collective social action, by a great many rules, rituals and routines. Yet their central ethnographic narratives were built around the figure of the journalistic *newsmaker*, a praxiological subject<sup>12</sup> who possessed at least a significant degree of agency to shape his/her social environment through his/her professional practices and, by extension, who possessed a significant degree of influence over public knowledge through the craft of journalism. This portrait of news journalism doubtless drew upon, and reinforced, in subtle ways, other popular praxiologies of news journalism, many of which continue to be quite lively today: the fearless foreign correspondent, the hard-nosed desk journalist, the relentless investigative reporter.

But what I heard in my interviews and saw in my observations and what I have sought to convey here is a different vision of contemporary news journalism and a different sense of the agency of contemporary news journalists. Slotting requires tremendous practical skill and demands a considerable, even exhausting, degree of energy and attention. I asked Paul once how many words he wrote each day and I gasped a little when he calculated for a moment and told me: 6,000 words. Every day. Slotters took pride in their achievements along these lines, in their impressive mastery of fast-time information practices that would intimidate even other digitally-enabled and -confident information practitioners. The journalist as professional, as craftsman,

11 See, e.g., Fishman (1980), Gans (1979), Tuchman (1978) and Tunstall (1971).

12 By contrasting 'praxiological' and 'mediological' subjectivities in this section, I mean to highlight the complementarity and tension between (praxiological) discourses and understandings of news professional life that emphasise the active, creative, effective agency of journalists and (mediological) discourses and understandings that emphasise the overriding power of news mediation, circulation and flow.

as praxiological subject, in other words, remains in the heart of what has been termed 'sedentary journalism'.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, as one hears in their narratives, slotters were also acutely aware of themselves as *mediological* subjects, that is, as operators within a complex, fast-moving, conjuncture of information flows and intra-institutional relations. Theirs was a life informatic and they struggled with the implications of digital informational immediacy and automaticity for their decision-making; they were worried about being caught in a world of self-referential news mediation gradually hiving off from the genuine *Öffentlichkeit* they strived to serve and to influence; they felt sometimes disempowered by how clients and competitors defined *Themen* and by how the synchronisation of contemporary news media, in Anke's words, made them *zwangsläufig miteinsteigen* (necessarily climb on board). The slotters, in other words, did not, or did not always, narrate themselves as the praxiological protagonists of their newsworld; they were well aware of the contingencies and vulnerabilities of their professional agency, of the stupefying circulation of news messages that made any claim to perceive the news as a series of crafted, controlled objects an improbable assault on experiential truth. Georg had a wonderful answer to my impossible question as to who or what made the news today: 'I mean, who knows really. All I can tell you is that we're somewhere in the mix.' Everything that transpired across the screens of the slot island suggested the same: a dense, vibrant and ultimately unknowable environment of news *mediation*.

And, yet, the slotters had institutional routines and powerful strategies of attentional and epistemic *immediation* at their disposal with which to dampen the flowscape of news into forms that could co-exist with a sense of praxiological subjectivity. What other choice, after all, did a 'newsmaker' have? They had, for example, the filtering principles of their craft. They had their complex and powerful digital information technology. They had planning and evaluation instruments. They had a faith in good news decisions made elsewhere in the 'lead media', the authority and objectivity of whose news output offered a desirable counterpart to the sometimes harried and anxious experience of slotting. They had their colleagues with whom they could negotiate *was gerade Thema war*. They had an entire praxiological language of *machen, geben, senden, nehmen, werfen* (making, giving, sending, taking, throwing) with which to discursively craft the stresses, fluidities and contingencies of their work into objectified forms susceptible to their agency. With the assistance of so many prosthetics of immediation, it is not only thinkable but entirely possible to sustain a sense of praxiological subjectivity on the slot island.

Yet, in conversation or in life, the hard armour of immediation can be turned over or inside out to reveal the soft belly of self-doubt or feelings of imposition or the supple logic of market supply and demand, and suddenly once again the overwhelming flood of information was there, the forced choices, the exhaustion. Immediation, as anthropologists like William Mazzarella and Patrick Eisenlohr have noted, is a complementary condition to mediation, and the one folds easily into the other. Georg told me, 'if I'm going back and forth about whether to do a *Meldung* on some topic, I'll look at whether it is out there somewhere else already and, if it is, that will usually sway me to do it'. Mediology seems to hold the upper hand. But then Anke told me, 'It's stressful to come to terms with the flood of information [*Informationsflut*] that's for sure. But the work itself is fine, I seldom find it stressful. I mean, the environment is

13 Baisnée and Marchetti (2006: 114).

stressful, the TV, the three computer screens, the emails, the competition, the telephone. But the work of reporting, sorting and distributing, that's easy to get used to.' What is striking about Anke's statement is that she defines an immediated sanctuary – her work, her active self – within an environment of informational stress and distraction. In this, she was not alone among the slotters. Praxiology, too, holds an upper hand.

So what do we make of all this as analysts of news journalism in the era of digital information? Slotters both accept and do not accept the vision of the news as ceaseless liquid flow. On the one hand, we have the *Informationsflut* and the treadmills and on the other hand the frequent material metaphors of *Baustellen* (construction sites) where one puts in *Arbeit* (work); for every aquatic metaphor of flows, I heard informatic talk of operations with 'interfaces', 'circuits', 'inputs' and 'outputs'. We find a sense of news mediation as a vast, unknowable domain and on other hand little mystery regarding the *Meldung* as a textual artefact created on a workbench, and then edited, sorted and sent off on a wire. When I asked Isidora once about how she found the time to be reflective as to news value given the intensity of slotwork, she lowered her eyes and raised her shoulders slowly, saying firmly, 'It's a good question, but I know *I* can do it.' And, of course, she did do it. The only reasonable conclusion is that both praxiology and mediology inhere in, and are constitutive of, news journalists' understandings of their practice, their agency and the environment of news mediation.

## Conclusion

This unresolved but nevertheless valid truth seems as good a place as any to conclude this investigation into news agency and news mediation. Slotwork, the core of office-based news agency journalism, is a key node of contemporary news journalism. We have seen that slotwork exists in a complex of technologically- and organisationally-enabled practices that is evolving between professional tradition and contemporary influence, between technological automaticity and human agency, between attention and distraction, between *Öffentlichkeit* (publicity) and market, between producer and client, between praxiological and mediological modes of understanding. There are other important sites of news mediation of course; slotting is only one node among many. But it captures for me many of the crucial trends that inform news journalism in the digital era more generally, particularly how journalists are increasingly working with and through screen interfaces and trying to come to terms, both in practice and in knowledge, with what seems (both to them and to us) increasingly fast and dense channels of digital information. Slotwork is therefore an excellent point of departure for assembling an understanding of what contemporary news is, how it is made but also how it is flow.

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