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Contextual fields and social theory

Introduction

In the last chapter we established the need for co-ordinates that can provide an adequate degree of orientation to audiences for news and current affairs. Such co-ordinates can allow audiences to have more than a disembodied, superficial understanding of the events presented to them, enabling them to grasp more of the conditions, meanings and processes that surround those events, that led up to them, that played major roles in causing them to happen. In the terms I've introduced, this is the need for a suitable *contextual field*, a mapping of the primary institutional and individual actors, networks, forces, pressures and dynamics relevant to the key events a current affairs account is focused upon.

In this chapter I will begin to flesh out the idea of contextual fields, indicating how they can guide us to be on the lookout for certain things when viewing or reading a current affairs account. In the first part of this chapter I will make some very general, and therefore inevitably quite abstract, points about contextual fields, indicating that they have certain features that are applicable in all places and at all times. Seen in this way the features have a generalized status. However, this is combined with more specific qualities. Contextual fields take on particular forms and shapes in different times and places, and so to truly understand a set of news events one needs to combine knowledge of the generalizable features they possess with an ability to grasp the specific colours and tones of particular times and places. The fact that the general features have to be complemented by the hues, tones and shades specific to localities of time and place means being alert to these particularities of context, to the unique qualities of particular events. It means that when we approach a particular news event, we need to be sensitive to how much we

probably don't yet know, to the kinds of things we need to learn, and to the fact that there will always be a good deal we'll never know. All this means that even when the general, abstract aspects of contextual fields are known, there is still a lot of work to be done in interpreting particular news and current affairs stories. This should never be forgotten. Having said this, however, the general, abstract categories can take us a long way.

That contextual fields do possess general features is useful because it means that the knowledge we build up about these is transposable from situation to situation, news story to news story. This means we don't always have to start entirely anew when a fresh news story breaks. In order to develop the best set of generalizable, transposable tools for thinking about all news stories, in any place at any time, I will take the discussion of contextual fields, and the concepts that populate it, as far as I can at an abstract level. This will involve the introduction and elucidation of some key concepts of social theory, whose true value will only emerge slowly over time as we apply them to news events and stories in a range of different circumstances. I will try to present the abstract concepts as clearly and succinctly as possible in this section, and then, as the book proceeds, to gradually demonstrate how they can be used in a variety of different ways with respect to a variety of different real-world circumstances and news events, combining the general with the local tones and shades of particular stories. As noted, it is the combination of the two – the general and the detailed particular – that will determine whether the knowledge that audiences are provided with is strong or weak, adequate or inadequate with respect to the claims of a given story.

In fact, audiences already possess relatively complex understandings of the generalizable characteristics of *contextual fields*, which is a highly encouraging sign for this venture. As viewers or readers approach a text of some kind, their initial orientation will be provided by their pre-existing stocks of generalized, typified, notions of how to position and understand what is going on. The next chapter will draw out this point further in indicating that, at the very least, the audiences for high-quality political drama on television employ sophisticated understandings of contextual fields, which they bring to their interpretation of unfolding events. It is debatable, however, whether the same audiences currently employ the same quality of interpretation when they consume television news. In any case, audience understandings and competencies are usually intuitive, tacit, and are rarely, if at all, made explicit, and I want to argue for the importance of making them explicit. This would allow these routine skills and interpretations to be compared to the most adequate forms of understanding available. If the comparison reveals that the general background understandings audiences bring to news and current affairs items are overly gauche or naïve then those understandings need to be subjected to constructive critique, as a means to improve them. The setting out of theoretically informed generic categories and forms of social

understanding in this chapter, and in following chapters, rests on this chain of reasoning. That is, it rests on recognition of the key role played by background understandings of contextual fields in audience interpretation of news events, and of the corresponding importance of the quality of those understandings.

So, let us start with the general understanding of contextual fields. How should one identify the basic contextual features relevant to grasping the key issues, puzzles or dilemmas of a story? Contextual fields, as we've noted, involve structured networks of relations or configurations of forces, and it's important to be able to think of these as having an *objective* existence. By 'objective' here, I simply mean aspects of the social context that have a real existence. So, for example, the fact that the objectively existing social field can facilitate or empower actors in what they want to do, or can constrain or prevent them from doing what they want to do, suggests that the contextual field has objective qualities above and beyond the wishes of the actor-in-focus. If social actors are not to get their fingers burned then they need to take these objective qualities seriously.

To talk about the social context having an 'objective' existence doesn't mean that aspects of social life we typically think of as subjective – such as the world views, ideologies, cultural perspectives and personal moral and emotional orientations of individuals – aren't included in contextual fields. They are, of course. The social context and the processes that go on within it continue to be reproduced minute by minute, hour by hour, and there are people out there to help reproduce these processes, people who are subjectively interpreting their situation in order to act within it. Social processes rely on human subjects, even if they involve much more than this. The processes within the contextual field, and the other characteristics of the field – both subjective and objective, human and non-human, material and cultural, with all their many interweavings and entanglements – all have an *objective existence*.¹ This is an **ontological** point – a point about the nature of the entities and relations that exist in the world (see **box 1**, below). Social theorists concern themselves with conceptualizing these entities and relations in a systematic fashion, developing powerful illuminating ways to think about such elements of the world as time, space, agency, structure, the body, technology, meaning, culture and so on. We require concepts that are up to the job if we are to be able to think satisfactorily and accurately about the world, but we also need to remember that these relatively abstract concepts can only do half of the job. For we also need to include the detail of specific processes in particular places if we are to capture the full-bodied character of social life. We need to be able to see the different shapes taken on by the conceptualized entities in varying situations if we are to grasp reality in its detailed complexity. If social life was a paint-by-numbers canvas, then the concepts would provide the topography of empty shapes, white and numbered, and the rich and messy detail of everyday life would be equivalent to the paint box of many colours. The key

difference is that everything isn't as static in social life, with general concepts and unique situations interweaving with each other in all kinds of ways. In order to truly find out about what is going on in particular places within this objective reality, one needs to do a good deal of further work, involving the moments of methodological and epistemological objectivity (see box 1, also) that I will now describe.

Box 1 Three valuable meanings of 'Objectivity'

[1] ONTOLOGICAL OBJECTIVITY

(a commitment to the reality of the world, *and* to the conceptualization of the kinds of entities and relations existing within it)

Objectivity, here, indicates a commitment to the independent existence or reality of events, and to particular conceptualizations of this reality. These conceptualizations are of the constituents of the contextual field relevant to an event, and of the processes within this field. Both objective and subjective elements (see next row) are included in ontological objectivity. Concepts of these elements only grasp half of the story of the reality of events, as the real-world shapes taken by actual processes and events will vary from situation to situation. Finding out about these detailed processes will involve a good deal of further work, including the moments of (2) and (3).

[2] METHODOLOGICAL OBJECTIVITY

(investigates what is in the world with a focus on 'objective elements')

Objective elements, here, refers to a way of bracketing out reference to the interior worlds of actors (subjective elements). Knowledge of these elements can be gained from an 'external perspective'. Objective elements are to be distinguished from subjective elements (see Chapter 3).

[3] EPISTEMOLOGICAL OBJECTIVITY

(evaluating the quality of knowledge claims about the world)

Objectivity here refers to the validity or invalidity, the adequacy or inadequacy, of knowledge claims. This includes the need to assess the adequacy of the detailed evidence provided to back up claims about the particular shapes taken by conceptualized independent reality (i.e. 1 – ontological objectivity) in specific situations.

There is an important *methodological* point to be made about how to best reflect upon and investigate the relations between a news event and the contextual field that provides it with meaning. Here it is extremely useful to be able to discriminate, analytically, between two broad aspects of this reality when considering how to initially approach a particular issue and its contextual field. On the one hand, attaining knowledge of some aspects of the contextual field doesn't require detailed reference to the interior worlds of actors, and I will refer to these as *objective elements* (see **box 2**, below). I will focus on these in the present chapter. On the other hand these are to be distinguished from questions about the contextual field that do require detailed reference to the interior worlds of actors. I will refer to the latter as *subjective elements*, and I will focus on these areas of the contextual field in Chapter 3.

Claims to possess knowledge of either subjective or objective elements, or of the ways in which they are intertwined in a given story, can be more or less valid or invalid. Some knowledge claims will be well substantiated in terms of evidence, and others will be less well substantiated or just plain wrong, relying on empty rhetoric, flimsy or inaccurate evidence and so on. This means that claims to knowledge can be more or less 'objective' in a third sense. This is an *epistemological* point – a point about assessing the quality of the knowledge one has about the entities and relations that exist in the world. Knowledge of a more objective kind, in the epistemological sense, will be substantiated by a good deal of evidence commensurate with the claims that have been made. These three types of objectivity can each be distinguished from the kind of anodyne, misguided, conception of objectivity as a neutral 'view from nowhere' that dominates and eviscerates so much of news and current affairs.²

Knowledge claims **[3]** *about* the processes taking place within contextual fields **[1]** can thus be objective, in that it is quite possible to try and identify

the existing dominant characteristics of these processes at a given point in time. There will be characterizations of these that focus methodologically [2] on objective elements, characterizations that focus on subjective elements, and those that combine the two. Whatever the methodological focus, the knowledge acquired can be better or worse, more or less accurate, and we should be able to make disciplined and informed judgements in these respects.

In initially orienting oneself to the relevant *objective elements* of the contextual field included in a particular news or current affairs account, it will be useful to try and identify the presence or absence of some or all of the following basic repertoire of objective elements:

Box 2 Objective factors in the contextual field

- the *key actors* involved, both individual and collective;
- when and where to locate key actors, processes and events (issues of time/history and space/geography);
- the most important *duties, obligations, sets of expectations, values and goals* that are formally or informally attached to an actor's position (the formal aspects of these are akin to a job description);
- The various kinds of *resources and powers* actors have at their disposal, the effectiveness with which they can deploy them, and the various kinds of constraints that their immediate positioning imposes on their use.
- The social relations of *interdependence* that link key actors to each other and to non-key actors, providing conditions of existence for each other's activities and for degrees of control. These relations include various kinds of hierarchy, power dependence and other kinds of interdependence, including those based on resources, technology, logistics and communication.
- The shared *cultural or ideological affiliations* between actors, or alternatively, objectively existing relations of ideological antagonism and conflict.
- The *forces, pressures, constraints and sanctions* that actors impose, or could impose, on each other as a result of these powers, relations and interdependencies.

The presence and significance of these factors within a news event will vary, depending upon the event. Choosing which to focus on will be a matter of judgement and purpose. It is important to the scheme I'm proposing that it is possible to approach these objective elements of the social context from two, different, primary perspectives. The first is by looking at the contextual field – the structural context – from the perspective of an *external observer*, and the second is by looking at it from the viewpoint of the *involved actor*, an actor positioned within that contextual field. These two different vantage points will give rise to different fields of vision; they will inevitably draw differing aspects of the contextual field into view, simply because of the position of the viewer. This will be a central point in the present chapter. If audiences are to examine the status and quality of an account they must first ask themselves from whose perspective that account is being told.

In what follows, I will clarify each of the points listed in Box 2, building up the discussion in three parts. In the first part, saying more about the generalizing, abstract, level, I will explore what is involved in mentally 'mapping out' the contextual field for a news story. I deal here with the basic stocks of knowledge about objective features that should guide the interpretation and assessment of news events and stories. Their primary content is conceptual, involving an understanding of how to think about, how to conceptualize, the elements contained in the above-mentioned points. The conceptual shapes provided, for example, by ideas of what social actors are, and how they function, or of the kinds of power interdependencies that exist between actors, and how these work, are the basis on which we can make sense of evidence. Fragments of evidence need to be pinned onto conceptual shapes before they will make sense, even in those instances when unexpected and unforeseen evidence means that the conceptual shapes themselves need to be attenuated. Evidence without conceptual shape is meaningless. The basic shapes of the contextual field that are brought to the interpretations of events are inherent in any attempt to make sense of any news event. The quality of these sense-making conceptualizations is thus of paramount importance to the quality of the final understanding.

I will follow this account of the general characteristics of the contextual field with a particular example, with its own hues, colours and tones. This section will demonstrate how these general aspects of the contextual field can be employed in the interpretation of a particular set of circumstances. The story is one of a young single mother, Sandy, facing a particular contextual field as she searches for somewhere to live in a contemporary American city. This story will be told from Sandy's viewpoint, the viewpoint of *the involved actor*. This means I will draw attention to her (hermeneutic-structural)³ subjective frame of meaning, which, of course, is the perspective through which she experiences and negotiates her predicament. However, the *thematic focus*

of the section will be less on how Sandy is dealing with the situation within her inner world and thoughts – which is something we will spend more time on in Chapter 3 – and more on how she experiences the *objective character of the contextual field* that she is faced with. I will indicate how the view of the contextual field used in Sandy's understanding corresponds to various elements of the basic objective repertoire as indicated in Box 2. It is important to recognize both the typical strengths and the typical limitations of this kind of perspective. Audiences should adopt this perspective, this way of seeing, when a current affairs account makes claims that imply knowledge of how the structural terrain looks from the viewpoint of the people in the thick of it.

In the third and final section of the chapter I will change perspective. Specifically, I will recount the findings of two in-depth analyses undertaken by media scholars of particular news events in Denmark and Sweden, respectively. One of these two sets of media analyses focused on the coverage of transport policy in Denmark at the turn of the new millennium, and the other on the Swedish news coverage in 2011 of the mistreatment of elderly people in private health care.

I want to draw attention, here, to both the strengths and the limitations of current academic media analysis. My account of these cases is meant to indicate that the limitations are readily apparent in even high-quality research whose ostensible focus is on practical policy fields. I will, first, point to the sophisticated ways in which academic media analysts shed light on the language, rhetoric and so on of journalistic texts. I will then indicate that the concentration on the 'rhetoric of the text' is accompanied by a lack of focus on what news and current affairs texts manage to say about the objective characteristics of the contextual field as such. I want to insist that, on the one hand, we need the sophisticated analyses of media texts, with their emphasis on discourses and media frames. But, on the other hand, we need social theory to help us to look beyond these discourses, to analyse what current affairs texts tell us about the characteristics of the events they are writing about, including what they tell us about the relevant networks of relations that have produced those events.

There is just enough, however, in the academic analyses of the media accounts of the two cases to allow us to glimpse some of the limitations of the way in which journalists engage with the contextual fields relevant to their stories. The two case studies do suggest some of the intricacies and subtleties involved in journalistic presentation and, in the first case, in audience reception and interpretation. However, despite the analyses being focused on news accounts from a plurality of sources and genres – each focused on the particular domestic issues mentioned – the findings suggest that journalists worked with quite simplistic frames, with little sense of mapping an appropriate contextual field. It seems they did very little to position the actors

and events they were covering within a contextual field, provided little in the way of evidential detail and lacked any real hermeneutic engagement with the perspectives of involved actors on the objective character of the contextual field that confronted them. Similarly, audiences tended to work with a very thin background conception of the contextual field. An inevitable consequence of a thin, simplistic, notion of the contextual field is a corresponding dearth of attention given to any of the objective factors within this field, that is, to the kinds of objective factors whose generalized features are outlined in the box on page 32.

If Sandy's viewpoint stands for the perspective of many of the people who are interviewed on the streets and in the homes of news and documentary events, the external viewpoint stands for the typical perspective of the journalist or the academic, looking in from the outside. We will see later that one of the strengths of this latter viewpoint, when it is sufficiently focused on key objective factors within the contextual field, is in generating 'ways of seeing' directed more towards the larger, broader, scale. As always, it will be important to explore, and to make explicit, exactly what these kinds of accounts provide, and what they do not. One aspect of particular importance for us not to lose sight of is how the external perspective – a typically broader, but more distanced, way of seeing – should relate to situated, more immersed, points of view. One way of thinking about this is to ask how pictures taken with a wide-angled lens from up on the hilltop should combine with those taken close-up, from within the midst and heat of the battle.

The contextual field: General and transposable concepts

When approaching a news and current affairs story about an unfamiliar topic, it is useful to begin by 'mapping' as many as possible of the key objective factors derived from the general, abstract level, to get an initial sense of what is involved in the story's particular contextual field, even when this has to be carried out in an impressionistic and rudimentary manner. A rough template for such a mapping is represented in graphic form in **Figure 2.1**. This diagram is useful to keep in mind while thinking about contextual fields in general.

The black circular nodes represent collective and individual actors, and are also meant to bring to mind their immediate power resources and capabilities. It is essential to acquire a grasp of the positioning of each of the key actors in relation to the other relevant actors. One consequence of this is that it is usually necessary to identify precisely which actor one is focusing on at any one time. This individual or institutional actor, who faces a particular context

FIGURE 2.1 *A contextual field.*

at a particular time, and so has a specific relationship to that world, should be thought of as *the actor-in-focus*. This is in order to differentiate that actor from all the other actors who are implicated in producing and reproducing the social structure that is the context for that actor-in-focus. Without this simple discipline, commentators and casual conversationalists alike often slide inadvertently into giving too much power to social actors over social structures. The slide begins with the recognition that when social structures get reproduced or undermined then it is usually because social actors have brought this about. There is often a leap from this observation to the truism that if all the actors got together then they could change many of the structures. However, this is a very general, highly abstract, and entirely conditional statement about structures and actors. It is not a statement about particular actors in particular situations. It is a short, but misleading, step from such aspirational ruminations to the *non sequitur* that a particular actor, no matter how they are positioned, has the power to change, resist or undermine a particular structure. They often don't have this power. Think, for example, about the situation of an individual or collective actor (the actors-in-focus) facing a contextual terrain in which the dominant ideological and cultural affiliations of key actors are in conflict with their own. For these actors-in-focus the characteristics of the ideologies and cultural formations that face them will often possess objective qualities of obstacle and constraint. Keeping track of the actors-in-focus and their positioning helps to keep feet firmly on the ground.

The positioning of actors in relation to one another can be formulated in several different ways, depending upon the definition of the situation most

relevant to the problem being explored by an account, or the claims being made within the account. Actors and their practices can be positioned in relation to each other in a number of different ways, and along a number of different dimensions. These can include their positioning in relation to each other: in geographical terms; in terms of time, including chronological sequence or simultaneity; in terms of shared cultural or ideological affiliations, or, alternatively, connections through relations of ideological antagonism and conflict; or in terms of lines of communication, regular face-to-face meetings and so on. However, when considering current affairs it will typically be most useful *to begin* by thinking about the black, networked lines linking actors as indicating *relations of dependence and interdependence* with respect both to power resources and to obligations and duties attached to social position. Actors rely on other actors to provide them with resources of various kinds, from finance through material and technological objects and artefacts to information. The resources provided by actors to other actors can also take the form of granting them permission to do something, or of giving them the authority to command others to do something. Actors also often depend on others to follow their commands, but also to simply do the 'right thing' without always having to ask them to do so, and without peering over their shoulders.

These interdependencies will usually be embedded in broader hierarchical systems, which can be internal to organizations or can reflect the relations between organizations. These hierarchies need to be identified when they are germane to a current affairs account, but it must also be kept in mind that their levels of integration will vary, with some hierarchies functioning efficiently and effectively in their own terms, while others don't function well at all.

It will be quite easy to superimpose the other aspects of mutual positioning – with respect to geography, time, cultural and ideological affinity, quality and frequency of communication and so on – onto this key dimension, and to think about the ways in which the various factors interweave with each other. Mutually beneficial power interdependencies, for example, will very often lead to the downplaying of ideological or cultural differences. This is not always the case, however, and like all general concepts, care must be taken in applying them to particular situations. Nationalist, religious or moral zeal, for example, will often refuse to bend to the demands of those who might withhold resources of one kind or another. On the other hand, as we shall indicate in a moment, such zeal can often be met by negative sanctions, by the withholding of resources that are necessary to sustain practices that the unyielding party also holds dear. Things get interesting in such configurations, and such configurations are frequent.

An initial primary focus on the black, networked lines as indicating a relation of dependence and interdependence regarding power resources has the

virtue of indicating in quite concrete terms what actors have to gain and to lose if that relation breaks down. One can quickly see how the current set of social relations in which actors are embedded could have their conditions of existence undermined, or significantly altered, by a disturbance of relations of interdependence. Taking this as the primary focus for the black, networked lines also draws direct attention to the sources of an actor's current power resources, so that one gets a keen sense of how power resources of various kinds can be expanded, or potentially diminished, through shifts in networks of relations and 'alliances'. It is useful to remember that when actors join together in resource alliances they will often, as a consequence, have more power to alter the structural terrain than when they act alone. The extent to which this is true will also depend, naturally, on how much power they command on their own, and how much additional power the alliance gives them. The goals and objectives of actors will almost invariably be pursued within configurations of the kind indicated by the configured lines.

Social theorists refer to the duties and obligations an organization expects its personnel to fulfil as 'normative expectations', or norms. These *norms* can be more or less formal or informal, and more or less clear cut. Individuals in their various roles will have to make judgements as to what would and would not be acceptable in a given situation. The sociologist, Erving Goffman, wrote very insightfully and entertainingly about the tacit mutual knowledge and subtle skills we employ in judging what is appropriate behaviour in a variety of social contexts.⁴ When, for example, is it appropriate to hold hands with someone else, and where, when, and with whom, would holding hands be a transgression of acceptable behaviour, a transgression of the social norms prevailing in that particular kind of context? Does the age, gender or race of each of those holding hands make a difference? What degree of embarrassment or discomfort would be produced by the transgression of the prevailing social norms? There are also strict norms about whom we are allowed to approach socially, and where and when we are allowed to do so. Such norms around 'access' can be policed by controls over entry to certain kinds of buildings, or they can be more informal, so that it is a matter of courtesy not to follow your doctor around the supermarket, reciting a string of ailments and symptoms. In public places, we are traditionally allowed to ask a stranger for the time, directions, or, in the old days, for a match, but there will be fairly strict time and other rules about the nature of even these permissible interactions, and one would need to rely on special skills or characteristics in order not to very quickly come up against the limits of what seems normal and acceptable.

The point of this excursion is to emphasize the significance of norms in social life as a prelude to highlighting the formidable role they play in sustaining relations of interdependence between key actors – nodal points in Figure 2.1 – within a contextual field. There will typically be normative expectations on

either side about the conditions under which the interdependence should be continued, and the potential cost of transgressing such norms will be either tacitly or explicitly understood. For power structures to be sustained, resting as they typically do on networks of interdependence, actors within the organizations at each end of the chain will need to be 'doing the right thing'. For an involved actor looking outwards from their position within a contextual field, the behaviours expected of them – as duty, obligation, appropriate action – by others within the relevant networks of relations will often be experienced as an objective set of imperatives. The dynamic force of these external expectations will be quite correctly understood as forming objective structural demands and constraints. A simple, and increasingly widespread, example of this would be where the failure to meet certain targets attached to one's working role leads to the sanction of demotion and an unfavourable change in contract. For an organization, the failure to meet profit or performance targets and related sets of external normative expectations can, in some circumstances, lead to loss of general confidence, financial calamity, or both.

Power relations and norms usually work hand in hand, and their various combinations are part of the objective social relations of any contextual field. Normative expectations are very often the form in which power expresses itself. At the more macro level of international relations, sets of expectations will commonly be attached as conditions to be met if aid, finance, trading agreements, or the provision of military hardware and support, are to be continued. In using the contextual field as a guide to the analysis of current affairs texts, these general considerations need to be drawn to mind and sized up when texts are concerned with the constraints and opportunities facing particular actors, which they very often are. These conceptualizations can, for example, focus our attention on how much of a situated actor's perception of the strategic field, if any of it, has been considered by a particular journalistic account.

In order to avoid thinking of social structures as too 'thing-like', too fixed and impersonal, it is essential that the networks of the contextual field – representing the social-structural context – be thought of as contexts that are always partially in motion at any moment. All kinds of situated practices are involved in maintaining, repairing, consciously running down, damaging, improving, and otherwise variously changing, existing social structures. Social structures, contextual fields, will always have social actors within them, undertaking practices of more or less import. Because of this, any sense of social structures as fundamentally intractable, which they undoubtedly often are to a particular actor-in-focus, needs to be leavened with questions of 'to whom?', 'due to what?', 'within what time frame?', and so on.

Large socio-structural forces, and other kinds of forces, active in the social practices of the past, can leave significant marks on the form and content

of the contextual field of the present. The four thick arrows pushing into the current network of positioned relations in Figure 2.1 indicate this legacy, and its provenance in past times. This inherited presence can exist in objective crystallized forms – in current power resources and hierarchies, and in laws, bureaucratic and informal rules, technologies and architecture – within current contextual fields. These crystallized forms provide the inherited social terrain inhabited by current organizational actors. Such organizational actors can include, of course, governments and states, transnational corporations engaged in production, services and so on, and cultural and normative institutions such as educational and legal bodies. The individuals who work within these organizations, no matter how powerful they are, will have to manoeuvre within and negotiate the weight of the past – the inherited sedimentations of past practices. These individuals may eventually change the structures they inherited, in turn leaving a new set of sedimentations for those who come after them. But at least initially they will inherit circumstances that are not of their own making.⁵

There is a lot that could be said about the junction between the past and the present. It is especially important to be continually aware of the various ways in which the practices and constructions of the past can *colonize the future*, so that long before it arrives, it is already populated, less empty, more constraining than is routinely supposed.⁶ This is a general point that needs to be combined with knowledge of specific histories, and is an observation to remember in analysing any news story. It's a simple but often overlooked truth that one can't simply will completely new worlds into existence when there are all kinds of impediments in the way, all sorts of legacies from the past that make some things impossible, others difficult, and yet others very dangerous. The temptation to campaign for an ideal future based on a moral vision abstracted from any knowledge of historical inheritance lodged in current arrangements risks all kinds of unintended consequences, including opening a Pandora's box of potential schisms, subdued animosities and latent grievances.

Other insights into the junctions between the past and the present can usefully be gleaned from the writings of the American sociologist C. Wright Mills, and especially from his slim, perennial volume, *The Sociological Imagination*, which has excited and illuminated successive generations of sociology students.⁷ Mills noted that an understanding of the power and significance on social life of large social structures and forces inherited from the past will be magnified many times once one grasps how profoundly they influence the biographies of the men and women who live within the folds and creases they leave on the objective landscape. On a subjective level, the individual actors who populate the social structures inherited from the past will themselves have also been socialized by inherited practices within various

social institutions, including families and schools, which function, among other things, to prepare new generations for their future. And, of course, this doesn't stop in adulthood, with later jobs and roles continuing to socialize, and to lay the ground more or less intentionally or randomly, and more or less effectively, for subsequent, ever changing, roles. Both the objective and the subjective factors will combine to make up the terrain that faces any one actor at a particular juncture. Interwoven together – with the subjective inhabiting and informing the objective, and vice versa – they will present themselves to that actor with the immense force of often intractable social structures, forever pressing on their lives and pushing them to do this or that, or to suffer the consequences. Our understanding of people's lives is given much greater depth once we understand how these large historical forces and social structures surround, inhabit and mark them, and provide the scope of whatever opportunities they have. What may seem like entirely 'private troubles', Mills famously argued, are greatly illuminated once one looks for how they intersect with 'public issues'.⁸

The impact of past practices on the present events covered by news is not the only dimension that is rendered invisible without a grasp of the broader contextual field. For relevant contextual fields do not only stretch back into the past, but also stretch out in space. Both journalists and audiences hence also need to be able to position events in relation to the spatially extended networks of relationships that have combined to produce them. The networks represented in Figure 2.1 will naturally be variable in terms of the spatial distance between the actors represented by the black nodes, and these distances may span local, regional and globalized contexts. Part of the represented frame may belong, spatially, to micro contexts – say, relations within a department of a business company or a ministry of state – or to middle-level contexts, but part of them may also be part of networks that span the globe. International financial networks, for example, reach from afar right into the heart of local city, town and household contexts. The remittances home from international migrants would be another example from a list of such 'stretched' chains of interaction, an example that now, in the age of globalization, points to a major phenomenon. Such remittances are likely to be between family members, who are stretched between households in different parts of the globe, each engaged in their different micro- and middle-scale (meso) networks. Extended chains now play a part in countless numbers of news stories.

It is important to be subtle in thinking about the relationship between these spatial dimensions and the past, historical – temporally prior – practices we have just been discussing. A remittance could be sent back home to the Philippines, to family members in Manila or Cebu City, or in more remote rural area such as, say, the landlocked Bukidnon province of Northern Mindanao, from a maid working in Hong Kong. The process clearly involves a spatially

extended network, but also a temporally extended one, as there will be a time-lag between the work done in Hong Kong and the resultant pay being received, and then spent on food, schooling, or something else, by a family member in the Philippines.⁹ It is not only that the two connected practices are geographically far apart but also that one practice happens prior to another. Likewise, with the global financial crisis, the production of certain indicators – signalling a widening trade gap, an expanded money supply or an increase in national debt – will have a pre-history leading up to the release of those figures. Furthermore, the release of the figures themselves will then be prior in time to the response of credit rating agencies such as the Fitch Group, Moody's or Standard and Poor's deciding whether or not the indicators merit, say, relegating Greece, Ireland or Portugal to 'junk' status, or stripping France or Austria of their triple-A rating. It can be important, therefore, to remember that the distinction between the past that is absent from the television screen and the spatial distance, which is also absent, is usually only an *analytical* distinction, as the absent practices are often *both* spatially distant and in the past, to a greater or lesser degree. Accordingly, depending on the current affairs story and the claims being investigated, it will often be important to recognize both dimensions at the same time. It is perhaps best to think of relevant contextual fields as encompassing various combinations of narrow and extended spatial stretches intermingled with shallow and deep temporal stretches.

All of this means that, in Figure 2.1, the large black arrows coming up into the networked contextual field from below could represent both *spatially* distant and *historical*, past, socio-structural connections and influences. It also means that the representation is imprecise in another way. For they are represented as being one step removed from the immanent micro- and meso-level networks whose interdependencies are spelt out through the black interconnecting lines. In reality, the impacts and pressures of spatially distant connections are often experienced *directly* by locally situated individuals and institutions. Such is the case in the examples I've given, where the thoughts and actions of individuals at a local level are impacted by situated actions far away. It is as pertinent to keep this thought in mind when observing a scene of a Filipina grandmother preparing breakfast for her migrant daughter's child as when reading about the officials of an Irish ministry meeting to discuss the implications for spending plans of an overnight reduction in the government's credit rating. These palpable micro events are directly marked by the large social-structural workings of the system of international migration and the international financial system. In order to represent these external pressures accurately within a particular example, the arrows in Figure 2.1 would ideally be represented as connecting directly with the black nodes in the centre of the field.

The combined notions of the social-theoretical frame and the contextual field it brings into view can embrace and help to consolidate all of these insights, while adding further tiers of analytical precision. One of these further tiers is the development of the idea of *networks of relevant relations*, which is able to combine the immediate micro situation, the middle-level network of interdependencies it is located within, and distant but consequential forces, all within the one field of vision. The most general level of a contextual field, as represented in Figure 2.1, is a form of ‘typification’, in the sense we spoke of earlier. That is, it represents background knowledge of typical ‘kinds of situation’, which we can invoke in meeting new current affairs stories. Strictly speaking, however, it is a cluster, a gathering-together, of a range of different typifications – of actors, relations, forces and so on, which at this level of generality represent only the scaffolding or the skeleton for the real flesh-and-blood entities and processes we want to grasp. It is one of the roles of social theory to adequately conceptualize and refine these typifications, working out which features possessed at this abstract, general, level are most important to keep in mind when bringing them into contact with the real world. It is the ability to move between a sophisticated grasp of this abstract background knowledge and unique real-world processes and events that is key. The quality of our understanding of news events is dependent upon a combination of how adequately we can hone and refine our various abstract typifications of *various entities and processes*; how adequately we can indicate *their relations to each other* within a contextual field; and how adequately we can flesh out these more or less abstract notions with *the detail, texture and colour* they possess in specific situations.

In the greater scheme of things, the initial criteria I’ve listed for the contextual field provide parameters that are really quite basic, and it is revealing – especially when we consider the rigour and sophistication we routinely expect from the natural sciences – that making explicit such a frame of understanding for the social world, and setting it as a standard for news and current affairs, seems rather alien, almost too demanding. If I am right that this is more than a passing thought, then a positive message to take from it is that the schooling of audiences to even a minimal level of theoretical competence in the reading of news and current affairs could radically improve the quality of social and political debate.

A *general* understanding of contextual fields provides the basis for viewers of, say, a news story, to think about what kind of map they could create from what they have been told in the news account they have just seen and heard. It provides a basis for then reflecting upon the implications and productive uses of such a mapping, as we will do in case studies throughout the book. A general knowledge of what is involved in the idea of a contextual field establishes a durable foundation in that it provides viewers with the capacity to draw on it

selectively, sketching out a series of more specific, limited, contextual fields relevant to whatever the story is at hand. The metaphor of mapping is an especially useful one in thinking about the idea of contextual fields when it is combined with a sense of interlinking networks. It puts into wider perspective any particular set of actors, individual or collective, and starkly reveals the inadequacies of attributing responsibility in overly individualistic or atomistic ways, ways that make no reference to this broader context.

The threat of homelessness: Viewing the contextual field from within

In this section, as noted above, I will recount and explore the predicament of a young single mother of two young children, Sandy, who faces a specific, fleshed-out contextual field as she searches for somewhere to live in a contemporary American city. The story will be told from Sandy's viewpoint, looking at how she experiences the *objective character of the contextual field* she is faced with. I'll make a point of drawing out relevant elements from the basic repertoire of objective elements of the contextual field described within the box on page 32.

Sandy's story is taken from a major contribution to political theory, *Responsibility for Justice*, a brilliant exposition of the implications for moral reasoning of taking social structures seriously.¹⁰ Its author, Iris Marion Young, for many years Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, creates the imaginative example of Sandy's predicament, extending it over a period of lived time, in order to explore the moral issues involved in the interaction between an individual and an inherited set of social structures. I will draw on Young's deliberations about Sandy's situation, as the agent-in-focus, in order to indicate how the abstract notion of the contextual field should be brought into contact with the detail, texture and colour of the lived experiences of particular individuals. In focusing on Sandy's positioning in relation to those objective factors within fields that have been captured in box 2, we will be interested in looking at the world from her own situated viewpoint.¹¹

In Young's narrative, Sandy needs to move out of her rented central-city apartment building in an American city because a developer has bought the building and plans to convert it into condominiums. This is an objective, external force that Sandy needs to respond to, whatever her own views on the matter. The force is intractable from Sandy's perspective, and it affects her, out of the blue, simply because of her positioning within this contextual field of rented apartments and property development. Sandy's first feeling is that maybe this isn't a bad thing as the rent was quite high, and the building

was poorly maintained and falling apart. It is apparent here that the character of Sandy's initial perception of the situation, and the positive, optimistic gloss she puts on this, makes a difference to how she experiences her position. This highlights the power of people's internal frame of meaning on the ways they internalize external forces and situations. Understanding how Sandy feels at this point means understanding both the external forces and her internal values and dispositions.

In the previous chapter we noted the additional weight and significance provided to stories when knowledge of the internal worlds of actors is included. Social theory, following the classical German sociologist Max Weber, typically refers to attempts to understand the internal perspective of social actors as the method of *verstehen*, and as we've already noted, it is often also referred to as the 'hermeneutic method'.¹² However, as we've also noted, this is not always combined with an insistence on including the actor's internalization of the external structural context in the picture, and it is this structural aspect that I want to concentrate on, to thematize, in the current chapter. The relatively recent social-theoretical approach of structuration theory – a synthesis of the fruits of several traditions of social theory – has made much of this structural aspect within the internal world of actors.¹³ In Sandy's case we need to think of the ways in which the contextual field 'out-there' is experienced by her as presenting an objective terrain which is for the most part intractable, and which she must try to manoeuvre within, and to negotiate, as best she can. Her sense of what she might do, the dilemmas she feels she faces and the kinds of choices she feels are available to her, where there are any at all, revolve around her knowledge of her situation, her knowledge of the relevant contextual field. This is a particular kind of knowledge. It is situational knowledge, knowledge of the immediate social terrain in which she must act, choose, decide and so on, in the awareness that she must live with the consequences, positive and negative.

From the point at which Sandy accepts her immediate fate and begins to look for a new place to live, she is faced with a whole series of specific objective external factors that she needs to take account of. These external factors enter into Sandy's internal world, and what results is a negotiated compromise between what she would ideally want and what the external world will allow. She works as a sales clerk in a suburban mall and has been taking two buses from her current residence in order to reach work, which has meant a total commuting time of 3 hours each day. Her ideal is to travel less and so to find an apartment closer to where she works, but not for the last time she soon finds that there are many aspects of the contextual field that she was unaware of. As she looks in the newspapers and online for rental apartments nearer to her work, and also on a bus route, she is shocked at the rents for one- and two-bedroom apartments:

Sandy learns that there are few rental apartments close to her workplace – most of the residential property near the mall is single-family houses. The few apartments nearby are very expensive. Most suburban apartments in her price range are located on the other side of the city from her job: there are also some in the city but few that she can afford which she judges decent and in a neighbourhood where she feels her children will be safe. In either case, the bus transportation to work is long and arduous, so she decides that she must devote some of the money she hoped would pay the rent to make car payments. She applies for a housing subsidy programme and is told that the waiting time is about two years.¹⁴

Surprises such as this are not unusual for limited, finite human beings whose lives are carried on in complex modern societies; social theorists have come to reflect upon this in terms of our inevitable ignorance of large swathes of our situated 'conditions of action'. The greater the extent of the conditions of action that we are ignorant of, that are 'unacknowledged', the more likely we are to come across *unexpected obstacles*, or to make decisions that lead to *unintended consequences*.¹⁵ The significance of the newly acquired knowledge for Sandy is clearly not a detached, intellectual, inquisitiveness¹⁶, or a product of mild curiosity. Rather, it is a direct consequence of her objective, flesh and blood, positioning within the relevant contextual field. The knowledge impinges profoundly on her life and the lives of her children, and she is radically constrained by her lack of power. Structural constraints manifest themselves with respect to her positioning in relation to financial resources, transport, time, qualifications, working conditions, and her role as a mother of young children. The various ways in which she is positioned, socially, and the variety of interdependencies that come along with these, mean that she already has a series of duties and obligations to meet, at home and at work, in order to satisfy her own and other people's expectations of appropriate behaviour. Intertwining with, and often in tension with, the internal pressures she experiences as a result of her own personal values, external expectations impose their own sets of constraints as Sandy internalizes the threat of sanctions, potentially disastrous, that would accompany her failure to adequately fulfil various obligations.

Faced with the powerful objective constraints, pressures, forces and dynamics imposing themselves on her from the external context, including the date of the eviction order closing in on her, Sandy makes a decision. This is a decision whose reasoning could only be grasped on the basis of her understanding of context, and her positioning within it. She settles on a one-bedroom apartment that is a 45-minute drive from the shopping mall where she works. It is smaller than she hoped for, but this has had to be a trade-off given the limited resources at her disposal and the money she has had to

pay out for the car. The two children will sleep in the bedroom and she will sleep on a foldout bed in the living room. She has had to forfeit the hope of getting an apartment with such amenities as a washer or dryer in the building, and there is no playground for the children. Ultimately, however, although she sees no other option but to rent this apartment, she has a further shock when she realizes that she will be required to deposit 3 months' rent to secure the apartment. This is 3 months' rent that she doesn't have, having used all her savings for a down payment on the car. Her lack of knowledgeability combines with her lack of resources to leave her unable to rent this apartment, or any other apartment, given that this is a standard landlord policy. She consequently faces the prospect of homelessness.¹⁷ None of these are consequences she envisaged in the first flush of optimism with which she confronted the initial news that her existing apartment building had been bought by a developer.

Giving breadth and depth to the contextual field, Young makes it clear that a whole series of different institutional actors have contributed to the structural context that confronts Sandy's 'personal' choice. These actors are both public and private institutions, and are located at the different socio-spatial levels of nation, state, city and locality, all of which influence the supply and price of rental housing. They include:

the federal Reserve Bank, Congress, executive agencies, and the courts; national housing industry organizations, such as the National Association of Home Builders and the Institute for Real Estate Management; national tenants' advocacy associations; municipal councils and local zoning boards; local housing industry organizations; local tenants associations; and individual professional and amateur landlords.¹⁸

The various decisions of these institutional actors, working over time and in networks of connection with each other, have interacted with the operations of the market 'to influence rents and the supply of affordable housing.'¹⁹ This means that the current structural context at any one time is only the most immediate layer of the relevant contextual field. This immediate layer will have been produced, caused, over a historical medium term through the combination of the situated decisions and actions of this plurality of actors. Each of these actors will have been working according to their own variously structured sets of cultural rules and expectations. This fleshes out in a further concrete example the point already made that contextual fields have both historical depth and geographical stretch.

It is worth noting that in moving outwards from Sandy's immediate predicament to this broader contextual field, naming the most salient private and public institutions specific to this field, we have taken an external observer's point of view. Many of these institutional actors will have been

unknown to Sandy, lying outside her field of vision even as they contributed to her predicament. In this situation, an external observer's point of view that is also aware of the situated actor's point of view is a precondition for being able to identify which parts of the relevant contextual field Sandy knows about and which remain 'unacknowledged conditions of action'. The same point applies to the identification of unintended consequences of action. It is equally worth noting that while Young introduces these additional institutional actors, all contributing to the objective qualities of the contextual field facing Sandy, the attention she pays to their analysis is inevitably more limited than that she pays to Sandy's own situation. She looks at them as an external observer, from the outside, and paints them in with broad brushstrokes. All accounts, to a greater or lesser extent, contain this kind of movement between micro-detail and sweeping summary, and the latter is very often from the viewpoint of an entirely external observer.

Young notes that Sandy's position is shared by many people with 'diverse attributes, life histories, and goals'.²⁰ All these people are structurally positioned in situations that are the systematic, largely unintended, outcome of the actions of multiple different actors, all for the most part abiding by the rules of society. For example, it is an unintended structural outcome, created by uncoordinated decisions by many different actors, that the median asking rent for a two-bedroom apartment in the United States 'in 2004 was \$974, far out of reach of the 40 per cent of renters with incomes less than \$20,000'. Not wanting to lay the blame in any simple way on particular actors in this causal chain, Young does want to say that it is surely a structurally unjust situation that has left 'only one in eighty subsidized apartment units . . . located in an area with strong job growth', and in which one-fifth are 'located in areas whose employment opportunities are declining'.²¹

An essential part of Young's argument is that 'moral judgement' – which we should remind ourselves is one of the key journalistic frames identified by the academic literature – needs to be thought about with respect to two different levels. One of these is the common-sense attribution of moral judgements with respect to how people treat each other in more or less direct dealings with one another. The other involves making moral judgements about structural contexts that no one necessarily intended, but which systematically deny opportunities to some people while systematically providing them to others. Sandy's vulnerability to housing deprivation is a *structural position* shared by many people, a generalized set of relations that 'position people prior to their interactions, and condition expectations and possibilities of interaction'.²² This is not the place to pursue this argument in the detail it deserves, and I must refer the reader to Young's own extended and persuasive argument. However, it is important to say that the moral judgements made in news and current affairs pieces should try to find ways of paying more attention to structural

networks, and to the layered ways in which they are created and sustained, if they are not to focus their concern only at the circumscribed level of direct interaction. This is not to diminish the significance of moral behaviour and judgements with respect to people's direct dealings with each other. However, it is to point out that this is a highly restricted domain, and to insist that many moral issues require a close engagement with structured contextual fields. In terms of particular news events, this means that moral judgements need also to be made with attention to the causal configurations that have produced them, over more or less extended periods; this involves structural wrongs of many different kinds. Embedding events and stories within contextual fields is clearly a necessary condition of possibility for being able to do this.

Transport policy and the mistreatment of the elderly: Limitations in the frames of both journalists and audiences

Two detailed academic case studies of news coverage on transport policy in Denmark and the mistreatment of the elderly in Sweden are insightful for what they reveal about the strengths and the limitations of current academic media analysis. They also hint at the limitations of the journalistic frames in both cases, and, in the Danish case, of the limitations of the frames employed by audiences.²³ In both cases journalists are, for the most part, taking an external observer's perspective on events. Also, where one would hope for an appropriate contextual field within which to position the events-in-focus within the news stories, there is, in fact, very little of substance. And with a generally empty contextual field comes, by definition, a corresponding deficiency of attention to any of those objective factors within the field that, from an insider's situated perspective, were so pervasive within the account of Sandy's predicament.

Both cases deal with news stories focusing on specific policy issues – transport policy and the mistreatment of the elderly in private care homes – presented by national and local media in a range of genres, debating values lodged in quite circumscribed everyday concerns within national boundaries. One might expect such coverage to exhibit a significant concern with specific details and context, homing in on causes and possible solutions in a complex field of dynamic forces, constraints and opportunities. Given this, the fact that the level of specificity and context provided turns out to be very limited is particularly revealing.

The first of these studies, focused on Danish transport policy, suggests a lack of specificity within the news accounts, the absence of real engagement with situated processes. It also reveals a similar deficit of involvement on

the part of audiences, who turn out to be interested only in details that relate directly to their own experience. The field of vision of the audience is as restricted as their interest in details, with only rhetorical notice paid to the contextual field of key actors in the political realm, or to the concerns of anyone with alternative values.

The second study, concerning the mistreatment of the elderly in Swedish nursing homes, also betrays the news media's lack of engagement with the details of situated processes. At the same time, it reveals a similar restriction of the scope of vision. Part of this involves the adoption of a narrow view that excludes relevant key actors and processes from the picture, consigning key aspects of the contextual field to darkness. The other part entails taking only the most passing, surface-level, interest in those most prominent actors and processes that are included within the range of attention. However, the researchers from Gothenburg University who analysed these news accounts point to aspects of the socio-historical context that explains a great deal about why the various news media in Sweden at this time converged on such a narrow point of view. Providing such contextualized, historically contingent, reasons for the shape of news gives cause for optimism and works against fatalism, as it suggests that such constriction isn't inevitable, that work can be done to resist it. Similar points can be made about the quality of audience involvement and reception in the Danish case, which, likewise, need not be thought of as forever destined to operate at these disappointing levels.

The first of these studies was part of a larger project funded by the Danish parliament, designed to investigate democracy and power.²⁴ The study aimed to gain insight into the relationship between the presentation of news within the media and citizens' use of this for political purposes in everyday life. They chose traffic and transport policy as the primary areas to explore. The main debates here were around traffic congestion, the extent to which the provision of proposed new motorways would be sufficient, the environmental costs of this, and possible alternatives including an expansion of the rail network. The political background to the study was a great deal of dissatisfaction among many citizens about the direction of policy, with a strong feeling that the views of ordinary people were being ignored. The researchers, Kim Christian Schrøder and Louise Phillips of Roskilde University, focused on the media coverage – three national television channels, one regional television channel, one radio programme, four national daily broadsheet newspapers, two national tabloid newspapers, one local broadsheet newspaper and one local free newspaper – during one week in which an inter-party transport agreement was reached in January 2001 between the Social-Democratic/Social Liberal government and three right-wing opposition parties. They complemented this with seven focus group interviews in which citizens spoke specifically about this transport policy and also about traffic and transport issues in general.

Using these methods, the researchers identified two 'orders of discourse', or culturally inherited ways of talking about something, through which *both* the media and viewers discussed the transport issues.²⁵ It's important to note in what follows that the main emphasis of the researchers is on the language, rhetoric and discourse of the texts, and on the discursive frames of the audiences, rather than on what is known about the objective characteristics of the relevant contextual field. As noted above, I have no doubt that we need the sophisticated analyses of media texts provided by these studies, with their emphasis on discourses and media frames, and so it is important to include strong examples of such work here. However, in reading these accounts, one should note that they lack a concerted focus on the world that media and audience discourses are purporting to grasp. There is little attempt to engage with the characteristics of the events themselves, or with the characteristics of the relevant networks of relations through which those events have been produced.

The two discourses identified by the researchers consisted of the same cluster of six 'interpretive repertoires' but with different weightings in the importance and significance given to particular repertoires. The joint use of these six categories indicated a two-way process between media and citizens, in which interpretation and dialogue took place within this broadly shared discursive frame. The authors of the study believe their findings accord with the dominant view within communications analysis that the media can be seen to set the public agenda of topics, and to have autonomy over the particular ways in which stories are told. However, they insist that the dynamics work both ways, with the news stories being told in such a way that they would dovetail with the framework of perceptions and ways of seeing already existing among the culture of citizen viewers.²⁶

It is striking, however, that the two groups – the news media and the citizen viewers – differed in the ways they drew on the shared discourses, giving more emphasis to some aspects than to others.²⁷ The news media primarily emphasized two 'orders of discourse', one of which, given great weight in the media, is categorized by the researchers under the heading of 'Parliamentary democracy in action'. This is a discourse that celebrates the workings of parliamentary democracy and presents it in an overwhelmingly positive light. The second category, given only slightly less emphasis in the media, is labelled, 'Populism: citizens against "the system"', which is perhaps the clearest point of contact between the frame of the journalists and that of the audience. The citizen-audience, by way of contrast with the media, places very little emphasis on 'Parliamentary democracy in action', and instead places a good deal of weight on the much more cynical, disaffected category of 'Parliamentary democracy: politics as "dirty deals"'. Two other categories are emphasized by the viewer-readers, and one of these is 'Politics in daily

life: negotiation of individual responsibility', which speaks for itself, while the other, interestingly, is shared with the news media, and is 'Populism: citizens against "the system"'.²⁸

The case brings out well the importance of the audiences' frame, and hence the benefits that could be derived from a pedagogy cultivating this frame by means of social theory's conceptually disciplined perspective. However, Schröder and Phillips identify a difference within their audience grouping that suggests, perhaps predictably, that some groups would be more immediately open to such pedagogy than others. That is, some uses of the media divide along educational lines, so that those with a relatively short education express a lack of interest in in-depth background knowledge, wishing to gain just an overview of what is in the news on a daily basis, 'without unnecessary and irrelevant details'.²⁹ Those with a relatively long education, by way of contrast, see themselves 'as socially engaged citizens to whom it matters to be well-informed, which means both to have a broad overview, but also to immerse themselves in the background and context of the political and cultural stories on the news agenda'.³⁰ Both groups are characterized by the authors of the study as generally well informed about social, political and cultural matters, and to possess 'extensive *knowledge repertoires* which they can draw on in their appropriation and contextualization of the information offered by the media' (original emphasis). Both groups are also said to be able to respond with a certain critical distance to media representations of events, although those with a longer education are judged to possess this capacity to a considerably greater degree than those with a short education.³¹

It is important to acknowledge the extent to which Schröder and Phillips believe that the audiences they've studied are skilled and knowledgeable.³² But while one can see what they mean by this, it also seems to be an extremely generous assessment. While we have noted the need to adjust, downwards, our expectations of what television news texts can provide, we also need to adjust upwards what we should demand of audiences in their engagement with the media. In this case of Danish transport policy, Schröder and Phillips' research findings suggest that both media presentation and audience reception were strikingly limited. Significant elements of the presentational frames shared by the various media remained at an overly vague level of abstraction. Statements indicating the indifferent and intractable workings of 'the system', positioned as working against the wishes of 'the people', were too imprecise to allow audiences any possibility of identifying the precise practices at issue, which would be necessary to be able to reinsert them within a network of relevant relationships.³³ Greater knowledge about causation is needed in order to really understand the contours of the problem, and to begin to think reasonably about possible solutions. Similar points can be made about the media's use of *the populist repertoire*, which sets the system against the

people in a blanket manner, serving to discredit politicians and the political system without drilling down into specifics. One effect of this was to 'invite political actors to follow popular moods rather than political vision and rational argument'.³⁴

On the audience's side, while it is true, as we have just noted, that some of the material they had to work with was restricted, audience responses were also limited by the character of the discursive frames and interpretive repertoires they brought to bear on the texts. For example, discussion within the focus group criticizing the distribution of resources between different regions and different forms of transport was, according to Schröder and Phillips, 'attributed to the political system as such', seen as emanating from 'the very essence of politics', as being 'inherent' within the system.³⁵ 'Dirty politics' and 'the system' were seen as responsible for the perceived shortcomings and policy failures. Audiences felt empowered in their role as 'the people', a collective actor that was presented by the media and by themselves (in focus group discussions) as understanding transport issues from the ground up, as being in touch with the real world. By way of contrast, the politicians were portrayed as elitist and disconnected from everyday life. However, the audience's feeling of empowerment came at a cost. The cost lay in the retreat into moral absolutes that accompanied the binary opposition they worked with, a binary divide that took the form of an impersonal us versus them. Audiences sought refuge in 'indignation and consternation', including in some cases 'the use of extreme-case formulations, such as "crazy"; "every single morning," and "chaos"', to recount stories of traffic conditions.³⁶ Such expressive, cathartic, ways of interpreting and discussing media texts are no doubt healthy at one level, but they indicate a distinctive deficit regarding specificity of appropriate knowledge. This, again, reveals a lack of precision that means audiences are deflected from any interest in identifying the particular practices at issue and their positioning within a relevant network of relations. The limitations of audience response consequently reinforce those of media presentation.

The second study, carried out by Monika Djerf-Pierre and colleagues from Gothenburg University in Sweden, doesn't include an audience dimension, concentrating solely on the media presentation of the issues. The specific case involved a private health care corporation, Carema, which in 2011 was accused of mistreating the elderly in its nursing homes. Disclosures in a number of media outlets resulted in a national scandal, 'where the news media exposure to a large extent came to deal with questions of responsibility and accountability'.³⁷ The researchers note that the story followed the typical pattern of a news wave or attention cycle whereby an initial report was subject to 'social amplification' through the media, and over time the story evolved in various ways. An initial emphasis on employees and relatives in the nursing homes, who came forward with accounts of offences and misconduct, gave

way to a subsequent phase in which 'the problems were blamed on the operating management of the nursing home, and on the corporate culture (the heavy emphasis on cost-cutting and the downsizing of staff) of Carema.'³⁸

The study of Djerf-Pierre et al. is based on a corpus of 156 news items that were part of an intensive period of news coverage of the Carema case. The analysis examined the main national coverage, including news, editorials and opinion pieces in two newspapers – the daily 'prestige' liberal newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, and the daily social democratic tabloid *Aftonbladet* – and the daily national news on both public service television (*Rapport*) and commercial television (*Nyheterna*).³⁹ The analysis of these items focused on the degrees of effectiveness with which journalists engaged in what the authors of the study refer to as 'accountability interviews' with politicians and others in relation to policy failures. The authors draw on the academic media frames literature to look at questions of accountability with respect to the social problem at issue. Their particular interest, within this, is on causes and solutions, which we have already encountered as key preoccupations of the media frames approach, but also on issues of responsibility. Responsibility is, of course, closely connected to questions of causation and also to the making of moral judgements, and is a natural corollary of concerns over accountability. It is worth noting that when thinking of responsibility one would intuitively think about the particular people or institutional actors who could be identified as responsible for an action or series of actions, as opposed to impersonal systems or structures, and the focus on holding politicians and officials to account fits with this common-sense notion.

The broader social context for the events emphasized by the researchers is that of new public management regimes, a social landscape in which there is a diminishing role for politics in favour of market mechanisms.⁴⁰ Against this background the authors were particularly interested in whether journalists now neglected 'political' accountability in favour of other forms of accountability, particularly those associated with the commercial and market worlds that were now an intrinsic part of the processes being investigated. The researchers found that issues of political responsibility were indeed downgraded, being replaced at the apex of interest by a concern with the administrative and professional responsibilities of the management of Carema.

Within this hierarchy of emphasis, Djerf-Pierre and her co-researchers draw attention to the significance of the values embedded in different media frames and the consequent necessity of bringing these to the foreground of awareness. As with the analysis in the Danish case, it is evident that the theoretical tools of media analysis employed by Djerf-Pierre and her colleagues are not primarily directed at the character of the news events and the contextual fields in which they have been produced. Rather, the balance of their concerns is weighted towards the nature of the discursive, media,

frames employed by the journalists. The researchers identified three broad social perspectives that framed how political accountability was construed in the news reports. These were: *a new public management frame*, derived from neo-liberal political discourse, with freedom of choice an overriding value and health care for profit seen as 'inherently good'; *an anti-marketization frame* – evident only in some opinion pieces, and in a one-hour-long documentary on Carema (*Dokument Inifrån*) emphasizing the resources and power of international health care corporations in the wake of the potential move to privatization – which was alert to the dangers of capitalism, and viewed the profit motive that accompanied privatization as a threat to quality of care; and *a greed frame*, which focused on the greed of top-level managers at Carema and the corporations behind it (Ambea, Triton, KKR). Translating the latter case into the language of the media frames perspective, the authors of the study write that the message given by the news stories adopting this frame was that '[T]he real cause of the problems at Carema is the personal greed among top-level managers, and the solution (albeit not stated clearly) is public condemnation of such immoral behaviour, thus effectively de-politicizing the problem'.⁴¹ Journalism in the Carema case is said to have 'primarily operated within the new public management frame, supplemented by the greed frame', with issues of political accountability muddled or obscured in the new public management frame and 'lost altogether' in the greed frame, 'making it a moral issue instead of a political problem'.⁴²

The researchers combine this media frames' approach with a second research perspective, that of closely analysing the discourses and practices of the journalists using one or other of the frames. This combination brings the approach very close to that used in the Danish study, combining as it does both relatively broad discursive frames and the more localized interpretative practices employed by the journalists as they conduct interviews with key actors. The research question posed by Monika Djerf-Pierre and her colleagues on the basis of this approach is quite precise. They ask how journalistic interviews are used 'in *positioning actors as responsible and asking politicians to justify* their decisions and actions (or non-actions)'. (original emphasis).⁴³ There is a clear implication that we are here in the realm of moral judgement, with the justifications offered by politicians as they are held to account being evaluated by journalists and audiences as either 'satisfactory or not'.⁴⁴ In the event, the lack, within the journalistic frames, of relevant categories of political-civil society relations, and of historical context in relation to this, meant the journalists were unable to find a way to hold politicians to account for the mistreatment of the elderly.

One of the key arguments of Djerf-Pierre et al. is that the account told from within the more politicized anti-marketization frame indicates that it is not only the current Conservative-led government that should be held accountable for

endorsing and legitimizing the marketization of social services, but also the Social Democrats, 'who approved of the market orientation of the public sector when they were in government in the 1990s'.⁴⁵ These are the kinds of relevant networks of social relations that Bourdieu was talking about, stretching away from immediate events. These are networks whose causal impact arrives here from other sites in geographical space – from the 'somewhere else', which are the halls, rooms and chambers of political parties and government, to the 'immediately here' moments of mistreatment in the nursing homes – and from the shallow temporal past of the 1990s.

The journalists found themselves unable to hold these politicians to account because the frames they were working with were inadequate. In our terms, the frames were too narrow to bring into view some of the most relevant networks of causal relations, while they also lacked the appropriate historical depth. As a consequence, as we shall see, they failed to adequately position politicians within a contextual field that would have helped to explain the news events-in-focus. The researchers state very clearly that the 'journalists had incredible difficulties in finding a position from which they could hold politicians to account'. They argue that this was because the news media had 'gone native', working entirely from within the new public management frame, with the corporate greed frame a subsidiary perspective within this. This meant that their notion of context simply mirrored this frame, and so excluded politicians' past and current responsibility for creating and legitimizing this system.

As Djerf-Pierre et al. put it, 'the responsibility of the politicians was narrowed down to their role as purchasers of services (managers of bid contracts) and as suppliers of the regulatory framework for agencies doing the quality control'.⁴⁶ Even within the broad parameters of the public management frame, however, journalists could still have explored the relevant networks of relations and held the politicians to task for not being able to manage these aspects satisfactorily. The authors argue that they didn't do this because they were in the grip of a hegemonic neo-liberal ideology and an elite consensus that simply assumed that marketization and the new public management was the most appropriate way of organizing welfare services. There was an unstated and unexamined belief that this method would be effective, almost automatically, barring some kind of malfeasance extrinsic to the institutional arrangements. The effect of these presumptions was to render redundant, by ideological fiat, any concern with the relevant political dimensions of the contextual field. It was this that prevented journalists from asking more detailed, specific, questions about the regulatory mechanisms or the workings of the system – questions, as the authors point out, one can readily find prompts to in the academic literature on new public management and political accountability – such as whether 'it is reasonable to expect local politicians to have the purchasing know-how, the resources and capacity to

handle complex bids, and if the existing quality-control arrangements are effective enough to monitor the providers (and at what cost it is achieved).⁴⁷

In the event, it is argued, the journalists could only fulfil their duty, as the fourth estate, to hold power to account by taking the populist route of the 'greed frame'. But just as we have seen in the Danish transport case, the retreat into populism tends to come at the cost of specificity, with a retreat into moral absolutism, and with emotionally heightened news discourses appealing to outrage, indignation, and an inadequately contextualized empathy.⁴⁸ The authors conclude, as they must, that the political accountability work carried out by journalists, and presented in the news items analysed, was 'weak, vague and restricted'. As with the Danish study, the problems were ultimately 'construed as a moral scandal instead of a policy failure'.⁴⁹ We are left with the impression that the journalists' exploration of the objective contextual field in both of these studies is extremely thin, even for those elements that have been embraced by their perspective. As a consequence, the kinds of objective concepts outlined in box 2 will have had very little bearing on the accounts they provided.

Conclusion

It will become ever clearer as we proceed that the balance of the academic media analyses we've looked at here is weighted towards the level of the media text. That is, it is weighted towards the media frames of journalists and the framing of the news texts themselves. The point is clearly not an absence of any concern with the objective realities that are the raw material of news accounts. Such concern is plain to see. Rather, it is that the main focus is not on the characteristics of the contextual field. It is not on: the relation between conceptualization and evidence; the character and status of the knowledge acquired or missing from view; or on the evaluation of the validity or adequacy of the knowledge, judgements and strategy derived from within a media frame. These elements, where they are broached, remain intuitive and unsystematic. Moreover, when compared to the benchmark of the social-theoretical frame on the contextual field that we've begun to build up, focusing in this chapter on its 'objective' features, the *journalistic* frames suggested by these two case studies seem badly wanting. It is clear, also, that in order for citizen-audiences to have more effective critical distance and insight into what is and isn't offered by these frames, they would need more sophistication than that revealed in the Danish research. In the next chapter, Danish production values and Danish audiences fight back. I draw here on an episode from the first-rate Danish political drama, *Borgen*, to demonstrate the sophisticated skills it demands of audiences, and to indicate that interpreting

the drama's storylines means employing many of the general concepts of the contextual field and then applying them *in situ* to the local tones, colours and details of particular events and processes. I will also use the chapter to complement the general account of the *objective elements* of the contextual field introduced in the current chapter with a more fine-grained exposition of the *subjective elements* that should also be conceptualized and deployed.