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The circuit of culture: A model for journalism history

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***Abstract**: More than forty years ago, James W. Carey published his seminal essay "The Problem of Journalism History" and called for a "cultural history of journalism." While his plea has posed intriguing questions, it has fallen short on providing specific answers to the challenges of contemporary journalism history. I propose that the circuit of culture model offers promising research strategies to flesh out Carey's idea of journalism as a cultural practice. The circuit of culture model re-articulates Carey's call in numerous ways. It circumvents the intangible concept of consciousness and instead focuses on the production, transformation and renegotiation of meaning in a social world structured (albeit not entirely) by regulative and institutional pressures. It puts more emphasis on acknowledging power and asymmetries in society. It accounts for economic pressures without privileging them. While holding on to the holistic notion of culture, the circuit of culture model identifies specific sites for research and thus allows for a more detailed view of the practice and reception of journalism. Ultimately, the circuit of culture approach complements Carey's vision but re-articulates it in a more specific and nuanced way.*

***Keywords**: journalism studies, cultural studies, journalism, history, James W. Carey*

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1. Introduction

More than forty years ago James W. Carey published his seminal essay "The Problem of Journalism History." Both an appeal and an admonishment, the piece "marked a turn in the writing of journalism history" (Schudson, 1997: 79). Carey wanted to "ventilate" the field of journalism history with "fresh perspectives and new interpretations" (1974/1997: 88) and called for a "cultural history of journalism." In the wake of the essay, a "cottage industry" (Nord, 2006: 122) of Carey commentators developed.

Journalism, evidently, has changed over the last forty years, as has the intellectual landscape of media studies. Yet, Carey's plea to study journalism as a "structure of feeling" and an "embodiment of consciousness" (Carey, 1974/1997: 93) could not be timelier. When if not now, at this watershed moment of the digital revolution, is it worth exploring how journalism and its symbolic practices are shaped by societal forces? When if not at this moment of a journalistic identity crisis is it worth examining how journalism itself is affecting the way in which the social world is represented through journalistic practices and how this changed over time?

Recent scholarship demonstrates the relevance of Carey's thoughts and also shows a renewed interest in the theoretical and conceptual implications of studying journalism history. The 2013 spring issue of *American Journalism* devoted a special section to the question of "theorizing journalism in time." Forde goes so far as to detect "an altogether new 'ferment in the field'" (2013: 3). Nerone (2013) makes a passionate case for the need of journalism history by pointing out that each new journalism builds on a previous one. Vos (2013: 38) cites an essay that Carey wrote with Christians (Christians & Carey, 1989) to lay out his claim that journalism history must be theoretical, i.e. provide explanations that "rise to the level of abstraction above the empirically based stories we tell." Schudson disputes the view that standards of newsworthiness and journalistic practices have varied little over time and instead defines the task of journalism historians "as examining the various social forces that have shaped news and prompted changes in its construction, delivery, and influence over time and likewise led to sometimes notably different formations of journalism across different nations" (2013: 33). A plea for more theoretical approaches in studying journalism history is also articulated by Roessner et al. (2013). And new interest in theorizing the changing nature of journalism is developing against

the backdrop of digital transformation, technological change and economic challenges. Special issues of *Digital Journalism* (2015) and *Journalism Practice* (2015) featured a variety of scholars who presented novel strategies of conceptualizing journalism in an interconnected, digital era (see also Zelizer, 2015). Moreover, these efforts come at a time when the field of cultural history has established conceptual tools in a variety of subdisciplines in historical research (see Lipsitz, 2008 and Glickman, 2011).

This paper is intended to make a modest contribution to the growing body of literature by journalism historians interested in incorporating theory into the study of history. In a first step, I will take a look at James W. Carey's call for a cultural history of journalism and describe its reception by journalism historians, identifying three areas in which Carey's terminology requires clarification and focus. Then, in the second section, I will describe the basic tenets of the circuit of culture model. In a third step, I will propose the circuit of culture model as a promising approach to re-articulate Carey's ideas. More specifically, I will suggest to reconceptualize some of Carey's central, yet vaguely defined, terms such as consciousness, ritual and community. In doing so, I hope to offer novel analytical tools to theorize the multi-layered practice of journalism in time.

Even though progress has been made towards an understanding what a cultural history of journalism could look like (for examples see Carey, 1985/1997; Nerone, 2011; Schudson, 1997; Schudson, 2015), critics of Carey repeatedly pointed out the weak spots of his conceptual framework. It is my hope that incorporating the circuit of culture model will not only help solidify the theoretical appeal of a cultural approach to journalism history but also encourage further efforts to study journalism history from this vantage point.

2. A cultural history of journalism

Carey's call for a cultural history of journalism was one of his most important legacies. He decried the "Whig" character of conventional historical accounts which "views journalism history as the slow, steady expansion of freedom and knowledge from the political press to the commercial press, the setbacks into sensationalism and yellow journalism, the forward thrust into muckraking and social responsibility" (Carey, 1974/1997: 86).

The "Whig" historians made an important contribution to the discipline by establishing a documentary record, Carey noted. Yet, their studies were not

sufficient to account for the complexity of social life, nor the particular role of journalism in society. For Carey, journalism was not just a medium for the message; it was not just about passing on news and information. Rather, it was instrumental in establishing the ways for a society to understand and constitute itself: "Journalism is essentially a state of consciousness, a way of apprehending, of experiencing the world" (Carey, 1974/1997: 91).

Carey's concept of journalism has to be seen in the light of his efforts to describe communication as the condition and foundation of society. He emphasized the inherent interconnectedness between language and the social world. In his view, society was based on and structured by the use of language:

> "Reality is not given, not humanly existent, independent of language and toward which language stands in paler refraction. Rather, reality is brought into existence, is produced, by communication—by in short, the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms. Reality, while not a mere function of symbolic forms, is produced by terministic systems—or by humans who produce such systems—that focus its existence in specific terms." (Carey, 1975/2009: 20)

For Carey, the process of constructing, apprehending and utilizing symbolic forms was nothing other than culture. He defined culture as "the organization of social experience in human consciousness manifested in symbolic action" (Carey, 1974/1997: 91). In his seminal essay "A Cultural Approach to Communication" (1975/2009), Carey differentiated between a "transmission" and a "ritual" view of communication. While the first "is the transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control" (Carey, 1975/2009: 12), the latter "is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but representation of shared beliefs" (Carey, 1975/2009: 15). Both views have their roots in religious practice and thought but modernity — and especially industrialization in the nineteenth century — provided a framework in which these views unfolded. Carey argued that the dominance of the transmission view rendered impossible the full appreciation of communicative practices and their potential.

> "Neither of these counterposed views of communication necessarily denies what the other affirms. A ritual view does not exclude the processes of

> information transmission or attitude change. It merely contends that one cannot understand these processes aright insofar as they are cast within an essentially ritualistic view of communication and social order." (Carey, 1975/2009: 17)

When Carey calls for a cultural history of journalism, he wants to highlight the "ritual" aspects of journalism — its potential to make sense of the world and create meaning. Journalism accomplishes that by a particular method of bringing order into chaos, sorting the important from the unimportant and presenting it in an intelligible way: the report. Carey encourages journalism historians to get to the bottom of the question why, how and when people accepted the report as "a desirable form of rendering reality" (Carey, 1974/1997: 90). The report is historically contingent but if we understand the circumstances under which this social interaction between journalists and the public came into being and how it changed over time, we can grasp journalism as "a particular social form, a highly particular type of consciousness, a particular organization of social experience" (Carey, 1974/1997: 91).

Carey's essay triggered a lot of interest — but also confusion. What did he really mean by consciousness? How can we transpose the notion of ritual and its context of small, local communities to a larger scale of complex societies? What does it really mean to speak about a particular organization of social experience when that very experience is fragmented and mediated by economic and technological forces? And how could this be channeled into a research strategy of theorizing journalism in time? The very notions that made Carey's conceptualization intriguing — consciousness instead of an exclusive focus on economy and technology; ritual instead of a top-down sender-receiver template; community instead of a world of isolated monads — also triggered critique. Various scholars engaged with the theoretical implications of these terms and problematized their usefulness.

Initial efforts to "operationalize Carey" zeroed in on the report as an expression of "consciousness." Schwarzlose (1975) suggested a content analysis spanning over a period of 270-years to analyze content, technique and style of news reports. Erickson (1975) proposed to examine in how far news reports reflected flavor, ethos and climate of journalistic values. Marzolf (1975), too, underscored the importance of content analysis but was also interested in studying journalists as a group. In sum, as Nord noted, there was some "misunderstand-

ing" (1988: 122) because the early Carey commentators mistook a paradigmatic for a mere methodological challenge. While Nord applauded Carey's initiative, he remained skeptical of the implications for the study of journalism history:

> "The turn to cultural anthropology has its utility, to be sure. But it has some serious drawbacks as well. Specifically, the anthropological approach is weak on the study of power. This weakness may be minor for some types of cultural history; it is a major problem for the study of mass communication. The study of the mass media "from the bottom up" is enormously complicated by the fact that the messages arrive from the top down. In other words, the 'consciousness' embedded in the language of journalism is the product of larger institutions." (Nord, 1988: 10)

Thus, instead of focusing on "consciousness," Nord suggested to examine the business of journalism, the symbiotic relationships between press and government and the political culture. Instead of a cultural history, then, Nord advocated an institutional history. Interestingly, while institutional approaches to studying journalism have expanded into a vibrant field of scholarship (Cook, 1998; Kaplan, 2001; Ryfe, 2006; Sparrow, 1999; Vos, 2013) there is hardly any overlap with cultural conceptualizations (a notable exception is Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011).

While being sympathetic to Carey's goals, Tucher (2009) suggested that "consciousness" might be too confusing a word to explore the history of journalism. Instead, she reframed Carey's call for a cultural history and proposed to "explore the development of the most distinctive and elemental of journalistic tasks: the effort of some humans to persuade other humans they probably do not know that what they say is an acceptable (I do not specify 'accurate') representation of a world every one of them can glimpse" (Tucher, 2009: 290). The latest effort to re-read Carey's call to action and draw conclusions for the practice of studying journalism history comes from Roessner et al. (2013). While detecting a "naïve optimism" in Carey, Roessner counters the popular perception that Carey did not offer a framework for crafting the cultural history of journalism. She recommends taking a closer look at the cultural historian Raymond Williams in order to tease out Carey's understanding of cultural history (Roessner et al., 2013: 263–267). Her co-author Popp demonstrates that Carey's journalism history essay "has become emblematic of broad historiographic questions"as to whether journalism history has ever followed the "cul-

tural turn" in departmental history and incorporated cultural theory (Roessner et al., 2013: 268). Both authors suggest to shift attention from conceptualizing "consciousness" as an entity to thinking about it as "real lived relationships among individuals, institutions, and cultures" (266) and "the circuits of market culture, or dense networks of exchange through which socioeconomic worlds are made and remade" (Roessner et al., 2013: 270–271).

While Carey was widely hailed as introducing an anthropologic perspective to communication research, his "ritual view" was equally criticized for uncritically reifying notions of community and inclusion to the detriment of marginalized groups in society (Soderlund, 2006[2] is representative). Additionally, critics and acolytes alike problematized Carey's idealist leanings and demanded a more thorough investigation of power, ideology and social conflict (see Zelizer, 2009: 301; Durham Peters, 2006: 141). Carey countered this critique by pointing out that he was far from ignoring conflict. He suggested to conceptualize social and cultural struggles within a broader framework and gave as an example the Chicago School of Thought and its view of cultural struggle. It "views struggle not merely in class and economic terms but extended it to a full array of interests: aesthetic, moral, political, and spiritual. Such struggles were, of course, conducted on class lines but also along other fronts: racial, religious, ethnic, status, regional, and, we would have to add today, gender." (Carey, 1996/1997: 32) Carey also acknowledged structural pressures weighing on the journalism as culture. He described journalism as an "industrial art" in addition to being a "literary art" and highlighted that "methods, procedures, techniques were developed not only to satisfy the demands of the profession but also to meet the needs of industry and to turn out a mass-produced commodity" (Carey, 1974/1997: 91-92).

All in all, however, it is probably fair to say that Carey was more interested in analyzing the cohesive forces of community than deconstructing the divisive forces of capitalist society. As this brief review of Carey's approach has demonstrated, this limitation arises from a particular terminology that emphasized consciousness, ritual and community. I agree with Grossberg that some of the vocabulary in Carey's version of cultural studies "may no longer have the power

[2] "At the center of Carey's plea for resurrecting the ritual model is the promise of a return to conditions in which 'communal life,' 'community,' and 'shared experience' can flourish. Yet Carey's argument relies heavily and uncritically on the rhetorical weight of such concepts, which are conceived of in commonsense terms as intrinsic social goods." (Soderlund, 2009: 106)

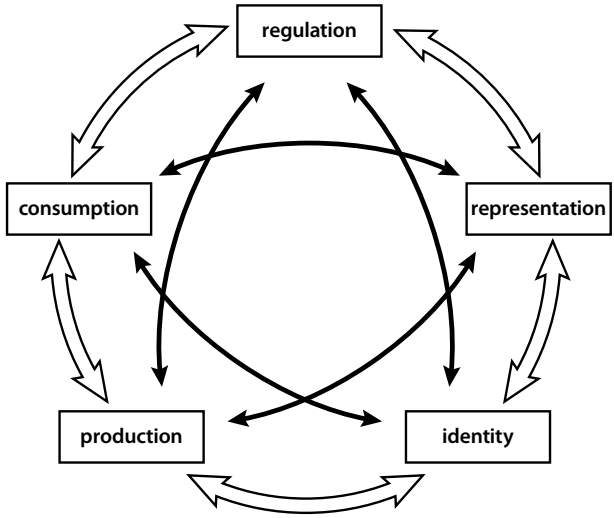
to do all that is required of it" (2009: 181). This view does not discount Carey's merits; it just calls for a renewed effort to think about the complexities of theorizing journalism as culture.

In the next section I suggest to rearticulate Carey's ideas by incorporating conceptual approaches of the circuit of culture model as developed in the British tradition of cultural studies. It is curious that although Carey was significantly influenced, amongst others, by Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall (Carey & Grossberg, 2006; Sterne, 2009), he kept his distance from the British tradition. He suspected that it had a tendency to reduce culture to ideology and put too much emphasis on the modes of production. Carey's skepticism notwithstanding, I believe that initiating a conversation between his version of cultural studies and the British tradition as articulated by Hall and his co-authors would hold some promise for studying journalism history. I will argue that the circuit of culture model retains the originality of Carey's thinking, yet sharpens its focus by identifying site of social interaction and mediated experiences; that it provides a more nuanced view of the journalistic marketplace and its constraining forces; and that it acknowledges the agonistic nature of public discourse in a globalized world instead of putting forward idealistic notions of community life.

3. Circuit of culture

The circuit of culture model (du Gay et al., 1997; Figure 1) is rooted in mainstream British cultural studies but takes a decisive break by discarding the realm of production as a privileged site to examine cultural practices. Instead, the model calls for treating production as one process or moment amongst others (representation, consumption, regulation, and identity) to analyze the "shared cultural space in which meaning is created, shaped, modified, and recreated" (Curtin & Gaither, 2007: 38). In doing so, the model emphasizes that meaning is not produced in one location but the result of multi-faceted, yet identifiable interactions and social practices. Culture, then, takes on a double meaning: it is the result of these different processes, yet it also provides an overarching framework in which these processes are embedded.

Figure 1: The Circuit of Culture



The model identifies five processes that a cultural analysis should focus on. Applied to case studies — i.e., du Gay et al. (1997) put forward an analysis of the making of the Sony Walkman — this analysis examines how cultural artifacts are represented, what social identities are associated with it, how they are produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use. From an analytical standpoint, these processes are distinct sections but "in the real world they continually overlap and intertwine in complex and contingent ways" (du Gay et al., 1997: 4).

This conceptualization of culture can be connected to the study of media and journalism in two ways: One option would be to view the media in general and journalism in particular as technological means "by which much (though not all) of [modern] culture is now produced, circulated, used or appropriated" (du Gay et al., 1997: 23). Viewed thusly as a kind of social technology, the media provide certain practices as well as a set of knowledge to sustain and produce culture. This is the interpretation that du Gay et al. propose and that they specifically lay out in their study of the Walkman. However, I would like to suggest another possibility of making the circuit of culture model productive for the study of journalism. In addition to being a technology, journalism can also be viewed in a more narrow sense as cultural product itself: journalistic forms are not only cultural tools; they themselves constitute cultural artifacts. Consider various journalistic forms such as the newspaper report, the news

broadcast, the magazine story, the interactive documentary, etc. Viewed from this perspective, then, journalistic forms can be studied like other artifacts. We may ask how they were produced, consumed, represented, regulated and what subjectivities (individual, collective) were associated with them. It is the latter context, i.e. journalism as a cultural form, that I will focus on to examine the potential of using the circuit of culture model for the study of journalism. While most of journalism scholarship studies the *content* of journalistic depictions and how it serves to frame issues and set the public agenda, this approach emphasizes that the *form* of news also creates a particular interpretive lens that privileges certain issues and discourages others. As Broersma (2007: xi) notes, "While the content of an article is unique and incidental, form and style are more universal and refer to broader cultural discourses as well as accepted and widely used news conventions and routines". Scholars in a variety of media-related fields have shown that the news form, like other symbolic systems, is not as natural, transparent and invisible as some practitioners purport it to be. Moreover, historians of journalism have documented that the tension between fact and fiction, journalism and literature, information and story is a constitutive component of modern journalism.

Let me briefly review the five cultural processes in the circuit of culture model and how they may help to examine journalistic artifacts and practices. Representation refers to the textual and visual manifestations of a journalistic form (i.e. news article, photo, television broadcast). They are based on conventions that gained acceptance over time. As conventions are socially constructed, they embody values, constrain possibilities and, to some extent, prescribe certain outcomes. Production is more than the basic process of bringing a particular journalistic artifact into being. Rather, it is a cultural process that is informed by the interaction between intra-organizational practices and larger cultural forces — distinct ways of life within which journalistic forms need to resonate. Consumption encompasses a wider area of practices than merely focusing on actions such as buying a product or receiving a message. In the circuit of culture model, the consumer is not a passive victim of propaganda but an active agent of appropriating and constructing meaning in the practice of her everyday life. "[M]eanings are not simply sent by producers and received by consumers but are always *made in usage*" (du Gay et al., 1997: 85; original emphasis). As other social activities, journalism is regulated by legal controls of technological infrastructures, formal bodies of self-governance and institu-

tional educational systems. Business constraints, government regulation, and professional codes of conduct all play a role in shaping meaning. Identity refers to particular modes of subjectivity as individuals or groups. Practicing journalism creates an identity; yet journalistic forms also construct and conceptualize subjectivities — both in their depictions and in their interaction with readers and viewers. Moreover, identity is both multi-layered (individual, professional, institutional) and socially constructed (class, gender, race, etc.).

While it is possible to look at these five moments individually, the circuit of culture model emphasizes the inherent interconnectedness of these processes. Production cannot be examined without consumption, representation not without taking into account regulation and so on. These disparate elements and distinct processes form temporary units, forging fragile firmness and fleeting stability. Nothing about these connections is "necessary, determined, or absolute and essential for all time" (du Gay et al., 1997: 3). Rather, they evolve and dissolve in the course of what du Gay et al. call "articulations". Grossberg (2006: 154) describes articulations as a "complex set of historical practices by which we struggle to produce identity or structural unity out of, on top of, complexity, difference, contradiction."

To sum up, the circuit of culture model consists of five different moments that are joined by temporary (and thus changing) connections. Examining the characteristics of each moment as well as their various interactions over time provides multiple vantage points to study the emergence, presence and variability of journalistic forms. The circuit of culture approach is not a theory but a model to zero in on particular sites of social relationships. As Curtin and Gaither (2007: 105) note "the circuit of culture contains an inherent tension between the institutional and the particular, the macro- and microlevels of analysis. Such tension does not lend itself to easy analysis or categorization, yet it also avoids many of the shortcomings of more narrow and deterministic approaches."

After having explained the specifics of the circuit of culture model, I would like to return to Carey's call for a cultural history or journalism and demonstrate how the circuit of culture model offers a more nuanced terminology. As discussed above, Carey encouraged journalism historians to get to the bottom of the question why, how and when people accepted the report as "a desirable form of rendering reality" (Carey, 1974/1997: 90). Using the circuit of culture model, historians could flesh out what this process of becoming "a desirable

form of rendering reality" looked like if they describe how particular journalistic forms were produced and consumed, how they were textually and visually represented, what social identities were associated with it, and what mechanisms regulated their distribution and use. Let me be clear that I do not want suggest a new, all-encompassing master narrative. There simply is no privileged vantage point for any historical analysis of social relationships. Rather, I propose to use the circuit of culture model to focus on identifiable moments in the historical evolution of journalistic forms and how they changed over time. Of special importance are relationships, interactions, articulations, i.e. the interfaces between different moments. A cultural analysis does not have to cover all dimensions equally but could pick a particular articulation between two elements. For instance, how do organizational routines influence the textual and visual representation of news? How do patterns of readership and viewership matter in debates about regulation?

4. Rearticulating Carey

In the brief review of critical appraisals at the beginning of this paper I identified three areas in Carey's concept that various scholars found intriguing but also troubling. They concerned Carey's central, yet vaguely defined, terms consciousness, ritual and community. The second section presented a brief overview of the circuit of culture model and its basic tenets. In this final section I will discuss how the circuit of culture model alleviates some of the criticism of Carey's concept. I see three specific ways in which the circuit of culture model substantiates and expands Carey's concept of a cultural history of journalism.

(1) When Carey wrote that journalism was "a state of consciousness," his conceptualization obscured more than it illuminated. Consciousness seems a vague and immobile concept to capture the complex and multi-directional forces sustaining journalism. Moreover, it is challenging to think about concrete methods to study and describe consciousness and its transformation over time in meaningful ways. Instead of focusing on consciousness as state of collective identity, the circuit of culture model suggests to break it down into a process. Instead of asking "What is culture?", it investigates "What does culture do?" Therefore, in contrast to thinking about journalism as a state of consciousness, the model encourages us to conceptualize journalism as the circulation

of cultural forms. As such, it circumvents the intangible concept of consciousness and instead focuses on the production, transformation and renegotiation of meaning in a social world structured (albeit not entirely) by regulative and institutional pressures.

(2) Carey's basic motivation to emphasize a ritual view of communication was to push back against simplistic concepts focusing on the transmission of messages between senders and receivers. While this concept certainly provided a more holistic image of the human condition and the centrality of communication, it also proved to be elusive in a globalized world integrated by market capitalism. When he described the ritual interaction between journalists and their publics as "a particular organization of social experience" (Carey, 1974/1997: 91), he failed to acknowledge a crucial aspect of journalism: that it is also a business. The ritual view of communication is still valuable but it has to address the processes of production and consumption. The circuit of culture model moves practices and relationships into the center of the analysis by introducing a dynamic view of production and consumption. Journalistic forms are not produced as finished products; they are in a constant feedback loop. The activities of readers and viewers—how they accept, reject or transform journalistic forms—always already affect the introduction, modification and subsequent redevelopment of journalistic forms. Journalism is a ritual constrained by market forces but at the same time more than merely an economic exchange.

(3) Journalism, as Carey was envisioning it, is community-oriented or it is not journalism at all. As desirable as this vision might be, it is blind to the contested and adversarial nature of public discourse. The circuit of culture model, on the other hand, acknowledges power differentials and asymmetries in society. From this perspective, the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms does not happen in a vacuum but is part of a public sphere in which meanings is constantly and irreducibly challenged. It is an agonistic arena where some participants have more resources than others. The circuit of culture model takes a middle position between a propaganda and an empowerment model. It acknowledges the decisive influence of powerful participants (like the propaganda model), yet also emphasizes the powers inherent in consumption (like the empowerment model). It equally rejects the deterministic, pessimistic propaganda model and the voluntarist, optimistic empowerment model.

An appreciation of the circuit of culture model would not be complete without acknowledging its limitations. At this point, I just want to briefly mention some areas of concern. Even as the model speaks about social and cultural technologies, it falls short of conceptualizing them in a comprehensive way. Not that it underestimates the impact of technology; it undertheorizes it. A second area of concern is that the dimension of "identity" only insufficiently and superficially addresses the ways in which cultural processes construct and conceptualize subjectivities. The model clearly prioritizes the moments of production and consumption. Finally, while the model integrates the importance of power differentials and economic disparities, both elements function more as underlying principles than fully developed components.

James Carey's call for a cultural history of journalism had a lasting impact on the field of journalism research. However, in order o retain its energy and originality I believe it is necessary to sharpen its terminology. The circuit of culture approach complements Carey's vision but also re-articulates it in a more specific and nuanced way. In fact, it is able to deliver exactly the kind of analysis that Carey called for but was not able to formulate himself:

> "The cultural history of journalism would attempt to capture that *reflexive process* wherein modern consciousness has been created in the symbolic form known as the report and how in turn modern consciousness finds *institutionalized expression* in journalism." (Carey, 1974/1997: 93, emphasis added)

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