CHAPTER 2

Empirical Reflections on Cognitive News Media Capture in Africa and Latin America: Towards a Sociological (Re)Imagination

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Although the generic meaning of 'media capture' coalesces around the instrumentalization of the media by vested economic or political interests, its manifestations as seen across chapters in this volume are diverse and contested. In this chapter, we explore 'cognitive capture,' one of the deeply contested but under researched pillars of capture that both asserts and explains the way in which journalists subvert their professional norms to 'external actors' with the effect that they cease to report autonomously and impartially on critical issues directly connected to the 'external actors'. Put in slightly different terms, cognitive capture describes 'abstruse forms of influence' that achieve the practical equivalent of the prevalent forms of media capture which foreground 'material self-interest' (Kwak 2014). It highlights the tendency of the news media to internalise and champion the perspective of the 'external actors' they are meant to report on (Schriffrin 2015; Stiglitz 2017).

As we show in the section that follows, the concept is closely associated with the financial crisis of 2008 in which the lack of scrutiny of financial institutions resulted in regulatory and legislative officials *thinking* "exclusively in terms dictated by the private interests they [were] supposed to regulate and control" (Langbein 2010, 568-569). In the context of journalism, this resulted in news organisations and financial journalists failing to effectively 'fulfil their societal mission' as watchdogs, particularly in terms of anticipating and reporting effectively on the financial crisis (Schiffrin 2015; Stiglitz 2017).

Although contestable, the potential of cognitive capture for exploring a range of perennial questions about the news media in the Global South seem self-evident. Thus, using previous empirical research conducted in Africa (Zimbabwe) and Latin America (Uruguay), this chapter illuminates the conceptual efficacy and limitations of cognitive news media capture in

the two regions. In exploring these issues, we reflect on a number of intricately connected questions: could cognitive capture independently explain some of the vestigial issues in post-authoritarian and transitional media-source relations, ideological leanings, and proprietorial influences? Could it provide an explanatory framework for some of the more pernicious but elusive effects of state-media collusion? While a full response to these questions is beyond the scope of the chapter, we, however, offer some broad-brush analyses of cognitive capture's potential as an explanatory framework for some of the unique journalistic practices that manifest in Africa and Latin America. In this vein, the chapter highlights possible instances in which 'cognitive media capture' is manifest and shows how, as part of a broad range of factors, rather than in isolation, it can draw our attention to how journalists in transitional contexts think and make decisions on their work, and the effect of their professional socialisation on the decisions they make. This undertaking is important not least because, like other generic conceptions of media capture explored in this book, existing scholarship on cognitive media capture and its roots, are largely based on Western empirical cases linked to the 2008 global financial crisis.

Beyond highlighting the fact that media capture also occurs in more subtle ways and mechanisms other than the most obvious forms of capture such as ownership and financial control, which are associated with material self-interest (Stiglitz 2017; Mabweazara et. al. 2020), the chapter argues that, like other notions of media capture, cognitive capture exposes fundamental differences in news media theorisation between the West and the Global South, which need to be teased out. It further shows that, despite the manifest weaknesses of cognitive capture as a concept, especially when deployed on its own, it can potentially be 'rescued' through a sociological (re)imagination that plugs some of the glaring gaps and blind spots associated with the concept. We stress that the concept is best understood as intricately embedded in the wider and well-established sociological conceptions of journalism as a social product shaped by interactions among media professionals, media organisations and society. This understanding is rooted in the assumption that journalism relates to the societies within which it is produced – that it both acts on and is acted upon by the surrounding social environment (Schudson 2000; Mabweazara 2010a).

The chapter begins by giving a broad overview of conceptualisations and meanings of cognitive news media capture followed by attempts to empirically apply the concept to three broad themes that offer some useful insights into cognitive capture in Zimbabwe and Uruguay: *a.) journalists' ideological alignments with centres of power, b.) cognitive capture as an explanatory concept in transitional democracies, and c.) media-source relations*. The final two sections of the chapter respectively discuss cognitive capture's epistemological blind spots and conclude by suggesting ways of (re)imagining and conceiving the concept sociologically.

Cognitive Media Capture: History and Meaning

There is consensus among several scholars that the term 'cognitive capture' gained traction following the 2008 global financial crisis (Nechushtai 2018) as researchers tried to make sense of the monumental economic event from a variety of angles, including questioning the performance of the press both in the run-up to and during the crisis (Tett 2009; Schiffrin 2015; Stiglitz 2017). Much of the early scholarly debate around the concept was inspired and championed by scholars broadly located outside media and journalism scholarship and with an interest in an array of issues connected to the global financial crisis, particularly the failure of governmental regulatory functions (see Langbein 2010; Kwak 2014; Rilinger 2023).

However, while the news media have no regulatory mandate per se, with some "theoretical flexibility" as suggested by Nechushta (2018, 1047), it is not too difficult to see the connections between "the regulatory role of government and the watchdog role of journalism." This merits the expansion of 'cognitive capture' to the context of the news media. It is thus not surprising that the concept has inevitably been linked to the role played by journalism during the financial crisis. Gillian Tett (2009), Anya Schiffrin (2015) and Joseph Stiglitz (2017), among others, have been instrumental in expressly connecting the global financial crisis to the failures of journalism. This application of the concept has evolved beyond the global financial crisis to the generic interpretations of the performance of the news media, particularly in post-transitional contexts where partisan journalism persists. Stiglitz's work demonstrates how cognitive capture can be a useful explanatory framework for some of the unique journalistic

practices that manifest in the Global South. In the discussion that follows we draw on a diverse range of 'cognitive capture' scholarship to define and contextualise cognitive media capture.

It is important to highlight that despite the seemingly stable conception of cognitive media capture suggested above, it can be a slippery concept to define and diagnose. It is often referred to as a "nonmaterialist" or 'irrational' account of capture (Kwak 214, 77) that constitutes "*the subtlest* […], *pervasive and often unintended"* form of capture*.* This makes it "the most corrosive" in undermining "the ability of the media to fulfil their societal mission" (Stiglitz 2017, 15) relative to other forms of capture. In the simplest of terms, as noted earlier, cognitive media capture describes the tendency of journalists *to think exclusively in terms dictated by the private interests they are supposed to* objectively report on (Schiffrin 2015, Stiglitz 2017; Nechushtai 2018). However, within the context of the 2008 global financial crisis, the concept has been used to explain the lack of critical reporting and how many business reporters were assimilated and naturalised into the environment of finance in the period leading up to the crisis and during the crisis. According to Stiglitz, this tendency for journalists to align themselves or collude with private financial interests was brought about by "the process of continual association and engagement" (2017, 11), which led to a gradual cognitive identification between journalists and the *broader culture of the business world*.

Some scholars thus use the term 'cultural capture' in place of 'cognitive capture': *cultural* because it "operates through a set of shared but not explicitly stated understandings about the world; *capture* because it can produce the same outcome as traditional capture" (Kwak 2014, 79). This use of alternative terms to describe cognitive capture highlights how discussions about the concept, like media capture more generally, are sometimes marred by confusing discourses as well as inconsistent use of different terms. Although mainstream scholarly discussions have coalesced around the term *cognitive capture*, it is fair to say the concept remains slippery and floats in a conceptual soup along with a range of other terms that have been used in its place, including: 'deep capture', 'intellectual capture', 'ideological capture', and 'Stockholm Syndrome'(Schifrin 2015, 642). A common thread across this nomenclature is the psychological shift in the explanation provided for the close association between journalists and their sources or the private interests they are supposed to objectively report on.

While the traditional conceptualisations of media capture discussed across chapters in this book broadly assume that journalists are rational actors who seek to "maximise their material self-interest" (Kwak 2014, 76), cognitive capture on the other hand highlights journalists' susceptibility to subtle "nonrational forms of influence, which interests groups can exploit to achieve the practical equivalent of capture" (Kwak 2014, 76). Most importantly, cognitive capture stresses the fact that journalists are "subject to the same sets of cognitive shortcomings as other human beings" (Kwak 2014, 76). This implies that they make decisions for reasons other than the material self-interest of their consciously held beliefs. Even if they do so, "those beliefs depend on the peculiar ways in which people develop their ideological preferences" (Kwak 2014, 76). Thus, as Langbein contends, cognitive capture is "not achieved by special interests buying, blackmailing or bribing their way towards control" (2010, 580) of journalists as is the case with other forms of media capture.

It is also worth highlighting that although behavioural scientists may bridle at the conflation of cognition and *culture*, it will suffice for now to indicate as long argued by media sociologists, that there is some interaction between the environment in which reporters operate which affects how they think about social, economic, or political issues, and this in turn affects how they report on these issues (Schudson 2000; Mabweazara 2010a). The critical point is that this process results in reporters abandoning an objective or critical perspective – or the norms of journalism– and adopting the viewpoint of a particular elite group or institution in society. As Stiglitz contends: "Rather than being the 'fourth estate,' set apart from the rest of society to provide the checks and balances necessary to make society function well, the media [...]can become part of the echo chamber that amplifies and solidifies conventional wisdom" (2017, 14). Finkel takes this view further and describes cognitive capture as "a transfer […] or a surrender of objectivity, unconscious or otherwise" (2021, 147).

The mechanisms that produce or cultivate cognitive capture, have been characterised as either *explicit* or *implicit* (Nechushtai, 2018). The first comprises "formal advocacy, persuasion, and public relations efforts, comprising various initiatives to present the company's worldview and make the case that its adoption by regulators would benefit the market as a whole" (Nechushtai 2018, 1046). The second type relates to the more insidious influence of

professional relationships and non-rational factors on beliefs and actions, including in-group/out-group dynamics, the effect of perceived social or economic status, and social networks that are exploited "to achieve the practical equivalent of capture" (Kwak 2014, 76). Both these processes are proposed to explain capture around the 2008 financial crisis. However, it is not too difficult to surmise how implicit mechanisms of cognitive capture are more likely to produce an unconscious influence on reporters.

Locating the Efficacies of 'Cognitive Media Capture': Some Empirical Reflections

Several questions arise from the above overview – how are we best to understand the relationship between cognitive media capture as a distinct concept within wider scholarship on *journalists' ideological alignments*, *editorial policies, proprietorial influences*, and *media-source relations?* Within the context of the Global South, is cognitive capture, as may be argued in the general case of media capture, giving an umbrella term for a set of phenomena that are already well-understood? These questions will not be resolved here, but two points are worth noting based on the discussions above and existing journalism scholarship. *First*, broader media capture theory as seen above is focused on outcomes, and so it is deduced that cognitive capture is also identified by outcome rather than process. However, as we attempt to show below, the idea that ideology weaves its way into the thinking and working practices of journalists and can result in the dereliction of journalistic objectivity and the watchdog role is not controversial. One point of contention, however, is whether the channel is the political economy of the media, journalistic routines, or indeed cognitive capture. *Second*, there is a suggestion that cognitive capture is a more unacceptable and severe dereliction of journalistic duty than is described in the 'soft pressures' and 'impersonal mechanisms' of editorial policies and proprietary influences or media-source-relations theory. Yet Lippman (1922) warned of the distorting effects of these mechanisms and theorists since then have emphasised the deleterious effect of proprietors and elite sources, for instance, on media democracy. While the focus on journalistic routines emphasised by the sociology of news (see Tuchman 1978, Schudson 2000), has normalised these distortions, up to a point, the attraction of cognitive capture is that it is inclined more towards emphasising the fact that *it is not normal,* and *it*

should not be expected. It also implicitly suggests that this should be changed. Wider Global South journalism scholarship has not engaged broadly with these issues, nor has it paid close attention to how cognitive capture manifests itself in the real world and how it could be addressed.

As already established, 'cognitive media capture' is inherently difficult to diagnose and pin down. In the following sections we attempt to locate the efficacies of the concept using cases drawn from our previous empirical studies in Zimbabwe (Mabweazara 2010b) and Uruguay (Pearson 2017). We illustrate that even if we cannot unambiguously point to cognitive capture, there are a range of possibilities that wholly or partly point to its manifestations in the developing countries of the Global South – far too many to capture in the space available here. We discuss the complex manifestations of cognitive capture under the following three closely connected themes, which are by no means exhaustive: *a.) Journalists' ideological alignments with centres of power, b.) Cognitive capture as an explanatory concept in transitional democracies, and c.) Media-source relations.* The broader discussion not only draws attention to the intricacies of the manifestations of cognitive capture, but also highlights cognitive capture's inextricable connections to other 'forms of capture' and the well-established factors that shape and constrain newsmaking globally. From the themes we also surmise that the pervasive nature of cognitive capture and its subtlety 'silently' imbue and saturate journalists' editorial decision-making alongside other forms of media capture.

A brief contextual note of the different empirical contexts we draw upon to locate the potential manifestation of cognitive capture is necessary. By way of demonstrating the range of this potential, we draw upon contemporary news production practices in Zimbabwe and journalism during and shortly after the transition to democracy in Uruguay.

As in most Southern African countries, mainstream news production practices across the state-controlled and the privately-owned press in Zimbabwe have, since the turn of the millennium, been shaped by the country's polarised political terrain (Mano 2005). While the private press is seen as predominantly assuming an anti-government editorial perspective, the state-controlled press is manifestly partisan and politicised in its support for government policy (see Mabweazara 2010b). This is a defining characteristic of Zimbabwean news production and

has a significant impact on how journalists conduct their day-to-day activities, which include their news selection habits, how they connect with the wider society wherein news is sourced, and how the 'beat' system is deployed.

In contrast to the Zimbabwean media scene, the media in Uruguay is frequently rated among the freest in Latin America and broadcast reforms have drawn praise from UNESCO (Segura and Waisbord 2016). In common with other countries in Latin America transitioning back to democracy from authoritarianism in the 1990s, Uruguay's media also underwent processes of media democratisation. Laws securing the freedom of the press were immediately restored, while media diversity increased both in response to the democratic opening and growing commercial market. For example, in the early return to democracy, a popular left-wing daily newspaper, *La Republica,* was launched to counter the right-wing *El Pais* which had survived the authoritarian period through cooperation with the civic-military dictatorship. In the early 2010s, *La Diaria* launched to focus on left-wing social and political issues. However, its media landscape also shares important and interconnected features of the media in the region – high concentration of media ownership, a lack of plurality of representation, and close ties to political parties. Key to the focus of the discussion of Uruguay in this chapter, then, is the potential for cognitive capture to play a role in explaining processes and obstacles in media democratisation.

a.) Journalists' Ideological Alignment with Centres of Power: *Beat Reporting in Zimbabwe*

Although beat reporters in Zimbabwean newsrooms generally follow established procedures, routines, and practices in their reporting, some 'beats' are, however, highly politicised. They assume a political stance and identity that mirrors the country's polarised political environment. The most prominent among these politicised beats is *political reporting* (Mabweazara, 2010b). As one political editor at the state-controlled *Sunday News*, put it: "If you talk about the impact of political pressure, I will be surprised if anybody else in this newsroom told you they feel it the way I do, particularly as it comes from politicians. I am the person who directly deals with it" (Mabweazara, 2010b, 133).

While this alone does not always lead to *cognitive capture*, there are conditions under which it might. For example, the roots of the concept from the work of business correspondents during the financial crisis suggests that reporters assigned to cover a particular beat may be more susceptible to cognitive capture than general news reporters, who encounter a wider range of sources and do not need to nurture and engage with a finite pool of sources. Political correspondents for instance must maintain elite sources in government, and various centres of political power.

The 'politicisation' of the beat system in Zimbabwe has often manifested in journalists' brazen ideological alignments with political power. A graphic picture of this alignment among political reporters is captured in Mabweazara's (2010b) interview with a senior political reporter at the *Sunday Mail* who openly aligned himself with the government's political ideology at a period of unprecedented state-sponsored human rights abuses and national economic meltdown:

> **Reporter:** I will tell you something that will give you a broader idea of the principles that underlie my operations in this newsroom, and I'm sure I share the same spirit with my fellow political reporters within Zimpapers [...]
>
> When the *Daily News* was set up in 1999; I was one of the first journalists to be offered a job as a senior political reporter. I was offered a good remuneration package because they knew I had what they wanted. I simply said, "thank you very much for your offer, but I'm not taking it". I told them I didn't believe in their editorial driving force (sic). Believe you me, at that time I didn't have a personal car, I just had my mobile phone with a sim card provided by the company, but I simply said "no thanks" to the lucrative offer.
>
> And just recently, the *Sunday Times* in South Africa offered me a good job; they said I will be heading their operations in Zimbabwe, but I still turned it down. All my bosses know, I showed them the offer letters, but I told them not to worry about me going.

So, the long and short of what I'm saying is that I know what I want as a political journalist...*To be more specific, I will tell you that I believe in [the ruling party's] political ideology – it appeals to me. I always tell people that "if there is one thing that [the ruling party] is very good at, it is making you realise that you are in a struggle*" [...] (emphasis added).

Interviewer: So, as a political journalist you operate on the basis of individual principle?

Reporter: Of course! There is something that has gone wrong with journalists in this country. *When you read what they write you tend to think that they were journalists first before they were Zimbabwean […] but it should not be like that! You are a Zimbabwean first then you become a journalist by qualifications. So, you defend who you are, you defend what is your own*! (Mabweazara 2010b, 133-135) (emphasis added)

This example shows how deeply politicised and ideologically rooted the political beat is in Zimbabwean newsrooms. The ostensibly partisan sentiments expressed in the interview potentially permeate newsmaking practices with marked implications on how journalists frame or mediate their stories. From the extract above, it is difficult to avoid the impression that the political reporter is too close to the government and "too responsive to [its] special pleadings" (Langbein 2010, 580) to make independent journalistic decisions on any matters involving government, including its abuse of power. The bold display of excess sensitivity to government's 'ideological' position can, in the words of Langbein (2010, 580), further be seen as pointing to the fact that the journalist "has been co-opted" and "has effectively internalised the objectives, concerns, world view and fears" of government. What makes this forceful as evidence of a form of 'cognitive capture' is the fact that, unlike the materialist forms of capture – at least on the surface – this does not appear to be

> achieved by special interests buying, black-mailing, or bribing [...], but instead through [journalists] internalising, as if by osmosis, the objectives, interests, and perception of reality of the vested interest they are meant to regulate and supervise in the public interest. (Langbein 2010, 580)

It could be further argued that although other factors and pressures might be involved in shaping this ideological positioning, if cognitive capture is identified mainly by outcomes rather than process, as noted earlier, the journalist's alignment with government can be considered a classic case of its manifestation. From a Western journalistic normative orientation, the partial or one-sided perception of issues undermines journalistic autonomy and its ability to fulfil its "societal mission just as much as do the other forms of capture" (Stiglitz 2017, 15). The alignment can potentially result in the dereliction of journalistic independence and a general failure of the press to provide the checks and balances necessary for a functional society (Stiglitz 2017; Finkel 2021).

The politicisation of the politics beat in Zimbabwe was also manifest among reporters in the private press as shown in the interview extract below with a political reporter at the *Zimbabwe Independent*.

> **Interviewer**: Are political reporters ever objective?
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> **Reporter**: Well, we are taught at school to be objective, but as you might know the environment in which we work pushes us to depart from notions of objectivity. Working in Zimbabwe where you have a government that cracks down on opposition supporters and colleagues whom you sympathise with makes it difficult to uphold objectivity. It is definitely compromised, but not without good cause of course...
>
> **Interviewer**: So, I take it you are naturally biased in your political reporting?

> **Reporter**: I tend to sympathise with the victims, whether I'm writing on politics or not [...] *I sympathise with them because I live with them and so I always see how they are being violated. You look at human rights defenders you see they are being cracked down for the same views that you also uphold [...] At the end of the day as much I try to be objective, I still end up giving coverage to one part at the expense of the other*. So, it's because of the environment in which we are operating [...] (Mabweazara 2010b, 135-136) (emphasis added)

This character of political reporting is also closely connected to other factors that shape journalists' everyday news construction and sourcing patterns.

b.) Cognitive Capture as an Explanatory Concept in Transitional Democracies: Human Rights Reporting in Uruguay

In transitional contexts, several features point to a potential role for cognitive capture to help explain dynamics and inform theoretical understandings of processes of media democratisation. First, periods of authoritarianism by definition impose severe and ongoing restrictions on journalistic routines. Journalists at surviving newspapers and radio stations must adapt their working practices to avoid shutdowns and censorship. On the other hand, journalists at newspapers supporting or at least tolerating the regime also experience a change in working practices by learning obedience to the regime. The nature of the longer-term effects of these experiences is largely unexamined in media democratisation literature. Like the mainstream democratisation literature upon which it is based, which posits that the post-transitional context will see a "return" to "politics as usual", the media democratisation literature broadly assumes a reversion to "journalism as usual" (Pearson 2017, 2022). The closest reference to the ongoing and significant disruption of this is noted by Randall (1993), who indicates that journalism practices in the return to democracy may be combined with practices internalised during the period of authoritarianism. Randall further draws attention to cases where this issue has been recognised in quoting Czech media scholar Milan Smid's diagnosis of journalists in

Eastern Europe after the transition to democracy as "behaving like prisoners whose prison has suddenly disappeared" (ibid, 643).

Here, there is a clear invocation of features of post-transitional media practices for which cognitive capture may prove a useful concept, in a number of ways. First, in enabling the re-visitation of some of the assumptions of media democratisation literature which focuses more on the news media's role in supporting new democratic institutions and less on how this is shaped by unresolved power dynamics, even well into transition (see Grugel 2002 for a critical approach to democratisation processes). Second, in identifying relevant dynamics that may have contributed to broader assessments of the news media in Latin America as having continued and severe democratic deficits in the period following the return to democracy (Lawson and Hughes 2005; Lugo-Ocando and Santamaria 2015). Lastly, in providing – even in the admittedly vague terms that we acknowledge as a weakness elsewhere in this chapter – an approach for beginning to understand the more insidious factors that shape journalistic practices during democratisation. Randall and Smid (1993) indicate that the effects of working under authoritarianism, such as ongoing self-censorship and timidity around watchdog reporting, must be understood, at least in part, as psychological. Cognitive capture provides a sketch for a framework for developing this.

In exploring some of these ideas, we now turn to Uruguay. Journalists in Uruguay were subject to a first phase of media restriction before the military coup on the 27th of June 1973. This pre-emptive wave of censorship and control saw direct measures from the government as well as the beginnings of "docile obedience to government censorship, manipulation of information and outright distortion of the news" (Faraone and Fox 1988, 152). Once the authoritarian regime took hold, all left-wing and Marxist publications were banned, and the regime's media restriction reached "absolute control" (Faraone 2003, 237). Uruguayan journalists were spared the direct violence and intimidation in neighbouring countries, with the regime there utilising more totalitarian methods of building an environment of fear through high levels of torture, surveillance and unlawful detention (Servicio Paz y Justicia – Uruguay 1993).

As indicated earlier in this chapter, the return to democracy in November 1984 saw the rapid lifting of authoritarian media laws, opening up the media market and allowing journalists to work without fear of reprisal. However, the broader political, social and cultural landscape within which journalists are working during this time is also relevant. Uruguay underwent a *pacted* transition, in which the outgoing authoritarian regime contributes to the conditions of the handover. This association with the preservation of "authoritarian enclaves" that can be obstacles to the quality of the emerging democracy and, in particular, the lack of a response to dealing with human rights violations that took place (Garreton 2004). Indeed, the transition is also noted for the way in which the political system from the democratic period appeared preserved in aspic. Gillespie describes the transition as a return to the *status quo ante* – evidence for which was drawn from the way in which the vote share for the first election almost exactly mirrored that for the last before the military takeover (Gillespie 1986). Similarly, Barahona de Brito describes it as "restoration" rather than "renovation" (1997).

It is this space between, on the one hand, formal media democratisation and the deceptive continuity of political democracy and, on the other, the lack of reporting on past human rights abuses (Pearson 2017, 2023) that the concept of cognitive capture may play a role. Therefore, when the bestselling daily newspaper *El Pais* that had survived the authoritarian period as a mouthpiece of the regime continued to support the policy of impunity for human rights violations well into mature democratisation and an editor explained in an interview "it's not that we did what the government said – we believed that it was the right thing" (Pearson 2017), we might rightly ask questions about how this statement of belief should be interpreted. When interviewed about the lack of access to the media for anti-impunity campaigns, one NGO representative commented: "Impunity is not just the Expiry Law – it is a concept, a culture" (Interview with *Famidesa* representative, 2014). Thus, when organisations said they did not gain media access, they did not mean that events or announcements were not featured in newspapers, but that the deeper issues of transitional justice are not discussed in this coverage. Interviewees also linked this superficial approach to transitional justice as evidence of the media being influenced by the state's approach and resulting in a lack of investigative reporting on the issue: "The press adheres in some way to this [state narrative of

impunity]. Luckily there is ... an organisation that enables access to information" (interview with *Servicio Paz y Justicia* (SERPAJ representative, 2014). In this way, a silence had descended over the issue in the media, which represented the wider "politics of oblivion" (Roniger and Sznajder 1998) that continued to have far-reaching effects on broader Uruguayan society.

This vestigial internalisation of authoritarian-era politics has been analysed in terms of persistent hegemonic narratives using a neo-Gramscian framework. However, given the psychological, social and cultural dimensions of authoritarianism and subsequent impunity, it appears clear that the concept of cognitive capture may be useful in drawing attention to specificities of how this is manifested. Yet again, here we encounter a familiar theme in identifying the more nebulous forms of media capture – it is entangled with so many complex social, economic and political processes that confidently isolating a phenomena and attributing it to, in this case, cognitive capture, is impossible. Yet it is possible to identify key questions and issues going forward. If periods of authoritarianism can give rise to cognitive capture that has a long-term effect on journalistic practices, what are the key influences on this? Does the length of the regime matter? What about the particular forms of media restriction and methods of repression used? Does the type of transition matter, as in Uruguay where the "pacted" transition had the effect of sweeping key transitional issues under the carpet and the promotion of the narrative that everyone must look forward, not back? Does the level of professionalisation matter, and can a process of professionalisation early in the return to democracy, as seen in Uruguay, "undo" the internalisation of authoritarian-era practices?

c.) Media-Source Relations

While cognitive capture is about more than access, it appears to *begin* with access and the way in which reporters interact with their sources since "Individuals come to adopt the views and perspectives of those with whom they interact" (Stiglitz 2011, 26). The crux of this is at what point the day-to-day news sourcing practices become a mechanism for a "transfer of loyalty or a surrender of objectivity" (Finkel, 2021, 147). Alternatively, how do we get to distinguish between 'soft pressures' that are conventionally not associated with 'capture', and the more systematic, deeper-penetrating mechanisms within the gaze of analysis as capture. A useful

starting point is the observation that some features of media-source relations theory echo 'capture' (Nechushtai 2018) or more accurately, since the work dates back many years, cognitive capture echoes media-source relations.

The cultivation, selection, and deployment of sources has a defining impact on the character of journalism practice globally. That this can have a negative effect on the democratic role of the media has been accepted for decades (Sigal 1973; Hall 1978). Yet the rupture in "business as usual" represented by the perceived failure of reporters in the run up to the financial crisis has refocussed attention on just how dangerous this dynamic can be. Thus, perhaps a key contribution of work on cognitive capture thus far is the "de-normalisation" of accepted dynamics of media-source relations and its emphasis on its fundamentally distortive nature. By way of further exploration of this, this section considers the distortions of media-source relations that might produce cognitive capture to explain in both current day Zimbabwe and post-transitional Uruguay.

Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, media-source relations are entangled in the country's polarised political environment. Thus, the processes of sourcing stories do not simply entail routinely phoning regular and specific sources to maintain a relationship that ensures a steady flow of story ideas, tips, and comments, but also involves carefully selecting and cultivating new sources whose political and ideological orientations can serve to buttress the media outlets' political orientations. As Mano (2005, 63) explains, except for "openly accessible news sources, […] a number of news sources in Zimbabwe restrict their interviews to publications of their liking and in most cases along political lines". So deeply naturalised are these divisions in the sourcing routines that professionalism is often at stake as highlighted in Mabweazara's interview extract below with a senior political reporter at *The Herald*:

> It's the environment in which we operate in [...] For instance, every time I phone my sources in the police force, I know for sure that when they give me reports of politically related arrests – they will only focus on supporters from one political party, the main

> opposition […]. They won't say much about the involvement of [ruling party] supporters.
>
> So glaring are the divisions in our sources that, at times when I call [the spokesperson of the opposition], because I am a political reporter for *The Herald*, he is always scathing in his responses. He would say "you have already started doing [your dodgy journalism], when we get into power you will see what we will do to you". He says this almost daily when I call him. On a bad day, he simply says, "I don't talk to a […] political commissar!" and hangs up.
>
> This is the environment we operate in. It therefore naturally has an impact on our source selection […], you think twice before phoning some potential sources. (Mabweazara 2010b, 130-131)

While this shows how *access* and the *interactions between reporters and sources* influences editorial content, it also highlights how the everyday political atmosphere in Zimbabwe generates "predictable hierarchies of sourcing and representational practices" (Atton and Wickenden 2005, 351). These sourcing routines and practices are clearly linked to the journalist's internalisation of their editorial policies and proprietary expectations. Louw (2001, 163) reinforces this view in his observation that: "Learning who news editors and editors consider to be 'appropriate' contacts constitutes an important part of the staff-cloning process in any newsroom. This will be learned by having contacts 'passed-on' and by encountering disapproval when 'inappropriate' contacts are used".

This socialisation echoes cognitive capture as journalists learn to work within "shared" understandings (Kwak 2014, 79) of who constitutes the appropriate or acceptable source in their respective newsroom. As we learn from the above, Zimbabwean journalists tend to "*internalise [...] the values of their employers. They cooperate [...] rather than risk a fall out with the proprietor*" (Mano 2005, 68, emphasis added). To this extent, it is not just the newsroom routines that determine journalists' news coverage or the range of news sources gaining access

to news, but as noted earlier, “the informing political ethos of the news organisations” (Cottle 2000, 27) and the wider socio-political and economic context in which news is sourced. This wider context also suggests the possibility of ‘cognitive capture’ in shaping and influencing news content through the pool of sources and contacts that reporters wittingly or unwittingly restrict themselves to as seen in the way the behaviour of financial journalists during the 2008 global financial crisis defined and shaped news frames (Tett 2009; Schiffrin 2015; Stiglitz 2017).

Thus, where cognitive capture is implicated as shaping news sourcing practices, other factors, including the well-established view that journalists tend to privilege institutional sources with “social hegemony” and appropriate infrastructure to guarantee a reliable and steady supply of news (Schudson 2000, 184) that enables meeting deadlines, should not be overlooked. Gitlin long warned of the dangers of access in journalism, and the way in which maintaining close access to elite sources can erode critical distance from those sources while embedding reporters in their world, deciding in 2006 that it “has become the end not the means”. As one political reporter at the state-controlled *Chronicle*, explained:

> Because of the deadlines some people tend to fall out of my pool of sources, which is quite unfortunate […] But I have to deal with reliable people for me to meet my deadlines. [Sources] I can get in touch with even at odd hours and get some information without any hassles at all. (Mabweazara 2010b, 132)

Supporting this view, Louw (2001, 164) submits that a key feature of the routine practices of journalists is the importance time plays in imposing certain practices “because news-making takes place within the parameters of deadlines”. Observation in some of the newsrooms studied in Zimbabwe also established that journalists always preferred the ‘easier way out’ in terms of contacting sources, particularly when under deadline pressure (Mabweazara 2010b). The flipside of this is the exclusion of marginalised and less powerful voices who might challenge the narratives of the elite and indeed, potentially disrupt the close relationship between journalists and elite sources.

Uruguay

In the daily newspapers analysed during the period after the return to democracy, content analysis indicated that it was common practice to use direct quotes by politicians in articles, with very minimal interpretation or additional content included by journalists. This reduces the possibility of adding context or background information. This was acknowledged by all interviewees, with one describing it as a "declaratory" style of journalism as opposed to the "interpretative" style of countries such as Mexico, where it is more acceptable for journalists to put their own spin or interpretation on political events (Reyes Matta 1981). In the liberal tradition, a declaratory style, or heavy reliance on quotes, is associated with the perceived objectivity of verbal testimonies. However, in the context of both Uruguay's history of strong partisan journalism and the transition out of an authoritarian period, the practice appeared more related to newspapers acting as a relatively unobstructed mouthpiece for politicians.

Interviewees offered various explanations for declarative reporting. One reason was related to the pressure of working to deadline – re-printing quotes is simply faster. The second was related to maintaining good relations with sources. If a quote was published without additional comment or analysis, then the article could not be disputed by the source. Not for the first time, this was justified as necessary in Uruguay because of its size. As an editor explained:

> The thing is, if you start to add a lot of literature around a quote then you have to face the source who will ask what it's all about. Journalists and politicians in Uruguay see each other every day. You go to the supermarket and the minister for something is there. I'm going to see that guy eventually or next week, and if I did something that's not OK, I will need to have an answer for him. It's not that we are better than Argentinians or Mexicans, there's more of a short-term accountability here. (Interview with editor, 2016)

This explanation obscures the underlying power dynamics of the relationship between journalists and their sources. Adding fact-based analysis and contextualisation of quotes to

articles in a way that challenges sources or holds them to account is not the same as a journalist contributing their own opinion to a topic or indeed doing "something that is not OK". In this way, the practice of quoting sources without analysis indicates a degree of deference to official sources, expressed in the above quote as the sense that journalists are "accountable" to official sources rather than to professional standards. The dangers of deference to official sources and the way in which this may contribute towards the dysfunctional media-source relations that characterise cognitive capture ought to be clear.

As indicated in the discussion of Zimbabwe above, the over-use of official sources is frequently linked to the ease of access in the sense that journalists and official sources move in similar social milieu and can be said to *speak the same language*. While this close relationship between journalists and official sources is the focus of the critique of cognitive capture in the reporting of the financial crisis, it is important, too, to draw attention to why journalists think this pool of sources is not wider. Indeed, with more plurality in representation of sources, it appears that cognitive capture is less likely. What kind of perceptions limit journalists from contacting non-official sources, then? In the case of transitional Uruguay, where civil society actors were under-represented in coverage of anti-impunity campaigns that they led, and thus could be considered de facto experts in, journalists gave different reasons. The news editor of *El País s*aid that political sources are often used in reports about protests against the impunity law because:

> Usually when you have a march like this, you find out who the heads are, the most influential figures, and they were usually these guys [politicians]. There are people who are more genuine than these guys, like this old lady Luisa Cuesta, but also they are not so articulate, they are not so reachable. (Interview with editor, 2016)

This develops the point introduced near the beginning of this chapter, that civil society actors are perceived to be outwith the "bureaucratic affinity" between politicians and journalists (Fishman 1980). This concept captures the way in which journalists and their sources share an implicit understanding of news values and reporting conventions, such as the ability to give a

quote in a reportable way rather than being “not so articulate”, as the editor describes above. Yet Uruguay was frequently described as a small country – Montevideo a small city – where government ministers returned calls the same day journalists left messages, so this notion of “reachability” obscures a socio-political proximity that appears to provide a more accurate set of coordinates by which to navigate the nuances of media-source relations. If this proximity is a necessary condition for cognitive capture, then its remedy is surely improving access for a broader range of sources, including marginalised groups in society.

Caveats and Blind Spots of Cognitive Media Capture

As noted at the start of this chapter, there is consensus among scholars that ‘cognitive capture’ is difficult to prove (Stiglitz 2017) as a determining factor behind the instrumentalization of the news media and associated outcomes. The main point of contention is that, like other psychological approaches, it is not directly observable and, it appears to spring from a strong sense of disciplinary connection that ignores other reasons for journalists’ behaviour other than *cognitive*. Because of this, the approach can be seen as reductionist in that it ignores possible causes for journalistic and editorial decision making that could come from other social factors. A further challenge is that even as we have attempted to identify empirical traces of what can fittingly be framed as cognitive capture, much of the evidence, boarders on the parameters of informed conjecture, thus leaving the implied cases empirically difficult to pin down with absolute certainty. We therefore remain sensitive to the fine line that the cases discussed above present in relation to the dominant materialist conceptions of media capture. This not only points to the epistemological limitations and blind spots of cognitive media capture, but also highlights the extent to which various forms of media capture are, in practice, intricately interwoven. In this section we briefly highlight some of the caveats, critiques, and blind spots of cognitive media capture, which directly implicate the cases discussed above.

Unlike proving cases of material capture, which can be a relatively straightforward process of documenting government orders or payments and financial inducements, among other factors (see Mabweazara, Muneri and Ndlovu 2020), isolating the influence of cognitive capture is not as clearcut and straightforward. This is primarily because, as we have shown

above, there are always multiple reasons behind individual beliefs and actions (Kwak 2014). Thus, a Zimbabwean political reporter's ideological alignment with political power despite widely publicised human rights abuses and governance failures in the country could be due to cognitive capture as well as other social factors. Similarly, a Uruguayan newspaper editor may sincerely hold the same views as an authoritarian regime. Moreover, if journalists are asked why they carry out a certain action, they may not give the correct account or even be aware of unconscious influences on their behaviour. This observation is also made by Nechushtai who contends that "Cognitive biases are clearly difficult to monitor, and there is always the chance that [journalists] are genuinely convinced that policies with positive outcomes […] are also beneficial to the public [...]" (2018, 1047).

The foregoing highlights the glaring epistemological limitations of cognitive media capture. In particular, the material point is around the extent to which the concept has utility if it cannot be isolated or identified with any degree of certainty. It is also unclear to what extent it maps out on the characterisation of media capture more generally as assessed purely as an 'outcome' (Schiffrin 2021). Equally, if deployed without considering other social factors, to borrow a phrase from (Schudson 1989), it appears to leave issues 'sociologically untouched,' as if it comes pre-prepared, rather than being subject to the process of negotiation. For this reason, it lacks a 'sociological imagination' that can help us to grasp, with 'empirical confidence', how journalists transfer their loyalty or surrender objectivity to private or state interests. On its own, cognitive capture therefore does not fully explain how and by what means journalists get to "*think exclusively in terms dictated by the private interests they are supposed to regulate and control*" (Langbein 2010, 568-569).

Whatever the value of existing conceptions of cognitive media capture, it remains theoretically incomplete when it comes to providing a nuanced account of the structures of news that it controls. This, however, is not to say it should be written off wholesale, particularly on grounds of 'non-testability' (Kwak 2014). In the words of Kwak, if we ignore the possibility that journalists "hold beliefs or make decisions in part because of nonrational factors, we risk constraining the solutions space" (Kwak 2014, 80). Equally, it could also be argued that a restricted focus on material self-interest broadly associated with generic forms of media capture

is limiting in that it only leads to solutions that are focused only on the most obvious forms of capture such as bribery, but not on the other influences, including cognitive capture. As Nechushtai contends, the very fact that "ideas, beliefs, and value judgments tend to spread through social networks demonstrates the importance of remaining alert to the risk that journalists will become overly influenced by [other factors, including] the industries and the people they are covering" (2018, 1047). It is in this light that we contend that we need other ways of interrogating cognitive capture, which can, for instance, explain *how* ideologies control processes of news production as seen in the case of political reporting in Zimbabwe discussed earlier in this chapter. As we attempt to show in the concluding reflections below, crucial lessons from more sociologically driven efforts to unpack the concept of cognitive capture might offer productive insights that can help to plug some of the glaring gaps and blind spots associated with cognitive media capture.

Concluding Reflections: Towards a Sociological (Re)Imagination

This chapter has offered a broad-brush analysis of cognitive capture's potential as an explanatory framework for some of the unique journalistic practices in Africa and Latin America. Through an exploration of three closely connected thematic areas that directly implicate the social practice of journalism in Zimbabwe and Uruguay, we have attempted to empirically illuminate the efficacy and limitations of cognitive media capture. The chapter highlights possible instances in which 'cognitive media capture' is manifest and shows how, as part of a broad range of other factors, it can draw our attention to how journalists in transitional contexts think and make decisions on their work.

We have also shown that although the notion of cognitive capture can serve as an explanatory framework for the instrumentalization of the news media that does not overtly lend itself to the most obvious conceptions of capture, it remains highly contestable. The concept has a number of epistemological blind spots, including the difficulties in empirically proving exactly how journalists subvert their professional norms to 'external actors' with the effect that they cease to effectively play their 'watchdog' role. While this drawback makes it difficult to think of ways of combating cognitive capture, a note of optimism can be drawn from

the simple awareness of its presence, which arguably allows us to see reporting through a different lens, and perhaps to correct the distortions it brings with it. More importantly, as the news media become aware of the pervasiveness of cognitive capture and its implications for unbiased reporting, they can set in place checks and balances to mitigate the consequences. At the very least, a better understanding of the mechanisms of capture is necessary if we are to try to limit the extent of capture and create media that better fulfil their societal roles (Stiglitz 2017, 16).

Further empirical research into the intricacies and manifestations of cognitive capture is therefore necessary. In our view, a potentially viable avenue seems available in empirical approaches that draw from the field of *Sociology*, which has for a long time "offered the default setting for thinking about how journalism works" (Zelizer 2009, 34). In particular, we draw attention to the centrality of the well-established notions of *sociological imagination* and the *sociology of news*, which collectively provide meaning and interpretation to the social practices of journalism. If indeed, as we have established, one of the core weaknesses of cognitive capture is that it leaves things 'sociologically untouched' and is empirically difficult to prove, then it stands to reason that a *sociological approach* can help us to dig deeper into the concept to understand how it interfaces with other forms of capture as well as the broader socio-cultural, political, and economic context. As Zelizer further submits sociological inquiry is crucial in that it has by and large "created a picture of journalism that focuses […] on relationships, work routines, and other formulaic interactions across members of the community who are involved in gathering and presenting news" (2009, 36). Thus, conceiving cognitive capture through sociological lenses can help us to see the phenomenon as tangled in journalists' functions as "sociological beings, with norms, practices and routines" that are intricately shaped by interactions among media professionals, media organisations and the wider society.

The concept of *sociological imagination* as propounded by C. Wright Mills provides a critical 'tool' for understanding "the idea of social structure" and the complex linkages "among a great variety of milieux" (cited in Eldridge 2015, 1). It is a self-reflexive tool that connects social experiences "in relation to history and the structural conditions and opportunities of a given

period of time" (Solis-Gadea, 2005, 114). As C. Wright Mills put it, it embodies the idea that "the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances" (cited in Solis-Gadea, 2005, 114). The intellectual spirit embedded in this conception can help to illuminate cognitive media capture in "a rational, communicable, telling and coherent way" (Solis-Gadea 2005, 113) that makes a meaningful contribution to the debate. By using the sociological imagination, we can thus view cognitive capture as part of interconnected personal and public concerns. In this sense, the real power of the *sociological imagination* is in its potential to distinguish between the *personal* and *social levels* in the lives and routines of journalists. This reinforces the fact that most personal problems are not experienced as exclusively personal issues, but are influenced and affected by social norms, habits, and expectations.

For this reason, as C. Wright Mills conceived it, (media) sociologists should demonstrate an awareness of the idea of 'social structure' and use it to trace linkages between "the economic and political institutions of […] society, and […] the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals" (Crossman, 2020). As an analytical tool, the *sociological imagination* therefore offers researchers "a heuristic and normative infrastructure" that lays bare the intricacies of complex social experiences (Solis-Gadea, 2005).

The foregoing sensibilities are also embedded in the *sociology of journalism* which offers enduring insights into the working practices of journalists (Zelizer 2009). As a body of knowledge, it has concerned itself with the ways in which news organisations manage the processes through which information is gathered and transformed into news, and the pressures that encourage journalists to follow familiar patterns of news making (Tuchman 1978; Schudson 2000). It engages directly with the factors that shape news, and broadly argues that news is a social product shaped by the interactions among media professionals, media organisations and society (Mabweazara, 2010a). This 'constructivist' understanding is rooted in the assumption that journalism relates to the societies within which it is produced and that it both acts on and is acted upon by the surrounding social environment.

The approach also highlights that although journalists aspire to independence as a normative ideal, they can never be entirely 'free' from the circumstances within which their work is organised, regulated, and consumed (Schudson 2000). Newsroom sociologists also make the important point that the factors that shape news production are not mutually exclusive nor are they independently exhaustive. In other words, journalists are subject to pressures from proprietors, political factors, professional imperatives, social organisational and cultural factors, personal factors, or source tactics – often all at the same time (McNair 1998). At times, the pressure from one direction may contradict that from another.

Taken together, the foregoing sociological approaches highlight "the need to look at a variety of contextual factors (internal and external to media institutions) that influence, shape and, in some instances control (on a number of levels), the journalistic profession and its practice" (Mabweazara 2010a, 22). The approaches also point to the need to "acknowledge the complexity of the social context of news production and escape from the reductionistic idea of fixing news-making at one point along a circuit of interactions". In the context of the overall discussion in this chapter, this calls for acknowledging the complex interplay between multiple elements of media capture. Such a 'multiple-determinations' approach recognises that each determining factor is itself embedded within and constituted by a system of interlinked constitutive processes. As media sociologists note, these processes and relationships are in no way linear or fixed, nor are they of equal influence.

Finally, what is clear from the above is that cognitive media capture is an area that requires more empirical research, particularly in the Global South. This undertaking is important not least because existing scholarship on cognitive media capture and its roots, are largely based on Western empirical cases and scholarship. What this chapter covers on Africa and Latin America is far limited, but hopefully enough to ignite ideas for further empirical research and reflections across countries and regions of the Global South.

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