

**Media power and journalistic autonomy:
Using Bourdieu's field theory to better understand questions of
power and agency in journalism**

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Abstract

Media power is often taught to journalism students at an abstract and institutional level in relation to governments and state actors and the power individual journalists wield is dealt with through the teaching of ethics and codes of conduct which are used to constrain and channel journalistic agency. As a result most student journalists have a crude understanding of media power and its effects in the public domain. They often have little grasp of the power inherent in the practice of journalism and the autonomy journalists have to effect changes in the world because of their ability to disseminate information and thus make known and visible knowledge that might otherwise be hidden. Understanding how this power works, where it draws its authority from and how it is also constrained and channelled, is not a subject usually dealt with in classrooms. Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, which he expounded over a number of decades by applying it to a number of different fields of human endeavour, is therefore a very useful theory to marry to media studies theory in order to understand both the extent and the constraints on media power and journalistic agency. Before he died Bourdieu began a collaboration with media theorists (see for example Benson and Neveu 2005, Couldry 2003) to better explicate how field theory could be applied to journalism. His ideas about the structures of fields; the relations of fields to each other and to the political field; the accumulation of economic, cultural and symbolic capital; consecrations and consecrators; habitus and hexis, are all very useful concepts to better explicate power, its embeddedness in the possibilities of a field and the capacities of individual actors. To teach field theory alongside other media and journalism studies theories (such as sociology of news and newsroom routines) and to harness the concepts of field and field actors would give teachers a more effective way of showing aspirant journalists how power is built, used, constrained and thwarted. Field theory would also show them how agency is structured, how capital of different sorts is accumulated, how those with accumulated power (the consecrators) use their power, and so enable a better understanding of journalistic agency. My argument is that we teach issues of power by investing it in institutions and states, and, knowing that individuals also wield power, we channel that power by insisting on professional behaviour and ethical conduct. We deal with power in the media and in public life by sidestepping it. We do not really give attention to how social, economic and political power moves through media, how media attention on and public knowledge of individuals, issues and ideas disseminated via the media give them prominence and dominance in the world, often to the exclusion of other significant issues and events. Bourdieu's field theory applied to journalism and overtly taught in practice courses could help give us and our students a more nuanced and better grasp of power in the media field and of journalistic agency.

Keywords: Pierre Bourdieu, field theory, agency, power, journalism, media meta-capital

For teaching constitutes a disciplinary approach in the Foucauldian sense. If you make people learn things in a certain way you are defining the field in the strongest possible terms. (David Hesmondhalgh and Jason Toynbee “Why media studies needs better social theory” 2008:6).

A very interesting conference on media change and social theory was held at Oxford in 2006. The organisers, the Centre for Research on Socio-cultural change¹, were concerned (as they say in the subsequent book of the conference papers) that the intellectual resources on the media were in need of “enriching” (2008: 1) and they expressed the opinion that as we “enter a new period characterised by unprecedented forms of mediated social relations” (2008: 1) that present theorising lacks a “metatheoretical dimension” (2008: 1). Turning their attention to teaching they remarked that “The most usual way to divide media theory up is according to the classic triangle of production, texts and audiences” (2008: 8) and that with narrow applications of certain parts of social theory this has resulted in a “growing theoretical parochialism” (2008: 8).

My interest in the dissatisfaction which was expressed at the conference and in the subsequent book by the editors, is that, as they say in the beginning quote, the way the field of media is taught is – and has become – defining of the field. But at a university in which we teach both the theory of the media and the practice of journalism, we are disabling our students who eventually become media practitioners if we do not give them flexible, nuanced, subtle intellectual tools to work with once they are inside the rapidly-changing media industries. Given the massive changes in the global media landscape (which are simultaneously technological and economic), and the shift of the traditional relationship of journalistic professionalism (which guarded a journalism of the public sphere and of public service) with the commercial imperatives of the media industries², we have to take account of the fact that they are often entering a

¹ This centre is based at both Manchester and the Open universities.

² I'm thinking here of the point made by Daniel Hallin: “Journalistic professionalism has a complex relationship with the market... its origins, particularly in the United States and Britain, are closely connected with the rise of the commercial mass press and the specialisation of the reporting function that took place in large commercial newspapers. But it did in crucial ways provide a counterweight to the market. It involved the consolidation of a relative degree of what, in Bourdieu's terms, would be called field autonomy, including a normative order, widely accepted for many decades not only by journalists but also by media owners and by the wider society, which emphasised the responsibility of journalists to wider social goals and not just to their particular employers. It was strong enough that when Herbert Gans (1979) did his classic participant observation study of American news

rearranged field hostile to the idea of journalism as a public good rather than as a commercial product.

It is not a clever strategy to persist in old-fashioned resistance mode to these changes and to hope that by continuing to teach as we always have (ie producing critically-aware students steeped in media theory) that we will somehow infiltrate with superior intellectual skills such a hostile environment and show it the error of its ways. In the face of radical media industry change perhaps one of the intellectual tools we can give our students is to help them think strategically about the power of the media field, the autonomy of the journalism profession and the personal agency they may be able to draw on. And for this I turn to Pierre Bourdieu's explications of field theory.

I. Field theory, a nuanced explication of agency and creativity

In multiple texts over a substantial period of time, Bourdieu has explicated his field theory for a range of social situations (1980, 1981, 1983, 1988, 1991, 1993, 1995, 2002, 2005). Bourdieu says in the *Rules of Art* that fields are "social microcosms, separate and autonomous spaces in which works are generated". Each field has a system of "objective relations" (which are often invisible) and allows for "particular cases of the possible". A field, Bourdieu quoting Foucault (1995: 197) says, is a social space of "strategic possibilities", and a site of struggle and the interplay of forces (1983: 312). It is the field which generates methods, constructs objects (1995: 181) and ascribes value to people, positions, institutions and productions. The field provides the conditions which make knowledge possible, generates practice and representations of practice, and distributes power, struggles and strategies, interests, profits, resources and status (1981b: 257). He sums all of this up by saying a field is "a locus of social energy" (1993a: 78).

Bourdieu's preoccupation with understanding the complexity of agency informs his development of field theory. He is concerned to describe the agent not as

organisations in the 1970s, he found that journalists paid little direct attention to market-based criteria in the production of news. It was institutionalised in the form of professional associations like the American Society of Newspaper Editors and, in Europe, often in strong trade unions, press councils, and sometimes legal regulations or structures protecting journalistic autonomy with the news organisation" (2008: 45).

“structuralism’s bearer of structure”, nor as “the pure, knowing, neo-Kantian subject” (1995: 197), but as a “practical operator of constructions of the real” (1995: 180). In order to get a sense of this kind of agent, Bourdieu uses the terms “habitus” and “hexis” to explain the agent-field relationship. Habitus is a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways. Dispositions are inculcated, structured, durable (in the body), generative and transposable across fields (Thompson in Bourdieu 2002a: 12). And, reflexively, the habitus is also a product of these dispositions. (2002a: 12-14). Practices and perceptions are produced by the relationship between habitus and field. Hexis is a term used to describe how such behaviours become effectively embodied. Thompson points out that neither habitus nor hexis can be thought of as a “model” or a “role”. And Johnson points out that habitus does not preclude the possibility of strategic calculation on the part of agents (in Bourdieu 1993a: 5).

In his explication of field theory, Bourdieu has investigated to greater and lesser extents the workings of the literary field, the field of art, the political field and the scientific field. He has also ventured into larger configurations such as the “field of power”, the field of cultural production, and towards the end of his life with collaborators, the media field. It is important to note that fields nest within fields: so both the literary field and the media field sit within the field of cultural production, and the political field and the field of cultural production are located with the field of power. Each field is a space of authority over what counts as valuable work and products and who count as recognised operators within the field.

Generally in society, Bourdieu claims, the field of power and the political field try to impose into all other fields the legitimate view of reality, and increasingly today economic power is on the rise asserting its logic over all fields. Rodney Benson (1998: 488) says social organisation is structured around a basic opposition between economic and cultural power and this opposition plays out within fields. Bourdieu says that within each field there are practices located on a range from the “autonomous pole” through to the “heteronomous pole”. The autonomous pole is where the immanent logics of the field hold sway and the resistance to external political influences and economic logic is strong and guides those operators and practices. So within the field of cultural production, avant garde poetry would be

located at the autonomous end of the field. The heteronomous pole is open to the influence of politics, the mass market and other external logics. Mass media production would be a good example of a set of practices at this pole of the field of cultural production. All actors and institutions within fields compete for authority and autonomy because this gives them the power to assert competence, the capacity to speak, to act legitimately and with recognition, to set limits and to impose the definition of what constitutes their field of expertise and knowledge (Bourdieu 1981b). According to Benson:

A field's autonomy is to be valued because it provides the pre-conditions for the full creative process proper to each field and ultimately resistance to the 'symbolic violence' exerted by the dominant system of hierarchisation (1998: 465).

Fields are also spaces where shifts of power and battles over authority take place constantly. Bourdieu says it is essential to note that field actors operate as much by belief or faith in the field's legitimacy as by bad faith (1980: 292) which denies the workings of power, economics and violence in the sustaining of the field (2002a: 75). He calls the investment in and the "collective misrecognition" (1980: 267) of the actual underpinnings of the field, the "illusio". This misrecognition extends to denying or making invisible the relations operating in the field and suppressing the recognition that fields also operate to create silences, impossibilities, exclusions and limitations.

Agency

To enter a field, negotiate a field and achieve recognition is a complex process for an agent. This is made easier by association with the field's "consecrators", those people of authority who can recognise, confer value on and introduce and promote the person and work of the newcomer. A consecrator is someone in the field who has authority, credit and connections, and the moments at which the newcomer is enabled to make significant transitions into, within and across a field are called "consecration" (see 1993a: 76-77; 1981b: 265). While conformity to the field's logic is crucial, no agent can make their mark in the field of cultural production without exhibiting the difference that sets an individual apart in their work from all others. This effort marks both the individual and the field. "To exist in a field – a literary field, an artistic field

– is to differentiate oneself,” says Bourdieu, “... he or she functions like a phoneme in a language: he or she exists by virtue of a difference from other[s]...” (2005: 39).

As an agent works their way into and through the field they are on a trajectory which is a path of neither “submission to, or freedom from, the field” (Benson 1998: 467, reinforcing Bourdieu’s carefully-poised understanding of agency). Trajectory in field theory is understood as a combination of “disposition and position”. The successful negotiation of a field, says Bourdieu, is greatly enhanced by the accumulation of “capital”, the credit of the field which is bestowed on the production of knowledge and skills and products which are considered valuable. Capital takes three forms: economic, cultural and symbolic. Symbolic capital is acquired when prestige and honour attach to the works and person of the field actor thus giving that person authority and “the power of constructing reality”. Bourdieu points out that those with the most symbolic power in a field have all the forms of capital; they dominate the field and the market (cultural and economic capital) and in some exceptional cases they attain a status within “general culture” as well, thus allowing them to use this symbolic power beyond their field and across the social space.

While success within a field for an agent requires a clever figuring out, and then negotiating of, the operations of the field – a process smoothed by alignment with those institutions and people that have field authority – agents must distinguish themselves, their projects and products in order to draw the attention and recognition of the field. This, Bourdieu calls “distinction”, and it is particularly sought after as a characteristic in fields where autonomy is high. Distinction is one of the ways change happens within fields through the search for and promotion of individualism and difference. Another way change happens is through new entrants into the field who arrive, establish themselves and challenge the status quo. In this way a field produces both control and censorship and innovation and rupture.

The political field

...the political field is... the site par excellence in which agents seeking to form and transform their visions of the world and thereby the world itself... (Thompson in Bourdieu 2002a: 26).

In his editor's introduction to *Language and Symbolic Power*, Thompson remarks that the political field is the "site par excellence in which words are actions and the symbolic character of power is at stake" (2002a: 26). The agents in the political field are constantly engaged in contestation over their particular constructions of reality and visions of what society should be, and over the support of those on whom their power depends. While all the characteristics of fields operate here too (as in other fields, agents must negotiate the inner logics of this field, serve apprenticeships and master its knowledges and methods), the interesting distinction about the political field is that its actors must relate to and receive their legitimation from those not within the field. And because politics has become increasingly professionalised, these agents have become removed from those whom they represent and who give them their mandates. Thompson says they must appeal to "non-professionals" for the "credit" which then allows them to enter into contestation against other political players (2002a: 28). Political capital is credit based on "credence or belief and recognition", says Bourdieu (2002: 192) and "political clout" is the "power of mobilisation" (2002: 194). Along with this goes "personal capital" – fame or renown – and which is "based on the fact of being known and recognised in person" (2002a: 194).

The media field

In Bourdieu's conception of field theory the activities and practices of the news media fall into the general field of cultural production (Bourdieu and Nice 1980). The field of cultural production includes in its range large-scale mass production through to avant garde art production. Journalism with its populist subject matter and mass audiences is situated at the "heteronomous pole" of the field; that is, it is strongly dominated by the external pressure of economic power, which Bourdieu insists has a "powerful determinative effect... in the contemporary historical context" (according to Benson 1998: 488). But while journalism operates under these external pressures, it also (along with politics) seeks to apply a pressure of its own across society – "the legitimate social vision" (1998: 466). In addition, journalism as a practice has the particular hallmark of mediating knowledge and power across fields and through society, so much so that politics and other practices make use of the news media as a primary vehicle to distribute important information to general publics. Says media theorist Nick Couldry:

The journalistic field has always occupied a pivotal role in the field of cultural production because of its specific role in circulating to a wider audience the knowledges of other, more specialised fields (2003a: 657).

Benson and Neveu emphasise the influence on and relation to other fields that journalism exercises:

Transformations of the journalistic field matter, Bourdieu argues, precisely because of the central position of the journalistic field in the larger field of power, as part of an ensemble of centrally located fields – also including social sciences and politics (both state and parties or associations) – that compete to impose the ‘legitimate vision of the social world’. Because fields are closely intertwined and because journalism in particular is such a crucial mediator among all fields, as the journalistic field has become more commercialised and thus more homologous with the economic field, it increases the power of the heteronomous pole within each of the fields, producing a convergence among all the fields and pulling them closer to the commercial pole in the larger field of power (2005: 6).

Although Bourdieu did not, regrettably, turn his attention to the economic field in itself, there is clear indication within field theory that he and his collaborators saw the increasing interpenetration of economics and politics and pointed to the particular power the market has across social space. They also pointed out that economic power would continue to have increasingly determinative effects in all fields, and we have seen how technological revolution hitched to economic logics is rearranging the landscape of the media field with effects on journalism’s capacity to operate with autonomy. Patrick Champagne says:

Despite the journalistic milieu’s incontrovertible efforts to professionalise its activities, to submit only to intellectual imperatives and techniques of information production – evinced, among other things, by the creation of the first school of journalism at the end of the nineteenth century and their proliferation over the past few decades – it seems that journalists’ search for autonomy runs up against two limits: on the one hand, the strictly political requirements of press outlets which have been, in France at least, deeply implicated in broader political struggles; on the other, the increasingly strong relations which connect them to the real or imagined expectations of the public, from which, in the last instance, they earn their living. In other words, journalists are structurally condemned to produce... under political and/or economic constraints (2005: 49-50).

According to Benson, journalism's cross-field activities give it a further capacity (one not usually available to fields other than the political) – “the power to ‘consecrate’, that is, name an event, person, or idea as worthy of wider consideration”. He says:

...the extent to which a particular medium or media enterprise is able to exercise such consecrating power is an indicator of its relative weight within the [journalism] field (1998: 469).

The field theory term “consecration” – which Bourdieu uses to describe the power that important actors have *within* fields of conferring legitimacy on producers and productions (Bourdieu 1983: 323) – is picked up here and used to explain the extraordinary power of media *across fields* to impose agendas and ideas on the political, social and cultural domains. Benson points out that historically the serious journalism of print used to have the consecrating power of media in society but television, with its reach into home lives, audiences of millions and economic weight, has both usurped and extended this power: “It is television that has helped give journalism a wider reach and capacity to transform the fields with which it interacts” (1998: 472).

In seeking to understand this disruptive power of media attention, and how this attention can attach to a human being and confer status, it is useful to look at what Bourdieu (1983: 331-2) calls the “three competing principles of legitimacy”. These are: 1. the recognition by other producers in the autonomous field; 2. the taste of the dominant class and by bodies that sanction this taste; and 3. popular legitimacy – “consecration bestowed by the choice of ordinary consumers, the mass audience”. It is because of the mass media's alignment with economic logics, which permeate the field of power, and its mass-based audiences, that media attention becomes a distinctive power with the qualities of consecration and therefore can bestow a particular type of capital on those caught in its glare.

This has led some media theorists to coin a new term for this power. Patrick Champagne uses the term “media capital” (2005: 662). But Couldry goes further by calling it “media meta-capital” and says that this describes the media's “definitional power across the whole of social space” (2003a: 669). Couldry uses this term to capture the notion of a “new type of capital” which crosses fields, imposes social visions and consecrates people, ideas and agendas but which does not necessarily

depend alone, as in other more autonomous fields, on its own field's "cultural capital" (knowledge, professionalism and accumulation of expertise) for its value. Couldry says:

...some concentrations of symbolic power are so great that they dominate the whole social landscape; as a result, they seem so natural that they are misrecognised, and their underlying arbitrariness becomes difficult to see. In this way, symbolic power moves from being merely local power (the power to construct this statement, or make this work of art) to being a general power, what Bourdieu once called a 'power of constructing [social] reality' ... such symbolic power legitimates key categories with both cognitive and social force ... this power is relevant also to the wider field of power, and indeed, to social space as a whole (2003a: 664).

Couldry explains that media meta-capital would also account for the way in which media influence what counts as capital in each field (for example the pressure exerted by media on cultural producers and intellectuals to speak to large audiences and produce work that is economically of value) and the media's legitimization of influential representations of, and categories for understanding the social world, which are then taken up in within particular fields (2005: 668). A very useful insight arising from this theorising is that:

By altering what counts as symbolic capital in particular fields, media also affect the exchange rate between the capital competed for in different fields... so media-based symbolic capital developed in one field can under certain conditions be directly exchanged for symbolic capital in another field (2003a: 669).

Consecration

The key Bourdieu term "consecration" often undergoes a dilution in meaning in its use by media theorists and in its application to journalism's products. A reading of Bourdieu's work seems to elicit a particular meaning which is, that someone established in a field confers legitimacy upon an individual at a key, or ritualised, moment in order to enhance their status. But Bourdieu also says that there is a "process of consecration" (1983: 339) or a "series of signs of consecration" (1981b: 265), implying that as an individual moves through a field seeking to "win prestige" (1983: 312), there will be many moments in which the person experiences "consecration". The media theorists' use of this word sometimes reduces and generalises it to the mere *attention* of the news media, in which case the media theory ideas of news values, framing and agenda-setting, capture and explain this attention

quite adequately. But in order to understand how persistent media attention translates into an attribute (a “capital”) that gives a person the capacity to speak across fields and to general society with authority, it is helpful to keep in mind the etymological roots of the word. In its religious use, “consecration” involves the components of ritual or ceremony, the act and/or words of a consecrator must be a factor, and there must be a noticeable transition in position and trajectory for the consecrated. When an individual’s symbolic capital has been enhanced or created in part by media meta-capital, not only is it portable, but it gives the individual the “almost magical power of mobilisation”, the “power to construct reality” (Bourdieu 2002a: 170), which has effects across the social landscape.

II. What does field theory offer journalism studies and what insights does it give into the workings of power within journalism, the media industries and the world journalism seeks to report? Does it offer intellectual tools that are supple enough to account for the rapidly-changing media environment our students are encountering? But more than that, does it allow new journalists to have a realistic grasp of both their capacities and their limitations?

An understanding of their own field within the wider social whole

I think to encounter a theory that is flexible enough to apply across social space and to be able to see that across fields similar techniques are used to build power, to create authority, to accumulate capital and to impose ideas and versions of the way the world is and works, will enable the understanding that journalism is not an exceptional practice outside of society but shares with other fields very similar operations. It enables an understanding of journalism imbedded in social processes and not distinct from them – a particular problem that is perpetuated by the way professionals think of themselves when they observe society. It also enables a larger understanding of the processes of how power is built and contained. To grasp that power concentrates around nodes (individuals and institutions that are ‘consecrated’) but to also recognise that fields are always in flux and that struggle is integral to their functioning. As Benson and Neveu say “...field theory provides the best defence against ‘media-centrism’, helping us situate journalism within its larger systemic environment” (2005: 18).

An understanding of the dominance in our world of economic logics

To see that journalism as a practice constitutes a smaller field within the larger field of cultural production (and is located at the heteronomous pole of that field because of its susceptibility to the logics of both politics and economics) would allow students to better grasp the contradictory nature of a practice in which the profession espouses a precious autonomy but which, nevertheless, is imbedded in an increasingly “complex relationship with the market” (Hallin 2008: 45). To be able to test the limits of autonomy in relation to an economic imperative and to have a historical sense of this altering relationship, might be an antidote to a wholesale embrace of market logic as is becoming prevalent in the mainstream media world. But also to understand that the social space is under increasing pressure to conform to market logic is to be able to analyse other fields with greater insight (for example the terrain of higher education). And for those who actually end up working in the media that reports the economy, it might be possible to hold the attitude that this moment of market dominance is a consequence of particular historical processes rather than to assume that this dominance is natural and inevitable.

An understanding of how the field shapes them individually

To quote Benson and Neveu: “To speak of habitus is to assert that the individual, and even the personal, the subjective, is social, collective” (2005: 3). To be able to use the terminology of habitus and hexis, is to be able to conceive of a relationship and an imbeddedness in a field, to understand how the field enables and constrains, to know that personal performance is relational and becomes embodied through behaviours. But to also understand that striving for capital, distinction and for a personal trajectory also shapes agency and the field. To see themselves as coming into an already-existing space, but one which is in flux and which by the very presence of the newcomer is subject to change, is to have a more perceptive understanding of journalism practice as variable. The language and terminology of field theory also means that more precise descriptions of accumulation of power can be used rather than the common-sense ideas of egos, ambition, dominance, control, manipulation, lack of choice, etc.

An understanding of the powers and constraints of their own agency.

While it is often fairly easy to figure out – usually by observing a hierarchy – where power within a field resides, field theory might give students the ability to watch its

flows and to see its nodes of concentration across the field. They could more usefully make decisions about who and what to align themselves with, and to decide where in the field to expend their energies if they had better tools to assess who its consecrators are and what its favoured products are. Instead of treating this information as gossip and over drinks talk, they could more usefully bring to bear some actual theory on how the field rewards and approves of certain behaviours and products. They could also temper both their enthusiasm for change and impact or their despair at stasis with a more nuanced understanding of their own autonomy and its relational aspects to the field. They could figure out that with accumulation of capital comes greater autonomy and how to strategically accumulate capital for particular purposes. It enables a new journalist to ask quite legitimately: “What is good journalism?” “What is excellence?” and to understand that there are multiple answers depending where in the field one is situated and might choose to be situated.

An understanding of media meta-power and how it confers capacity to ‘construct reality’.

Field theory might also enable students to understand that journalism works **with** power (even if the illusion is that it only reports **on** power). As Benson and Neveu say journalism “tends to engage with first and foremost those agents who possess high volumes of capital” (2005: 5). This could be put differently via a sociology of news perspective by saying that of course journalism as a practice routinely seeks news of high import and its newsmakers. But field theory is making the association of journalism and those with symbolic capital in a society much more clear-cut. The daily business of journalism is a meddling with power, and journalism is one of the social practices which seeks to impose on society “the legitimate social vision”. But more than that, journalism itself exerts power, not just to confer consecration on those within the field who prove themselves, but to legitimate other agents in other fields as being worthy of wide social attention. To be conscious that as a field actor, the field enables a journalist to wield this dual power (legitimizing visions and consecrating people) and to acknowledge – rather than deny – that power so that the consequences are also acknowledged and not treated with surprise.

Conclusion

I'm arguing for teachers of journalism and media studies to help students overtly theorise the way power flows in and through the journalism field, and to enable them to grasp the confusing – yet explicable – situation they might encounter as newcomers into a field (ie as subject to the field's more powerful members and their trajectories but as poised to rearrange the relations of the field). Instead of continuing to dissect the world external to journalism as saturated with power in only the negative sense, or to use only political economy theories to connect media institutions to power, we can find – through field theory – more subtle ways of showing how power flows across fields connecting journalism practice with political and economic logics. And instead of using the moralistic route of warning off students from bad practices that will bring journalism into disrepute, we could help them come to grips with how autonomy within the field has been institutionally protected (but is now under threat) and how agency is both possible and contingent. Finally, for them to understand media's particular meta-power across social space to make issues, people and ideas widely recognised and legitimated might enable them to calculate the range and depth of attention they devote in their reporting, because they might better understand the consequences.

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