

Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

College of Communication Faculty Research and
Publications

Communication, College of

12-1-2014

Trajectories for the Future: Journalism Studies in Context

Bonnie Brennen

Marquette University, bonnie.brennen@marquette.edu

Accepted version. *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 6 (December 2014): 695-698. DOI. © 2014
Taylor & Francis (Routledge). Used with permission.

Trajectories for the Future: Journalism Studies in Context

Bonnie Brennen

*Diederich College of Communication, Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI*

Journalism Studies initially developed as an interdisciplinary project that offered critical insights on the practice of journalism, integrated research and theory, and promoted professional journalism education. From its inception journalism was seen as a social, cultural and political institution, a public trust rather than a profit-driven business and an integral part of democracy and social change.

During the last decade, the project of journalism studies has showcased a wide variety of issues related to the field of journalism through the development of the Journalism Studies Division of the International Communication Association (ICA) and two international media-related journals, *Journalism Studies* and *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*. As we address the future of journalism studies, I would like to encourage researchers to focus on the specific conditions of production of the media products that they evaluate and to emphasize the relevant social, political, economic and historical relationships as they relate to journalism studies.

At the 2014 ICA conference, the Journalism Studies Division featured a myriad of theoretically framed research projects that used a variety of methods and approaches. The division showcased international perspectives on issues related to news content, production, reception and cognitive processing, reporting, foreign correspondents, citizen journalism, sources, accuracy, media systems and audiences. There were sessions on science journalism, using visual materials, new technologies, including Facebook and Twitter, as well as papers on journalism ethics. While there was a wealth of interesting and relevant research presented in the Journalism Studies Division, what seemed to be missing from the presentations was a sustained discussion of the larger social, political and economic issues, concerns and constraints facing contemporary journalism. I would like to suggest that as part of their research activities that journalism studies scholars focus on issues such as conglomeration, standardization, corporatization and the commercialization of journalism. In addition, they could also evaluate the deskilling of newswriters, the falling revenues of news outlets and contemporary bottom-line pressures as they influence the practice of journalism.

The commercialization of news, where profits trump public understanding and news must above all else be cost-effective, is an important concern for journalism studies to emphasize. In mainstream media labor issues have become nonexistent and it is important to consider what has happened. The closing of news outlets, the replacing of photojournalists with reporters carrying cell phone cameras, the falling revenues and the lack of profitability in journalism are all timely issues that need additional study. For example, scholarly research on citizen journalism has focused on its democratic potential as well as issues of authenticity, objectivity and journalistic authority. However, citizen journalism research rarely connects current economic issues facing news outlets to the development of citizen journalism. Journalism Studies researchers might emphasize the shuttering of news bureaus, the firing of journalists, the downsizing of newsrooms and other economic decisions as they relate to the rise of the user-generated content.

While the numbers of owners of news organizations continue to dwindle, and alternative perspectives are increasingly difficult to find, it seems relevant to consider if we are witnessing an erosion of ethical standards within the field of journalism. These days, press releases and advertising copy are regularly published without fact checking, oversight or additional reporting, and we are increasingly seeing Facebook and Twitter feeds repurposed as news.

The belief in the press constituting a fourth estate has been pivotal to the development of journalism studies as a field of inquiry. The concept of the fourth estate envisions the press as providing a check on those with power, making sure that they do not over-reach or abuse that power. From this perspective, the press is expected to expose falsehoods that those with power often disseminate in order to protect themselves. The notion of the fourth estate expects journalism to be adversarial-to speak truth to those with power-and it maintains that without adversarial journalism, abuses by those who wield power are inevitable.

In *No Place to Hide*, Glenn Greenwald (2014) distinguishes between adversarial or investigative journalism and what he refers to as "neutered journalism" or journalism that validates, glorifies, befriends and amplifies the political leaders and/or business elites that journalists are supposed to be watching over. He finds, in contemporary society, with the commodification of news that journalists often act as if they should not disturb the status quo.

Greenwald's own experiences reporting on Edward Snowden and the National Security Agency (NSA) for the *Guardian* are a pointed illustration of the need to reinvigorate discussions regarding the press as the fourth estate. In Greenwald's case, elite journalists, politicians and government officials alike wanted him prosecuted for his adversarial reportage because it dealt with classified information and made the US government look bad for spying on and lying to the American public. Yet, for media historians, this is not a surprising reaction. A consideration of investigative journalism, the abolitionists, the muckrakers, the Black press, the underground press and other key aspects of media history provides journalism studies researchers with important insights that may help them to situate contemporary media

experiences in their proper context and reinforce their understandings of the ideology of journalism.

A new study on American democracy by Gilens and Page (2014) finds that in the United States politics is totally dominated by economic elites and special-interest groups who represent business interests. This has resulted in a political process where public opinion no longer has any influence on policy. The researchers looked at 1779 policies enacted over a 20-year period and discovered that public opinion had virtually *no* impact on any policy change. While many people might think that this study would be of great significance to the public, interestingly, traditional media has only minimally addressed Gilens and Page's research.

In rejecting an adversarial stance, corporate media is neglecting important fourth estate issues in favor of featuring pro-business viewpoints on policy issues. As Robert McChesney (1999) explains, information that empowers the public and reports critically on aspects of the US government or on corporate power is exceedingly rare. This is one reason US media rarely cover issues of ownership concentration and media commercialism. McChesney finds that although the current conservative climate encourages scholars to play it safe and avoid challenging the status quo, he urges researchers to question authority and consider incorporating a political economic approach in their work.

Looking forward, I hope that journalism studies researchers will resist the temptation to slip into an a-political postmodern morass, where evidentiary distinctions no longer matter, context is irrelevant and perception is viewed as the same as reality. While I believe that reality is socially constructed, and that individuals learn to see the world and create their own sense of reality based *on* culture-specific rules and ways of seeing, I think that it is important for us to remember that a natural world exists whether we see it or not. As Raymond Williams (1961) explains, historical events, cultural practices, political situations and technological forms all have a material existence. Individuals, classes and groups interpret these events, practices, situations and forms, based *on* culturally determined rules that frame how we understand what we see. Differing realities are created from the many ways people interpret their experiences,

yet the specific material conditions of production are also central to consider.

For example, researchers who focus on audience response, and study viewers', listeners' and/or readers' usage and evaluations of news products, should also emphasize the production of the intended meanings of the messages, as well as issues of language and literacy which may impact on audience members' interpretations and potential misinterpretations of media products. It is also important to assess user access, costs, time constraints and audience interest, along with the perceived relevance of the news to their lives. A greater consideration of these contextual issues will help researchers to analyze and understand the complexities of media usage in contemporary society.

While I understand that in many circles history is now seen as *passé* and some individuals maintain that nothing relevant in journalism studies occurred before the internet era, I think it is important to remember that journalism has a long, complex and interesting history that offers researchers guidance for their work. For example, consider that when Diane Sawyer steps down as anchor of *ABC World News* in August, the number of female broadcast anchors in the United States will be back to zero, along with the recent firing of Jill Abramson as executive editor of the *New York Times*. These two developments not only reinforce the lack of women in top newsroom leadership positions, but they beg the question of sexism in journalism. However, these personnel changes also illustrate the complex history of women in American journalism as well as key political and economic issues affecting the field. While Sawyer struggled with ratings throughout her tenure as anchor, Abramson has been known as a tireless advocate for the fourth estate function of the press. She supported a strong adversarial relationship with business and government and discouraged *New York Times* journalists from getting too close to their sources. Abramson's approach to journalism is strikingly different than that of her replacement, the new executive editor of the *New York Times*, Dean Baquet. Baquet has been reluctant to publish negative information about the US government and while he was working for the *Los Angeles Times* he

was accused of killing a story about how AT&T was collaborating with the NSA.

Although being a journalist has never been easy, throughout the history of American journalism, women have faced additional challenges, constraints and pressures to those of their male counterparts. Once hired, female journalists are usually tolerated but to this day they are often seen as easily expendable. In her 1936 history of female journalists, reporter Ishbel Ross (1936) wrote that even though women were integral to journalism, they were in newsrooms "on sufferance." Ross determined that if all female journalists were "to disappear tomorrow no searching party would go out looking for more, since it is the fixed conviction of nearly every newspaper executive that a man in the same spot would be exactly twice as good" (13). Unfortunately, in 2014, Ross's concerns are still important to keep in mind. As we consider the original intention of journalism studies, and look forward to its future, I believe that an understanding of the relevant, social, political, historical and economic contexts will help researchers to continue to produce timely, relevant and important insights about the practice of journalism.

References

- Gilens, Martin, and Benjamin L. Page. 2014. "Resting Theories of American Politics." *Perspectives on Politics*.
<https://www.princeton.edu/~mgilens/Gilens%20homepage%20materials/Gilens%20and%20Page/Gilens%20and%20Page%202014-Testing%20Theories%203-7-14.pdf>.
- Greenwald, Glenn. 2014. *No Place to Hide: Edward Snowden, the N.S.A and the U.S. Surveillance State*. New York: Macmillan.
- McChesney, Robert. 1999. *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Ross, Ish bel. 1936. *Ladies of the Press: The Story of Women in Journalism by an Insider*. New York: Harper.
- Williams, Raymond. 1961. *The Long Revolution*. London: Chatto and Windus.