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DEFINITIONS OF JOURNALISM

Barhie Zelizer

S JOURNALISM HAS COME TO BE THOUGHT OF AS A PROfession, an industry, a phenomenon, and a culture, definitions have emerged that reflect various concerns and goals.¹ Journalists, journalism educators, and journalism scholars all take different pathways in thinking productively about the subject, and the effort to define journalism consequently goes in various directions. Naming, labeling, evaluating, and critiquing journalism and journalistic practice reflect the populations from which individuals come, the type of news work, medium, and technology being referenced, and the relevant historical time period and geographical setting. No wonder, then, that the distinguished broadcast journalist Daniel Schorr noted that reporting was not only a livelihood for him but "a frame of mind." By extension, journalism as a frame of mind varies from individual to individual.

Thinking about Journalism

The various terms of news, the press, the news media, and information and communication themselves suggest profound differences in what individuals consider journalism to mean and what expectations they have of journalists. Although the term journalist initially denoted someone who systematically kept a public record of events in a given time frame, today it is applied to individuals with a range of skills, including publishers, photographers, field producers, Internet providers, and bloggers. Largely associated with journalism's craft dimensions, the term tends to reference the evolving skills, routines, and conventions involved in making news. The term news—originally derived from the word new during the late sixteenth century—tends to signal a commercial aura that surrounds the ongoing provision of information about current events. News media, by contrast, and the press as one of its forms, came into use in association with the industrial, institutional, and technological settings in which journalists began to work in the eighteenth century, while more recently, a focus on communication and informa-

tion—an outgrowth of the ascent of academic curricula in communications that took over journalism training programs—created a sense that journalists are above all information providers, setting aside the other roles that they fill.

None of these ways of understanding journalism provides the complete picture of what journalism is. Nor do any reflect all of the expectations we might have of the press in a democracy. Each instead underscores a tendency to argue for the universal nature of what we call news work. And yet journalism is anything but universal: we need only recognize that Dan Rather, Matt Drudge, and Jon Stewart—a professional broadcast journalist, an Internet scoopster and columnist, and a popular television satirist—all convey authentic news of contemporary affairs to a general public, despite the questions raised about whether they are all journalists and all do journalism.

These different terms for journalism have not been equally invoked, either by journalists themselves, those who educate budding reporters, or those who study journalism. Although journalism today reflects many contradictory sets of people, dimensions, practices, and functions, discussions of journalism tend to be reduced to one variant of practice—that connected with hard news in primarily mainstream establishments. This growing gap between "the realities of journalism and its official presentation of self" has grown more severe as journalism continues to be responsible for shaping public events.

How Journalists Talk about Journalism

Journalists are notorious for knowing what news is but not being able to explain it to others. More prone to talking about writing or getting the story than providing definitions of what news actually is, journalists easily trade sayings such as, "News is what the editor says it is" or, "News is what sells papers or drives up ratings." As one journalistic textbook commented in the 1940s, "It is easier to recognize news than define it."

Nonetheless, journalists do repair to collective ideas about what news is. Although not typically mentioned in the literature on journalism—for as Theodore Glasser and James Ettema argued in 1989, there remains a "widening gap between how journalists know what they know and what students are told about how journalists know what they know" —journalists talk about journalism in patterned ways. Revealing what the sociologist Robert Park called "synthetic knowledge"—the kind of tacit knowledge that is "embodied in habit and custom" rather than that which forms the core of a formalized knowledge system —journalists display much of how they think about journalism in journalistic guidebooks, how-to manuals, columns, autobiographies, and catchphrases associated with journalism's practice. The cues that they invoke metaphorically address potentially problematic, and not altogether revered, dimensions of journalistic practice, providing a venue to talk about journalism in ways that are true

to experience but not necessarily respected by the professional community. Six such references prominent in journalists' discussions of their craft are explored here.

Journalism as a Sixth Sense

Journalists make frequent mention of what they call a "news sense," suggesting a natural, seemingly inborn ralent or skill for locating and ferreting out news. "News" refers to both a phenomenon out there in the world and a report of that phenomenon, and sometimes a news sense is said to have olfactory qualities, as in having "a nose for news," being able to "smell out news," or, as stipulated in a 2003 directive from the Poynter Institute, "writing with your nose." As the Poynter guideline reminded its readers: "Good reporters have a nose for news. They can sniff out a story. Smell a scandal. Give them a whiff of corruption and they'll root it out like a pig diving for truffles."

The news instinct is so central to the journalistic endeavor that it has been referenced in campaigns to recruit new reporters, and in the development of Web sites for news organizations, new modes of reporting, and public relations strategies for institutions dealing with the news media. Journalists often maintain that one is either born with a news sense or not. Lord Riddell, a longtime newspaper editor in both the United Kingdom and Australia, wrote in 1932 that all "true journalists" possess an itch to communicate the news. Having "a nose for news" was so important to the U.S. journalism educator Curtis MacDougall that he used the expression to title a section in the many editions of his text *Interpretative Reporting*. It also prompted the *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee to explain why he decided to publish Seymour Hersh's exposé of the My Lai massacre, the 1968 massacre of unarmed civilians by U.S. troops during the Vietnam War: "This smells right," Bradlee was rumored to have said. 10

Conversely, when journalism falls short, it is often blamed on the failings of its positioning as a sixth sense. Journalists are said to have missed the scent trail of a story or to have "underdeveloped noses." 11

Journalism as a Container

Journalists talk about journalism as a phenomenon with volume, materiality, dimension, depth, and complexity. Thought "to contain" the day's news, journalistic vehicles are said to hold information for the public until it can appraise what has happened. "Containing" in this regard has two meanings—keeping the news intact and keeping the news within limits, or checking its untoward expansion. Journalism as a container thus both facilitates access to information while putting limits on the information that can be accessed.

Seeing journalism as a container requires a certain degree of attention to the material that fills it, and a corresponding notion of the "news hole"—or the capacity of a newspaper or newscast in delivering the news—concerns journal-

ists faced with more information than can be processed on any given day. The news hole presumes that a day's news must fill a number of predetermined empty spaces—in a newspaper edition or newscast lineup—on a regular and predictable basis. One early U.S. textbook provided novice practitioners with the following example: "'We're filling up,' the news editor warns. 'Boil hard.' The copy editor hears this warning often. There is almost always more news than space." A large news hole suggests that journalists need to find more news; a tight one indicates an inability to take new copy.

The material in this container is unevenly valued. It is shadowed by concerns, borne out by research, that the news hole has been continually shrinking to accommodate more advertising, though the Internet offers what many regard as a bottomless offset to the hole's constriction. Reduction of the news hole has many implications—the shortening of news articles or items, closing of foreign bureaus, lessened assignment of complicated investigative pieces. Conversely, the journalistic "scoop," or the advantage gained by being first on an important news story, always rises to the top of the container. Made famous as the title of Evelyn Waugh's book-length lampoon of England's newspaper business during the 1930s, the "scoop" references not only the victorious activity of filing a story before anyone else but also the news items themselves, positioning them as evidence of journalistic triumph over usually adverse circumstances.

The idea of journalism as a container also figures into the idea of "journalistic depth." Good journalism is said to be that which plays to the volume and materiality of information out there in the world, and journalism's role is to reflect that depth by making complex events and issues into simple and understandable stories. Good journalism is expected to tackle the complicated, unobvious, and often embedded angles of seemingly straightforward happenings. Certain modes of journalistic practice—investigative journalism, muckraking, journalistic reformers, news sleuths, and exposés, to name a few—are premised on the notion that journalists dig deep to find their stories. No wonder, then, that events and issues are said to be "in the news," and journalists "in the know."

Journalism as a Mirror

Journalists see journalism as the work of observation, tantamount to gazing on reality or the objective happenings taking place in the real world. News is equated here to all that happens, without any filtering activity on the part of journalists. Journalism as a mirror is central to professional notions of objectivity, still prominent in the United States, and it presumes that journalists function primarily as recorders, observers, and scribes, reliably taking account of events as they unfold.

A central part of existing journalistic lore, the idea of journalism as a mirror surfaces among some of the most highly regarded reporters. Lincoln Steffens remembered his years on the *NewYork Evening Post* by recounting that "reporters

were to report the news as it happened, like machines, without prejudice, color, or style." Ernie Pyle's dispatches from the foxholes of World War II were said to have a "worm's eye" point of view, and Walter Cronkite's famous nightly sign-off on CBS—"And that's the way it is"—was built on the notion of journalism as a mirror. As Daniel Schorr told it, "the word 'reporting' was always closely associated in my mind with 'reality." 15

The notion of journalism as a mirror figures prominently in how journalists and news organizations present themselves to the public. It surfaces in catchphrases by which journalists describe their work—providing "a lens on the world," producing "newspaper copy," compiling "journalistic relays," offering "all the news that's fit to print." Publishers choose names for newspapers that play to the idea of journalism as a mirror of events, likening them to a sentinel, beacon, emblem, herald, standard, reflector, or chronicle.

The conception of journalism as a mirror also has particular resonance for the visual side of journalism. Not only do catchphrases like "having an eye on the news," or relying on "the camera as reporter" crop up, but the epithet for many local television news stations—"eyewitness news"—builds on the idea that journalists are able to reflect what they see into the processing of news. The camera is said to be a reliable and objective recorder of reality, with noted photographer Robert Capa saying that "if your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't close enough." As news photographer Don McCullin said of his time in Vietnam, Biafra, and Lebanon, "Many people ask me, 'why do you take these pictures?' It's because I know the feeling of the people I photograph. It's not a case of 'There but for the grace of God go I'; it's a case of 'Tve been there.' . . . My eyes [seem] to be the greatest benefactor I had." 16

And yet, the notion of journalism as a mirror is seen by many contemporary reporters as a less than viable way of explaining journalism. Recognizing the metaphor's limitations as a way of thinking about journalistic practice, Pete Hamill noted the following rules of journalism: "Things ain't always what they seem to be. . . . If you want it to be true, it usually isn't . . . [and] in the first twenty-four hours of a big story, about half the facts are wrong." ¹⁷

Journalism as a Story

Journalism, for many journalists, is reflected in notions of the "news story." The "story" describes what journalists produce when gathering and presenting news. Journalists refer to different kinds of news stories—items, briefs, reports, series, records, chronicles, accounts, and features—and have different expectations about the kinds of information each highlights, the style in which it is written, the position that it occupies in the newscast or newspaper, and the role it plays.

Journalists distinguish most frequently between the kinds of stories typical of hard and soft news, with the front pages of newspapers and top items of broadcast lineups commonly favoring the former over the latter. As Michael Schudson demonstrated in his history of American newspapers, practices of storytelling have long been central to distinctions made between journalism that informs and journalism that tells a gripping tale. Among journalism, hard news has long been associated with an absence of storytelling, involving no narrative technique whatsoever, though that notion is complicated by an increasing degree of attention to what Hugh Kenner called "the plain style"—a storytelling mode that strategically involves brevity, simplicity, and explicitness. Soft news, by contrast, uses a variety of narrative techniques to produce dramatic and heartrending stories, moral lessons, and compelling plotlines.

Getting the story is the imperative of every reporter. As one editor commented in 2003, "There are so many times when I hear reporters gripe about the fact that 'there just isn't a story there.' And that 'they can't believe they have to make a story out of this; nothing happened.' And yet, there in the paper the next morning is 12 inches of informative non-story." Journalists aspire to producing a "top or lead story," often a "special report"; in-depth efforts get labeled as the "story behind the story" or a "news series." And yet, good stories often come at the expense of good journalism. As the National Public Radio reporter Nina Totenberg said in reference to stories that she worked on and then threw away, "I've had more good stories ruined by facts." "21

Certain kinds of journalism are characterized by the kinds of stories they provide: human interest news, New Journalism, and literary journalism each take on storytelling forms that distinguish them from the larger world of journalistic relays. Hunter S. Thompson, credited with founding "gonzo journalism," consciously turned his writing into a blend of fact and fiction because "the best fiction is far more true than any kind of journalism—and the best journalists have always known this."²²

The downside of seeing journalism as a story has been the various violations involving storytelling—plagiarism, fabrication, misquotation. The plight of journalists who lost their jobs and reputation for such violations—Janet Cooke, Jayson Blair, Mike Barnicle—is often said to have developed on the backs of their strong storytelling skills.

Journalism as a Child

For many journalists, the news requires careful nurturing, and they position themselves as its caretakers. Journalism is seen as not only fragile and vulnerable—a phenomenon in need of attention, supervision, and care—but it often demands an unreasonable and unpredictable on-call status. No surprise, then, that journalists can and do adopt a parental stance, by which they necessarily attend to the news at all times. That position, which according to professional lore has been variously held responsible for journalists' fabled premature professional burnout, high divorce rates, and uneven social lives, tends to figure promi-

nently in popular cultural representations of journalists in fiction, television, and cinema.

This conception of journalism forces on journalists a watchdog role, by which they stand guard over the shaping of news, and at other times calls for a gentler nurturing role. Catchphrases like "putting the paper to bed"—which involves closing the press for the night, "sitting on a story"—which involves taking care of a story until it is time for publication, and "pampering" or "coddling" a story—which refers to elaborating a "thin" or unsubstantiated story line all build on this idea. And "feeding the beast," a reference to an always hungry press, describes a reaction to situations in which journalism's demands are excessive and go too far, not unlike those of an overly demanding child.

Journalism as a Service

Journalists think of journalism as a service in the public interest, one that is shaped with an eye toward the needs of healthy citizenship. A notion of service both to the profession and community permeates the language that journalists use in referencing journalism: news *service*, wire *services*, and news as being *in the general interest*. Journalists are said to "serve" London, Washington, and Beijing.

Serving the public surfaces frequently in journalists' discussions of their craft. Addressing journalists' isolation from the lives of poor and working-class individuals, *Columbia Journalism Review* reminded its readers that "we in the press have a responsibility to engage everyone." The *Washington Post* ombudsman Michael Getler complained that the tendency of newspaper chains to "work on the cheap" shortchanges "readers and our democratic foundations." Awards—the Pulitzer Prizes, National Magazine Awards, and Dupont Awards, to name a few—are regularly given for journalistic service.

The idea of journalism as a service has received renewed attention with the ascent of the public journalism movement, which defines journalism in conjunction with its ability to serve the public. Journalists' willingness to break with old routines, a desire to reconnect with citizens, an emphasis on serious discussions as the foundation of politics, and a focus on citizens as actors rather than spectators all position journalism squarely in the service mode.²⁵

How Scholars Talk about Journalism

Scholars borrow from various disciplinary interests in talking about journalism. Five definitional sets, none of them mutually exclusive, prevail in the scholarly literature.

Journalism as a Profession

Many scholars regard journalism, first of all, as a set of professional activities by which one qualifies to be called a "journalist." The designation was

helpful for organizing a basically disorganized group of writers in the 1900s into a consolidated group, but today journalists display few of the traits by which sociologists tend to identify professions—certain levels of skill, autonomy, service orientation, licensing procedures, testing of competence, organization, codes of conduct, and training and educational programs. ²⁶ In David Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit's words, "The modern journalist is of a profession but not *in* one. . . . The institutional forms of professionalism likely will always elude the journalist."

But other ways of understanding journalism as a profession point toward the term's broader resonance. Scholars argue that it provides a body of knowledge or ideological orientation about what to do and avoid in any given circumstance or that it constitutes an organizational and institutional firewall for reporters, safe-guarding against change, loss of control, and possible rebellion. Certain scholars are critical of the idea. Thomas Patterson explains the failure of journalists to energize a robust political sphere by pointing toward one of the long-standing supports for U.S. professionalism, the idea that journalists could and should be politically neutral. James Carey brands journalism's professional orientation "the great danger in modern journalism," because the client-professional relationship it implies leaves the public no real control over information and thus dependent on journalism for knowledge about the real world.²⁹

Nonetheless, the idea of journalism as a profession lives on, if unevenly so. Many quarters of the academy readily include the norms, values, and practices associated with professionalism as part of their curriculum, and concerns over professionalism remain implicit in much of the journalistic trade literature. Trade journals as wide-ranging as the *American Journalism Review, Quill,* and *Editor & Publisher* invoke journalistic professionalism in discussions over breaches of consensual journalistic practice and ongoing conversations about the need for stronger journalistic ethics. The outcries in 2003 over Jayson Blair and the *New York Times'* attempts to cleanse itself of his unethical behavior were shaped around invocations to professionalism.

Journalism as an Institution

Scholars often regard journalism as an institutional setting, characterized by social, political, economic, and cultural privilege. Journalism is seen here as a large-scale and complex phenomenon, whose primary effect is wielding power, shaping public opinion, and controlling the distribution of informational or symbolic resources in society. Although the institution simultaneously means the setting, the behaviors that constitute the setting, and the values by which the setting is organized, including organizations or formal groups that work according to collective standards of action, regarding journalism as an institution is by definition to address the historical and situational contingencies against which journalism performs a range of social, cultural, economic, and political tasks or

functions. That said, journalism by this view must exist institutionally, if it is to exist at all.

In thinking about journalism as an institution, scholars tend to search for the interfaces by which it links with other institutions, facilitating connections between journalism and the government, the market, culture, the educational system, and the religious establishment. Primary here has been work devoted to the study of the intersection between journalism and economics, highlighting patterns of ownership and convergence, corporate influences, deregulation and privatization, as well as journalism's impact upon the production and distribution of material goods and wealth. Other scholars have targeted the meeting point of journalism and politics, focusing on journalism's impact on public opinion, its blurring of public and private spheres, and its role in changing conventions of citizenship. In the production of the scholars have targeted the meeting point of journalism and politics, focusing on journalism's impact on public opinion, its

Adopting an institutional lens has facilitated global and comparative analyses of the news. Institutional pressures vary as nation-states jockey for power with the interests of broader economic corporations and global concerns.³²

Journalism as a Text

Scholars interested in the patterned relay of news see journalism as a text. The texts of journalism tend to have agreed-upon features—a concern with certain types of events (a fire, a summit conference, a murder), currency or timeliness, and factuality. In the United States, they also tend to display less readily articulated features—an anonymous third-person author, a generally reasoned and unemotional accounting of events, and an uncritical gravitation to the middle of the road on issues of contested public interest. In David Halberstam's view, such features have "required the journalist to be much dumber and more innocent than in fact he [is]." ³³

Seeing journalism as a text considers the public use of words, images, and sounds in patterned ways, and key here has been the evolving notion of different kinds of news styles—print and broadcast, mainstream and alternative, elite and tabloid. Scholarship over decades of research—produced by Helen Hughes, Robert Darnton, Roger Fowler, and G. Stuart Adam, to name a few—paved the way for thinking critically about the various ways in which a news text can be put together.³⁴ As the role of journalism has been claimed by an increasingly varied register of venues—the news magazine, the Internet, reality television, the comedy show—a focus on the texts they use shows how they resemble and differ from more traditional modes of reportage.³⁵ Seeing journalism as a text has also produced discussion of the frames through which journalists and news organizations structure their presentation of events, using story presentation as the prism for considering the lack of neutrality in U.S. news.³⁶

But scholars have not agreed about which journalistic features to analyze—words tend to take prominence over either images or sounds. Neither have they

agreed about which texts to appraise—one issue of a newspaper, one segment of a broadcast, or all existing coverage of a given event.

Journalism as People

Defining journalism through the people who work as journalists has been common since journalism's initial days of academic study. Although Walter Lippmann was first to note that "anybody can be a journalist—and usually is," others have offered more elaborated descriptions of the attributes of the journalistic community. In one view, journalists need

a knack with telephones, trains and petty officials; a good digestion and a steady head; total recall; enough idealism to inspire indignant prose (but not enough to inhibit detached professionalism); a paranoid temperament; an ability to behave passionately in second-rate projects; well-placed relatives; good luck; the willingness to betray, if not friends, acquaintances; a reluctance to understand too much too well (because *tout comprendre c'est tout pardoner* and *tout pardoner* makes dull copy); an implacable hatred of spokesmen, administrators, lawyers, public relations men and all those who would rather purvey words than policies; and the strength of character to lead a disrupted life without going absolutely haywire.³⁸

Scholars have made substantial effort at defining the wide range of traits characterizing the people we call journalists. J. W. Johnstone and his colleagues and David Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit in their stead were instrumental in conducting wide-ranging surveys of journalists in the U.S. context, providing a comprehensive picture of who they are, where they were educated, their values and beliefs, and the kinds of experiences they have as journalists.³⁹ Such work focused primarily on high-ranking individuals employed by recognized and elite mainstream news institutions.

A certain degree of residual disagreement over who is a journalist has lingered alongside the ongoing attempts to define the journalistic community. Early ambivalence over consideration of print setters, proofreaders, and copyeditors as journalists has given way to an ambivalence directed at individuals engaged in page layout, graphic design, video-camera editing, fact checking, and provision of Internet access. A common focus on the most prestigious national news organizations, and primarily on top editors and national reporters even there, has minimized academic attention to women, minorities, and holders of nonmainstream political views, all of whom have been employed more often in the ethnic press, weekly journals of opinion, and local and regional media.

Journalism as a Practice

Scholars also envision journalism as a set of practices. How to gather, present, and disseminate the news has been a key target of this lens, which has pro-

duced a flow of scholarly work on "getting the news," "writing the news," "breaking news," "making news," "news-making strategies," and "newsroom practices."

Thinking about journalism as a set of practices focuses on the practical and symbolic dimensions of news practice. Not only does journalism have pragmatic effects, such as information relay and agenda setting, but it is ascribed a crucial role in shaping consensus by relying upon tested routines, practices, and formulas for gathering and presenting the news. Scholarship by Gaye Tuchman, Herbert Gans, and Todd Gitlin, among others, established the register of features that characterize what we today recognize as news work.⁴⁰

As journalism has expanded into new technological frames, the set of practices involved in doing news work continues to change. Typesetting skills of the print room have given way to a demand for computer literacy, and an increasingly diverse list of sources necessitates changes in news practice, making journalism a more collective operation: using teams for fact checking, for instance, lends news making a collaborative dimension that it did not have in earlier days.

Still in need of attention are the alternative ways for thinking about journalistic practices. Those following the tenets of muckraking would be hard-pressed to deliver their relays through wire-service briefs. Literary journalism ranks the actions of journalists differently than does investigative journalism, a difference made more marked by the preferences of the Anglo-American tradition, which sides with briefer, fact-based chronicles, and its French counterpart, which prefers a more elaborated prose style.

The Usefulness of Definitions

Journalism is a phenomenon that can be seen in many ways—as a sixth sense, a container, a mirror, a story, a child, a service, a profession, an institution, a text, people, a set of practices. These ways of thinking about journalism suggest various routes through which we might approach journalism, the press, and the news media. They are useful here because each offers a way to think about how the press could work better than it does today. And in considering its role in democracy, the stated intent of this volume, there can be no more suitable aim.

How might the press serve democracy more effectively? Much is suggested by the broad range of terms through which journalism is defined here. We might remember that no one definitional set has been capable of conveying all there is to know about journalism. But taken together, they offer a glimpse of a phenomenon that is rich, contradictory, complex, and often inexplicable. That richness, those internal contradictions and complexities, and the fact that we cannot explain all of journalism's workings in one way at any given point in time all need to be sustained and nurtured. For recognizing their uneasy coexistence can help us see how the press might work better in contemporary democracy. Thomas

Paine is rumored to have said long ago that journalism helps us "see with other eyes, hear with other ears, and think with other thoughts than those we formerly used." In thinking about journalism, we might do well to heed his advice.

Notes

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- 18. Schudson, Discovering the News.
- 19. Kenner, "The Politics of the Plain Style." Also see Adam, Notes towards a Definition of Journalism.
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- 24. Cited in Laurie Kelliher, "Brits vs Yanks: Who Does Journalism Right?" Columbia Journalism Review (May/June 2004): 49.
- 25. See Rosen, What Are Journalists For?; Charity, Doing Public Journalism, and Merritt, Public Journalism and Public, Life.
- 26. See Schudson, Discovering the News; Schiller, Objectivity and the News; and Gaye Tuchman, "Professionalism as an Agent of Legitimation," Journal of Communication 28, no. 2 (1978): 111.
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