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# Introduction: On Finding New Ways of Thinking About Journalism

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# Introduction: On Finding New Ways of Thinking About Journalism

## **Abstract**

When a phenomenon is as widespread and as well known as journalism tends to be, it can seem counterintuitive to look for new ways of thinking about it. And yet finding new ways of thinking about journalism is point-center to ensuring journalism's future. As it faces mounting challenges of a political, technological, economic, cultural, and social nature, those who study journalism have a role to play in developing fuller ways of thinking about it. From the quandaries that arise when the public turns increasingly to comedy, irony, and satire as a viable mode of news delivery to those that ensue when threats to journalists' physical safety neutralize their ability to work, journalism today must contend with numerous problems that call on us, as scholars, to develop more responsive modes of inquiry. We need to develop inquiry that will not only reflect the changing circumstances in which journalism finds itself but anticipate them as well, because, judging from the present state of affairs, journalism means at once both too much and too little. And therein the real challenge to its future lies.

## **Disciplines**

Communication

# Introduction: On Finding New Ways of Thinking About Journalism

BARBIE ZELIZER

When a phenomenon is as widespread and as well known as journalism tends to be, it can seem counterintuitive to look for new ways of thinking about it. And yet finding new ways of thinking about journalism is point-center to ensuring journalism's future. As it faces mounting challenges of a political, technological, economic, cultural, and social nature, those who study journalism have a role to play in developing fuller ways of thinking about it. From the quandaries that arise when the public turns increasingly to comedy, irony, and satire as a viable mode of news delivery to those that ensue when threats to journalists' physical safety neutralize their ability to work, journalism today must contend with numerous problems that call on us, as scholars, to develop more responsive modes of inquiry. We need to develop inquiry that will not only reflect the changing circumstances in which journalism finds itself but anticipate them as well, because, judging from the present state of affairs, journalism means at once both too much and too little. And therein the real challenge to its future lies.

Journalism means too much because it has become a stand-in term for thinking about various modes of mediated communication in the public sphere, regardless of how much they have to do with journalism per se. In eclipsing other modes of public expression, journalism no longer necessarily references what were traditionally its more singular traits—its respect for exploration and discovery, its skills of writing and synthesis, its reliance on language, its craft. Instead, journalism has become a residual term for all things related to the delivery of current-affairs information, and with that invocation has come a slew of differently related lamentations about what journalists should and should not be doing: Politicians complain of journalistic bias; academics deride what they see as journalism's inferior investigation of real-world concerns; members of the public worry over a negligent realization of journalism's public obligations. In trying to be all things to all people, journalism ends up being not quite enough for any of them. It is everywhere and yet, paradoxically, nowhere.

Journalism means too little because it has never generated the kind of academic interest that attends to all that it is, and, more importantly, all that it could be. Its study has favored proven routes of academic investigation that stay close to familiar topics of inquiry rather than accommodate the changing landscapes in which journalism finds itself. While its practice has expanded rapidly across new territories—with claims routinely made by late-night television satirists, individuals with camera phones, and contestants on reality television shows that they too “do journalism”—journalism's inquiry has lagged behind the realities of news practice. Journalists have been caught in the crossfire of attacks between right and left, between academics and practitioners, between old school and new school, even between the humanities and social sciences, without the kind of broad and nuanced models that might encourage thinking about how journalism operates differently in different circumstances, via different forms and with different kinds of anticipated impacts for different kinds of audiences. In the absence of inquiry that reflects the variant kinds of news relay that exist, references to journalism have shrunk to occupy the space of least common offense, bifurcating into too many distinct—and separated—entities. Radio is separated from television, press, and the Internet; daytime television remains distinct from prime-time and late-night programming; columnists appear to

have little in common with photojournalists. The end result is that inquiry on journalism refers to much less than what is out there in the world.

And so this special issue of *Political Communication* was born. Journalism has been with us for as long as individuals in society have needed a way to share information about public events, and thinking about journalism has always depended on a set of core notions about what journalism is, broadly referencing the public record-keeping of certain happenings within a specified time frame. Yet what constitutes journalism is not constant. New modes of journalistic practice, new circumstances in which journalism can and does operate, and new purposes for which journalism is called into action have all contributed to an expansion of what journalism is. New ways of thinking about journalism need to reflect the broad, yet changing, assumptions about what journalism is for. In part, this is implicit in our scholarship, where differences already emerge when choosing a prism through which to think about journalism: Is it a craft, a profession, a set of practices, an institution, an industry, a text, a group of people, or a political phenomenon?

This issue, then, is a beginning attempt to articulate the givens in our inquiry on journalism and to challenge their universality. Drafted at a time in which the ongoing challenges that face contemporary journalists often eclipse journalism's capacity to provide the body politic with the information it needs to function as an informed citizenry, the articles here suggest that questions of purpose, of style, of character, of focus, of perspective all need to figure more centrally into what we want our journalism to be, even if the conditions on the ground do not facilitate their coming into being. The promise is that journalism endures, fiercely so, and with or without our help, it must continue to redraw its parameters in establishing and maintaining its relevance.

This special issue begins to redraw the scholarly parameters at journalism's side. Though it is only a beginning, the issue points us in the direction of addressing what we think we know about journalism and where what we know falls short of what exists on the ground.

## **Changes in Circumstance, Form, and Impact**

The articles here reflect changes in journalism that have occurred on three main fronts, circumstance, form, and impact.

The *circumstances under which journalism operates* no longer reflect the picture drawn by much of the traditional scholarship on news. Changing political mandates for journalism's operation across the globe, new questions about patriotism and autonomy, wavering standards for maintaining journalists' physical safety while on the job, the ascent of terrorism as an increasingly central spoke of journalistic attention, and the diminishment of the nation-state as the locus through which journalism finds its legitimacy all point to new ways of conceptualizing how journalists go about being journalists, for which purposes and to which ends.

Changes in circumstance are addressed by Silvio Waisbord, Michael Schudson, and James S. Ettema, each of whom ask us to reconsider givens in our thinking about journalism's role in democracies.

Silvio Waisbord overturns the long-presumed linkage between the nation-state and journalism to examine journalism in a condition of "statelessness," which characterizes a sizable part of the world. In tracking its effect on journalism in "Democratic Journalism and 'Statelessness,'" Waisbord argues that not only can journalism offset state fragility but that

journalism needs a functioning state apparatus to keep public life vibrant, itself a precursor of good journalism. He suggests expanding liberalism's notion of the state as enemy to a more inclusive understanding that sees the state as a necessary regulator of events that affect necessarily journalism's fortunes.

In "The Concept of Politics in Contemporary U.S. Journalism," Michael Schudson wonders whether too narrow a notion of politics has motivated journalists' connections with the polity. Noting that journalists have long privileged their role as informational providers beyond the other valuable functions they hold, he argues that journalists have a broader notion of politics than a Progressive Era vision would suggest. Schudson makes the case for advancing alternative visions of politics and suggests that these visions are already being followed by journalists in everyday practice.

James S. Ettema addresses the part that journalism is presumed to play in facilitating deliberative democracy in his article, "Journalism as Reason-Giving: Deliberative Democracy, Institutional Accountability, and the News Media's Mission." Arguing that journalism needs to assume a more active role in deliberative democracy than simply presiding passively over an uncritical forum for reason-giving, Ettema asks whether journalism can act more effectively as a reason-giving institution in pursuit of justice. Using the *Chicago Tribune's* campaign for the reform of capital punishment in Illinois as a spearhead for discussion, he makes the case for journalists themselves acting more as a reasoning institution, playing a more active role in evaluating claims made in the news and demanding accountability from public institutions. Here Ettema calls for an expanded and proactive journalistic function so as to meet the changing circumstances in which deliberative democracy operates.

The *forms of journalism* as we know them have changed dramatically over time, and perhaps nowhere is this as much the case as in the contemporary era. Today's technologies of journalistic relay embrace a variety of heretofore unrecognized channels—the "new media" embodied by online journalism, blogs, chat, and newzines; the "citizen journalism" found in camera-phones and video cams; the "public journalism" typical of public forums and interactive displays. Even the changing forms of live event coverage have altered the landscape, while the outliers to mainstream journalism—talk shows, documentary films, reality television, and satirical comedy shows—have become increasingly a part of the picture of how journalism looks today.

Changes in form are addressed here by Herbert Gans and by Pablo J. Boczkowski and Martin de Santos, who independently consider the ways in which the contemporary forms of journalistic relay coax our notions of "what is journalism" into new and unanticipated venues.

In "Everyday News, Newswriters, and Professional Journalism," Herbert Gans forces a rethinking of what we think journalism is and who we think is manning its operation. Focusing on so-called "amateur" involvement in journalism, as embodied in the ongoing exchange of information about events in the public sphere by individuals in a wide range of roles, Gans raises the question of what happens when journalists lose their monopoly on news. Raising the possibility of "everyday news," Gans ponders whether the increasing involvement of nonprofessionals in news-gathering and presentation suggests new models for thinking about how journalism manages its charter to the public.

Pablo Boczkowski and Martin de Santos consider how online journalism has impacted journalistic content in their article, "When More Media Equals Less News: Patterns of Content Homogenization in Argentina's Leading Print and Online Newspapers." Tackling the longstanding assumption that different technologies of news relay are thought to impact news

content, the authors show that such differences are not always as forthcoming as we might assume. They examine the interconnection between print and online journalism in Argentina, where they show a strong degree of homogenization across both modes of relay, rendering content more alike than different. Their article thus challenges longstanding assumptions about how news relay plays to the technological determinants of the medium at play. What does it mean when content becomes homogenized despite an increased proliferation of outlets, and what does this say about journalism more broadly, where, to paraphrase the 2006 State of the Media Report, “we have more outlets covering fewer stories”?

Finally, the various populations that attend to contemporary journalism are changing our understanding of what *journalism's impact* refers to. As journalism has moved across an increasing variety of distributional modes, different audiences have begun attending to the news in different ways. Populations like children, teenagers, ethnic communities, and the politically disenfranchised attend according to their own needs and thus require different parameters for journalism to function. How do these changes affect public perceptions of journalism, and to what degree do journalists themselves organize around changes in their perceived status? Moreover, what happens when these changes come from the margins, as has certainly been the case with the recent importation of materials from Al Jazeera into the mainstream U.S. news media?

Changes in impact are addressed by Aeron Davis in “Investigating Journalist Influences on Political Issue Agendas at Westminster.” Situating his analysis against one of the most frequently traveled topics in journalism inquiry—sourcing—Davis turns the intersection between journalism and the polity on its head by asking whether the agenda-setting paradigm through which many sourcing practices have been addressed is an effective prism to consider contemporary journalistic practice. Using a combination of ethnography and interviews, Davis focuses on the political processes in which U.K. journalists are involved when covering Westminster. He shows that journalists and journalism play a far more extensive role in setting agendas than much of the agenda-setting research would have us believe.

Long ago, Thomas Paine was said to have noted that democracy is about seeing things through other eyes. Hopefully, the same can be said about journalism, and this special issue is a small attempt to send us down that road. Thanks to David Paletz for conceiving the idea of thinking about journalists from a new platform; to Matt Carlson, who helped with the technical sides of giving it a form; to the reviewers who sharpened its parameters; and to the many scholars to whom this special issue speaks—both those represented here and those whose ideas were not granted space within this issue but who invigorate journalism’s study nonetheless.

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