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Book review

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Zelizer, B. 2017. *What journalism could be*. Malden: Polity Press. 256 pp.

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What journalism could be is the most recent book by Barbie Zelizer, one of journalism's leading contemporary scholars. It is a collection of book chapters and journal articles that she has published over a period of 25 years on different issues in journalism studies. The writings were selected because of their imaginative approach to understanding the foundations of journalism in terms of craft, economy, politics and morality in the new media ecology characterized by new technologies and globalization. The purpose is to call on scholars to interrogate commonly accepted theories and perspectives that often result in negative or worrisome conclusions about the future of journalism. Instead, the book invites us to acknowledge the possibilities of novelty and transformation to provide a more efficient answer to this changing context in which journalism operates, since "the flip side of exhaustion of a phenomenon is its triumph" (p. 7). Although some of the selected pieces of work were published many years ago, it turns out that their arguments are still relevant today and that the update provided reinforces their imaginative claim. In doing this, Zelizer puts forward a global perspective on what journalism looks like in the West and other parts of the world, thereby avoiding ethnocentric viewpoints and navel gazing that characterizes many inquiries in the Western world. As such, the book is highly relevant for the European and international field of communication research.

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The book starts off with a presentation of twelve metaphors that are used by journalists (e.g., journalism as a mirror) and scholars (e.g., journalism as a profession) to describe journalism. The metaphors are useful because each of them projects an ideal image of what journalism could be if it worked better than it does today, but they are also regularly challenged by Zelizer throughout the subsequent chapters of the book. These chapters are organized in three main sections, each presenting different ways of reimagining journalism and journalism studies.

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The first section presents three key tensions in journalism (eyewitnessing, democracy and ethics) and how they have stretched over time, pointing our attention to what journalism is and what it should be. Yet Zelizer invites the reader to think of more realistic ways to address these tensions and focus instead on what journalism could be. This is best illustrated in Chapter 4, in

which Zelizer challenges the taken-for-granted reciprocal relationship between journalism and democracy. The coverage of the 2015 refugee crisis is used as a case study to demonstrate that even in well-established western democracies, journalism does not always foster reasoned and democratic understanding of public issues, and that democracy is not always a prerequisite enabling good journalism. As such, the author calls for the retirement of normative thinking about what journalism should be in a democratic society in order to welcome more down-to-earth reasoning about what journalism could be, taking into account a range of complicating factors including new media, and corporatization or globalization.

The second section draws attention to the gap between journalism professionals and academic scholarship and puts forward several suggestions to strengthen ties between practice and theory. Chapter 6 presents an overview of the five dominant types of academic inquiry into journalism (sociology, history, language studies, political science and cultural analysis), while Chapters 7 and 8 zoom in on the contribution of communication and cultural studies, respectively. In Zelizer's view, these different fields of study are largely disconnected and thus fail to provide a comprehensive understanding of what journalism is in practice, and, moreover, consequently fail to anticipate where it needs to go and why. Here, she falls into a somewhat patronizing analysis that underrates the many good examples of interdisciplinary work that have already been accomplished. At the end of Chapter 6, she partly acknowledges this herself by referring to the establishment of conferences and divisions (e.g., the biannual and high-standing 'Future of Journalism' conference at Cardiff University, the ECREA and ICA Journalism Divisions) and journals (e.g., *Journalism Studies*, *Journalism Practice*, *Digital Journalism*) that focus specifically on studying journalism from an interdisciplinary perspective. Yet we can only underwrite her plea for continued investment in integrated academic inquiry that allows the gap with journalism practice to be closed.

The third section of *What journalism could be* is composed of three chapters that put forward alternative prisms for thinking about journalistic practice. Central here is an invitation to consider journalistic practice in all its shapes and colors instead of the dominant but restricted emphasis on traditional reporting practices in much research. For example, a discussion of journalists as members of an interpretative community instead of a profession (which has been a problematic assumption in academic inquiry for over a century) in Chapter 9 allows journalism's boundaries to be broadened and a more dynamic and up-to-date picture of its members, conventions, routines, and practices to be sketched.

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80 The final chapter brings these different arguments together and makes a
81 synthesis on how to predict the future of journalism in a more imaginative way.
82 Considering the fact that a Google search produced over 52 million hits for
83 the phrase “future of journalism” but mainly rendered anxious and negative
84 forecasts, Zelizer finds an explanation in scholars’, journalists’ and journalism
85 educators’ obsession with an ideal past addressing narrow definitions of ‘hard
86 news’ (excluding a plethora of news genres) produced by ‘professional’ journal-
87 ists (while the labor force has expanded, including, among others, fixers, citi-
88 zen journalists, and even engineers) to assess present and future directions in
89 journalistic practice. As she states on p. 249: “These dated discursive cues sug-
90 gest that while journalistic practices and those who act as journalists have
91 expanded, journalists have not exhibited similar expansion in their discussions
92 of themselves.” In addition to more reflexive thinking about journalism’s past,
93 she calls for more transparent and proactive reflections on journalism practice
94 and scholarship to advance our understanding of what journalism is in the
95 present and could be in the future.

96 The main contribution of *What journalism could be* lies in the fact that it
97 challenges accepted notions in journalism practice and journalism studies to
98 foster more imaginative and innovative thinking about journalism. Even though
99 Zelizer does not formulate concrete recommendations or predictions for future
100 directions in journalism practice and journalism studies, the book is highly
101 effective in its purpose to trigger more critical thinking about taken-for-granted
102 assumptions about journalism and its position within society at large. It is now
103 up to journalists, educators and academics to put these ideas to practice and
104 engage with the future of journalism in more creative and realistic ways.