

Journalism

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What is journalism? A colleague, whose specialty is journalism studies, once remarked that he never sought to define the term because “once I do, I’ll be out of a job.” While joking, he was making an important point: Journalism studies, as a field within the communication discipline, is inherently interesting in large part *because* of journalism’s definitional complexity—indeed, one could argue that the fortunes of the academic field have been inversely related to those of the legacy industry, the one growing in part because the other is struggling and evolving into something new (see Carlson, Robinson, Lewis, & Berkowitz, 2018). Struggles over defining what qualifies as journalism and who qualifies as journalist are ongoing contests that are more than discursive disputes; they are key points of departure for understanding the societal roles as well as social meanings of journalism as a feature of our twenty-first-century world. A textbook definition might fall back on the functional representation of “journalism” around which most can agree: *Journalism refers to the systematic gathering, filtering, and circulating of information deemed to be news and in the public interest.* However, that simplified version, while useful as a starting point, masks a great deal of complexity that lies below the surface.

Indeed, defining “journalism” may be one of the most complicated endeavors in this encyclopedia devoted to the study of journalism in its many forms and functions. Journalism is the backdrop against which the news-related people and processes, practices and products, are elaborated throughout this volume; as such, journalism is both everywhere in this volume and yet, ironically, perhaps nowhere else defined as such. Indeed, in the fast-growing field of journalism studies research—a field of inquiry that 20 years since its institutionalization now boasts several major journals, scores of studies published annually, and hundreds of scholars globally engaged in the study of news (Carlson et al., 2018)—one could scour the many pages of books, articles, and the like and yet be hard-pressed to find an actual definition of “journalism.” One can find many references to types of *journalisms* in the most pluralized sense and according to various social, cultural, political, economic, and technological dimensions—from participatory journalism, solutions journalism, and reciprocal journalism to data journalism, computational journalism, and peace journalism, to name but a few. But in these and many other iterations, more of the effort is paid to defining and conceptualizing the adjectival addition—for example, the “data” in data journalism—rather than the original noun being modified. In the singular sense, journalism is a comparatively neglected object of definition.

This neglect, however, is not for lack of discussion about the concept itself. Indeed, as Barbie Zelizer (2004) has shown, many different stakeholders have many different

ways for coming to terms, as it were, with this term. “Although one might think that academics, journalism educators, and journalists themselves talk about journalism in roughly the same manner, defining ‘journalism’ is not in fact consensual” (Zelizer, 2004, p. 13). Nor does this neglect of a single definition suggest that journalism studies, in skipping over a definition of its core object of study, is somehow unique; in fact, most scholars tend to focus on their narrow object of inquiry within their disciplines and subdisciplines rather than continually define and redefine their field as a whole. And yet, it may also be true that “journalism”—as a term, as a signifier for a field of study, as a representation for an occupation, and as a signal of purposes, processes, and sensibilities that may defy easy description—seems more slippery than most containers. This is particularly true in a digital era of social media, mobile hyper-connectivity, and human augmentation, when the hybridized nature of media—between old and new, publisher and platform, professional and amateur, institutional and individual, human and machine—is challenging basic boundaries of journalism and journalist; boundaries that, while never quite as enduring as popular mythology would lead people to believe about twentieth-century journalism, are nevertheless being contested and reconfigured around the world (Carlson & Lewis, 2015). As such, it may be particularly challenging to pin down journalism with a one-sentence summation that can serve to satisfy everyone. With that caveat, this encyclopedia entry seeks to synthesize the many definitions and offer a crystallization that, while hardly the last or even best word on this subject, may point toward explaining what we are talking about when we invoke “journalism.”

To begin, journalism as a term cannot be understood apart from its history. Explaining journalism as “a constellation of practices that have acquired special status within the larger domain of communication through a long history that separated out news sharing from its origins in interpersonal communication,” Barnhurst and Owens (2008) emphasize that journalism emerged as a thoroughly modern-era phenomenon. Telling others about events and information that are new to the listener (by definition “news”) has been a commonplace activity throughout humankind. But a practice limited mostly to one’s social and physical surroundings became distinct from ordinary communication with the advent of newsletters, which, in addition to being available only to those with literacy and leisure, “also required some facility to produce more than one copy and to distribute the result, as well as sufficient social status to make their activity appear to have value for recipients. The latter quality,” Barnhurst and Owens (2008) note, “has been the source of constant attention in journalism.” From the beginning, they argue, journalism was defined by certain essential features as a cultural practice: telling about events, providing novelty, and establishing truth based in fact. Later, as newsletters went from handwritten to printed and then to newsheets, and as mechanization allowed for circulating such news at scale, the definition of journalism broadened to include systems of production and distribution. Furthermore, Barnhurst and Owens (2008) argue, journalism’s claim to social distinction came through its “close alliance with political life,” insofar as early publishing, frequently linked to parties and partisanship, was often conducted under government control or in opposition to it. Journalism thus emerged “at the nexus of negotiating boundaries to demarcate private life, civil society (or the market), and the state from each other”—leading, for example, to notions of journalism’s interstitial role in facilitating a public sphere, a domain apart from government

yet maintained in public where debates about civic life could occur. Finally, they suggest that by the nineteenth century, with the growth of literacy, nationalism, and government information systems such as the post, and with the industrialization of newspapers as key drivers of economic activity, the term “journalism” came to refer to the group of occupations engaged in crafting and circulating news—with journalists, in particular, becoming “chief among workers” for their visible role as reporters and writers (and, later, broadcasters).

Against this historical backdrop, journalism in the twentieth century became a professionalized practice, one with high modern aspirations to act in the public interest. Accordingly, journalists fashioned themselves as fact-based, ethical, autonomous, and neutral observers—even if the cleanliness of that image was not necessarily reflected in the messy practices of negotiating personalities, politics, and proclivities within and beyond the newsroom, as sociologies of “making” news have shown since the time of David Manning White’s (1950) classic study of the news gatekeeper and Warren Breed’s (1955) examination of social control in the newsroom. And yet, such ethnographic accounts of newsrooms past and present also have shown how durable and enduring news production practices can be, even in the face of digital disruption and industry upheaval. Institutional tendencies and routinized patterns remain hard to overcome when so thoroughly cemented as a form of identity and culture (Broersma & Peters, 2013; Ryfe, 2013). Indeed, particularly in the U.S. context, Ryfe (2013) argues that the ideals of journalism have not varied greatly since their emergence in the 1920s, grounded in detachment, objectivity, and independence. In his reading, the “symbols that compose the culture of journalism” (p. 11)—principles such as “cover the story but do not become the story,” norms such as objectivity, and practices such as verification—not only remain stubbornly unchanged, but are essential determinants by which certain people, organizations, and activities come to be accounted as adequately “journalistic.” In the context of metropolitan newspapers, which are often used as a stand-in representation for journalism writ large, journalists “can *imagine* new kinds of journalism” but nevertheless “find it exceedingly difficult to do journalism differently” (p. 23, emphasis original).

Journalism is thus a complex and consequential social practice. It is one with particular meaning because it “seeks to observe and communicate what it learns of social importance, something called news, and in doing so is always in the process of creating a public by bringing it into synchronized conversation with itself” (Reese, 2016, p. 2). Schudson (2003) similarly frames journalism according to its professionalized practices that carry a public orientation: “Journalism is the business or practice of producing and disseminating information about contemporary affairs of general public interest and importance. It is the business of a set of institutions that publicizes periodically (usually daily) information and commentary on contemporary affairs, normally presented as true and sincere, to a dispersed and anonymous audience so as to publicly include the audience in a discourse taken to be publicly important” (p. 11). Elsewhere, Schudson (2003) defines journalism according to what it “can do for democracy,” such as by informing the public, serving as a watchdog, offering analysis, encouraging social empathy, and providing a forum for debate. Many studies take this normative stance as

a key point of departure, if merely implicitly: Journalism matters and is worth studying because, by definition, it is publicly and democratically significant.

Many scholarly accounts define journalism according to these idealized, professionalized dimensions. But, as Zelizer (2004) has shown, journalism may be understood quite differently depending on one's background, education, experience, and so forth. "Defining journalism," she says, "emerges from the tacit knowledge and interpretive strategies that people share when thinking about journalism as a phenomenon" (p. 13). When patterned and persistent, these modes of thinking result in "interpretive communities" that determine the boundaries of knowledge around a given phenomenon—in this case, what journalism means, why it matters, and how it should be studied. For example, in contrast to how they are portrayed by the interpretive community of researchers, "journalists tend to take exception to the idea that they make or construct the news, preferring to see their role as one of holding up a mirror to events rather than reflecting the acts of negotiation, power brokering, and resource management that typify newsroom practices" (p. 14). Zelizer (2004) thus offers a reminder that "fields of inquiry work from their own interpretive assumptions," and that "while such assumptions help researchers fashion broad statements about how journalism might work, they also facilitate an inattention to their relative and partial nature and limited applicability" (p. 15).

From that vantage point, Zelizer (2004) offers a tour de force in classifying journalism. Exploring the varieties and complexities inherent in representations of terms such as "journalist," "news," and "media" in relation to "journalism," she argues that journalism is "comprised of many contradictory sets of people, dimensions, practices, and functions" (p. 29). In breaking these down further, she outlines how *journalists* talk about journalism. They describe journalism as a sixth sense, with one having "a nose for news"; as a container, with certain dimension and depth "holding" the day's news; as a mirror, or an unfiltered and objective representation of reality; as a child, or the view that journalists are caretakers of the news, nurturing and supervising it; and as a service, or inherently connected to citizenship and the public good. Then, she describes how *scholars* talk about journalism across five dominant definitions: as a profession, as an institution, as a text, as people, and as a set of practices. First, "journalism as a profession" denotes those activities by which one qualifies to be called "journalist," and is invoked to talk about norms, values, and practices within the occupational system. Second, "journalism as an institution," a perspective often adopted in critical/cultural, political economy, and ideology studies, assumes that journalism "exists in or functions as an institutional setting characterized by social, political, economic, and/or cultural privilege" (p. 36). The third view, "journalism as text," puts emphasis on "news" texts and "the public use of words, images, and sounds in patterned ways," as in the evolution of "story" as the defining mode of journalistic expression (p. 38). The fourth definition, "journalism as people," points to the way scholars have long used surveys and interviews to represent journalism through the attitudes and activities of people who work as journalists—even though such accounts have too often focused on elite journalists at the expense of more inclusive categorizations (see Deuze & Witschge, 2018). Fifth and finally, "journalism as a set of practices" acknowledges that journalism is defined by how news is collected, organized, presented, and circulated—from notions of "breaking

news” and “making news” to the technologically directed forms of work that have been the focus of many recent studies, and according to routines that have interested historians, sociologists, and others interested in tracking conventions of news work.

What brings together these perspectives, Deuze (2005) argues, is an occupational ideology of journalism that spans the teaching, practicing, and studying of journalism. This ideology benchmarks journalistic actions and attitudes around four key ideal-typical standards: “providing a public service; being objective, fair, and (therefore) trustworthy; working autonomously, committed to an operational logic of actuality and speed (preeminent in concepts such as reporting on breaking news, getting the story first); and having a social responsibility and ethical sensibility” (Deuze & Witschge, 2018, p. 167). More than a decade later, “this conceptualization is still strong within the field today and seems to endure even in the midst of profound changes and challenges to the profession” (p. 167). Nevertheless, as Deuze and Witschge also note, this inside-out definition of journalism, focusing on its supposedly stable core, may be popular with industry insiders and researchers but is misleading in its seamlessness. At the same time, however, “it would be a mistake to assume that the type of journalism emerging outside and alongside legacy news organizations are necessarily different or oppositional to the core values, ideals, and practices of the profession” (p. 168). They argue for moving beyond a false dichotomy between core and periphery approaches to understanding journalism by developing a bottom-up representation of journalism.

Indeed, a cohesive ideological construction of journalism is increasingly out of step with journalism as a lived experience. For journalists, their work is increasingly freelance-based, atypical, and entrepreneurial (Deuze & Witschge, 2018). For citizens, news consumption, once associated with certain spatial and temporal rhythms of daily life, is becoming “de-ritualized” (Broersma & Peters, 2013, p. 8); in its place, for most people, is incidental exposure to news across many sources, platforms, and interstitial slices of the day. Moreover, the modernist logic of journalism’s self-presentation may clash with broader societal shifts that prioritize the individual over the institutional. As Broersma and Peters (2013) note, “while the *societal role* of journalism may be enshrined in many influential documents—the idea of a free press being fairly central to democracy—unfortunately, its *societal relevance* is not” (p. 2, emphasis original). In their view, obsessive hand-wringing about resolving journalism’s woes—from struggling business models to fragmenting audiences to declining influence—may be distracting from the larger, more structural problem: that high-minded assumptions about what journalism *does*, important though they are, may not match the reality of how journalism is actually perceived by people and incorporated (or not) into their everyday lives. What may be required is nothing less than a complete rethinking of what journalism is and why it matters.

In that vein, scholars have been questioning key assumptions surrounding journalism. For example, Josephi (2013) argues that associating journalism with democracy is “too limiting and distorting a lens through which journalism can be viewed in the 21st century” (p. 445). She also notes that “even if fears of the demise of journalism are generated by scholars in North America, no such decline can be observed in Asia, Africa and Latin America” (p. 443). Together these point to two key shortcomings in journalism

studies: an overwhelming emphasis on the Global North at the exclusion of the Global South, and taken-for-granted ideas about journalism, politics, and citizenship that may be misleading. A more grounded appraisal, according to Nielsen (2017, p. 1251), would acknowledge this reality: that “a few thousand over-worked and increasingly under-paid and inexperienced white-collar professionals” we call journalists, buffeted within “sometimes existentially threatened media organizations,” are toiling away trying to cater to a fickle audience—“people who see themselves as citizens only occasionally and as one amongst many identities, and engage with news to widely varying degrees.”

Scholars have also begun to question anthropocentric assumptions about journalism as a distinctly human endeavor, at a time when algorithms, automation, and artificial intelligence (AI) complicate long-standing ideas about who (or what) produces journalism. Such technologies draw attention to the nonhuman material artifacts that are imbricated in how news is made (e.g., automatically generated by software) and how it moves (e.g., through algorithmic personalization and AI). For example, Lewis and Westlund (2015) have argued for a more encompassing perspective of cross-media news work, one that situates journalism as the outcome of a broader array of people, platforms, and processes—a “system of actors, actants, and audiences engaged in a complex set of media activities” (p. 34). To define journalism, then, is to better account for the roles of non-journalist humans (such as technologists) and nonhuman technologies (such as algorithms and automation) in the production and distribution of information classified as “news.”

Ultimately, because dominant definitions are an expression of discursive and epistemic authority, future research should acknowledge power dynamics associated with them. Who or what has the power to shape what counts as journalism—and how do such representations influence the power expressed in and through journalism (see Carlson et al., 2018)? For example, as Barnhurst and Owens (2008) note, “While scholars debate the power relations of journalists in media and political systems, journalists see multiple threats to their powers to practice in safety, to retain political autonomy, and to resist losses in their tenuous professional status.” Taking power into account, definitions of journalism can better articulate the forces that shape how people and publics make sense of information, what part journalists have to play in that process, and, in the end, why journalism matters at all.

SEE ALSO: Interpretive Community; Journalism Studies; Journalistic Roles; Journalists; News; News Judgment, News Values, and Newsworthiness; Objectivity; Professionalization of Journalists; Historical

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Further reading

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