

## **Definitional Essay: Journalism Studies**

**John Bermingham. Oct. 6, 2014.**

As mass media journalism undergoes a tectonic disruption of its business model, fragmenting news audiences and undermining traditional journalist roles, the need for journalism studies has never been more urgent. For the 'breadth' component of the comprehensive examination, my readings will analyze these shifts, and their effects on journalism and democracy, but they will also cover how new opportunities have arisen for democratic alternatives to mainstream journalism.

This research will form the background to an exploration of key theoretical debates in the field of journalism studies, and provides the basis for future dissertation research, which will examine the arguably growing influence of public relations on news journalism. I will draw upon the political economy, cultural studies and sociological approaches.

I define journalism studies as "the multidisciplinary study of journalism as an arena of professional practice and a subject focus for intellectual and academic inquiry" (Franklin, 2005, p. 128). In conducting the readings in journalism studies, primary concern is given to the performance of journalism in relation to its democratic expectations, particularly in light of the tension between news media as a public/political institution, and also as a capitalist enterprise.

The course of study will refer to five theoretical traditions, as frameworks for research. Firstly, critical political economy will help to analyze the relationship between journalism and capitalism. It situates the history and development of journalism within an economic context, in forging its business model, and how journalism operates in a market system. Second, I will analyze normative models of the democratic role of journalism, drawing in particular on the traditions of liberal-pluralism (including such variants as competitive elitism and deliberative democracy) and the public sphere. Thirdly, field theory will facilitate examination of the news media as an institutional field with a distinct set of beliefs and practices, yet one that also engages in relations with other professional and institutional fields. Fourth, a 'hierarchy of influences' model will assess internal and external forces that influence mediated news production. Finally, a cultural studies approach will be useful to engage the audience dynamics, along with framing, priming and encoding. In the course of applying these traditions, I will also

be evaluating them in terms of their contributions to the understanding of the performance of the media, in terms of its democratic expectations.

The broader knowledge of journalism studies, resulting from this comprehensive study, will provide a solid foundation for my dissertation research, a thorough understanding of the journalism studies field, and the ability to ask better questions going forward. In a word, I hope to better match the map with the constantly shifting media territory.

My readings will revolve around five areas of theoretical tension that form the basis of a contemporary understanding of journalism studies.

### **1. Normative expectations and effectivity of journalism, in relation to democracy:**

This set of readings will engage the debate over the mass media's normative role in liberal-pluralist, Western democracy. What are the main traditions or paradigms in normative reasoning about the appropriate roles of journalism in democracy? It will examine media's role in the public sphere: facilitating debate and deliberation, while at the same time also constraining it. (Butsch, 2007; Calhoun, 1992; Habermas, 1991).

It will survey a pioneering study of comparative media systems, one that employs differentiation theory (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and will look at how democratic societies organize public communication, where most media are also privately-owned (Christians, 2009; Curran, 2011). It will compare journalism's normative role with actual performance, taking into account its market-liberal, public sphere and radical democracy perspectives on this question (Hackett, 2005; Hackett & Carroll, 2006). One key question concerns the extent to which public distrust and low credibility of journalism are linked to corporate media ownership and an ideology that valorizes global trade, marketization and monetization of news content, often excluding opposition to the media consensus.

In investigating this area of theoretical tension, I will consider the question of how effective public sphere, normative descriptions are in arriving at a contemporary understanding of journalism, compared to the historical and critical approaches?

This section will also address the political impact of journalism, and its imbrication within democratic structures. It will address the effectivity of journalism, through its actual performance

in liberal democracy. It will examine the different contributions journalism makes to the construction of public issues, in relation to normative democratic theory. To what extent is journalism a positive or negative force in its influence over democratic discourse? The contribution of journalism to how public issues are addressed, in particular, and how they are played out in a political setting (Blumler, 1995; McNair, 2000) On the other hand, I will analyze the democratic potential and performance of the new media (McChesney & Nichols, 2002; Cottle, 2008; Fenton, 2010). How does mediatised political discourse influence democratic engagement within the public sphere, and where are the sites of contestation and struggle? (Calhoun, 1992; Papacharissi, 2009).

## **2. The influences on journalism:**

This section will look at the forces, logics and factors (including, but not confined to institutional interests) that shape the functioning and content of news media. The readings will take a critical look at the roles of participants in the media, particularly those with influence over news coverage; including government, corporations, media owners, editors, and of course, journalists.

After defining the field of journalism studies, I will study how it addresses such issues as structure, agency and power (Benson, 2005), democratic engagement (Curran, 2010; McChesney, 2008) and the online news environment (Deuze, 2004; Hermida, 2010).

In terms of political communication, I will critically engage with journalism's relationship with political power (Davis, 2007; Allan, 2010). I will engage themes and variants within the critical political economy of mass media (McChesney, 2010), including the commercialization of news (Fenton, 2010); journalism within capitalist society (Beam, 2009; Calcutt & Hammond, 2011), and the journalistic field (Bourdieu, 1996; Benson & Neveu, 2005). What is the role of journalism within a hegemonic power structure? (Atton, 2002; McChesney, 2010)

After asking "what are journalists," I will review journalism practices such as objectivity and news values, as aspects of a professional ideology that potentially influences information content (Shoemaker, 1996; Hackett, 1998; McChesney, 2008; Maras, 2013). I intend to research the origins of professionalism, paralleling the rise of commercialism and communication technology (Curran, 2002). I will consider the question of whether objectivity is even possible in a

commercial media system (Hackett, 1998; McChesney, 2008) How would a field theory approach assess journalists' professionalism and interactions with other institutional fields? (Bourdieu, 1996; Benson, 2005) My readings here also include a critique of media as a tool of legitimation for an elite political and economic agenda within the arena of class struggle (McChesney, 2000). It will look at the news effects of framing (Gitlin, 2003), agenda-setting and priming (Iyengar, 2010). Finally, it will re-examine professional norms within the new media environment (Peters, 2013).

### **3. The Journalism Crisis: Media Industry and Labour Perspectives**

What are the contributing causes to the current structural problems in contemporary mass media, particularly in the U.S., and how has this crisis disrupted news values, journalistic practices, gatekeeping and agenda-setting? (Beam, 2009; Fenton, 2010; State of the Media, 2013) I intend to analyze the recent transformation of journalism through audience, technological and economic shifts, and whether it presages a significant shift in the control over news discourse away from corporate media (Allan, 2010; Fenton, 2010; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2009; Winseck, 2011). These readings encompass a history of journalism, and the role of the journalist today in the context of a collapsing business model (Curran, 2011; McChesney, 2008), and a critical assessment of journalism within contemporary capitalism (Calcutt & Hammond, 2011; Downing, 2009; McChesney, 2010). The readings will identify the constituent elements in the journalism crisis, such as the business model, technology, the labour process, working conditions, and a re-conceptualization of the journalist's role within the new media.

This section will also address the implications of the current structural transition for journalism as labour (Deuze & Fortunati, 2011). It will examine the consequences of technological disruption on journalist numbers, their work routines, and increasing participation by the audiences in journalistic work (Deuze & Fortunati, 2011; Terranova, 2004). It will also look at the journalism crisis as one of identity and legitimacy. More broadly, these readings will situate the pressures on journalists within an online environment and what some writers (Webster, 2014) calls the 'information society', especially in the digital labour by audiences (Fuchs, 2014).

#### **4. Digitized Journalism:**

This section includes the effect of digitization on mass media, in particular, the tension between the promise of greater opportunities for democratic engagement on the Internet, as well as its constraints (Curran et al, 2012; McChesney, 2013). To what extent has the Internet enhanced and/or undermined the democratic functioning of journalism? How does the Internet map onto journalism's democratic functions; as alternative and citizen journalism (Atton, 2002; Lievrouw, 2011); in the political economy of the internet (Curran et al, 2012; McChesney, 2013), as well as in the transformation of mass audiences into interactive co-creators in the journalism production process (Pavlik, 2000; Philo, 2008; Ornebring, 2010; Bruns, 2011; Calcutt & Hammond, 2011;).

#### **5. Alternatives to Hegemonic Journalism:**

These readings will define, describe and evaluate alternative journalism as a conflictual force of resistance to mainstream media (Atton & Hamilton, 2008). It will include citizen journalism and various forms of audience participation in the news production process (Allan, 2013; El-Nawawy, 2013), including media participation as 'alternative democracy' (Dahlgren, 2013). It will look at alternatives to mainstream journalism as a social issue (Curry Jansen, 2012), and as a media reform movement (Hackett & Carroll, 2006; McChesney & Nichols, 2002). In addition, it will survey the recent rise in online investigative journalism and radical journalism, as a means of democratic renewal (Bailey, 2007; Forde, 2011). Throughout this section of readings, I will be testing the tension between the hegemonic and oppositional 'pull' within online media.

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