

Professional Identity of Journalists

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One of the main approaches used in the study of the professional identity of journalists has drawn upon functionalist research models. By and large, these approaches focus on three elements: the profession's dominant representation and its capacity to ensure group cohesion; the relationship between these representations and the realization of a social function; and the way these relationships result in a common ideology and imply a specific approach to their work. Throughout, journalistic identity is associated with producing and disseminating news, defending public interest, and promoting democracy. In correlation with these functions, journalists share a set of values based on principles like objectivity and impartiality. This belief system not only promotes common journalistic routines and procedures, but also the construction of a discourse of legitimacy based on the existence of a journalistic expertise: the capacity to determine what is news, verification for factual accuracy, respect of deadlines, and a shared sense of newsworthiness. Hence, professional identity is based on a shared set of values, definitions of role, and interests—the mechanics of cohesiveness through which journalists give meaning to their work, negotiate and assign fundamental values to their practices, and construct an aura of authority based on a collection of competencies (Zelizer, 1993).

Within this definition are numerous deep-seated dilemmas that elicit debate within the community of scholars more or less aligned with this functionalist paradigm. First of all, it appears to construct only a partial view of the professional group, ignoring the diversity of statuses, practices, and values in constructing a core definition. Second, discourse on professional values offers an extremely normative perspective of journalism that appears to suggest that journalists adhere to an established role and ethics. In this sense, the discourse on professional values and attitudes may mask material aspects of journalistic work. Third, it implies a very real risk of reducing professional journalistic identity to that of Western models, particularly those of northern countries.

In parallel with these functionalist approaches, another current of research emerged structured around journalistic roles in an attempt to shed light on, and account for, the constitutive heterogeneity of journalism. Research on roles makes it possible to aggregate differentiated practices, to recognize the identity representations journalists create, and to better understand collective norms as well as the contribution of journalism and journalists to the functioning of society. These roles are often dichotomous:

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gatekeeper/advocate, neutral/participant, adversarial/loyal, consumer/citizen-oriented, and others.

Comparative research has become a mainstay of journalism scholars interested in professional identity over the last few decades. Voluminous transnational research projects have resulted in comparisons between different professional cultures, levels of professionalism, and the professionalization processes. These studies also map the common traits of national journalism impacted by globalization and the emergence of a form of global journalistic culture. While largely modeled on a Western methodology, comparative research has also led to an increase in study of journalism in Africa, the BRICS countries, and Eastern Europe.

Though comparative research addresses the plurality of social roles and conceptions inherent in journalism, journalistic identity remains normative and media-centric. In response, another group of researchers has sought to examine how professional identity is constructed, how it establishes itself, how it forms a group, and how these professional groups construct and transform themselves, and manage the inherent blurred boundaries of their profession (Ruellan, 1993). From these perspectives, the study of identities is driven by both the idea that the blurred boundaries of journalism are constitutive and constructive, and by conceptions shared by those who make up the world of journalists. The first perspective views journalism as a historical and collective construct based on aspects both permanent and evolving, while the second sees it in the context of journalism as collective practice. Through the careful study of historical and collective processes and those of desires and personal choices, the present entry attempts to describe these aspects around three main axes: their place in history, their collective dimension, and their relationship to the career of journalists.

Professional individuals and groups are products of history; their own, but also one beyond their own with roots deep in the past. The history of journalism and journalists demonstrates that it had to carve a place for itself to survive; that it had to become established by distinguishing itself from competing discursive practices. In nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and America, journalism was neither the first nor the only activity claiming to describe reality in the making: literature, painting, politics, and science all laid claim to it.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, literature addressed topics of greater and greater social significance to the point of creating a “literary journalism.” From beginnings in romanticism, love stories, and epic battles, European writers began adopting an ever more realistic style and subject matter. In the United States, novelists tackled social issues like slavery, racial discrimination, and the life of ordinary folk during the Great Depression. Nascent early twentieth-century Latin American regionalism strove to construct a new secular history by injecting into the realist wave of European bourgeois literature elements of working class oral culture.

Literature is inspired by concrete things—writers research, travel, and take part in events—therefore it becomes a channel for disseminating information. Painting followed the same evolution in the nineteenth century. Though it may have been initially inspired by religious (faith-based subjects and experiences) and romantic (nature, romance, and historical figures) themes, it increasingly depicted regular life, work, day-to-day relations, the streets and cities, culture, military conflicts, and

colonial conquests. Though it may have inherited some aspects of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century painting, it was no longer rooted in moral discourse, philosophy, or romanticism—realistic and descriptive became the new order of the day. Journalism emerged concurrently and was inspired by this trend in literature and painting toward a more realistic representation of society.

Indeed, as the journalistic product became an industrial practice (during the mid-nineteenth century in Europe and North America, and the beginning of the twentieth century in South America) and circulation and the number of working journalists increased significantly (more and more were needed to fill the pages of an increasing number of newspapers), two other vehicles appeared on the horizon, staking their own claim to information, society, and news: political discourse (politicians describing and analyzing political and social phenomena were omnipresent in newspapers) and sociology (a new discipline evolving since 1850 on the fringes of philosophy and literature, and which, around 1895, settled on science as its vehicle of choice).

These parallels are often invoked by journalists and fuel continually the collective discursive construction of journalism and its professional identities. They explain why journalists today still identify with a pluralistic identity inherited from literature, a visual aesthetic, politics, and sociology. This heritage is noticeable in the journalistic assertion that it is not confined to “just the facts”—it claims to impact through literary style (reporting considered its foundational genre and essential to its narrative), visual aesthetic (the value of portrait photography and photo journalism determined by its visual impact), influential discourse (journalistic values include political and social engagement), and analysis (journalists claim to not only describe events, but to also relate them to a context and structures). In other words, the ideal representation of journalism comprises elements of literature, painting, politics, and sociology, and its contemporary identity can only be understood in the context of this historical heritage.

These relationships also explain how the representative organizations (the professional groups) struggle with a less ideal vision of journalism—an emerging, heavily critical representation of a journalism of complicity, a market-driven journalism, indeed, an “ambient journalism.”

Constructed in the gaps between several forms of discourse that each claimed to have the tools to describe and analyze society, journalism survived by establishing its specificity and power relations with its environment. With time, numerous groups of journalists were created by gradually excluding competing discursive parties from their areas of competence. This process of exclusion was sophisticated in that journalists had to work on two fronts: materially, they exiled from the social realm of journalism all those who inconvenienced them, while symbolically they tried to conserve the cultural heritage of those same competing parties. This push to exclude took place by way of a struggle for exclusivity: the title of “journalist” had to be reserved for a select group; professional ID cards handed out, rules of professional conduct established, and union particularities followed. Journalists sought these exclusions because they were fighting for their jobs and their benefits. From a sociological perspective, this struggle for control of a workplace is anything but new. In fact, all of the actions mentioned above reflect conflictual processes typical of competition for jobs and benefits (material and social). All who attempt to establish a domain that profits only themselves act in

the same way: they pretend to do it in society's interest (the public interest), and they create organizations capable of defending their conception. The study of the relevant unions and professional organizations is particularly interesting in that it can lead to the examination of identity in the context of its collective dimension and to the understanding of how united individuals create their conceptions in close relationship with their context—the society in which they exist. This perspective also helps shed light on the extent to which major political transitions affect and shape professional identities, perhaps even distracting them from their original purpose (Frère, 2016).

But journalism as a collective practice also has repercussions on a host of other processes, resulting in the appropriation by other professions of the narrative techniques (collection, processing, and dissemination of information) of journalism and the building of a unique rapport with an audience. Journalism in practice can therefore be considered a *space* shared with other professionals (in communications or marketing, for example) who make use of the relationships that the media have established with readers by adapting them to their own needs. This constant reinvention of journalism (Ringoot & Utard, 2005) serves to push back the boundaries of journalistic representation—as it is in practice. In this way, citizens, ordinary journalistic sources, and institutions can (and are encouraged to) practice these forms of journalism without having to lay claim to belonging to the professional group. This diversification of journalistic identities leads researchers to constantly rethink the reality of professional borders and to integrate defining features that do not always fit the ideal representation of the professional group. The image of the entrepreneurial journalist is a prime example of today's ambivalence between the desire to defend a vision of an innovative and autonomous relationship with the job market, and to critique the relationship of a “free market at any cost” with employment and the consequent loss of autonomy for journalists.

The conception of journalism as a work space or collective practice has opened the way over the last few decades for studies closer to the day-to-day of journalists and other agents participating in news production. From the classic 1970s studies of the newsmaking tradition to the numerous ethnographic studies carried out over the last 15 years (most notably of online newsrooms), research has made it possible to examine more closely professional routines, the manifestation of a journalistic ethos in the workplace, and the ever-present negotiations involved in day-to-day journalistic production. The journalist is thus seen as someone functioning within a framework of daily routines—work-related activity—as defined by an organization, processes, and ways of doing things, whether proposed, imposed, or negotiated. The journalist exists because he produces something day in, day out, through the relationships he builds in the everyday of his work. He *is* also because he shares with others a certain material dimension of work: a desk, a work space, tools. The spatial organization of production areas offers a framework (instituted by the media enterprise) that structures the representations of the occupation, the professional practices of the employees, and the news creation processes. These spaces obscure a fundamental importance in the representation journalists have of their work; that they share a common space whether it be in the newsroom, or outside its walls (in the field or e-working).

To study journalism from a sociohistorical perspective helps bring research into focus on two levels: the collective and the individual. A professional exists through

her relationships—with her colleagues and her bosses, with her sources, and with her media's audience. She acts, driven by the occupational representations created as her career progresses; by the journalistic references she identifies with; by those she is fond of or admires; by the route her career takes; and by her life story. She exists also by way of the culture (the values, standards, and routines) prescribed to her during her training and throughout her work life. She acquires this culture in part because she participates in its construct with others. From the beginning of a career to its conclusion, the world profoundly changes; technology, economics, social relations—nothing is the same, and that is also the product of the individual, seeing as she contributed to its evolution. She is the fruit of historical interactions between occupations, uses the wiggle room she is afforded (Lemieux, 2010), argues or comes to terms with her sources, and tries to stand out from the crowd or specialize. In the long term, discursive strategies emerge that frame the boundaries of the occupation (Le Cam, 2009), professional ideologies or mythologies develop (Aldridge, 1998), and imaginary discourses about media are circulated.

In one way, to be a journalist, or rather, to become a journalist, is to build a career based on multiple choices through which the actors negotiate their participation in the profession according to interactions with *the other*. These choices are the result of individual motivations, ties with the profession, and personal and professional projects, but also of the different realms of activity available (or being created) in journalism. This constitutive heterogeneity of journalistic identity is observable in the diversity of careers—in the different ways of being a journalist (media company employee, freelancer or entrepreneur, generalist or specialist, reporter, columnist or editor, literary journalist, community manager or data journalist, and so on). Each career branch has its signature access route and mobility options, a corpus of specific knowhow, professional ideologies, and lifestyles.

Journalistic careers therefore unfold in time and space. The difficulties encountered in accessing job markets, the competencies judged indispensable to be a “good journalist,” career paths, and mobility all change over time and differ according to national contexts. For example, in large areas of Latin America, corporate communication and public relations were folded into the journalistic career structure without causing an identity crisis, whereas in Europe and North America migration toward the communication sector is considered a significant change in career and status. And, despite the trend toward the transnationalization of certain journalistic practices (mainly tied to digital media), journalistic careers and identities continue, at least in part, to depend on *national* political, media, cultural, and university practices. Management of the professional journalistic realm depends on far-reaching relations between social worlds distinct but tied to journalism: audiences, government and political organizations, the technology and IT sectors, professional organizations, and educational institutions.

Journalism research has progressed in leaps and bounds over the last 30 years. It managed to sidestep confusion by engendering two study currents; that of media companies (cultural industry studies) and that of professional groups (sociology of professions). It asserted itself as the dominant study vehicle of the social, economic, and political practices of public information involving very diverse actors in the close-knit, generalized, and globalized field of communications. Tomorrow's journalism studies should further

address the dynamics of appropriation, employment, and news production by social media so as to stop considering the journalist as the principal agent in a linear process, but rather as one actor among others involved in news production and dissemination. This approach would offer a better understanding of the ways in which journalism integrates in new labor markets and new organizational forms, how its practices are transferred to other social groups, and how it creates and recreates continually its area of expertise in relation to other professional groups. The digitization of communication places information firmly at the heart of all economic, social, and political processes, and consequently research should study how journalism maintains and adapts its specificity and works with other agents in the information sector.

SEE ALSO: 19th-Century Journalism and Notable Journalists; Autonomy: Independence from Government; Autonomy: Independence from Market Forces; Boundary Work; Comparative Studies; Interpretive Community; Journalistic Roles; Journalists; Licensing and Certification of Journalists; Literary, Long-Form, or Narrative Journalism; Newsrooms; Professionalization of Journalists: Historical; Sociology of News Work

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