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Afterthoughts: So Where Are We to Turn in the Study of Journalism

Abstract
The contributors to this symposium on the identity, mission, and direction of journalism studies have raised more questions than answers. Each contributor faced responding to: what is required to ensure that journalism's scholarship remains connected with its practice and criticism? How are we to study journalism in a way that will keep it vital, relevant, and yet connected to impulses that go beyond the world of newsmaking? How are we to create a future for the study of journalism? While answering questions with questions is a rhetorical strategy with sometimes positive implications, here it appears to fasten ambivalence and uncertainty as the default assumptions underlying the study of journalism.

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Afterthoughts: so where are we to turn in the study of journalism?

Barbie Zelizer

The contributors to this symposium on the identity, mission, and direction of journalism studies have raised more questions than answers. Each contributor faced responding to: what is required to ensure that journalism's scholarship remains connected with its practice and criticism? How are we to study journalism in a way that will keep it vital, relevant, and yet connected to impulses that go beyond the world of newsmaking? How are we to create a future for the study of journalism? While answering questions with questions is a rhetorical strategy with sometimes positive implications, here it appears to fasten ambivalence and uncertainty as the default assumptions underlying the study of journalism.

Yet the symposium provides a valuable set of premises about where journalism study's fault lines lie. The contributors take us in many directions. Three participants – Carey, Glasser, and Bird – all lament the lack of a better connect with the humanities. In varying degrees, they argue for a positioning of journalism against other modes of self-expression, particularly in areas of public discourse not yet overwhelmed with an affinity to the social sciences play, philosophy, literature. Journalism should be concerned with these arenas of public discourse as much as with those that have vocally and authoritatively instructed us what to study in journalism. Two other contributions – Chalaby, and Whitney and Wartella – are concerned with the ability of new techno - logical environments to change what we need to produce as news as well as to recognize as news. The danger, they imply in different ways, is when the latter does not match the former. We must orient ourselves to the future, they tell us, in a way that accurately predicts the changes in news practice, as they are occurring. With news as the ever - changing record of the everyday, scholarship that falls short in this regard will in itself become history before it is able to convey what is important and novel about journalism. There is concern here too with the journalism professionals and the broader world against which journalism can be understood, as the contributions of Hartley, Steiner, and Schudson make clear. How are we to legitimate our study of journalism, if it does not, on the one hand, account for the bodies we know as journalists, and, on the other hand, contextualize these bodies against history, against the market, and against other national systems?

To decide to study journalism is to enter into a community of sorts. There are journalism scholars within and beyond communication studies, historians, journalism educators, writing teachers, technology scholars interested in technology transfer, economists interested in the ownership of the news media. The list goes on and one of the few attributes that characterizes each new arrival to the community is that it is promptly and definitively colonized by those arrivals who came before.

At the same time, however, the community of journalism studies is a community comprised of men and women who do the dirty work – running the reports, making the phone calls, and counting out the headlines – with little time to ponder others who might be interested in their behavior. It is a community with neighborhood patrols, the scholars who, regardless of journalists' interest, peruse the dirty work they do, searching valiantly for a pattern, system, or logic in the implementation of journalists' everyday tasks. The community of journalism studies goes far beyond developing a focus on journalism alone. In order to study journalism, then, we need search broadly even when our objective is to find closely.

Perhaps the most effective way to accomplish this is through the sociology of inquiry. This research has long taught us that the successful development of categories depends on their suitability to the larger world into which they are expected to fit. Thomas Kuhn, Nelson Goodman, Michel Foucault, and others have all taught us that a field of study grows when we develop shared paradigms, when we name and characterize problems and procedures in ways that have a broader consonance than the phenomenon we are studying. It is through that consonance that we achieve some degree of shared knowledge, communal values that guide us in our perusals of research phenomena. As Mary Douglas once observed, true solidarity 'is only possible to the extent that individuals share the categories of their thought'. It is up to us to find a way to share the categories of our thought about journalism. And, if nothing else, the contributions to this symposium make clear that we must do so before journalism itself outruns our capacity to study it.