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# The Failed Adoption of Journalism Study

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# The Failed Adoption of Journalism Study

## **Abstract**

The academic study of journalism resembles in many ways a failed adoption. Journalism study has no certain home, nurturing forces split by divisiveness and territoriality, and birth, foster, and adoptive parents at such cross-purposes that they cannot understand the child at the core of their attentions. Journalism is too important not to be understood by everyone, and universities need to play a role in helping to explain how it works. Yet the counterproductive actions of three agents—journalism professionals, academics who study journalism, and academics who care little for the study of journalism—are pushing the study of journalism into crisis mode. Meanwhile, as journalism itself continues to grow in the shadow of tensions about its appropriate placement in the academy, it begins to resemble a child whose inexplicable behavior is accountable only to itself.

## **Disciplines**

Communication

# The Failed Adoption of Journalism Study

*Barbie Zelizer*

The academic study of journalism resembles in many ways a failed adoption. Journalism study has no certain home, nurturing forces split by divisiveness and territoriality, and birth, foster, and adoptive parents at such cross-purposes that they cannot understand the child at the core of their attentions. Journalism is too important not to be understood by everyone, and universities need to play a role in helping to explain how it works. Yet the counterproductive actions of three agents—journalism professionals, academics who study journalism, and academics who care little for the study of journalism—are pushing the study of journalism into crisis mode. Meanwhile, as journalism itself continues to grow in the shadow of tensions about its appropriate placement in the academy, it begins to resemble a child whose inexplicable behavior is accountable only to itself.

Journalism's study has suffered first from the hostility of its birth parents—journalism professionals. As members of one of the few professions with no built-in mechanism of criticism, journalists remain closed to and largely unaffected by external opinions, particularly academic ones. In news organizations across the country, the study of journalism is routinely dismissed as being "only academic." Scholarly books on journalism are devalued as untouched by the real world, and an academic author's lack of journalistic credentials easily produces negative press reviews. Journalists mark journalism's boundaries by often refusing entry to academics seeking a forum in professional trade reviews, public symposia, and professional organizations.

Journalism's foster parents—academics concerned with studying journalism—have been similarly obstructive. Two camps here—journalism educators and media scholars—are mired in the replay of an artificial distinction between professional training, on the one hand, and educational efforts involving theories, hypotheses, and concepts, on the other. So much time has been spent arguing whether journalism should be housed in professional training programs, liberal arts curricula, or communication departments that journalism's study has fallen short.

When journalism educators concerned with teaching "how to" journalism encounter media scholars, the result is usually heightened claims of territoriality and periods of navel gazing. Not too long ago, arguments erupted over journalism's status at the University of Michigan and immediately produced reports that journalism education was dying due to a faculty preference for academic qualifications over professional experience. For media scholars focused on exploring "why journalism matters," numerous strands of research have intensified the impasse with journalism educators. Much of media scholars' research falls into overplayed paradigms that alternately reduce journalism to an effect on publics, a news-making setting, a piece of news text. On both sides of this impasse, there is little attention to the concerns of those on the other side, with journalism educators oblivious to the question of "why journalism matters" and media scholars insensitive to the question of "how to do" journalism.

Certain critical and cultural scholarship—notably that of James Carey, Michael Schudson, David Eason, and others—has softened the break, forcing attention to journalism by prying open the parochialism of both sides of the continuum. But their efforts have not been sufficient to quell the infighting between professional and academic camps and the ghettoization of training programs, liberal arts curricula, and communication courses, both of which have magnified limited aspects of journalism to fit territorial aims rather than account for journalism's full picture. The result: Rather than recognize the practical and theoretical as complementary parts of one whole and use both entry points—"how to do" journalism and "why journalism matters"—to inform one blended domain of journalism study, academic pockets have run themselves into the ground. No wonder, then, that when journalism's boundaries are drawn by many academics today, they reflect only a small portion of contemporary journalism.

Indeed, many of those studying journalism are finding themselves increasingly out of step with the growing

fragmentation and diversification of news. The journalism of today is filled with practices not always covered by academic curricula in professional, liberal arts, or communication versions—C-Span for policy devotees, MTV's *The Week in Rock* for musically inclined teens, the Weather Channel for meteorology addicts—rather than one version of the nightly TV news or daily newspaper. This growing tendency to narrowcast the news—seen in options like all-news television and radio channels, sports newscasts, and business news updates—gives contemporary publics tailored versions of events that might be more successful at capturing the few rather than uniting the many.

Yet many of those studying journalism continue to insist on a professional setting that addresses a heterogeneous and wide-ranging public, excluding from the academic curricula large portions of what might count as journalism for the nation's population—whether it be the *National Enquirer*, America Online, or *A Current Affair*. The persistent invocation of "the newsroom" metaphor in news media research displays a dated understanding of news work that pays homage to the successful newsroom ethnographies of the 1970s and 1980s yet explains little of relevance to contemporary journalistic workplaces, few of which have what could be called "newsrooms" anymore.

Such neglect has been exacerbated by the failure to reach an adoptive home, exemplified in the unrealized potential of multidisciplinary linkages between journalism study and other departments across the university—philosophy, literature, politics, government, history, folklore, and sociology, to name a few. A wide-ranging investigative setting could offer many creative explanations for the comprehensive phenomenon we call journalism. A discussion of its links with the rest of the academic world might show that journalism exists in different forms in each linkage, as in business reporters finding commonalities with scholars in the business schools.

Yet here journalism's study has faced its most treacherous battles. Many academics indifferent to journalism have oscillated between downright ridicule and tolerant marginalization of its study. At a recent conference, I found myself engaged with a prominent historian in a heated interchange on the distinction between journalism and history. Perturbed by his criticism of academics who study the media, I wondered aloud why some historians denigrated journalists while using their first draft of current events to generate historical record. "An aggrieved journalist!" proclaimed the historian somewhat smugly. "Don't you know that no reputable historian ever uses the work of journalists?" His remarks, easily contestable, nonetheless left me thinking that no matter what those studying journalism do, the rest of the academy is not going to recognize their efforts as bona fide academic endeavors. "It's just journalism" is a rejoinder that is too easily used to dismiss particular topics associated with journalism, the language of journalism, and a generalized interest in journalism. It is also invoked to negatively evaluate phenomena not remotely connected with journalism, disparaging work in all arenas of the social sciences and humanities.

These countercurrents in journalism study are troubling, for the most valuable explanations of journalism might come from traversing across the spaces occupied by professional journalists, academics studying journalism, and academics at large. In my own experience as a reporter turned academic, I have turned questions that disturbed me as a working journalist into the focus of academic research that reaches beyond journalism to raise broader questions about cultural authority and memory. Does one necessarily negate the other? Of course not, but the present state of journalism study provides few places for bringing journalism and nonjournalism together without having to address claims that they belong in one pocket or another.

The myopia that arises from the present state of journalism study requires immediate attention. Journalism is growing rapidly whether we like it or not; it might soon outpace the academy's capacity to explain it at all. And this brings us to the real crux of the problem: Despite the fact that journalism seems to be everywhere, it is becoming increasingly irrelevant and isolated in the public imagination. Journalism might be taking over new venues not because the public wants them and understands their relevance but because numerous technologies now facilitate the provision of such venues. Indeed, the public seems to be turning off to news in increasing

numbers, with younger generations displaying an alarmingly decreasing interest in current events. Yet the failed adoption of journalism's study has left the academy ill-equipped to deal with this dwindling interest.

Although the academy can provide catalysts for public understanding only if the public wants them, wide-ranging explanations for journalism have not yet been produced. And if we in the academy have not invested the efforts to explain journalism in all of its variations, why should the public do any differently? Isn't it time to set aside our own prejudices, snobbery, and territorial fights long enough to give journalism study a fairer shake? If it does not find its adoptive home soon, we might miss the opportunity to make journalism accountable for something more than itself.

### **Biographical Note**

Barbie Zelizer is Associate Professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. A former reporter and media critic who has written for *The Nation* and *The MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour*, Zelizer is the author of *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

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