



University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

Departmental Papers (ASC)

Annenberg School for Communication

2008

How Communication, Culture, and Critique Intersect in the Study of Journalism

Barbie Zelizer

University of Pennsylvania, bzelizer@asc.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Zelizer, B. (2008). How Communication, Culture, and Critique Intersect in the Study of Journalism. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 1 (1), 86-91. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2007.00009.x>

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/312
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

How Communication, Culture, and Critique Intersect in the Study of Journalism

Abstract

The world of journalism has always been privileged—for good and bad—by the prisms through which we have recognized its parameters. In acting as more than just the provision of some kind of shared repertoire of public events, journalism can be fruitfully understood by bringing to the forefront of its appropriation the notions of communication, culture, and critique that go into its shaping. Each offers different but complementary parameters through which to think about journalism's practice and, by extension, its study.

Disciplines

Communication

How Communication, Culture, and Critique Intersect in the Study of Journalism

Barbie Zelizer

Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104

The world of journalism has always been privileged—for good and bad—by the prisms through which we have recognized its parameters. In acting as more than just the provision of some kind of shared repertoire of public events, journalism can be fruitfully understood by bringing to the forefront of its appropriation the notions of communication, culture, and critique that go into its shaping. Each offers different but complementary parameters through which to think about journalism's practice and, by extension, its study.

Addressing the integral role that each prism plays in thinking about journalism is worth articulating because discussions of the practice and study of journalism have lost sight of the varied forms through which journalism makes its name. In particular, the communicative role played by journalism has pushed aside both its cultural and critical functions. This has prevented the establishment of a broader understanding of all that journalism does beyond the information relay established via its communicative role.

Journalism and communication

Journalism has long been seen first and foremost as an arm of communication, by which journalists optimally provide the public with information. For much of its evolution, journalism's operation has taken shape vis-à-vis a particular kind of communicative relay that has been thought to faithfully, truthfully, reliably, accurately, and dispassionately transfer information about the external world to the public. In exchange for that information, the public is expected to function as a more reasoned, responsible, and hopefully engaged body politic. In this regard, journalism constitutes one of the guard posts of a functioning public sphere, with the successful implementation of its communicative acts playing a support role for informed citizenry and for the successful exercise of democratic and other modes of government.

Notions of journalism as a provider of a certain kind of information relay have been central to much existing journalism scholarship, but they have been particularly developed across the fields of communication and media studies, sociology, political science, and economics. Scholars in these fields of inquiry have been instrumental in developing the idea that journalism has an effect on those outside of the news world, pondering variances in the potential of a journalistic relay that functions as a certain kind of unidirectional message sent from journalists to the public. Some scholars have addressed how journalism "ought" to operate under optimum conditions, assuming a normative interdependency between politics and journalism; in considering how journalism's relays operate, they have asked how journalists could create a more engaged citizenry and be more in tune with the general political impulses in the society at large. By providing information regarded as important and topical, journalism's communicative acts thereby have helped reinforce the notion that the much-heralded triumvirate of polity, public, and journalism works; each arm supports the others in a fashion that is continuous, integral, and indispensable. In this regard, journalism has been evaluated primarily for its central and presumably positive impact on the

interchange between the polity and the public.

The assumption that journalism's communicative acts can have potentially positive and public consequences has tended to privilege a scholarly emphasis on certain kinds of relays over others. When seen as a form of communication, most journalism is assumed to follow predictable parameters that support its functioning as a platform for public relay: Notions of the typical journalistic relay favor the uniform over the diverse, the institutional over the individualistic, the broadcast over the narrowcast, and the mainstream over the marginal. Journalism is also thought to gravitate toward simplistic and unidimensional explanations of phenomena rather than complex and multidimensional ones. In tone, it is distant rather than intimate, authoritative rather than hesitant.

In playing to these parameters, journalism reproduces itself in formulaic ways, playing to the mean of what is most conventional and recognizable about its workings. In many cases, this means that journalism has legitimated itself as the voice of an institution that takes few risks in extending beyond the known and familiar attributes of its communicative relays.

And yet, privileging journalism as a provider of information and a platform for communication speaks to only part of the picture of what journalism is. That larger picture is addressed by two other prisms that are equally important for thinking about journalism, though less articulated—journalism as culture and journalism as critique.

Journalism and culture

Alongside communication and critique, journalism can fruitfully be seen through the prism of culture. The notion of culture is not new but its incorporation in journalistic inquiry, largely led by those in media and cultural studies, anthropology, humanistic sociology, and legal studies, has been somewhat uneven. When seen as culture, journalism has been thought to provide a web of meanings, rituals, conventions, and symbol systems, with journalists, who provide different kinds of discourse about public events, as its facilitators. More than just reporters' professional codes of action or the social arrangement of reporters and editors, journalism as culture references a complex and multidimensional lattice of impulses that can be counterproductive, contradictory, and contrary to the supposed aims of what journalism is for. Such impulses have given equal credence to journalism's informal and formal dimensions; it is high and low, implicit and explicit. This means that seeing journalism through a cultural lens strategically and pronouncedly interrogates the articulated foundations for journalism that may be taken for granted elsewhere in the academy. Not only does seeing journalism as culture force attention to the cues by which journalists think about journalism and the world, but it presumes that what is explicit and articulated as that knowledge may not reflect the whole picture of what journalism is and tries to be.

Seeing journalism as culture thus opens journalism's definition to activities that go under the radar of conventional views of what journalism does. Under consideration here are alternative venues like the Internet and camera phones, opinion driven formats like cartoons and citizens' views, and forums situated explicitly on journalism's margins like the satirical comedy show and reality television. When seen as culture, journalism allows for aspects of work that have little to do with the efficiency, profit, or workability of the news organization but instead address the viability and integrity of journalistic practice, where discovery, exploration,

ethics, beliefs, and morality can come to the forefront of attention. The culture of journalism targets how practice, routine, and convention take on meaning internally for and among journalists and sees journalists as being “in” a culture, viewing them not only as conveyors of information but also as mediators of meaning. In suggesting that journalists themselves are part of the culture to which they report, they are thought to impart preference statements about what is good and bad, moral and amoral, and appropriate and inappropriate in the world, and their preference statements implicitly or explicitly shape the news. Seeing journalism as culture thus regards journalistic acts as more than just the relay of a certain kind of information that has been central to seeing journalism as a communicative form.

Journalism and critique

Alongside communication and culture, seeing journalism as an act of critique aligns it with impulses of exchange, pressure, opinion, interpretation, and protest, all of which can come easily to the forefront of attention when thinking from anew about journalism’s operation.

Notions of journalism as critique have long figured in academic appraisals of how journalism works, even if they have not been articulated as such. Primary to work in political science, cultural studies, and political economy, they have also occupied a long place in history, when journalism and critique were more integrally attached than they are today. The idea of journalists offering opinions, criticism, and review of the public events and issues surrounding them has been built into the romantic lore of journalism, which sees journalists as independent evaluators of the public sphere.

Across time and space, journalism’s acts of critique have underpinned a regard for journalism as a fourth estate, by which journalists are expected to hold in abeyance the vagaries and potential violations knowingly or unknowingly committed by the various arms of government. The capacity to mount a critical response to the often problematic official and institutional exercise of power has been central to the maintenance of a healthy link between the polity and the public.

Critique, however, does not always appear where it is most needed. Though some form of partisan journalism has been evident at certain periods in most areas of the world, of late, the much-heralded suspicions of journalistic bias, mounted from both the left and the right of the political spectrum, have pushed critique from the picture in different regions. In the United States, for instance, the possibility of an agenda driven journalist is seen as anathema to so-called “good” journalistic practice. That curious stance has outsourced the function of critique to quarters other than journalism, as evident in the fact that cinematic and theatrical works have critiqued the war in Iraq more fervently than U.S. journalism.

This is unfortunate, for many forms of journalism operate primarily from a critical impulse. The ability to offer a review, a critical opinion, or a thoughtful appraisal has historically always figured into journalism, though in varying configurations. Journalism’s independent critical voice has been central to alternative journalism, muckraking, ethnic journalism, journals of opinion, columns, editorial cartoons, and op-ed pieces, all of which have offered journalists a way to abandon their often much-touted though unequally implemented reverence for balance, objectivity, and impartiality. In effect, the mention of critique as a relevant prism for thinking about journalistic practice reminds us that its long-heralded role in providing a critical

reading of events taking shape in the public sphere has been somewhat overlooked, though its practice continues unabated.

In their contemporary formations, numerous journalistic forums privilege the offering of criticism on events of the public sphere. Although these forums have tended to emerge from somewhat marginalized journalistic venues that privilege opinion and sentiment over value-free information—such as talk shows, satire, late-night comedy, and blogs, their rise in popularity has made critique an increasingly relevant way to think about journalism. It is no accident that Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* credit their critical voice for having moved them, however reluctantly, onto the journalistic continuum. Evidence suggests that the young and the marginalized demand opinion and critique as a necessary journalistic engagement; when coupled with the popularity of comedy shows, satire, and blogs, this points to a healthy accommodation of the critical voice in ways that have been largely missed by thinking about journalism as a certain kind of value-free information relay.

Why culture and critique are as important as communication

So what does all of this suggest about journalism? The prisms of communication, culture, and critique highlight singular but equally relevant aspects of journalism. Each brings to the forefront different aspects of journalism's operation, though none provides the entire picture of journalism's trappings. Journalism as communication privileges the important role in information gathering and disseminating which journalism fulfills. Journalism as culture addresses the function of journalism in imparting value preferences and mediating meaning about how the world does and should work. Journalism as critique highlights the particular value of criticism and opinion as a modality through which journalism can make explicit its response to events and issues of the public sphere.

Each prism takes shape by creating different centers and margins, though with varying degrees of explicitness. When seen as communication, journalism plays to our most consensual academic understanding of how it works, where all media—from the press to displays on *YouTube*—are seen as providing general information of timely, public, and important bent. When seen as culture, journalism grows in breadth: Variables that have traditionally kept certain aspects or kinds of journalism distinct—hard news versus soft, mainstream news versus tabloid, journalists' verbal reports versus the visual images they use—are repositioned as links across journalism's different tools, different conventions, and journalism's similarities with the nonjournalistic world. As critique, journalism plays strategically to the margins by criticizing the center; it draws from the oppositions and the disenfranchised, hoping to create one engaged entity despite and across the various distinctions that bifurcate it.

This suggests that seeing journalism as an amalgamation of communication, culture, and critique facilitates an examination of facets of journalism that have not been examined across the broad range of news scholarship. Though doing so complicates the boundary marking that tends to exclude certain reporters or kinds of reporters from the community, seeing journalism through a multivariategated lens better approximates all that journalism is. Journalists regularly relay information, mediate meaning, and offer criticism. It is time we developed the analytical tools necessary to recognize the different facets of their activities

and how they intersect.

Considering communication, culture, and critique as equally relevant prisms for thinking about journalism is particularly relevant because it reflects the fact that journalism has itself changed, even if mainstream notions of what kinds of actions constitute journalism have not. Evidence mounts on numerous fronts: the rise of the Internet, ascendance of interactive displays, incorporation of personalized uses of blogs, cellular phones, digital cameras, and recognition of citizen journalism are all today recognizable pieces of the journalistic landscape. In accommodating each of these new venues as legitimate journalistic forms, the attributes of journalism's acts move beyond a certain kind of information relay. Not only are its many activities now often multidirectional, contradictory, incomplete, and uncertain, but they take on these attributes in varying ratios, making it more difficult to isolate specific ways in which journalism works. In other words, journalism can and does act in varied combinations of communication, culture, and critique, but we need the academic tools to recognize which of these activities is motivating the journalistic apparatus. More important, we need to ascertain why and when journalism takes the shape it does. Under what conditions, for instance, does critique come to the forefront of journalism's activities and under which conditions does it fail to emerge?

In accepting that much of what journalism conveys may have little to do with the information it provides, we need to consider how journalism would look different were we to focus not only on its information. This is critical because by moving beyond information, we move by definition beyond content. And beyond content, contemporary journalism raises a myriad of questions about form and modality. For instance, we might consider how headlines change what we read, how the order of a lineup on television alters what we think is important, and how the interactive displays of the Internet force our attention in certain directions. Visually, we could address how we are coaxed to see images in certain ways by an image's position, primacy, or size, even though its information per se does not change.

Finally, amalgamating communication, culture, and critique brings us closer to all that journalism can and should be. In this regard, our scholarship might better mirror journalism's practice. For in privileging journalism as primarily an act of communication and regarding its linkage with information as the relay that matters, we have cut journalism asunder from the numerous modes of expression that have bearing on journalism and to which journalism ultimately connects. Modalities like public sermons, theater, poetry, rumor, and gossip are only a few of the alternate forms that get displaced as neighbors of journalism when privileging the information function of news. Bringing back culture and critique helps offset that displacement. Incorporating all three prisms not only as possibilities but also as integral aspects of journalism's operation gives us a better chance of recognizing what journalism is and of nurturing more daring notions of what it could be.