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Introduction to What Is Journalism Studies? (Symposium Editor)

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Abstract

The contributors to this symposium are all concerned. Concerned about journalism in each of its present forms. Concerned about journalism's connection to its past. And concerned about its continued viability into the future.

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SYMPOSIUM

The contributors to this symposium are all concerned. Concerned about journalism in each of its present forms. Concerned about journalism's connection to its past. And concerned about its continued viability into the future.

Their concerns are as varied as the backgrounds that each contributor brings to his or her subject matter. And so when asked to ponder the twin questions “What is journalism studies?” and “What should we be thinking about when studying journalism?” the nine contributors to this symposium offered varied and unusual responses. They are alike primarily in the concern they echo for the future of the journalistic community. “Where will journalism be over the next 100 years?” they ask. And their answer: nowhere pleasant, if we don't do something about the way we study and teach journalism in the contemporary era.

The contributors to this symposium argue for a more expansive world of journalism scholarship than that which exists today. They ponder the distance separating the indicative state of journalism's study from its subjunctive field, calling for new scholarly links that will promote the growth of journalism studies along routes not necessarily traveled in the existing scholarly terrain. They call for a world of journalism studies that might consider its past alongside its future; its texts and their connection with its contexts – however varied they may be - across cultural grouping, nation-state, communication environment, and historical era; its affinity with the world of expressive communication and the pleasure of journalism-related activities. They ponder the long-held distinctions between information and entertainment, between technological determinism and cultural determinism. Some call fervently for more consideration of the humanistic setting against which the domain we call news came into being. Others ask that we be more attentive to the demands, good and bad, that have been created by the introduction of new markets, new technologies, and new political orders. Some argue against the information metaphor as the primary way to understand the world of journalism, while others insist on the efficacy of information as a filter to gauge what is most, and least, useful about the public's connect with the news world.

The symposium has two impulses. Initially, James Carey offers an individual historical overview of the evolution of US journalism study. Carey situates contemporary journalism scholarship against the long-held aims which journalism educators hoped to achieve. He provides an evocative tracking of the roots of US journalism education and concludes by lamenting journalism's neglect by the humanities. Journalism, he says, “is the whole of the real defined under the category of the present”, and so its study belongs alongside not only science, even of the social sort, but also alongside political theory, art, philosophy, history, and literature. Such a placement regrettably has not come to pass, largely because the humanities still rely on a background distinction between high and popular culture. Within that hierarchy, laments Carey, journalism remains part of the vulgate, and so stands unexamined by the humanities.

Against Carey's pinpointing of the unexamined premises of US journalism education, seven additional contributions develop key issues germane to the future of journalism study

around the globe. Theodore Glasser invokes William Stephenson's much-neglected theory of play to argue that unless we think more about journalism in terms of its pleasure-inducing functions for both those who write and read news, we will lose grasp of all that journalism is and can be. The ability to “engage a very public world in a very private and personally satisfying way” is what journalism provides; yet it has not been sufficiently examined under any existing academic rubric. The persistent decline of expressive narrative and the gripping, pleasure-inducing story in contemporary journalism is a problem worth pondering. But, warns Glasser, we need the appropriate scholarly paradigms to make that problematic visible.

S. Elizabeth Bird ponders the subjunctive state of journalism studies by coming from an alternative journalistic world - the tabloid. Considering the ways in which tabloidization has undergone something of a renewal, that positions its positive effects alongside its negative ones, Bird calls for a necessary inclusion of cultural context as a means to understanding the news. Although “journalism emerges from and responds to cultural specificities”, Bird laments that we do not always understand or employ that premise as an originating point in our scholarship. And when faced with what she calls journalism's “distracted audience”, those of us who care about journalism's future may be in for more of the same than we would like to have.

Jean Chalaby examines journalism through its contemporary technological prism. He cautions that the existing communication environment may prevent journalism from assuming its place as an arbiter of public discourse. Changes-in technology - heralded by the arrival of new media, cyberspace, and digitization - are displacing journalism as the dominant public discourse, cutting out editing, rendering the dominant media organizations no longer journalistic in character, and ensuring that news is no longer only a journalistic enterprise. Changes in content preference have made entertainment, not news, the privileged way of thinking about one's connection with the real world, while altered realities of news production and media ownership have made journalism less rather than more the default setting for thinking about public discourse.

John Hartley makes a call similar to that of Chalaby, though on markedly different terms. Labeling journalism a “profession of violence” that is distinct from the “smiling professions ... those who interface with the public in the name of pleasure, entertainment, attractiveness, appeal”, Hartley asks us to consider the effect of journalism's new function in a “redactional” society, that is, as an editor of the events of public life. Hartley argues that journalism is losing hold on its editing role, with journalism's expansion technologically and generically making it instead more akin to a “smiling profession.” Hartley calls for a closer examination of the ways in which the current elite research, education and training of institutionalized journalism studies can more fruitfully be brought to bear in making journalism once again relevant to its public.

Linda Steiner considers the disconnection between how journalism ought to work in democratic societies and how it does work. She calls for an address to the kinds of organizational structures, ethical understandings, and means of training and retraining that can better connect with journalism practices and practitioners. Steiner locates much of the current misunderstanding of news in its popular equation with information. Calling for an expanded scholarly consideration of journalism's conflicts with a market imperative, consumption patterns, new reporting tools, and journalism education, she argues for the necessity of aerating the ground on which the practices of journalism stand.

Charles Whitney and Ellen Wartella begin by lamenting the state of contemporary journalism, specifically its superficiality and redundancy, but explain those characteristics in part through the changing structures of news delivery and the increasing complexity of the world. “In

a globalizing world”, they state, “we simply must know more than we did before. Journalists must as well.” They argue against the model of the educated journalist as a generalist, and reason instead that expertise and expert knowledge are required for journalists to survive in the contemporary world.

Michael Schudson concludes the symposium by calling for the variegated study of journalism around the globe, particularly emphasizing broad historical and comparative perspectives that have been underdeveloped in much of the existing journalism scholarship. He makes the point that news has always created some kind of virtual community, yet cable television and the internet are diminishing the function of public inclusion that is so central to journalism's perseverance.

And so I ask: do these scholars have reason to be concerned? Not if we heed their call for a new and invigorated study of journalism that will heal journalism's wounds and facilitate its revitalization. We have our work cut out for us; the charter of *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, as suggested by each of these contributors, is clear: study journalism in all of its contexts and in so doing embrace a wider range of theoretical perspectives, cultural and historical circumstances, and research methodologies. If *Journalism* can do its part to make journalism's study flourish precisely along the lines laid out within the pages of this symposium, we may have less reason to be concerned than we originally thought.