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What Journalism Is (Not)

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Abstract

What I no longer believe: that the news industry as it has traditionally been organized is necessary for journalism as an ideology to survive and for the work of journalists to remain relevant to people's lives.

Keywords

boundary work, journalism education, journalism studies, media work

What I no longer believe: that the news industry as it has traditionally been organized is necessary for journalism as an ideology to survive and for the work of journalists to remain relevant to people's lives. For what is journalism? How does it respond to social, cultural, political, and technological transformations, and how does it stay true to its own ideals? What makes good—as in meaningful, contributing to the common good, autonomous, informative and inspiring—newswork possible? Those have been questions I have loved to struggle with throughout my academic career (Deuze, 2002). Originally, I synthesized what I learnt into a paper that, after first being rejected by another journal, was published in *Journalism* in 2005, and it is gratifying to see it is still one of the most read and cited articles in that journal today (Deuze, 2005). However, something about that paper does not feel right anymore.

Journalism, I originally believed, is first and foremost a set of values—such as breaking news, uncovering the truth, and providing a public a service. Second, these values would get meaning in the news culture of a specific time and place—a country, a medium, and a news organization. Third, individual journalists would come to embody these values and their meanings in their everyday routines and practices at work. All of this squared rather nicely with the arrangement of news as an industry in society, where expert institutions such as mainstream newspapers and broadcast news organizations would function as the “go to” places for the latest and most reliable sources of news and quality journalism, and where hardworking journalists would go about their business in the relative safety of the newsroom.

Even at the time of writing that particular piece, I remember feeling this seemed all just a bit too neat, too coherent. As a former freelance reporter, I knew from personal experience that journalism is not this seamless, this well-organized—nor has it ever been. I should have acted on that knowledge, but

only did much later, when, as a researcher, I started focusing more deliberately on the working lives of media professionals in atypical working arrangements: those who are working in the media, but whose work is not governed by regular salaries, contracts, or any other traditional employer–employee relationship (Deuze, 2007, 2014).

Precarious working arrangements have come to determine newswork, even for those who in fact still enjoy a contracted job with a salary and benefits. Few, if any, reporters and editors have control over what will happen next in their careers, seeing how colleagues are losing their jobs left and right (and facing empty chairs in the newsroom). In some cases, journalists reportedly feel they are someone costing their employer money rather than an appreciated and nurtured talent that the company cannot do without. The shift toward atypical labor accelerates due to advances in information technology and the role social media have come to play in media work, as more or less independent “free agents” (have to) commodify every aspect of their professional identities, using the relatively low publication threshold of the Web and (open source) production resources to compete with their salaried colleagues elsewhere in the industry, and with unpaid amateurs making and publishing their own content online.

What has always been fascinating is how—generally speaking—even the most precariously employed news-worker tends to love journalism, seeing it as the noblest of media professions, going well beyond the call of duty to make it work as a journalist. The *Beyond Journalism* project that I have been running since 2014 with Tamara Witschge

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(at the University of Groningen), where we conduct comparative case study analyses on journalism startups around the world, for example, found that a commitment to the ideology of journalism remains firmly in place, even though the reporters and editors involved generally share a deeply critical outlook on established “legacy” news organizations (Deuze, 2017; Deuze & Witschge, 2019; Wagemans, Witschge, & Deuze, 2016). I have even found in our survey and oral history interviews with journalists who lost their jobs, who went through the traumatizing experience of being laid off, that their loyalty to journalism as an ideal remained intact—they simply felt that news as a business and journalism as it tends to be managed is broken (Deuze, forthcoming).

So here I am, faced with a growing realization that the operational coupling I originally made between the values, ideals, and cultures of journalism with the structure of the news as an industry and the arrangement of news as work simply does not hold. In fact, when we focus on the lived experience of journalists, it perhaps never did. My original answer to the question what journalism is, however, has stayed more or less the same—confirmed as it is through all my studies among various newswriters. In other words, when looking at journalism writ large, the tendency to see coherence is relatively strong. When you switch to individual journalists—when the unit of analysis becomes what newswriters do and under which conditions they do it—a messy reality emerges.¹ Although I have argued before to always include the micro, individual-level perspective when theorizing journalism (see Deuze, 2009), it never occurred to me to question the implications of the way journalism is constructed, everyday day again, by journalists, and how this deceptively straightforward point has become so much more consequential considering profound changes in the working conditions and ways of “making it work” as a journalist (particularly since the collapse of the dot-com bubble, the rise of a platform economy, and a coextensive collapse of traditional business models for news and newswork).

What is interesting, therefore, is not so much the question what journalism is, but how it has so successfully remained similar in the context of continuous internal and external transformations, changes, challenges, evolutions, and revolutions. It is also revealing how the scholarly (and all too human) proclivity for closure and coherence has preferred to conflate the various levels of analysis when making sense of media work—as most explicitly and famously articulated in John Dimmick and Philip Coit’s taxonomy of mass media decision-making, Siegfried Weischenberg’s onion model, and Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese’s hierarchy of influences framework. Instead of working through how the various stages of newswork change under individualized, fragmented, networked, and altogether precarious conditions, as educators and researchers we have tended toward consistency across levels, proclaiming more or less “universal” theories of journalism, its culture, and

its role conceptions. In doing so, we have accepted explanations of newswork that assume journalists get their ideas of who they are and what they are (supposed to be) doing largely through occupational socialization and occupational context, leading to more or less homogeneous understandings of what journalism is. In recent years, this conceptualization of journalism has been crumbling.

Whereas influential, multi-nation comparative projects such as Worlds of Journalism (worldsofjournalism.org) and Journalistic Role Performance (journalisticperformance.org) started out with somewhat universalist ambitions, their most recent reports and publications suggest otherwise, emphasizing “multilayered hybridization in journalistic cultures” (Mellado et al., 2017, p. 961), and a world populated by a rich diversity of journalistic cultures (Hanitzsch, Hanusch, Ramaprasad, & de Beer, 2019). On the contrary, scholars who use the data from these and other cross-national comparative projects at times still cling on to notions of national (or even universal) coherence as determined by industry structures as the presumed context of newswork. What these remarkable projects do not do, however, is offer an explanation for this newfound diversity, hybridity, and—let’s be straightforward about it—messiness. Similarly, in reflections after his prestigious appointment as Director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2018) blogged about what the Institute can do for journalism, concluding that “(e)ven as much else change, core elements of the craft of journalism, and many of the fundamental challenges, remain constant.”

We find ourselves in a wonderful quagmire: journalism remains the same yet the conditions under which it is practiced have not only changed considerably, they are in permanent flux. This offers a tremendous opportunity for engaged scholarship. It is increasingly my contention that journalism holds great potential to further the imagination, creativity, and (paraphrasing Hans-Georg Gadamer) fusion of horizons, and performs a variety of functions (beyond informing citizens) that are necessary for society to thrive. However, in aligning itself constantly to fit the changing social, technological, and political landscape, journalism as a profession as well as news as an industry struggle to adapt and transform. This is where journalism *studies* comes in, as a scholarly endeavor to assist and inspire the field to move forward and innovate. Yet, the discipline, even before it became an established field in the start of the 21st century, has generally furthered a rather narrow range of conceptualizations of the profession and its performance and role in society, thereby subjecting itself to the arrangement of news as an industry, reifying its internal operations, and subsequently limiting the creative potential of the profession. And to some extent, I see my original work as part of that exercise to achieve coherence and consensus rather than fully embrace the messy realities of journalism as work, as a set of ideals, and as something with a purpose beyond industry.

In its eagerness to both prepare students for jobs in the news industry, and to understand and explain journalism's functioning in (the service of) democratic societies, journalism studies and education has constructed a theoretical framework that considers the profession in terms of its more or less consensual news values, dominant frames, routinized operations, gatekeeping functions, and industrial arrangements. This is not to say scholars of journalism have not studied non-mainstream, oppositional, or any other kind of non-traditional forms of journalism in the past. However, such “journalisms” have traditionally been reigned in and tamed in theoretical frameworks emphasizing inside/outside binaries—for example, between mainstream and alternative journalism, between hard versus soft news, or between information and entertainment functions of the press. In doing so, a certain way of doing (and thinking about) journalism prevailed—a benchmark of sorts. This has led the discipline of journalism, as it formed and coalesced around a rich range of theories and perspectives, down a conceptual rabbit hole, out of which escape is quite difficult. It is encouraging to see both junior and senior academics in the field wrestle with these binary oppositions, challenging them or indeed moving “after” and “beyond” them (Deuze & Witschge, 2019; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2012).

When journalism educators, students, and researchers talk about journalism, they cannot help but recognize the enormous diversity of the field. So many people—professionals as well as amateurs—and institutions produce some form of journalism these days across such a wide range of channels and platforms, it can be overwhelming. Stuck in our rabbit hole, we run the risk of explaining this complexity away by reverting to the same old dualisms, suggesting there is a core to the profession that continually reflects on itself vis-à-vis the developments in and challenges of the periphery in what would represent a continuous circling of the wagons to keep truly original, edgy, pioneering, creative, non-formulaic, non-traditional ways of newsgathering, storytelling, and audience engagement at the perimeter. We would coin or label anything not fitting our pre-conceived notions of coherence as diverse, complex, or hybridized, rather than acknowledging the messiness intrinsic to our object of study, only amplified and accelerated by changes in working conditions, information and communication technologies, and business models.

What journalism studies has systematically defined, over and over again, as news values (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001, 2017), news frames (Cacciatore, Scheufele, & Iyengar, 2015; Scheufele, 1999), gatekeeping (Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), and occupational ideology (Deuze, 2005) can all be considered to be examples of routines, conventions, and formulas that developed—and continue to develop—arising out of conversations in workplaces, debates in newsrooms, choices by individuals in a variety of circumstances, generally dictated by casuistry (rather than a more or less strict principle-based approach), and *everydayness*.

The industry that has arisen around journalism's everydayness does not define what it is—the idea(s), debates, and practices of journalists inhabiting these institutions do. What has become profoundly important to me (and a growing number of colleagues) is to recognize how many, if not, most journalists today do not (or only temporarily) inhabit any of the institutions typically associated with dominant definitions of journalism and its attendant industry. It is crucial to expand upon the exclusivity of journalism studies and education, to move beyond binaries, and seek out the stories and conversations of journalists elsewhere—consider, for example, Tamara Witschge's project Journalism Elsewhere, and Bregje van der Haak's work on Multiple Journalism (multiplejournalism.org).

What we find when doing so is that what explains “journalism” are the affective and cognitive ties that professionals (i.e., those who earn their living from it and take pride in their craftsmanship of it, which gives them some sense of ownership over their professional identity) bind to it (Beckett & Deuze, 2016). Journalists care about their work, often love what they do (and why they are doing it), and this translates into a particular perspective on what journalism is and should be. Interestingly enough, that is where the ideology of journalism comes back in, alive and well—not necessarily sustained by a news industry, but by a passionate army of precariously working, un(der)paid, and all too often undervalued reporters and editors—most of whom only rarely see a newsroom on the inside at any of the remaining traditional news organizations.

I no longer believe that the news industry as it has traditionally been organized is necessary for journalism as an ideology to survive and remain relevant to people's lives. What I do deeply care about is finding ways to prepare anyone for the perspective of a journalist (e.g., by investing in critical and creative media literacy research and training): dedicated to finding multiple perspectives, the process of rigorous verification, and the craft of telling compelling stories that matter to people's lives.

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Note

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Author Biography

Mark Deuze is a professor of Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam's (UvA) Faculty of Humanities. Publications of his work include most recently the books *Making Media* (January 2019; co-edited with Mirjam Prenger) and *Beyond Journalism* (November 2019; co-authored with Tamara Witschge). His work has been translated in Chinese, Czech, German, Portuguese, Greek, and Hungarian (Weblog: deuze.blogspot.com. Twitter: @markdeuze). He is also the bass player and singer of post-grunge band Skinflower.