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# News and Democracy: Shifting Functions over Time

## Noticias y democracia: sus distintas funciones en el tiempo

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**Resumen** | Este artículo se concentra en la relación que existe entre el periodismo y la democracia, examinando las funciones que el ejercicio periodístico ha tenido a lo largo del tiempo para aquel sistema político y cómo éstas han visto alteradas según las tendencias presentes en el contexto social y cultural. El autor identifica seis funciones centrales que analiza separadamente, explorando cómo aquellas han contribuido de manera diferente según los cambios experimentados por los medios y cómo posiblemente podrían transformarse nuevamente en el futuro cercano.

**Palabras claves:** periodismo, democracia, historia de los medios.

**Abstract** | This article focuses on the relationship between journalism and democracy by examining the primary democratic functions that the journalistic trade has provided over time and the ways in which they have changed in accordance with the trends of the broader social and cultural context. The author identifies six core functions, which he analyzes separately, exploring the different contributions the media have made in accordance with the changes experienced by the media and the possible directions of change in the near future.

**Keywords:** journalism, democracy, media history.

**D**emocracy and journalism are not the same thing. Most of the key philosophical works that lay out a case for democracy or a theory of democracy make no reference at all to journalism. This is not, of course, surprising—there was no such thing as journalism in ancient Greece, and even when the thinkers at the time of the American and French revolutions were making their arguments for republican government, the press had little role in their calculations.

Much later, the importance of journalism to democracy seemed enormous, so much so that at least one prominent American scholar of journalism, James Carey, concluded that journalism and democracy are one and the same, that «journalism as a practice is unthinkable except in the context of democracy; in fact, journalism is usefully understood as another name for democracy» (Carey, 1997, pp. 332).

But this plea for journalism's democratic virtue is misplaced. That journalism is crucial to modern democracy seems clear. That it is not by any means sufficient to democracy seems equally clear, and that journalism does not in itself produce or provide democracy is likewise apparent. Professor Carey offers a normative—one could even say a romantic— notion of journalism, defined as a pursuit so intrinsically democratic at heart that it does not exist if democracy does not exist. The truth is vastly more complicated and admittedly less happy. If we accept common understandings of journalism as 'the business or practice of periodically producing and disseminating information and commentary about contemporary affairs of general public interest and importance,' then journalism existed in Chile in the 1980s when democracy did not, just as it also in Franco's Spain without democracy. And it exists in China today, sometimes even daring to criticize the government, although without bringing China appreciably closer to democratic political institutions. Journalism exists—and has long existed—outside democracy.

Democracy does not necessarily produce journalism, nor does journalism necessarily produce democracy. British journalism arose in a monarchy and American journalism, a journalism of colonial territories under a monarchical, colonial power, preceded American democracy. Where there is democracy, however, or where

there are forces prepared to bring it about, journalism can provide a number of services that help establish or sustain representative government, although the relative importance of these services changes over time and varies across democracies. With the digital age upon us and changes in journalism taking place all around us, the democratic functions that journalism serves will continue to change as well.

This is therefore a most appropriate time to take inventory of what journalism has provided in different times and places and what it offers democracy today. In this essay I will identify the six primary functions that news serves in a democracy. In doing so, I will discuss the ways in which the media have shifted in serving those functions over time and suggest some ways in which they may change again in the near future.

Journalism has undertaken, in different ways and in different combinations and with different emphases, the following functions for democratic societies:

#### **I. INFORMING THE PUBLIC**

This seems the most obvious—and the most boring—claim for the role of journalism in a democracy. Yet we should not neglect it. Much of the power of the media comes from the simple fact that the media tell us things we would not otherwise know. Democracy probably does more to make information a part of journalism than journalism has done to make information a part of democracy. In the 18th century, even representative legislatures and assemblies operated largely in secret from the people who voted for the representatives. Reporters in mid-18th century Britain may have spoken to M.P.'s as they left the House of Commons, but they were not allowed to actually observe the M.P.'s debate (DeMaria, 1994, p. 51–56). Likewise, the United States Senate met entirely in secret during its earliest years, as did the U.S. Constitutional Convention. Freedom of the press at that time meant—and this was no small matter—the freedom for a writer to speak his opinion as he wished, even in criticism of the government, but it did not mean the freedom to report. It did not guarantee any type of access to governmental offices or officials. As late as 1842, former President John Quincy Adams wrote with disgust in his diary that President Tyler's sons «divulged

all his cabinet secrets to... hired reporters for Bennett's *Herald Newspaper* in New York...» (Schudson, 1998, p. 44). Notice his use of the term «hired,» suggesting how new and disreputable the occupation of reporting was at that time.

Even several generations later, once reporting had become widely accepted, some of the tools of the journalistic trade were still resisted. The most notable was interviewing, a practice that had become widely accepted in the United States by the 1880s or 1890s, but that would not be accepted in Europe until after World War I. A French observer in the 1880s criticized the American «spirit of inquiry and espionage» and attacked «the mania for interviewing.»<sup>1</sup> He predicted that the British, which he considered much more sensible than the Americans or the French, would never accept it. A more admiring Danish journalist at the same time noted of the American press, «The reporter and the interview are the focus of these papers... this is ideal journalism. These papers are produced by journalists, not aesthetes and politicians, and they are written for the lower class to help them, inform them, and fight corruption for them.»

Politicians and other public figures looked upon interviewing with alarm. They described interviewers as conducting «hold-ups» in confronting politicians at railway stations or undertaking «ambushes» in hotel lobbies thereby creating «an added terror to modern travel.» The British writer G. K. Chesterton reported early in the 20th century that reporters came onto ships from Europe even before they touched land in New York, «boarding the ship like pirates.» He admitted, however, that the interviewers were «generally very reasonable and always very rapid... displaying many of the qualities of American dentistry.»

Why note this here? Simply to suggest that the informational function—the reporting function—of journalism has been promoted by democratic political institutions as well as by democratic social and cultural styles. Americans were simply brasher and cruder in their manners than Europeans. American journalists were not part of a literary circle. They presented themselves as men of the street and of the city, not as men of the salon or the elite class. Although many were offend-

ed by the interviewers' effrontery, interviewing was the core tool of modern journalism, not only in the United States, but to a large degree, all around the world.

## II. INVESTIGATION

Alexis de Tocqueville, widely cited for his views on the American press, was a necessary and vital influence on American democracy, did not actually like the American newspapers. He objected to their violence and to their publicity, although he did see it as a virtue of the system that newspapers were widely dispersed throughout the country rather than concentrated in a capital city, because this limited the harm they caused. He wrote: «I do not feel toward freedom of the press that same instantane-ous and instantaneous love which one accords to things of their nature supremely good. I love it more for the evils it prevents than on account of the good it does» (de Tocqueville, 1969, p. 180).

The virtue of the press, then, may be a negative one—that it is a watchdog designed to foil tyrants rather than to advance a new movement or policy, to prevent bad things from happening rather than to promote the cause of good. In this view, nothing about journalism matters more than its obligation to hold public officials to the legal and moral standards of public service. Public officials should try to do what they will try to do. They should refrain from using public office for private gain. They should abide by their oaths of office. They should make good on their campaign promises. And if democracy is to work, the public should be well informed of just what these officials are doing while in office and how well they live up to their obligations, campaign promises, and public avowals. The media, therefore, should investigate.

Investigation is not necessarily inconsistent with providing objective information, but it is not the same thing. The ideal of objectivity or fairness seems to assume that the world displays itself to the reporter whose job is to describe that visible world without bias or favor. The ideal of protecting democracy through investigation is different. It assumes that some information that citizens consider most important is not visible to them and may in fact be deliberately hidden. The world is not an open book; it is a text of

<sup>1</sup> This and the following quotations about the history of news interviews are from Schudson, 1995, pp. 72–93.

**For investigative journalism, the world is not so much a complicated place that needs fair-minded description and analysis, but a misleading and deceptive construction of self-interested powers that require a professional truth-teller.**

written for many purposes, and some of those texts are written over other texts to intentionally obscure them. Journalists therefore have an obligation to assertively seek out the text behind the text, the story behind the story. They should not be judged by their fairness in reporting alone, but by their energy in detecting stories to be reported. In this model of journalism, the world is not so much a complicated place that needs fair-minded description and analysis as it is a misleading and deceptive construction of self-interested powers that require a professional truth-teller to keep the public informed. If the virtue of the informative journalist is judgment, the virtue of the investigative journalist is suspicion.

Suspicion would seem an easy virtue to cultivate. It is not. If it had been left to the top reporters at the *Washington Post* to pursue the Watergate story, it would have been dropped. The star reporters all believed that Richard Nixon was too smart to get caught up in dirty tricks, burglaries, and thefts. And they were all wrong. It is not easy to maintain one's suspicion; nor is it easy to turn suspicion on one's friends. The 2006 Pulitzer Prize for national reporting went to the *San Diego Union Tribune*, one of the country's more conservative newspapers, and one that routinely endorsed Republican Randy «Duke» Cunningham for re-election. But it was precisely this paper that followed up the suspicious sale of Cunningham's home to a defense contractor who then mysteriously resold it at a \$700,000 loss. «Why?» the reporters wanted to know. What they discovered was the worst bribery scandal in the history of the United States Congress. Mr. Cunningham is now serving an eight-year prison term and other indictments are likely, while the ardently conservative *Union Tribune* was overjoyed with its success in sending a conservative ally to prison.

### III. ANALYSIS

Analysis may be an effort to explain a complicated scene within a comprehensible narrative. Today we sometimes call this «explanatory journalism,» which even has its own Pulitzer Prize category. The virtue required for analytic journalism is intelligence and a kind of pedagogical wisdom that link the capacity to understand a complex situation with a knack for transmitting that understanding to a broad public. One such example would be the *New York Times* report on the mysterious dying off of the U.S. honeybee population (Barrionuevo, 2007), which showed the connection between NAFTA and growing imports of South American honey into the U.S. on the one hand, and on the other, the growing practice of U.S. beekeepers who transport their bees between regions and rent them out for crop pollination.

Another reporting style attempts to illustrate a complicated social phenomenon through the life of a single individual. A recent lead story in the *New York Times* described the case of Mary Rose Derks, an 81-year-old widow from Conrad, Montana suffering from dementia whose long-term care health insurance provider denied her coverage. Finally, in the sixth paragraph it becomes clear that the story is not really about Mary Derks but about the scandalous long-term care insurance industry. And what did the *New York Times* contribute to this? Quite a lot, in fact, and the story is given an entire inside page. The *Times* reviewed 400 cases of elderly policyholders who «confront unnecessary delays and overwhelming bureaucracies» (DuHigg, 2007).

Analysis, like investigation, requires far more financial backing than mere information providing does. Analytical reporting is expensive in that it requires a great deal of time and effort, and few news organizations are

willing to invest in it to any large degree. The financial resources necessary for investigation and analysis are worthy of our consideration because as newspapers find themselves competing—and not very successfully—with the free media available through Internet, the primary engines of public investigation and analysis increasingly appear at risk. Online journalism, particularly that which is not sponsored by major print or television media, has shown little ability or interest in making the large investments in investigation and analysis that result in the conventional media, especially newspapers, being such an enormous resource for democracy.

#### IV. SOCIAL SURVEILLANCE

What I refer to as social surveillance is something very important that journalism can do for a democracy but that has little place in the usual rhetoric on journalism. It deserves more attention. My own thinking about this goes back 25 years to a conference I attended in which Roger Wilkins, then an editorial writer at the *Washington Post*, told a story about sitting down at a lunch counter next to an elderly black woman in Washington and striking up a conversation with her. I will not recall the details precisely, but it went something like this: it was the fall of 1980 and the presidential election was coming up. «Who do you favor in the election?» Wilkins asked the woman. «President Carter; he's a good man. I don't know about this Ronald Reagan.» «So, are you going to vote?» he continued «Oh, no, I don't vote.» «Why is that?» «I'm too busy and too tired, it's too much trouble.»

Why did Wilkins bring that story to this conference of academics and journalists trying to determine the role of the press in democracy? Because, he said, he did not think there was much journalism could do to change the views or actions of that woman at the lunch counter, but he did think journalism could tell her story. Journalism could inform those of us who do vote, those of us who have the power to make decisions and the leverage to turn society in one direction or another, about that woman and others like her so that we could see her and understand her with compassion.

Journalism now does more of this and does it better than it ever has. Human interest stories have been a part

of journalism for a long time, but they are instrumentally these days to draw readers or viewers. A larger tale, one that tells us not just about an interesting or unusual individual but that shows how a person's experience ties in with larger issues, was what sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) used to say that «sociological imagination» was the leap of mind to see the connection between a person's private troubles and the public issues that gave rise to them. The journalistic imagination is no different, and the better news organizations of our day make a great effort to connect private troubles and public issues.

Social surveillance is a surprisingly recent development in journalism. At some point in the 1950s, but certainly not in the 1960s, «the personal and the political» became one of journalism's most important themes— and by the 1980s, personal trouble as related to a public issue seemed almost inescapable. The use of using human interest to open up larger public issues might seem to be as old as the hills, but in modern mass media, at least, it is not. The idea of personal trouble having general significance of a particular public issue was introduced by the case of a person whose problem was a fact related to or an instance of a public problem. Even in the 1970s, many arenas of life were closed to rise to surveillance stories were judged by conventional standards to be undignified and not the stuff of serious politics and business but «SMERSH» topics: Crime, Medicine, Education, Religion and all that (Hart, 1997, pp. 411).

The practice of linking individual vignettes to public policy issues became a matter of public controversy in the early Reagan years. In 1982, CBS aired a Bill Moyers narrated documentary that sought to examine the impact of Reagan's budget reductions on the lives of everyday citizens. The program followed four individuals, a man who had lost his disability benefits and three others also adversely affected by reductions in government spending. David Gergen, then Reagan's communications director, attacked the documentary for blaming poverty on the president when the president was already annoyed by this type of journalism-by-anecdote. He said, «You can't turn news into news without seeing that they're going to



someone else who has lost his job. Is it news that some fellow out in South Succotash someplace has just been laid off and that he should be interviewed nationwide?»

These stories reside in the collective memory of social science only because Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder (1987) tested the so-called «vividness hypothesis» in the laboratory. Their results were surprising. In sum, they found that «news stories that direct viewers' attention to the flesh-and-blood victims of national problems prove no more persuasive than news stories that cover national problems impersonally—indeed, they tend to be less persuasive.» Iyengar and Kinder found their results mysterious. They speculated that perhaps viewers blamed the victims and saw them as causes of their own misfortune. Perhaps viewers got so caught up in the melodrama of the specific instance that they failed to make the sociological leap that more sophisticated viewers so obviously understood as the journalist's point. Or perhaps the journalist's implicit or explicit subordinate thesis—that these people were just like them or, more spiritually, «there but for the grace of God go you»—was something viewers simply did not accept, thinking, «I am not black. I am not old. My family has not abandoned me. I have never relied on government assistance. I do not live in New Jersey. So what you are showing me does not translate into my own everyday life.»

Social surveillance, then, does not always stimulate the imaginative leap in readers and viewers that journalists intend. It still seems to be, however, one of the great achievements of the leading contemporary press and one that is closely linked to democratic values. It expresses the virtues of curiosity and empathy in the journalist, and it encourages empathy and understanding in the audience.

#### **V. PUBLIC FORUM.**

From the early days of journalism to the present, newspapers have always dedicated a significant amount of space to letters to the editor. Over the past 40 years, leading newspapers in the United States have also provided an «op-ed» page—so named because it is the page opposite the editorial page—in which staff writers, syndicated columnists, guest columnists, experts, and or-

dinary citizens provide a variety of views on current issues. More U.S. newspapers feel a responsibility to provide a range of perspectives in their pages because few major cities have more than one daily newspaper these days.

Television scarcely provides any help in extending the «public forum» function of the news. Television news still tends to convey a *naïve* impression that there is only one way to see the world. Walter Cronkite used to close his CBS News broadcasts with «and that's the way it is.» And that is still largely «the way it is» in television news, although there is more room than there used to be for a degree of spontaneity and subjectivity in the live reports from journalists in the field. Looking more broadly at cable television, however, we can see that various opinion programs have advanced this public forum function of journalism. Opinion, perspective, passion, and anger—even if it is often more theatrical than sincere—have enlivened the TV screen, although the most popular and pervasive of the voices are clearly from the political right. Public forum on cable television and talk radio is livelier than it used to be, but it is also skewed sharply to the right.

In recent years the creation of the Internet has cracked the public forum function of journalism wide open in the most wide-ranging and profound ways. Its virtue is not individual but social; it is the virtue of interaction, of conversation, of an easy and agreeable democratic sociability.

#### **VI. MOBILIZATION**

Historically, no form of journalism has ever been more important than partisan journalism, which seeks to rally together only those who share the journalist's political or ideological position. Even in U.S. journalism, which is now widely recognized for its powerful commitment to notions of non-partisanship and objectivity, party-based journalism was the dominant concept throughout the 19th century.

Why was the partisan press so pervasive? It was certainly not because the press failed in an effort to be fair and objective; the 19th century press never tried to be fair or balanced. Newspapers were directly and indirectly subsidized by political parties. The publishers, edi-

tors, and reporters understood their job was political cheerleading and mobilizing, and not political reporting. As one historian put it, 19th century newspapers were more interested in reaching people's feet than their minds and getting them into the streets marching, parading, and voting rather than persuading them by argument, facts or reasoning to share their opinions, let alone to think for themselves (Ryfe, 2006, p. 60-77). Top editors looked forward to political appointments if their party won the White House. Abraham Lincoln appointed newspaper editors as ambassadors or consuls in Switzerland, Holland, Russia, London, Paris, Elsinore, Vienna, Bremen, the Vatican, Zurich, Turin, Venice, Hong Kong, and Ecuador. He appointed editors who had supported his campaign to run the post office or the custom house in New Haven, Albany, Harrisburg, Chicago, Cleveland, St. Louis, and elsewhere (Schudson, 1998, p. 122). One wonders who was left to run the newspapers!

Was there information in 19th century newspapers? Yes, there was, but it was doggedly partisan. The press at that time did not endorse either of the first two democratic functions of journalism I have discussed—informing the public or serving as a watchdog on government—at least not in a way familiar to Americans today. The goal of the newspapers was not to create an informed citizen but a party-loyal citizen. The intent was not to reveal government scandal *per se* but rather to reveal government scandal when and only when the opposition party was in control of the government.

There is much to be said for this model of journalism as partisan cheerleader, journalism as propaganda, journalism as exhortation and incitement to participate. If different partisan viewpoints are well represented among the institutions of journalism, then a journalist-as-advocate model may serve the public interest very well. Partisan journalism enlists both the heart and the minds of the audience. It gives readers and viewers a cause as well as information. In contrast, today's objective, information-providing, and nonpartisan investigative functions of leading news organizations may have de-mobilizing effects. They provide people with information, but they do not advise them on what to do with it. If anything, they seem to imply that nothing can be

done, that politicians are only interested in political careers. The undertone of cynicism reports may well be a factor in encouraging an attitude of cynicism in the general public (see Schudson, 1998, pp. 144-187).

If the partisan press was so pervasive in the 19th century, where does the modern idea of news as a professional, balanced resource for an informed citizen come from? It comes from reformers at the end of the 19th century who attacked party politics. These reformers sought to make elections «educational.» They favored civil service reform rather than filling government jobs with loyal party workers. In a variety of ways they tried to insulate the independent, rational citizen from the distorting enthusiasms of party. In the 1890s, political campaigns began to shift from parade politics to pamphlets and so put a premium on literacy. News broke free. The attractions of the marketplace grew. More and more newspapers—a danger, to be sure, but a danger that freed the press from subservience to parties. In the 1890s, the Australian ballot was introduced in the nation and so for the first time in American history universal suffrage was required to cast a ballot. The novelty of the Australian ballot was that the state took responsibility for printing ballots that listed the candidates of every party that qualified for the election. This meant that voters received their ballots from state election officials at the polling place, not from party workers. This meant that the voter had a choice of candidates by marking the ballot, and this formally meant that provision was made for the voter to mark the ballot in secret. With this innovation, journalism changed from a social and public duty to a party propaganda from a social obligation to a party enforcement mechanism. Social pressure to a civic obligation or abstract principle was forceable only by private conscience. In the 1890s, non-partisan municipal elections, presidential primaries, and the initiative and referendum imposed increasingly challenging cognitive tasks on prospective voters. Never before, and these changes enshrined «the new citizenry» in the U.S. political imagination (Schudson, 1998, pp. 144-187).

Between 1880 and 1910 the most basic assumptions of American politics were challenged. These changes invented the language by which we still judge



tics today. It stresses being informed while it dismisses or demeans parties and partisanship. To put this more pointedly, the political party, the single most important agency ever invented for mass political participation, is the institution that current civics talk and civics education regularly abhor and is rendered almost invisible in the way we conduct the act of voting. Insofar as the way we do vote is a set of enduring instructions about the way we should vote and the way we should think about voting, the civic lesson of Election Day as the U.S. has organized it for the past century recommends contempt for parties and partisanship.

Nearly all of the 19th century's electoral rhetoric was focused on party loyalty and fraternity rather than informed choice. All of the U.S. electoral rhetoric since the early 20th century has insisted that people choose among candidates, parties, and issues, and independent, reasoned choice is the ideal. Nonpartisan groups get out the vote. Nonpartisan groups try to elevate the state of politics by analyzing the issues. The state of California provides every registered voter with an extensive information guide (a development of the same 1910-1920s reform period) that routinely consists of more than 100 pages of dense print, and Oregon's 2004 voter information guide was so long it had to be printed in two volumes. This does not, however, mean people are necessarily well informed, but it does mean that the collective ritual of obtaining news and information from the press and other sources in this past century has been very different than it was in the previous century.

## CONCLUSIONS

Where will journalism be in 10 or 20 or 50 years? No one knows. We do know, however, that it will be more online than it is today—it will be more online next week! I believe we can also say that television and radio news will continue. There are certainly more concerns about newspapers, it is fair to say, but at this point there are no online news gathering organizations of any scope and substance that are not a part of a print-based or TV-based media organization. There are, of course, all sorts of bloggers, aggregators, and opinion columnists whose

presence exists only online, and many of them are making impressive contributions to public discourse and to a number of the democratic functions discussed in this essay, but none of them has invested in news gathering in the way that hundreds of newspaper publishers have done. The efforts of these newspapers cannot be dispensed with, even though the economic model that sustains them must be redesigned.

The arrival of the Internet and the growth of the blogosphere mean that the public forum and mobilizing functions of journalism will grow relative to its informing, investigative, and social surveillance functions. It may also be the case that the Internet will help create an incipient seventh function of journalism for democracy, one in which the divide between the journalist and the audience for journalism disappears. Some people call this «citizen journalism,» and it has always existed to a degree. Every time a citizen calls a news organization and says «I have a hot tip for you,» it is a form of citizen journalism. Every letter to the editor is a form of citizen journalism. But now citizens can simply go online and publish that tip or letter on their own (see Schaffer, 2007).

I am not an alarmist, and I am not a utopian about the changes we see around us. We are not about to witness the end of journalism, but newspapers are in for a very rough ride for a while, and some of them, even some very distinguished ones, will not survive. The informative, investigative, and social surveillance functions that journalism has sometimes offered democracy may be redistributed across different journalistic and non-journalistic organizations. They may not be as centrally concentrated in traditional newspapers and television networks as they once were. But in the long run, this is not something to fear. As with Tocqueville long ago, so it is with us today. The informational landscape of democracy may not be lovable, and it may not live up to our highest hopes for it, but we should be open to its possibilities and recognize that now, as in Tocqueville's day, the unruliness of a decentralized and multi-voiced informational system may be among democracy's greatest assets.

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