What is Journalism? How is it Linked to Society?

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Introduction

This is a book of theory, specifically theory of the relation between journalism and society. It is written primarily from the perspective of society (rather than journalism), although it draws on the views of journalists as well as on research findings about journalism. The main focus is on the claims of society and the goals, rights, duties and responsibilities of journalists. Although the treatment is mainly explanatory and analytic, the outcome lends support to the case for an independent, professional and effective institution of a free press. This should be regarded as an indispensable element in a just and open society and beyond in the world. It is also unlikely that it can be achieved without some positive support from society, as well as from the press itself.

The term journalism is defined below but needs clarification in relation to other similar terms. Sometimes reference is made to 'the media' or 'mass media', or possibly 'news media', thus to the entire 'media system' or a large sector of it. The word 'press' is also encountered as an alternative (also explained below) that usually serves as a more abstract and formal description of much the same set of activities. Additionally, 'journalism' is often used as if synonymous with 'news' or even with the 'newspaper'. The relation between the various terms can be explained approximately as follows, since it is more than just a matter of words.

The widest frame of reference is that of 'mass media', both as an industry and a new social institution in its own right. Within this frame we can speak of the 'press' which occupies its own institutional terrain and acts to represent and stand for the interests of news media and, albeit informally

and incompletely, to regulate some aspects of the work of journalists. Note that the 'press'concept is not limited to print media, as the word might suggest. Journalism is the core activity that the press stands for. It is also the word most commonly used to describe the occupation. Finally, we can mention the 'news' – the main product of journalism that is sometimes used interchangeably with other terms. The 'newspaper' enters the picture because most employed professional journalists probably still work for newspapers and the newspaper model of the news genre has largely been carried over to other media. However, other types of print media, especially magazines, have historically been important vehicles for information, opinion and comment about society. There is thus no consistency in usage, but this book will try and keep to a formulation in which 'journalism' is always the primary referent, but with an understanding that it is not coterminous with 'news' and not just a genre of the 'newspaper'.

Origins of journalism

In everyday terms, journalism refers to the activities and outcomes of those professionally engaged in collecting, analysing and publishing 'news'. In turn, news can be defined as factual accounts and explanations of current or recent events of wider relevance to a given public, usually characterised by their geographical location (city, region, nation, etc.). It is important not to reverse this connection and identify journalism only in terms of 'news' since there is a strong case for including other kinds of 'account' of social reality within the scope of journalism. Of course each of the main terms used in this definition needs further explanation, but this will suffice for the moment.

Journalism in this sense is strongly associated with the invention of printing and with the particular printed form of the newspaper, which first made its appearance in the early seventeenth century. Its emergence is clearly related to what has come to be called a 'modern' society and with the development of towns and international commerce as well as political changes. Compared to earlier forms, such societies were more free and individualistic, more secular and dedicated to material progress based on commerce and the application of science and technology. They have a looser social organization, with a high degree of division of labour but with interdependence of their elements. The fore-runners of print journalism are diverse and include: written accounts of events (sometimes distant in time), chronicles of dynastic, ecclesiastical or national developments, log-books and records, letters and journals kept by travellers, diplomatic despatches and presumably reports of spies and agents.

The prototype of the newspaper was the printed or handwritten newsletter that reported significant events and circumstances of relevance for trade, commerce and politics. These letters circulated along the postal and trade routes of Europe in the first instance and then more globally. They could be read aloud and handed on or copied, and were often intended for wider public diffusion. The contents of private letters, public announcements and also word of mouth reports were compiled into summary miscellanies, printed and sold as both entertainment and useful information.

Journalism in these forms existed well before there were professional journalists or editors, since news would usually be collected by printer-publishers from a variety of sources.

Although the original forms of journalism were disparate, it quite soon acquired certain distinguishing features, on the basis of common practices and public expectations that have persisted. The main characteristics of journalism as it gradually emerged in the form of the newspaper are summarised in Box 1.1.

Box 1.1 Defining features of early journalism

- Having reference to, or relevance for, recent or current events

- Factual, informative in form

- Public and open in terms of content and audience

- Independent of official authority

- Regular appearance in print

- Secular and miscellaneous in subject matter (not political or religious in purpose)

- Content selected mainly on grounds of potential interest to reader.

Once invented, journalism was found to be: indispensable for commerce; appealing to readers; and the basis of a profitable small business for printers. It also drew the attention of authorities governing cities, regions or nations. For them it could be seen as useful both as a means of control and influence and as a potential source of intelligence. State and city authorities in Europe sometimes published their own official newspapers or gazettes with a somewhat different purpose than

commercial ventures, but with some overlap in content. Journalism was also liable to supervision or censorship as a potential cause of dissent or unrest, with much variation from one jurisdiction to another. Later, regular print publications (whether in newspaper or magazine form) came to be an important vehicle for movements towards political reform or revolution, national independence or freedom for religious minorities. Civic virtues and regional identities sometimes also gained journalistic support. The 'normative' dimension of journalism was well established before the commercial newspaper became dominant in the 'mass media age'.

In Europe and North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, journalism increasingly became a vehicle for the propaganda of established authorities and interests, and also a key instrument in the activities of opposing factions in political and religious struggles, reform movements and challenges to authority. As its role expanded, especially in relation to politics, it began to acquire an institutional character and formed the basis for what came to be known as 'The Press' in the nineteenth century (see below). Largely because of this development, the Press as an institution, with journalism as its core activity, has acquired a close association with aspirations for freedom and democracy. This strengthened the claim of journalism to have its own freedom.

As this brief history shows, journalism originated in the 'West' and became established as a genre and institution of society before newspapers really existed in Asia and the rest of the world. For this reason, at least, it is justifiable to define it largely in terms of a western 'dominant model', or at least as a very influential prototype. This has even been characterised more narrowly as an 'Anglo-American invention' (Chalaby, 1996). Nevertheless, the present and future of journalism need to take account of a much changed world in which journalism is a global phenomenon with a range of different forms and cultures, depending on the national society in which it is practised and the chosen medium. The different circumstances of its environment often strongly affect many of the theoretical issues about journalism discussed in this book.

Even so, we can still claim that our initial definition is still, generally, valid for most of the world's journalism and the key issues are still much the same in a more global environment, especially when they relate to freedom of reporting, standards of quality, the goals of journalism, the ties to society, the nature of the profession, and the challenges presented by changing media systems and changing worlds.

The journalism–society link: levels of analysis and theoretical perspectives

Although the practice of journalism, viewed from within, does not require any theoretical justification or explanation, some form of theory inevitably develops out of the wider interaction of journalists and their social environment, especially as journalism becomes more complex and more significant in its potential consequences. Theory may not be needed by journalists themselves to guide their day-to-day activities but it is essential for certain other purposes. It plays a part in explaining, or in justifying, the actions of journalists when these become controversial, and in processes of accountability involving the law or professional self-regulation. In particular, the claim to journalistic freedom as a fundamental principle cannot be sustained without theoretical justification as well as pragmatic arguments.

Following this line of thought, for purposes of theory, we can distinguish between three levels of attention to the practise of journalism: the levels being those of: the society; the news organization; and the individual journalist. The key issues facing journalism, beyond the practice of the task itself, are those of freedom, obligation to others, and accountability for meeting any obligations that are acknowledged. Each of these is experienced differently in the three main contexts looked at, with different expectations, rules for conduct and potential for negotiation, resistance or enforcement.

At the level of the society, journalism becomes enmeshed in all large public events, by way of contacts with social, cultural and political elites and drawn by the interests of its own audiences. At this level, ideas about the rights and obligations of journalism tend to circulate in the form of pressures and demands from society and proposals and counter-proposals concerning accountability and control. At the heart of the matter is the assumption that journalism plays an important, possibly essential, part in the collective life of a community or nation. In consequence, the press itself has to be governed, organized and conducted according to the same fundamental principles that are supposed to govern the rest of society. In a democracy this refers to freedom of speech, equality of all citizens and the rule of law.

Journalism in some form is a necessary condition for each of these principles, since it is a primary medium of public expression and it provides all citizens equally with the same information and advice for forming opinions and making choices. Under modern conditions of large-scale society, there can be no real public space for debate without journalism

and no opportunity for the many to participate in relevant society-wide processes of self-government. Publicity is also essential to a fair and efficient judicial system. The press institution provides the primary means of self-regulation of journalism and also a limited guarantee of some measure of responsibility and of accountability to society as a whole.

Box 1.2   The level of society: some reasons why journalism raises theoretical issues

- Journalism is involved in all major public events

- Prominent actors in society use journalism for their own ends

- Principal values of society transfer to journalism and are, in turn, supported

- Journalism provides the basis for society-wide public debate and participation

- The justice system depends on publicity from media

- Journalism exerts pressure for accountability and society exerts pressure in kind in return.

At the *level of the news organisation* (e.g. newspaper or media firm), patterns of systematic reporting and publishing that characterise the output of journalists are related to larger structures of the market and of the social system. Theory to account for the structure and behaviour of news media usually requires reference to political and economic circumstances, to public policies and forms of governance (especially as embodied in regulations and law and also to the working of the market, especially the media market itself). The main relevant factors are summarised in Box 1.3.

Box 1.3   Factors affecting the conduct and performance of journalism at the level of the news organization

- The legal and regulatory system in place

- The structure of ownership and control (public versus private; degree of ownership monopoly; foreign ownership, etc.)

- The links between media and politics (parties, politicians, movements, ideas)

- Market forces, practices and pressures

- The general influence of organisational requirements and work routines on reporting, processing and distribution of news.

It is evident that the relation between news and society is mediated according to some or all of the factors mentioned in Box 1.3.

At the *individual level,* the journalist is a person dealing directly with other individuals, especially those who are considered as sources or as objects of reporting. More distantly, and notionally, the journalist has some form of relation with audience members. Real audiences aside, it has been shown that journalists, faced with a large, disparate and anonymous audience are inclined to construct a preferred view of the kind of person they are addressing. The various relationships involved are often in some degree reciprocal, so theory is concerned not only with what the journalist thinks of others, but also what others think of journalists.

The central aspect of these relationships concerns the potential obligations (professional or personal) that the journalist might be aware of. Conventions and customs of the profession play a large part in turning theory into practice. Furthermore, journalists are attached to the wider society by obligations and constraints that are sometimes personally experienced as citizens, but also often embedded in a web of informal rules of the workplace and the role, giving rise to expectations about conduct.

A significant factor for individual journalists may be the conception he or she has formed of the main purposes and rationale of the role of journalist, insofar as this is not fully determined by the organisation and work specification. Role conceptions relate to the degree and kind of social engagement that is called for or allowed. The extent to which a person aspires to professional status is also relevant here. Theory has tended to focus most on the perception of these roles on the part of journalists. How do they see their primary task and what do they regard as criteria of good journalism in light of this? The definition and perception of roles has direct implications for other key issues, including the degree of freedom they might claim in their work and relations with potential sources of news, especially those in positions of authority or influence.

There are also ethical norms and other standards that guide journalists in their relationships with other individuals. Central tenets relate to: respect for the privacy and dignity of subjects; an awareness of the consequences of publicity; and honesty in the collection of information

and dealing with sources. These and other such matters are familiar to journalists. Observance may be governed by the policy of the news organization or by adherence to professional codes, but may sometimes be left to individual choice or governed by informal pressure and the demands and routines of everyday activity.

Box 1.4   The perspective of the individual journalist as an influence on conduct and performance

- Relationship to the audience, real or imagined (close or distant, favourable or hostile, etc.)

- Personal conception of the role

- Adherence to professional norms and codes

- Personal background, values and opinions

- Experience of in-work training and socialisation.

Although most questions of journalism theory relevant to the wider society can be dealt with by reference to one or other of these three levels and corresponding perspectives, there is an additional perspective to take into account – that of the reader or audience. Media use as a field of human behaviour has been extensively studied and 'the news' has often figured centrally in audience inquiries. Most relevant to this book, apart from the details of actual attention to, interpretation of, and 'learning' from news, are questions about motives for news attention.

Inquiries have revealed a wide range of motivations and satisfactions sought or obtained, with many variations, but frequent elements in public perceptions of news go beyond the more obvious purposes of keeping up with issues of the day and being informed of events. These additional purposes include: gaining a sense of security from the continuous flow of information; acquiring status through knowledge; having the means of social interaction with others; the entertainment and 'human interest' value of much content; and the sense of acquiring from regular news bulletins a framework for a daily routine or a ritual to follow.

Much actual use of news by large sections of the audience is thus not guided by motives related to essential informational needs of the person or the society. This fact co-exists with a widespread perception of news as generally a serious business. This ambiguous underlying reality of much

news 'consumption' does help to make sense of audience choices and attitudes and also of the strategies of news providers to leaven 'hard' with 'soft' news. The much criticised news phenomenon of 'infotainment' may fail to meet high standards of information quality and is related to 'commercialisation', but it is not simply imposed from above on an unsuspecting and vulnerable public.

In general the findings of news audience research reflect and confirm more abstract theories about the social functions of news and journalism. They are also a reminder that 'news' is not only defined and characterised by its originators and that its significance and effects go beyond the informative aspect and are not very predictable. More to the point of the present book, a few key issues about journalism are highlighted from this point of view. These include the variable extent and basis of public trust in the suppliers of news (sources, media and journalists); and the variable degree of support from the audience for 'higher' journalistic purpose as opposed to forms of news that are sometimes regarded as trivial or even harmful. The larger question raised here concerns the extent to which journalism is constrained to reflect the reality of the culture of its society and the limits to influence this entails. The counter-currents to what is conventionally regarded as 'quality' journalism are strong.

Box 1.5   Audience perspectives on the news

- News is selectively and often casually attended to

- The perceived uses and satisfactions of news are very diverse

- The contents and consumption of news are seen as entertaining and diverting

- Social and cultural variations strongly influence attention and perception

- Trust and perceived credibility are very variable

- Audience beliefs about the rights and duties of journalists often deviate from established norms.

The main concerns of social theory of journalism

Journalism can be examined according to different types of theory (social, economic, literary, political, etc.) but the category of 'social theory' is most directly relevant to the public role of journalism and principles of the kind just introduced. Social theory is a mixture of *description* and *normative*

prescription. As description, we are essentially treating journalism as conforming to a certain 'ideal type' of purpose and practice, but with differences according to time and place. Such an ideal form or model can be compared to the reality in a given national case and used as a tool of analysis and interpretation. The normative element refers to ideas about the ideal purposes of journalism and potential obligations to the wider society. It deals with the relative value of different goals and how these can or should be achieved, bearing in mind that in modern societies the 'press' is largely run as a business enterprise, not as a social service or for idealistic (or ideological) purposes.

Our aim is not to propose rules to be followed but to identify the guiding principles of journalism that are most widely recognised both internally and from the outside. The 'theory' we are seeking to describe either in empirical or prescriptive aspects, or both, is not fixed or universally valid, but open to alternative interpretations and formulations. Nevertheless, some coherence and consistency can be expected between societies that subscribe to the same values of civic and human rights and forms of political decision-making. The value of theory should lie in its potential to explain and assess the reality of journalistic work. It is an essential aid to criticism and self-awareness as well as to attempts at reform. The status accorded to journalism in the wider society depends on the values it subscribes to and how well it lives up to them. Efforts at improvement depend on there being a viable and respected body of social theory for diagnosis and prescription.

The main concerns of social theory of journalism are given in Box 1.6.

Box 1.6   Social theory of journalism: main concerns

- The nature of the 'needs of society' that are met by journalism

- The issue of whether or not journalism, despite its claims to freedom, has some obligations to society that it cannot ignore

- The nature and strength of any such obligations

- The means available to society to activate obligations or hold media to account for them

- The norms and standards that should apply to the practise of journalism, as it affects society

- Issues of control and accountability especially as they relate to freedom of expression and publication.

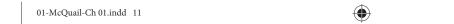---

Diversity and diversification of journalism

Journalism itself is a social and cultural phenomenon linked to many other conditions and ultimately escaping clear and unambiguous definition. Nevertheless, we can identify some of its various manifestations and look at the pathways by which these have emerged. As noted earlier, journalism is only one of many different genres of writing with a bearing on the contemporary reality of society that were stimulated by the invention of printing and publishing.

An important strand of much early print publication was the wider concept of personal *authorship* that had been stimulated by the discovery of printing. For some versions of journalism, this has given it an expectation of originality, personal vision and intrinsic authority. The journalist as author should have the same rights of freedom of expression and of conscience as any other author. However, the mundane task of news collection and dissemination is not easy to reconcile with this principle. There are practical limits to the exercise of personal freedom, imagination and expression. Journalists are typically employed by organisations engaged in selling and distributing the products of their work. They are inevitably constrained by these circumstances.

The version of the occupation or role of journalist that has come to predominate, as distinct from the simple activity of printing and publishing bare accounts of actual events, reflects the tension between the many demands and expectations affecting journalistic work. The individual journalist of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe or North America could sometimes lay claim to being an author or at least a writer, and not just a conduit from sources of information to typesetters. But the claim was not made by all or even many journalists and the public reputation and image of the profession was not usually very flattering. An inherent uncertainty about the status of the journalistic role remains with us.

Nevertheless, the literary and scientific dimension of authorship coupled with an involvement in the struggles for religious and political freedom did modify and extend the original idea of journalism as a neutral carrier of information about current events. One result can be seen in the emergence of different varieties or types of journalism, especially forms that involve the expression of strong opinions, the adoption of an adversary position, or the emergence of a 'watchdog' role. Contemporary journalism is characterised by a number of essentially different genres, carrying different expectations for the audience and society and often following their own distinctive ground rules.

This diversification is not simply a case of subject matter (for instance, the opinion-forming press or the press of sport, politics, business, art and

culture or celebrity gossip). More important are distinctions according to place (local, regional, national), social class and education (quality versus tabloid journalism) or audience taste/interest and style of writing (sensational or restrained, literary and philosophical, etc.). Not least important was the fundamental difference between a profit-oriented newspaper press and one with ideal, political or ideological objectives.

In more recent times, differences according to medium (and technology) have added another significant dimension of variation. The print-based model of journalism has proved a powerful survivor and in many respects still remains more influential than audio-visual media (for instance, in setting the news agenda for the latter and in its closeness to power). In many countries, the newspaper never attained mass circulation and, where it did, it has been in decline. Even so, the communicative power of the word seems to exceed that of visual reporting because of its lack of ambiguity and with the advantage of permanence. However, film and television documentary have unique possibilities for impact and the primacy of words may be slowly giving way to the capacity of online media to combine all forms and genres, with immense practical advances in processing and distribution.

Box 1.7   Dimensions of variation in journalism

- Authorship versus employment

- Profession versus trade or craft

- Local versus national and cosmopolitan

- Profit versus non-profit

- General versus specialist

- Adversarial and active versus supportive or neutral

- Print versus other media

- Informative versus entertaining purpose.

The variations described are easily recognisable, and we can also discern a general tension between a view of the press as an institution primarily concerned with serving the public interest and one that is a branch of commerce or even of the entertainment industry. Whatever side one takes on the issues raised here, we are still dealing with much the same idea of

what is basically expected of the press – namely the regular provision of relevant and reliable information about current issues and events. To that extent a large part of what the press ought to be doing is a matter of agreement and much the same body of social theory concerning the role of journalism can be applied.

However, there are large areas remaining for potential dispute, especially where it concerns not just the provision of information, but matters of interpretation, opinion and value judgments. These can strongly influence the selection of topics and events for journalistic attention as well as the manner in which stories are told. Sooner or later we come up against the view that a completely objective and factual journalism is not attainable. Theory can help to resolve this paradoxical feature of the work of journalism, by offering a more complex version of what can be achieved and an understanding of the limitations.

Journalism and changing technology: implications for society

Ever since the mechanisation of printing and the industrialisation of newspaper production, journalism has been changing in response to technological change. The early manual press supplied a limited class of readers, mainly in towns. Late nineteenth century developments led towards a 'mass market' audience, with journalism for all social classes. The new readers were thought to be less interested in politics and more interested in sport, gossip, human interest, crime and useful information for daily life. Broadcasting by radio and, later, television was slow to adopt a news and information function, but by the latter half of the last century television news had come to reach whole populations and was widely claimed by most to be their 'main source' of news. Accessibility, popularity of the medium and perceived reliability all played a part in achieving this position. The key consequence for society was that a majority was quickly and equally informed about the same events, in much the same version. This was interpreted as a basis for social cohesion and solidarity. It also encouraged governmental and other social actors to influence and control the medium, in ways that were not available for controlling the printed press. The dominant position of television news weakened as a result of increased competition from cable, satellite and other new channels, aided by deregulation and privatisation of media systems.

However, it was the rise of the internet in the late twentieth century that has most troubled the settled relations of journalism and society since

then. The most significant features of internet journalism from this point of view are:

- its great diversity of forms and its accessibility to all would-be sources;

- its freedom from most controls, even from the benevolent guidance of a press institution and profession;

- its capacity for feedback and interactivity in relation to an audience;

- its relative delocalization;

- its non-institutionalized character; and

- its disconnection from other social institutions.

As a news medium, the internet is no longer closely linked to the existing structures of power and influence. It may even be considered potentially destabilising and socially fragmenting. It cannot be expected to recognise the same responsibility to society as earlier news media generally did, partly because of its more global character. Actual consequences are still uncertain, but it has certainly destabilised some features of the established media system, for instance, the once dominant position of the newspaper press.

Box 1.8   Implications of the internet for journalism–society relations

- Less easy to control, formally and informally

- More diversity of content, sources, style, audiences

- Less concentration of any 'power of the press' in a few hands

- More chance for the 'mass public' to evade hegemonic influence

- More chance for active social participation, at the same time as a reverse potential for disengagement on the part of individuals.

Defining journalism and the news today

Journalism was defined in general terms at the start of this chapter, but we can now give a more precise definition in the following terms:

Journalism is the construction and publication of accounts of contemporary events, persons or circumstances of public significance or interest, based on information acquired from reliable sources.

Accounts of events can vary a good deal in form, although the most frequently occurring element is the factual report of an observed or recorded reality. The medium of report can also vary, including graphic, sound and visual means. A statement, speech, appeal, etc. by a public figure counts as an event in this definition. Often there is a secondary element that reports on the alternative perspectives on events, as far as can be known from witnesses, participants or interested parties. Thirdly, there may be commentary or opinion added by the journalist on a personal basis or as the view of a news organisation (i.e. of its owners or editors). The version of journalism outlined also strongly implies that journalism is *authored*, thus not just a collection of facts.

Journalism defined in this way is typically undertaken within a larger news organisation, by skilled or trained persons, following established and transparent rules and procedures. The main product of journalism (the factual accounts) is usually simply known as 'news', which has in itself become a central genre of mass communication. News has been characterised by sociologists (following Robert Park, 1940) in terms of the features shown in Box 1.9.

Most news conforms to a certain style and form that is readily recognised. The most obvious features are: its attempt to be timely and of the moment; its relevance to public concerns and the interests of its potential audience; and its central component of 'facts' that claim to provide accurate and reliable information about reality. A widely expected feature of news that goes with this is the stance of neutrality and objectivity, an attempt to avoid open value judgements and personal opinion in reporting. An extension of this is the general assumption that objective reporting will be independent of the interests of sources or other vested interests. Beyond these basic features are others, which are less obvious. One is that the 'reality' that is reflected is usually equated with an undistorted mirror image of what is actually going on in the society around.

The selection of some items out of many for attention cannot really reflect a reality that is for the most part not 'newsworthy'. It has to be guided by 'news values' – essentially ideas of what will interest an audience plus some assumptions about the meaning and significance of events. Finally it is evident that news is much more than information in the form of facts, but also a series of 'stories', with plots, characters, heroes and villains, happy or tragic endings, etc. The 'narrativity' of news is, inevitably, in some tension with the formal character of news. For good or ill, the above characterisation of news has shaped the internal and external perception of the nature of journalism. This association of meaning cannot be undone, nor its consequences evaded, although it is important not to forget other aspects of the journalistic task.

Box 1.9   Characteristics of 'news'

- Timeliness: having novelty and reference to or relevance for current events, but also being perishable

- Truthfulness: factual accuracy and completeness in essentials, plus verifiability

- Objectivity: neutrality of perspective and lack of conscious bias

- Independence: from sources, the objects of reporting, or vested interests

- Reflective, in a proportional way, of 'reality' as far as possible

- Relevance to expected audience interests and believed relative significance

- Predictability (consistency): in respect of type of event regarded as 'newsworthy'

- 'Narrativity': taking a story-telling form and structure.

The press as an institution

The term 'press', as already noted, is still often used as a collective word for the activities of journalists, editors and publishers, and generally for the organisations involved in producing news as defined above. It provides a short-hand reference to the whole complex of publication and circulation of ideas throughout society, without which democracy cannot work. Originally it only denoted print media, but has now been extended to electronic forms, at least in their journalistic activities. In general, an institution is a complex of activities and practices that are formally or informally regulated by the same set of broad purposes and by accepted rules of conduct that have developed over time. The press institution largely shapes the expectations that the wider society and its agencies have of news media and also provides a basis for mutual trust, as long as experience accords with the ideal claims made.

There is no formal organisation or office of 'the press' as such in any free country and no fixed rules of conduct. It has a much less concrete existence than the social institutions on which it reports, such as education, law, politics, business or the military. In part this uncertainty embodies and reflects the freedom that the press claims for itself and also its high degree of fragmentation. The institutional features of the press are correctly interpreted as potential means of social control.

Nevertheless, it is still helpful to think of the press institution as providing some coherence and guidance to essential activities of public information. Its 'membership' is largely determined by the aspiration of journalists and publishers plus the recognition accorded by the public and society at large. Despite the lack of a formal or fixed system of governance, the activities of 'the press' do entail a number of conventions and norms of conduct. These 'rules' generally support notions of wider responsibility and public accountability and, in turn, serve to foster the trust essential to the performance of a public informational role.

Membership of the press often brings with it certain informal rights and privileges in the collection of information about public events. Wide use is made by 'event organisers' of a process of 'accreditation' of journalists that serves as an entry ticket to news events, but it can equally serve to exclude. Generally, the term 'press' is only applied to the 'mainstream', professional, and established sector of the news media, especially newspapers and broadcasting. However, by now, news on the internet – especially where provided by established news media, news agencies and sources – is also often regarded as the voice of the press. Journalism that adopts a very adversarial or socially deviant attitude (as is permitted by press freedom) risks losing the benefits of public acceptance and at some point of non-conformity, its protected status and its 'accreditation'. This may occur as a voluntary choice, reflecting a deliberate choice for dissociation from the press 'establishment' but it may also result from pressure by authorities to conform.

One end served by the press institution is to help reconcile some of the inconsistencies and latent conflicts mentioned earlier. For instance, it establishes 'rules of the game' whereby newspapers can be financed by advertisers with vested interests in news content, while still claiming independence. Advertising has been an accompaniment to journalism since the earliest times, with an understanding that the two should be kept separate. In line with this, advertising material does not usually enjoy the same freedoms of expression as other content, where the 'rules of the game' apply. Similarly it helps to account for the co-existence of both idealistic and also material, profit-seeking, motives. The press institution is embodied in arrangements made within national societies, much influenced by culture and circumstances of time and place. However, there are also some universal features within the broad coverage of countries claiming to be democratic. Although the press institution has been described primarily as an entity of a national society, there has been a steady growth internationally of key features of the institution, especially by way of agreement on codes and values (see Appendix, §1 and the activities of trans-national global and regional associations of journalists, as well as of editors and

publishers. The influence of groups active in supporting the rights and freedoms of journalists has also grown, by way of research and publicity. The international manifestation of the press institution is the more notable because it is not available as a means of control and is even a source of resistance and assistance against national level oppression.

Box 1.10   The press institution

The press institution:

- informally sets boundaries and provides an identity to the practice of journalism;

- has no formal constitution or organisational form;

- acts as an agency of professional self-regulation and accountability;

- is closely associated with 'mainstream' news media channels;

- secures some rights and privileges for journalists as well as some means of defence; and

- has the potential to be a means of control by society.

The idea of a press institution as outlined has been powerfully affected by new developments of technology and media structure. An immediate effect has been to break up or re-arrange the structure of media systems and to introduce new elements that take time to be institutionalized. There has been a distinct 'desacrilisation' of the established organs and functions of the press. They no longer have such high status or elevated goals, but provide services to the public and clients in a competitive market. There is also an opening up of information and opinion functions to anyone who wants access by way of new forms of online publication. These changes tend to undermine the already weak identity of 'The Press', although so far they have probably not made fundamental changes to its position in society, largely because the needs of society and of individuals in respect of public information are still much the same as before.

The 'power of the press'

Society is both the source and end destination of news, in such a way that journalism is inevitably involved in the exercise of power and not just the power of governments, propagandists and advertisers.

The often cited or alleged 'power of the press' lies in the many consequences sought or experienced by both 'senders' and 'receivers' of news, especially when effects relate to issues of public importance. In this context, 'power' can only mean 'influence' and persuasion, since information cannot in itself coerce. Sometimes the apparent power is a simple consequence of the volume of publicity, with no intention of influence involved. All agencies that operate in the public sphere are vulnerable to reactive effects caused by information circulated publicly and outside their own control.

The capacity to have influence stems from certain general circumstances of the operation of the press. Primary amongst these are: the *de facto* ability to 'control the gates' of communication to the public at large, deciding who and what will receive varying amounts of publicity; some control over the quality of this publicity – whether positive or negative; the dependence of many institutions of society on the news media as their main channel to the public but also the window through which they are themselves routinely perceived.

The effects at issue relate to public behaviour stimulated by news, or to attitudes and opinions formed on the basis of news information. The news media can affect choices in matters of consumption, voting and public reputation, whether intentionally or not. We should keep in mind, however, that the 'power of the press' is not an intrinsic property of the media, but largely the outcome of forces at work in the society that are mediated by way of the media. Aside from sheer reach, it depends on the degree of trust and respect accorded by the public to media sources. We need to look elsewhere for the true bases of social power and influence.

Whatever type or degree of power that can be attributed to the press, the situation of general dependence on flows of public information inevitably raises issues of the rights and responsibilities of journalists and leads to demands for accountability. Social theory of the press (ideas of what journalism ought or ought not to do) flows quite directly from the links of purpose, cause and effect that have been indicated.

Box 1.11   Power of the press: main types of effect

- Persuasion and change of attitude

- Formation of public opinion

(Continued)

(Continued)

- Influence on public image and reputation

- Effects on behaviour (e.g. voting, consumption, mobilisation to action)

- Setting the public agenda of issues

- Shaping public interpretations of events

- Informing the public and structuring 'public knowledge'

- Differential 'amplification' of news and images.

What society expects from journalism

A central feature of the case is that journalism (like the media in general) in a free society does not have any specific obligations to the state or any outside body, thanks largely to the doctrine of 'freedom of the press'. Journalists are certainly required to do no harm and obey the law, but they are not required by any outside authority to do any specific good. They are free to choose or avoid a variety of goals and tasks, within the scope of their occupation. The news media generally resent and resist attempts to prescribe any role for them in society, except as self-chosen.

Despite this, there is much in the history, constitution and conduct of the press institution that leads to the recognition of certain unwritten (and ultimately unenforceable) obligations to society. There are also many external pressures and also possible attractions towards service to society that cannot easily be ignored. Normative social theory of media relates both to self-chosen social purposes and also to claims from outside about how they should conduct themselves.

Amongst these external expectations, the strongest and clearest are those that stem from the presumed role of the press in democracies as a carrier of news and former of opinion and as a communicative link between citizen and government. The relationship of journalism to politics is a central feature of the case, since the claim to press freedom rests in part on the needs of democratic institutions. We can also point to deeply embedded conventions and customs in the history of journalism itself that makes such 'service to politics' quite normal, even central. Apart from anything else, the ongoing events of public significance which journalism is committed to report on are often political

in one way or another and are also of relevance and interest to audiences for news.

The other major influences on normative expectations are the state and agencies of government on the one hand, and owners on the other. Although, in democratic theory, the former can have no absolute power over a free press, they are inevitably a potential source of rewards or punishments of various kinds (economic, status, regulatory, see Chapter 7). As a matter of course, well established press organisations pay attention to the wishes of government, if only out of self-interest. At times a symbiotic relationship of mutual assistance develops between the 'makers' and the 'merchants' of news. It is also normal for an adversarial relationship to develop; a conflict essentially over the power to control the flow of information and to 'define reality'. This is both a matter of keeping secrets and determining what is 'truth'.

At abnormal times of crisis, war or national emergency, there is a much higher likelihood that the news media will voluntarily cooperate with authorities, both by way of positive acts of news selection and access, and also by omission or self-censorship. Although such compliance may be temporary, it is also based on established lines of contact and cooperation as well as on foundations of patriotism and service to the national interest, that have a continuing influence in normal times.

The second major influence is that of owners and media business interests. The imperatives of large media corporations and market forces (more so than of governments) seem to many observers more threatening to freedom, with more idealistic goals subordinated to market discipline. The counter argument is that journalism has to be viable and earn a living, but profitability does not have to exclude other goals, even in an era of global mega-corporations. In fact, profitability can support independence and the ideals of journalism can still be pursued and may even be profitable. There are many different markets for information, not just a mass market, and ideal purposes also have a public following.

The practice of journalism is thus caught in a web of obligations and pressures of various degrees of strength and specificity. Social theory of journalism as presented in this book is both an attempt at codification of relevant norms and an assessment of the direction and strength of pressures encountered and how these relate to professional practice. It would be a mistake to suppose that journalism necessarily operates in a permanent state of tension or conflict with

the rest of society, despite powerful strands in the press's own 'ideology' that proclaim a more or less permanent adversarial stance of journalists (albeit on behalf of the public) in the face of dominant social power.

Box 1.12   Expectations of society from journalism

- To circulate information on public matters to all

- To connect citizens to government and vice versa

- To support the routine work of the main institutions of society

- To respect the reigning values and norms of culture and society

- To serve the national interest

- To be available to help at times of crisis or emergency.

There is a potential contradiction between some expectations and the claim of the press itself to freedom and independence from state and government, or other vested interests. Most of the time this can be tolerated, but it does contribute to a dynamic climate of conflict in which journalism has to operate.

The self-image of the social role of the press

The newspaper press has often shown a voluntary dedication to the public good, and the titles traditionally chosen by newspapers have often reflected such public-spirited purposes. Box 1.13 lists some of the recurring verbal images or metaphors representing a public role, with examples of the newspaper titles that express these ideas – the titles date mainly from the high point of the newspaper at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries. The view that news media have a part to play in society is an inherent and important component of the image the press has of itself as an institution. The images either refer to some chosen task of the press, some normative quality, or both.

Box 1.13   Images and metaphors of the newspaper role in society, as expressed in typical titles

Task or quality (plus sample titles):

- Actuality and timeliness: The Times; Journal; Diary

- Bringer of information: News; Messenger; Intelligencer; Chronicle; Courier; Reporter

- Identification with a place: by carrying the name of a city, region, etc.

- International range of coverage: Globe; News of the World; Planet; Universe

- Speed: Express; Mercury; Despatch; Telegraph

- Wake-up call: Clarion; Bugle; Drum

- Harbinger of events: Herald; Crier; Leader

- Being of and for the people: Humanité; Labour; Tribune; Citizen; Worker; The People

- Being a public voice: Voice; Echo; Tribune; Word

- Acting as a guardian: Guardian; Argus; Sentinel

- Reliability and trust: Truth; Ledger, Record; Gazette; Tablet; Mirror; Trust

- Freedom: Independent and Free in titles; Liberation

- Observation and Scrutiny: Examiner; Inquirer; Observer; Monitor; Eagle

- Emblem and guide: Standard; Flag; Leader

- Enlightenment: Sun; Spark; Star.

We can say that the main organs of print journalism have traditionally chosen titles that express an aspect of the larger role of the press and that the foundations of social theory of the press have been laid by the press itself. Radio and television, in giving names to their news and actuality programme formats, have typically followed on the same path as newspapers by choosing from essentially the same stock of metaphors. The elements of 'theory' assembled in later chapters are thus largely an elaboration of ideas that originate with the press itself (publishers, printers,

editors and journalists), in some kind of informal negotiation with the public and with those who want to reach the public (politicians, advertisers, educators, entertainers, etc.).

There is a diversity of meanings and emphasis that finds expression in a diversity of types of publication and types of journalism, as noted earlier. Even so, there is also a certain degree of convergence on what is likely to be most widely regarded as good practice. It is this modal form that has been institutionalised in what some consider as a profession in its own right (see Chapter 4).

The pressures and demands from outside are not all equal in force and conditions of society vary in even more fundamental ways (economic, social, cultural, etc.). It is primarily for this reason that there are alternative versions of the social role of the press, with particular reference to differences between liberal and socialist ideology, various degrees of statism or corporatism and different levels of economic and social development. In general, internal norms relating to the core practice of journalistic work have actually varied less than the external systems of governance applied to the 'press'.

Conclusion: questions to be addressed

The following chapters will develop the points made in this introduction, with particular reference to the social role of the press and the implications for journalistic standards. Account has to be taken not only of variations between social and cultural contexts but also of economic conditions and practical circumstances. Amongst the pressures towards convergence of practice, special weight has to be given to the impact of technology.

The following questions cover the main themes of the book as a whole and are placed here to give an idea in advance of its range and purpose. A set of more specific questions is posed at the start of each chapter to serve as an agenda and guide to readers.

Functions and purposes of journalism in relation to society

- How are they perceived by society?

- How are they defined by the media themselves?

- How far is a journalistic obligation to fulfil these functions acknowledged?

- How do journalists themselves perceive their own role amongst the choices available?

The public interest in journalism

- What are the main elements of a public interest that journalism is expected to promote and how can it be known or expressed?
- How can it be served by journalism?
- How far does journalism carry an obligation in this matter?

Social (normative) theory of the press

- Is there sufficient common ground on which to base a 'social theory of the press'?
- How universal is or can it be across different media systems?
- What are the main sources of limitation and variations?

Journalism as a profession

- What does it mean to classify it as such?
- If so classified, what does this entail in the way of rights and duties? If not a profession, why not?
- How far does it conform to criteria of other professions?
- Does it matter one way or the other?

Freedom and accountability

- Do journalists have special rights to freedom?
- Where are limits set?
- What are the main threats to freedom of the press, e.g. political, economic, cultural, etc?
- What means of accountability are compatible with 'Freedom of the Press'?

Power of the press

- What is the basis for alleged power?
- How far can it be directed or controlled?
- How far can journalists be held accountable either for the effects of their work or its quality? What forms of accountability are appropriate for the purpose?

Theory and actuality of performance

- To what extent is there a gap between social theory of journalism and the reality of practice and outcomes?

- How can such shortfalls between theory and reality be explained?

- In the light of performance, what remains of expectations of service to the public interest?

- In what sense and how far can journalism be considered as a 'mirror of society'?

Changes in technology and media systems

- What are the consequences of ongoing changes for the press institution and normative relations of journalism to society?

Further reading

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Online readings

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