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NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON JOURNALISM STUDIES: STOCK-TAKING AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Journalism has advanced greatly as a field in its own right in recent decades. As well as a cause for celebration, however, this may give rise to concerns - in particular that scholars may pay increasing attention to the inner workings of journalistic institutions at the expense of their external ties, impact and significance, including their normative ones. It is true that important normative analyses have appeared in the literature, six of which the article defines and exemplifies. So far, however, these ideas have had relatively little influence upon the thought or practice of journalists. The article concludes by suggesting a way in which a closer and more constructive dialogue could be achieved between journalism scholars and practitioners, centring on the normative challenges faced by both sides.

KEYWORDS: Journalism Studies; Normative Analysis; Civic Engagement; Public Communication; Democracy; Comparative Research

In this article we aim to review and assess the place of normative ideas in journalism studies.¹ We discern and depict a somewhat mixed picture of them. On the one hand, a number of scholars have made significant contributions over the years to a corpus of normative thought about the media – ones which we attempt to define and classify below. On the other hand, these are ever in danger of being marginalized, due both to seemingly more urgent preoccupations within academe and to pressures on journalistic organizations that have weakened their civic commitments – some of which we also try to identify below. We hope that out of an analysis of these conflicting tendencies, some suggestions can be derived for the future direction of normative journalism scholarship.

The rise of journalism studies

By journalism studies, we refer to ‘the multidisciplinary study of journalism as an arena of professional practice and a subject focus of intellectual and academic inquiry’ (Franklin et al 2005). And journalism studies has undoubtedly advanced by leaps and bounds in recent years as a field in its own right (especially outside the United States where it had had something of an earlier foothold), securing increasing disciplinary autonomy from broader academic pursuits in mass communication, sociology and cultural studies (Cushion 2012a). This rise of journalism studies is evidenced in dedicated panels at international conferences, peer-reviewed journals devoted specifically to the subject, the readiness of major publishers to commission book-length manuscripts and even in the DNA of educators, many of whom have assumed the identity of journalism scholars. Hence, Journalism Studies Divisions have been formed within the leading organizations of communication academics such as the International Communication Association and the European Communication Research and Education Association, attracting large numbers of members and of papers for presentation at conferences. The recent proliferation of journals established exclusively to publish articles about journalism has been striking. Examples of such journals of recent origin include *Journalism studies*, *Journalism Practice*, *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, *Digital Journalism*, *Journalism Education*, *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator* and

Journal of Applied Journalism and Media Studies. Some of these latter ventures even signal the emergence of specialist sub-divisions within the journalism studies field. According to its opening editorial, for example, *Journalism Education* is designed to 'align academic scholarship with real-world professional priorities...on matters of specific interest to journalism educators'.

Marginalizing influences

Although developments of such abundant vigour must be a cause for celebration, they also give rise to causes for concern. In our view the latter have not been sufficiently discussed. The danger is that scholars, authors, educators and students will focus more and more on the complex inner workings of journalism at the expense of attention to its external ties, impacts and significance. In other words, journalism studies could become too inward-looking, marginalizing normative concerns that should remain fundamental to the study of journalism.

Four factors may induce such an imbalance. One is the impetus of specialization itself. Scholars encouraged to adopt more specific journalism identities may just naturally focus more of their research, writing and teaching on the institution's inner anatomy than on its outer face. We note, for example, that many publishers are commissioning series that are shaped by changes in the industry (technological, commercial, etc.) or that purport to deal with specific media, such as newspapers, magazines, television and radio journalism. Palgrave is featuring a series at present that will arm 'journalists, academics and students with a unique practical and critical guide to key areas of contemporary journalism practice for the digital age'. This is not to devalue these and other similar publications but to point out how they may push matters of organization, operation and function further to the centre of journalism studies to the neglect of normative evaluations.

Second (and related to the above), there are the numerous, dynamic and varied technological developments that are buffeting everyone involved in journalism these days and that invite a great deal of research, analysis, application, even Futurology! Almost all the articles in a recent special issue of *Journalism Studies* on 'The Future of Journalism', for example, pivoted one way or another on the course or impact of technological change. This is again not to devalue the merit or rigour of these scholarly inquiries. But to point out the somewhat technologically-driven terrain of recent journalism scholarship.

Third, there are the severe challenges to their short- and long-term viability that many journalistic organizations face these days. The resulting developments and problems, often accompanied by financial and staffing reorganizations, naturally prompt much thought, research and speculation. It would be unsurprising therefore if amidst this barrage of change agents and shifts of industry scenery, the field of journalism studies were to concern itself predominantly with the institution itself rather than with its external ramifications.

These tendencies may be reinforced by a fourth factor, the increased employment of professionally trained journalists in university departments (termed 'hackedemics' by Errigo and Franklin, 2004), some at senior levels. By professionally trained journalists we refer here to the rise of former (or even current) journalists employed in universities who have to

some degree had specific journalistic training (whether within the industry or via a professional skills based course), such as newsgathering, editing and distributing news content (see Harcup 2011a, 2011b for further discussion about the entry of journalists into journalism faculties). The rise of so-called 'hackademics' is partly a response to the demand for skills teaching in what are essentially practical/academic hybrid courses. In many cases the input of professional journalists will have enriched departmental curricula, enhanced the understanding of students and extended the insights of faculty members into industry workings. Indeed, many former journalists have become leading scholars in the field (Zelizer 2004). But many of these (notably in the UK) are employed primarily as a teacher (rather than a researcher). Thus, a more practical focus in journalism faculties could further strengthen preoccupations with the nuts and bolts of reporting as distinct from the broader relationships that journalism has with society and politics at large.

The need for a normative perspective

And yet, the broad church of public communication, which includes the contributions of journalism and journalism studies to it, is an inescapably normative domain. That is, it is inescapably involved in the realization of – or failure to realize – collectively self-determining processes of citizenship and democracy. Civic values – not only utilitarian ones, not only financial ones, not only professional ones – are at stake in how journalistic institutions perform. But if journalism studies becomes too insular and becomes fixated on the practical world of news production, on fast-moving technological changes, on future funding models or on comparing professional identities, then the fundamental relationship journalism has with civic values could become a rather distant concern.

Of course journalism is not the only contributor to public communication. Its many other sources include politicians, interest groups large and small, campaigning causes, think tanks, charities, community groups, high-profile bloggers, even a few socially conscious celebrities! However, journalism is typically the key communication conduit through which such opinion advocates can gain attention and prospects of influence. That is particularly the case for television news, still the primary source of audience information in most advanced democracies despite the growth of online media. Yet longitudinal studies in some countries have shown an increased proportion of journalistic interpretation in the medium's reporting of political news, while that of politicians' comments has measurably declined (Hallin, 1992; Steele and Barnhurst, 1996). Indeed a recent study established that journalists interpreting political news in live two-ways (i.e. with anchors) made up a considerable share of UK television coverage of politics, a practice, according to the authors, that elevated the media from playing a secondary to a primary defining role (Cushion and Thomas 2013). In a 1999 article, Mazzoleni and Schulz captured the upshot of much of this in their concept of 'mediatization', which refers to the process whereby politicians (and by extension other opinion advocates) tailor their message-offerings to the perceived news values, newsroom routines and journalism cultures prevalent in the mainstream media. It is as if, in addition to its direct contribution to public communication, journalism also exerts an indirect yet powerful magnetic pull on the messages that all the other institutions in society would like to put across.

It follows that journalism should be examined not only empirically, not only analytically but also normatively. But what might be meant by a normative perspective? In a remarkably substantial work, Christians et al (2009) offer a useful definition in terms of 'the reasoned explanation of how public discourse should be carried on in order for a community or nation to work out solutions to its problems'. On similar lines, Blumler (2012) describes normative approaches as 'attempts to look at prevailing communication arrangements, at how they relate to defensible civic ideals and whether there are ways in which they might be improved'. This would encourage scholars not only to examine empirically how journalism is organized and what it does but also to discuss the values that journalism should embody and the quality of news that could be produced (Cushion 2012b).

Since at least the 1920s in fact, when followers of Walter Lippmann (1922) and John Dewey (1927) clashed over their differing visions of democracy, of media roles in democracy and of citizens' competences to participate in it, significant veins of normative analysis have graced the writings of journalism scholars and thoughtful ex-journalists. And since the 1980s that normative component of journalism scholarship seems to have increased and branched out. If so, this may have been spurred by several developments in the period: the disturbing injection of a Machiavellian streak into competitive political communication, arising from the systematic professionalization of party publicity machines; the increasing commercialization of many media organizations, both privately and publicly managed; the emergence of the Internet, with its numerous divergent avenues of communication traffic, which has stimulated much thought and experimentation about the realization of different democratic values (Coleman and Blumler, 2009) and of course the translation from German into English (1989) of Jurgen Habermas' normative edifice, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

Consequently, normative contributions to journalism studies have come in various shapes and sizes. These have involved different norms; different research or analysis aims; assessments and comparisons of different bodies of media content, whether local, national or international; different verdicts and conclusions; and different degrees of reflection on normative analysis itself.

Six normative approaches to journalism studies

In this section we outline six relatively prominent ways in which normative approaches have appeared in the Anglo-American literature, giving a few examples in each case. We acknowledge, however, that this material could have been carved up differently and especially that our typology might well need amendment and supplementation by references to non-English writings.

There is one seeming but nodding type of reference to a norm that we are not inclined to include in this discussion. These are the 'empirical after-thoughts' which appear all too often in concluding sections of articles that have been devoted almost entirely to presentations of empirical data and which then wind up with a glancing reference to some supposedly relevant value. In journal articles there appears a wide divergence in the level of empirical-normative reflection, i.e. the extent to which authors make normative sense of their data. Although it is true that some authors provide more extended discussions of the

normative implications of their results, others tend to conclude with mainly descriptive and cursory summations of their data sets. This seems most apparent in studies exploring the minutiae of newer forms of journalism with final thoughts transfixed by the technological possibilities of the online or digital future rather than a broader normative discussion. A normative approach proper should be more considered and, in our view, substantial.

First, there has been a long, varied and rich tradition in which political communication systems, election communication systems and other media systems have been appraised in normatively all-round terms. A landmark of this approach was Siebert et al's *Four Theories of the Press* (1956), which, though purporting to analyse the philosophic bases of four different press systems, is widely regarded as having normatively endorsed a liberal-democratic one. A different point of normative departure was taken by Berelson et al (1954) in their study of the 1948 US Presidential election campaign, in which they concluded that the classical image of the typical voter as politically interested, well-informed and heedful of alternative views was not supported by their evidence. But in a characteristically elegant statement Katz (1971) took a somewhat more hopeful view: "Election campaigns, for all their faults, may be the major learning experience for democratic polities. They deserve therefore to be better designed". This was a challenge that Blumler et al (1978) endeavoured to respond to along lines which Garnham (1979) subsequently criticized for having over-valued broadcast journalists' roles in political communication. The focus of such holistic assessments shifted somewhat later on with the increasing centrality of the news media in the political communication process and with the increasing determination of politicians to manage their news appearances. Thus, in *The Crisis of Public Communication* Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) contended that communication for citizenship had been steadily deteriorating over time in a number of specified respects. Bennett and Manheim (2001), among others, took a similarly jaundiced view. But yet other authors compiled more positive audits, such as Pippa Norris (2000) in *A virtuous Circle of Political Communication in Post-Industrial Democracies*. For their part, analysts of the political economy school, standing for values of political equality and participatory democracy, have consistently deplored the impact of private ownership and market forces on journalistic performance and standards (Golding and Murdoch, 1997; McChesney, 2000, Nicholas and McChesney 2013; Baker, 2007, among others).

Second, a great deal of research has been designed to check whether (or how far) a certain body of media content has realized some conventionally accepted standard of political journalism. While debates continue about what constitutes these standards (Bennett 2003; Zaller 2003), scholars broadly agree (to different degrees) that journalism plays some kind of normative role in shaping people's understanding of politics, most prominently during elections. The numerous attempts to measure impartiality or bias in reporting clearly fall in this category (Cushion and Lewis 2009). Methodologically demanding, these are usually binary, tracing in output the quotes, citations, evaluations and other portrayals of points of view of, for example, Republicans vs. Democrats, Conservative vs. Labour spokespersons. Israeli vs. Palestinian positions, pro- and anti- business stories, etc. etc. Such investigations may be carried out or sponsored by academics, think tanks or media organizations themselves. For example, since its formation to supervise BBC Management, the BBC Trust has commissioned independent studies of the impartiality of

the Corporation's television and radio journalism in five different subject areas.

Third, several lines of research have focused on what may be regarded as obstacles or barriers to suitable political communication, blocking or overshadowing the provision of material that might otherwise help citizens to keep up with current issues and judge how well they are being governed. Some of these have been longitudinal, tracking trends over time in, for example, how often politics has been depicted in news stories as a 'game' instead of as an arena of policy determination (Patterson 1993), though scholars have differed over the proportionalities involved and in their evaluations of the evidence (cf. Aalberg et al 2012; Coleman et al 2010). Similar controversy has attended the detection of increased negativity in political advertising (Fridkin and Kenney 2012). Longitudinal research has also charted declines in the average lengths of politicians' 'soundbites' in television news (Hallin 1992) as well as corresponding increases in the shares of journalists' commentaries in political stories (Cushion and Thomas 2013). Studies of the projection of politicians' personal images in the media and coverage of their domestically private lives (especially 'scandals' about those) as opposed to the presentation of their stands on public issues stem from the same normative root (Stanley 2012).

Fourth, a substantial body of work has emerged about journalists' roles and identities, most of the data on which have derived from surveys and interviews longitudinally undertaken at ten-year intervals by US scholars (Weaver and Wilhoit 2012). Though empirically grounded, this approach may be regarded as normative in the sense that much of it taps into the roles which journalists consider that they should perform. The surveys concerned have provided powerful tools for comparative analysis of journalists' positions within nationally domestic news environments as well as across journalism cultures internationally. The most prominent strand of the latter kind is the Thomas Hanitzsch-led World of Journalism Study (2011), now expanding beyond its original research base in 21 countries. Its normative flavour can be discerned in this statement of the project's aims: "to help journalism researchers and policy makers better understand world views and changes that are taking place in the professional orientations of journalists, the conditions and limitations under which they operate, as well as the social functions of journalism in a changing world".² A more recent feature of work in this area has been a probing of possible disjunctions between journalists' professed roles and those that they are obliged to perform on a daily basis in their newsrooms due to organizational requirements and pressures, especially competitive and financial ones (Mellado 2013).

Fifth, many studies have compared different journalistic services in terms of the political information that they carry and manage to transmit effectively to their audiences. For example, some pieces of early research examined whether people got more political information from television or their newspapers (Trenaman and McQuail, 1961; Blumler and McQuail, 1968; Chaffee and Stacey, 1996). What viewers learned from watching televised presidential debates was sometimes compared with what they gleaned from other formats (McKinney and Carlin 2004) But in more recent times – facilitated no doubt by the internationalization of conferences, journals and networking opportunities, as well as a decided maturation of comparative media analysis (Cushion 2012b; Esser and Hanitzsch 2012), this type of research has become more international and arguably more fundamental in its concerns. Nevertheless, the dependent variable still tends to be political information

of some kind (party policy proposals, say, or so-called 'hard' news in general or an ability to answer questions about political institutions and political personalities correctly or an awareness of specified international developments). But the independent variables refer to cross-national differences in the systemic environments within which the news media may be situated. Thus, under the leadership of James Curran, the news output of 11 countries was content analysed to determine whether different media systems provided different proportions of 'hard' and 'soft' news, respectively. Representative surveys comparing people's knowledge about public affairs and politics were then carried out to ascertain whether public or commercially financed broadcasting organizations conveyed a greater understanding of key issues (Curran et al 2009, 2010; Aalberg et al 2013; Papathanassopoulos 2013; Sakora 2013). Esser et al (2012) have recently carried out a similar study incorporating, however, a larger number of independent and dependent variables. And for their part, Aalberg et al (2010) have followed this systemic research path longitudinally by analyzing the television schedules of six countries' broadcasters in order to see whether the political information available in them had changed in response to the increased commercialization of their media systems over the period. The normative thrust of such work is directly expressed in the title of Aalberg and Curran's (2011) edited book, *How the Media Inform Democracy: A Comparative Approach*.

Sixth, in a more recent development, there have been a few philosophically grounded expositions of normative media theory in the round. In their *Normative Theories of the Media*, for example, Christians et al (2009) situate their consideration of four main roles available for journalists' adherence and application (monitorial, facilitative, radical and collaborative) within different traditions of democratic political theory and different models of democratic political organization, while also considering the main news media tasks that these role orientations may favour or mandate. And Althaus (2012) has examined in thorough detail what can be involved in making normative assessments about media and citizen performance, distinguishing four different levels of increasing rigour and explicitness on which such evaluations may be based. Of course a recurrent theme in Denis McQuail's career-long analysis of mass communication theory has been a specification and discussion of sets of norms for assessing *Media Performance* (1992) in public interest terms.

In addition to these six strands of journalism scholarship, mention should be made of an increasing supply of normatively slanted evidence on the organisation, practices and output of the news media that is being produced through research commissioned by - sometimes conducted by - public spirited foundations and think tanks. Two substantial and well-resourced bodies of this kind devoted specifically to the analysis of journalism include the Pew Foundation's Project for Excellence in Journalism in the United States and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (whose series of Challenges publications numbered 14 at the time of writing) in the UK. Such bodies aim principally to clarify communication policy issues and to contribute to public debate about them.

Toward a dialogue with practitioners

Thus, today's journalism studies cuisine includes quite a rich normative stew. In the past, however, few journalists, editors, or media executives seemed inclined to sample it! The severely critical thrust of prominent academic writings in the field's early years, often lambasting the media for their numerous shortcomings and for allegedly upholding an ideological status quo, may have played some part in this, tending to provoke defensiveness and denial among its practitioner targets (Philo and Miller, 2001; Quinn, 2007).

But latterly the mood music in this relationship seems to have become somewhat less discordant. We think that it may therefore be timely to try to build on this admittedly still modest change. Thus, some academic analyses of news work have become more judicious and balanced while some media personnel have seemed more open at times to scholarly contributions. In fact, media organizations and journalism scholars have recently managed to collaborate effectively over a number of tasks. In the UK, for example, reflecting perhaps the continuing place of 'public service' in its broadcasting system, scholars have been invited by regulators at times to assess and interpret whether their legal obligations are being fulfilled. A former commercial broadcasting regulator, the Independent Television Commission, commissioned a comprehensive audience survey in 2002 of news consumption in order to inform drafting of the 2003 Communications Bill (Hargreaves and Thomas 2002). OFCOM, which replaced the ITC in 2003, in addition to monitoring broadcast content, has commissioned reports from academics into media literacy amongst children (Buckingham 2005) and adults (Livingstone et al, 2005). Meanwhile, the BBC Trust has commissioned numerous reviews into the impartiality of its journalism, from the coverage of the Arab Spring (Downey et al 2012) and business affairs, to the reporting of the UK's several nations and devolved politics generally (Lewis et al, 2007; Cushion et al 2010). The latter study recommended specific editorial changes that – a follow up study revealed – led to more impartial treatment of the nations and sharpened up the accuracy of the BBC's political coverage (Cushion et al 2012). Moreover, the recommendations of the report were made available on the BBC's College of Journalism website – an organisation set up, in its own words, to offer 'teaching on every aspect of journalism: craft skills like writing and storytelling; the technical skills required to operate in a digital, multiplatform world; social media and the web; and ethics, values and law' (Cushion 2012a: 136-142).

But the foci of these developments have been scattered and typically narrow. Usually concentrating on some specific concern related to some specific norm (most often that of impartiality), less attention has been paid to other civic values. The question is whether some more broadly substantial and mutually acceptable terms of discussion trade can be forged between academics and journalists. Of course the institutionalized compartmentalization of university campuses and journalists' newsrooms could stand in the way of any such development. On the other hand, independent bodies do exist which might be able to overcome these divides and to provide grounds for the sides to meet and to exchange views – such as the BBC's College of Journalism and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

But what might the aim of such an enterprise be? Perhaps it could be conceived in terms of addressing the normative challenges which journalism scholars and practitioners face in

their civic capacities. Instead, for example, of researchers continually documenting the inadequacies of political journalism, all might focus on certain challenging conditions which journalists themselves could recognize, leading in turn (hopefully!) to a joint consideration of how those challenges might be faced and countered. Development along these lines might even yield a shared perception of journalism as a pressured and imperfect but corrigible enterprise.

What might an agenda of normative challenges for joint consideration look like? Different participants might well have different priorities. Thinking cross-nationally, preferred discussion points might vary by differences of media system and journalistic culture. But certain challenges might be more common across the journalism board. To illustrate the kind of thing we have in mind, we conclude by describing a few issues over which we believe that a discussion of the prospects for the democratic improvement of news could be fruitful:

1. The quart in a pint pot challenge of news selection. More and more report-worthy events, happening in global as well as domestic arenas, clamour for editorial attention. How do items of civic significance tend to fare in these conditions? What thresholds – and what kinds of thresholds – must they mount in order to receive attention? How might their prospects be improved?
2. Attention to what Coleman et al (2010: 27-30) have termed a 'civic mix'. This refers to the fact that democratic politics is both an arena of policy debate and a playing field of tactical manoeuvring. Although both these aspects deserve news coverage (particularly since they are often intertwined in the course of political conflicts) the challenge is to ensure that one of them (especially politics regarded as a 'game', which can be presented more dramatically and accessibly than can the substance of policy issues) does not unduly marginalize the other.
3. Risks of predominant framing. 'Framing' is one of the most productive concepts to have emerged in journalism scholarship in recent years and can be usefully applied to news coverage of politics. Its point is that issues are rarely presented 'bare' in the news. They are usually dressed or 'framed' in material that suggests how they have arisen, why they matter and how they might be tackled. Although such framing can facilitate audience understanding, it also sets the 'boundaries of discourse over an issue' (Entman 1993: 55). The challenge here is to avoid a monolithic framing of key issues and to ensure that relevant alternative frames are presented. The need for such discrimination is not the same as a striving for impartiality between holders of rival views. Impartiality might well be realized through the reporting of different opinions about an unduly narrow or restrictive frame of issue reference.
4. The challenge of excluded voices. When issues are covered, it is natural for journalists to turn to elite sources, who are articulate and close to the arenas where decisions are taken, for views about them. The challenge is to ensure that the situations, experiences and claims of other less powerful and knowledgeable groups are presented sufficiently often in their own terms. If not, they will be vulnerable to entrenched stereotyping and sustained injustice.

5. What about rhetorical policing? Although in some democracies, political rhetoric seems to have been getting harsher, journalists may feel obliged to report the views concerned, however strident their expression. Yet the democratic principle of government by consent is negated if opponents are treated not as rivals but as enemies or as beyond some constitutional pale. Although journalists understandably shy away from passing judgement on how political actors express themselves, the problem may at least benefit from an airing. The two-fold challenge here might be to avoid giving gratuitous support to declarations of extreme intolerance and to ensure that models and formats of more civilized debate are presented sufficiently prominently.

6. And what kind of democracy (to be served by journalism)? Although such a question cannot be definitively answered through some universally agreed position, exchanges of views on it could be clarifying for all concerned – as well as be enjoyably absorbing! To this end, we propose for consideration a certain view of communication-for-democracy: beyond freedom of expression and the press (though inclusive of that); beyond the dissemination of information about events (though inclusive of that too); beyond even holding power to account (via interrogative interviewing and investigative journalism); but incorporating as well the norm of meaningful choice over those issues and decisions that may ultimately determine much of how we live with each other. A civically relevant journalism might be expected to apply this last criterion to political coverage more explicitly and more frequently than it tends to do at present. Followers of the news these days must often feel as if they have been exposed to events after events, to statistics after statistics, to claims and counter-claims after claims and counter-claims. But what policy sense, what appreciation of the policy alternatives available on major issues, can the average news consumer derive from such a welter of material about so many situations? Knowledgeable political journalists should be well-placed to provide such assistance in varied and imaginative ways as opportunity might dictate.

Notes

¹ Some of the ideas in this article were first presented in a keynote speech by the first author to an International Conference on Journalism Studies in Santiago, Chile, June 2012

² This quote is taken from The World of Journalism study website:
<http://www.worldsofjournalism.org> Accessed February 2013

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