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Regarding Journalism

Inquiry and the Academy

Any light projects shadows.

Gaston Bachelard

Journalism is most appreciated when it turns into a nonjournalistic phenomenon. When Ernest Hemingway worked as a reporter for the *Kansas City Star*, the *Toronto Star*, and other newspapers during the 1920s, his journalistic experiences were seen as an “apprenticeship” for his later work, and his writing was dismissed as “just journalism.” But when he turned portions of that same material verbatim into fiction, it was heralded as literature, portions of which continue to inhabit literary canons around the world.¹

That transformation—from “just journalism” to a phenomenon elevated and worthy of appreciation—motivated the writing of this book. Why is journalism not easily appreciated at the moment of its creation, with all of its problems, contradictions, limitations, and anomalies? For those interested in journalism’s study, repeatedly facing its reticent appreciation resembles having to review basic driving procedures when all one wants to do is take the car onto the highway. It burdens much existing journalism scholarship by forcing scholars to repeatedly address the fundamental question of

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why journalism matters. Given that journalism has been with us in one form or another since people recognized a need to share information about themselves with others, it is bewildering that such a question persists.

Scholars of journalism are partly responsible for the fact that journalism remains at question and under fire in many collective sensibilities. Have scholars done enough to establish why journalism matters and under which circumstances it matters most? The starting point of this book is to suggest that they have not. And so this book crafts a framework for rethinking journalism, by which it might be better appreciated for what it is, not for what it might be or what it turns into. Looking anew at what we as scholars have established about journalism and aiming to get the story of journalism's study told in many of its configurations, the book borrows its title from a phrase coined by James Carey—it begins by “taking journalism seriously.”²

Taking journalism seriously means first of all reviewing the scholarly literature, with an eye to tracking the role that scholars have played in thinking about journalism. How have scholars tended to conceptualize news, news making, journalism, journalists, and the news media? Which explanatory frames have they used to explore journalistic practice? From which fields of inquiry have they borrowed in shaping their assumptions about how journalism works? And have their studies taken journalism seriously enough?

In considering what has been stressed and understated in existing scholarly literature, the book also takes journalism seriously by raising questions about the viability of the field of journalism scholarship. Its shape today, its evolution over time, even the challenges it has drawn from elsewhere in the academy—these issues make the politics of inquiry central to the viability of journalism's study. How have negotiations over what counts as knowledge legitimated certain kinds of scholarship and marginalized others in the burgeoning scholarly literature on journalism?

Underlying this endeavor is a deep concern for the future of journalism and journalism scholarship. While some might argue that they have always taken journalism seriously, this book rests on an assumption that that is not universally the case. My own experience offers evidence. As a former journalist who gradually made her way from wire-service reporting to the academy, I am continually wrestling with how best to approach journalism from a scholarly point of view. When I arrived at the university—“freshly expert” from the world of journalism—I felt like I'd entered a parallel universe. Nothing I read as a graduate student reflected the working world I had just left. Partial, often uncompromisingly authoritative, and reflective far more of the academic environments in which they'd been tendered than the journalistic settings they described, these views failed to capture the life I knew. Where were the small but unmistakable triumphs, the unending tensions, the tedium

blasted by moments of wild unpredictability, the unexplainable loyalties, the pettiness tempered by camaraderie, and the irresolvable dilemmas that comprised my time as a journalist? My discomfort was shared by many other journalists I knew, who felt uneasy with the journalism scholarship that was fervently putting their world under a microscope. Underlying this tension, of course, was journalism's fierce durability: Although many academic works separated journalists from the world around them for the purposes of academic inquiry, journalism continued to thrive in the world, regardless of what academics did or did not say about it.

The situation has been no less fraught inside the academy, where the terrain of journalism's study has looked at times like a territory at war with itself. The contemporary study of journalism has divided journalism scholars not only from each other but also from other parts of the academy. Within it are deep pockets separating groups of people who share concerns for the past, present, and future of journalism but lack a shared conversational platform for their concerns. They include journalism educators, journalism scholars in communication and media studies departments, writing teachers interested in the texts of journalism, technology scholars involved in information transfer. The list goes on, with each new visitor to the territory encountering a prompt and definitive attempt at colonization by those already there. This suggests a less than encouraging prognosis about our ability to provide a full understanding of journalism in its many dimensions. And so in attempting to take journalism seriously, this book holds constant our understanding long enough to uncover the default assumptions that have guided our thinking about journalism as a field, a profession, a practice, and a cultural phenomenon.

Though intended primarily as a review of the literature, it is hoped that the book also provides an intervention, however limited, into ongoing debates about the role of journalism. Setting the story of journalism's study in place is crucial, because without doing so journalism cannot be taken seriously. Thus this book points in the directions from which we can realign the goalposts through which journalism has been regarded. It calls for rethinking the ways in which it has traditionally been conceptualized and invites a reappraisal of what journalism is, which tools many of us use in its evaluation, and why we see it as we do.

Journalism Scholarship and the Politics of Inquiry

Taking Journalism Seriously proceeds from the assumption that if journalism matters, then journalism scholarship matters. In that it sees both as

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crucial to journalism's vitality, the book focuses on the broader ways of knowing through which journalism scholarship has taken shape. It assumes that no one voice in journalism's study is better or more authoritative than the others; nor is there one unitary vision of journalism to be found. Rather, different voices offer more—and more complete—ways to understand what journalism is. Accommodating a greater number of voices works to journalism's benefit for the simple reason that inquiry making is not only a cognitive act but a social one too. Undoing the givens behind journalism scholarship is thereby an exercise with foundations in a number of areas of inquiry—work in cultural criticism, the interpretive social sciences, and the sociology of knowledge, to name a few. As James Clifford observed some time ago (1986), the act of building inquiry needs to address the discursive dimensions of conceptualization alongside its cognitive ones.

A number of guiding assumptions thus arise when thinking about journalism scholarship. For in reconsidering journalism's study, we face a series of basic epistemological questions concerning how best to open ourselves up to the received view of what many of us think we know. What do we let go of in our understanding of journalism? What do we put in its place? How do we account for what we are seeing, and which frame do we use to explain it? In thinking about how many of us conceptualize journalism, we need too to think about what makes many of us decide to conceptualize it in one way or another and how we negotiate consensus across different ways of knowing. When making the choice to study journalism, for instance, do we do so because we hope to present our work at certain kinds of conferences or publish in certain kinds of journals? Or do we do so because we hope to land additional work in the popular press or on television? Our concern by definition thus needs to address who is engaged in conceptualizing and to which ends. When and from where do we work on the issue at hand and in which field? To whom do we hope to speak and under which institutional and historical constraints? And how do many of us navigate the terrain we share with others with whom we do not necessarily agree?

Interpretation is key here, and it too is subject to collective consideration. If we make a claim that all journalists are interested in public affairs without an interpretive frame that brings journalism and governance together in a way that convinces others of its viability, we fail to interpret the phenomenon at hand. In that the authority of interpretation is always partial, ruling in and ruling out certain types of knowledge, we cannot claim that historical research is better than sociological research without comparing the two. Nor can we make necessarily unitary claims about either domain. Furthermore, interpretation is always subject to considerations about how research has been conducted and with which field one is connecting oneself.

The identity of a given researcher often has bearing on the appraisals of the scholarship produced, and in journalism studies this has often centered on the question of whether or not a researcher has had personal experience as a journalist. Finally, interpretation can and need always be contrasted with the authority of other observers with other views.

Many of these assumptions can be informally traced to Emile Durkheim's interest in the forces that help maintain a social group's solidarity. Social bonds, said Durkheim (1915), emerge as individuals think of themselves as members of a social order, a process by which the collective is formed. A regard for collective ways of knowing has been advanced elsewhere too (Foucault 1972, 1980; Goodman 1978), where the successful development of cognitive categories has been seen to depend on their suitability to the larger world. Science grows, offered Thomas Kuhn (1964), by developing shared paradigms that name and characterize problems and procedures. True solidarity, observed Mary Douglas (1986: 8), "is only possible to the extent that individuals share the categories of their thought."

The decision to frame scholarship by focusing on its social dimensions has two primary effects. On the one hand, it underscores the difficulty in breaking free of established classificatory schemes. Once consensus is established for a given classification, new phenomena tend to be classified using the same scheme. On the other hand, when fields of inquiry are situated in what Kuhn (1964) called a "pre-paradigmatic" stage, they battle over competing insights that might alter existing classifications. Residuals of these battles often linger in reduced form long after disciplines seem set in place.

This focus implies three premises:

1. It implies that conceptualizing does not end with the concepts it produces. Rather, it extends into whatever gets made of these concepts, where they take us in our scholarship, and how many of us use them or not to make sense of everyday life.
2. It implies investing a certain degree of attention to the forces behind the conceptualization, whether they are individuals, organizations, professional lobbies, or informal groups. Such forces tend to be hierarchical, be politicized, and reflect an enactment of cultural power. For instance, many of us paid attention when critical linguist Roger Fowler produced a new book on language and the news because he was established in his own field (Fowler 1991), even if he had not previously targeted journalism as his focus of inquiry.
3. It implies a dislodging of certainty with which certain groups, fields, individuals can be seen as knowing all or, at the very least, knowing best.

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No one agency is more capable than others to conceptualize journalism and journalistic practice. This equalization of voices is a necessary precondition to engaging in renewed inquiry into journalism, even though accepting it side-steps ongoing academic tensions over who in the academy is best qualified to make claims about knowledge.

When taken together, these points suggest that “doing journalism” is not significantly different from “doing art” or “doing religion” (Carey 1985: 41). Thinking about journalism takes shape in patterned ways, and these ways reveal not only a wealth of cognitive information but also a social map of points of commonality and difference that goes beyond journalism per se.

Existing Inquiry Into Journalism

For journalism, that social map has two valuable referent points—journalists and journalism scholars. Both groups are invested in the shape of inquiry about journalism as it persists and changes. Both play a part in shaping that inquiry, and both have much to lose if that inquiry is not made explicit to all those it touches. Conversely, the common interest of both groups necessitates a workable and ongoing awareness of what each group thinks in regards to journalism. At the same time, what it takes to be a member of both groups is neither clear nor constant.

It is fair to say that existing journalism scholarship has not produced a body of material that reflects all of journalism. Rather, much existing scholarly work reflects only a portion of that which constitutes journalism and allows it to stand in for the whole, producing what Peter Dahlgren (1992) called the scholarship’s “metonymic character.” In his view, journalism has been primarily defined in terms of only a small (and decreasing) dimension of news making—hard news, and this has created a bias that undermines scholars’ capacity to embrace journalism in all of its different forms, venues, and practices. In other words, what many of us study accounts for only a small part of the *materiel* that is contemporary journalism.

Consider a repertoire of candidates that would not currently merit membership under the narrowed definition of journalism: *A Current Affair*, MTV’s *The Week in Rock*, internet listservs, Jon Stewart, www.nakednews.com, reporters for the Weather Channel, and rap music are but a few that come to mind. This book suggests that the reigning definition of journalism may not be the most inclusive way of defining who counts as a journalist. For as the practices, forms, and technologies for news gathering and news presentation increase in variety, demeanor, and number, the existing body of scholarly material shrinks in relevance.

The metonymic bias of journalism studies is buttressed first by professional journalists themselves, who often repair to a sense of self that either draws on a romanticized, partial, and biased view of the news world or reduces news to a set of narrow, functional activities. On the one hand, many consider themselves hard-core independent news hounds, constantly on the lookout for that enormously important and life-changing story—even when most of their work time is spent in the mundane activities of waiting for meetings to end, checking quotes, paraphrasing official statements and press releases, and following the leads of others. On the other hand, journalists often find it difficult to envision their work beyond the stern boundaries of bureaucratic settings. In G. Stuart Adam's (1993: 7) view, "professional practitioners are inclined to define journalism in terms of limited newsroom conceptions and thus jettison any consideration of journalism's poetics or its ambitious forms." The recent eruption at Columbia University's School of Journalism over the teaching of journalism theory and practice is only one case attesting to the divergent expectations held by journalists and journalism scholars regarding journalism's study.

And so a glaring disconnect taints the spaces between journalistic practice and journalistic inquiry. To quote Dahlgren (1992: 7), a growing gap between "the realities of journalism and its official presentation of self," which affects both journalists and academics, lies at the core of most discussions of contemporary journalism.

To exacerbate an already complicated situation, the academy's move to professionalize journalists has made things worse. Not only has it told journalists that they are professional whether or not they want to be, but it has raised the stakes involved in being a journalist, often to the detriment of those practicing the craft. This has generated some rather bewildering responses on the part of journalists, exemplified by the claim by Ian Hargreaves, former editor of *The Independent*, that journalism requires no qualifications because everyone in a democracy is a journalist.

The metonymic bias of journalism studies also comes in part from the separation of the efforts of academics who study journalists, on the one hand, from those of journalism educators, on the other. As I have argued elsewhere (Zelizer 1998a), the largely isolated pockets of inquiry produced by these two populations have run themselves into the ground. The result is clear: As journalism has flourished in form and in content, it now seems to be no clear place in the public imagination. The "it's just journalism" rejoinder, heard too often as an insulting response to overly descriptive academic scholarship, frames and marginalizes journalism as out-of-touch, trivial, and of secondary importance. It should come as no surprise that in one opinion poll after another, journalists come out near the bottom where issues of public trust are concerned.

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What does this tell us about the study of journalism? It underscores how overdue is a reexamination of journalism's received view. One given about journalism scholarship is a lack of consensus about what *is* the best way to understand journalism. Informally, or perhaps even subconsciously, many of us have tended to accept the social sciences, and particularly sociology, as the background field for conceptually considering journalism. But in adopting a sociological mode of explanation, we may have cut ourselves off from other ways of knowing (Adam 1993; Cottle 2000a). This is not a novel notion: Everette Dennis (1984) called for a revamping of journalism education in the early 1980s by wedding it more effectively to the wider university curriculum. Adam (1993) suggested reconceptualizing journalism as human expression and positioning it within the arts. Indeed, humanistic inquiry may offer us one way to offset the bias of sociological inquiry: Rather than conceptualize journalism as effect, we might find alternative forms for considering how journalism works, such as performance, narrative, ritual, and interpretive community (Zelizer 1993a, 1993b).

There is need, then, to suspend our default assumptions in journalism's study long enough to look anew at the evolving world of journalistic forms and practices. Admittedly, approaching all of journalism—as it takes on divergent shapes across national boundaries, media, interests, temporal periods, and localities—is difficult, as there is no unitary description to fit all of its evolutions. In fact, the story of how and why journalism turned into an object of scholarly inquiry in the first place has many points of origin, which follow trajectories that differ by location, discipline, and time period. No wonder, then, that even a project such as this is limited by a gravitation to that which is most familiar. But even with the natural limitations of one's perspective, engaging in a suspension of givens is valuable, in that doing so may help us evaluate new research on journalism as well as create a more welcoming home for journalism's continued study.

Organization of the Book

Based in the sociology of knowledge, this book reviews the literature on journalism by examining five fields of inquiry through which news has been studied—sociology, history, language studies, political science, and cultural analysis. These areas by no means account for all of the relevant scholarly fields invested in journalism's study; given no chapter of their own are important fields like economics, anthropology, law, and philosophy. Equally important, the two related fields of communication and media studies have no chapter here, for their explicitly interdisciplinary character renders them

somewhat ahead of the heuristic exercise attempted in these pages. Indeed, many premises described here could be seen as providing a common basis for much work on journalism in communication and media studies.

Nor are the chapters offered here mutually discrete or exclusive. Each chapter claims ownership of certain scholars in ways that by definition narrow his or her work into one disciplinary envelope: Michael Schudson, for instance, appears in the chapters on sociology, history, political science, language studies, and cultural analysis, because his work employs premises directly aligned with each of those perspectives. Scholars are grouped by the premises characteristic of their work rather than the training they received: hence, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, though trained as a rhetorical scholar, is positioned primarily under political science. Each chapter also claims ownership of certain scholarship because doing so illustrates premises central to a given disciplinary perspective. Scholarship on sourcing practices is offered here as a more effective illustration of the premises of political science than of sociology, despite the fact that it has more often been aligned with the latter than the former. For a similar reason, much recent textual work on journalism is positioned more directly in the chapter on cultural analysis than in the chapter on language studies.

Thus the delineations offered here may feel forced and subjectively drawn to many readers. However, they have been strategically chosen because they help us focus on different dimensions of journalism. Each disciplinary field offers aspects of journalism that have been stressed and ignored—differently in each case—and it is hoped that by drawing the map variously its constituents may appear in an alternative light.

By tracking these fields of inquiry, *Taking Journalism Seriously* also considers a number of central debates as they pertain to journalism. Journalism scholarship has evolved into a terrain with many noncommunicative neighborhoods. Suggested here is the identification of numerous interdisciplinary threads by which journalism can be better understood, for the simple reason that they echo different existing disciplinary views. Moreover, by tracking primarily literature written in English (with an uneven attention paid to scholarship in German, French, and Spanish and even less to scholarship in other languages), the view offered here privileges those English-speaking nations where such scholarship was produced—notably the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand—because they offer ground with which I am most familiar. References to U.S. and British journalism may appear more often than descriptions of journalism in Latin America or Africa. That said, no view offered here provides a complete register of the traits relevant to each perspective, but it is hoped that each takes us closer to providing a better, if still incomplete, view of what many of us call journalism.

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Beyond the close consideration of journalism scholarship offered here, the book also raises questions about the politics of academic authority. While the sociological frame of inquiry has long dominated journalism scholarship, prolonging the recognition of alternative ways of understanding journalistic practice, more general patterns of establishing academic authority have transformed partial frames into general statements about news. Not only has this detached much of the existing research from that employing other perspectives, but it has postponed the building of bridges across the many relevant fields of inquiry.

The book is organized around the five aforementioned fields of inquiry. This chapter, Regarding Journalism, and the concluding chapter, Taking Journalism Seriously, provide theoretical overviews that locate the project within the larger framework provided by scholarship on the sociology of knowledge. Chapter 2, Defining Journalism, offers some observations on the variant ways in which journalism, news, and news making have been defined. Chapters 3 through 7 each review and critique the literature invoking a different theoretical perspective on journalism, in an attempt to clarify the implicit assumptions behind each. These chapters are as follows:

Chapter 3 - Sociology and Journalism

Chapter 4 - History and Journalism

Chapter 5 - Language Studies and Journalism

Chapter 6 - Political Science and Journalism

Chapter 7 - Cultural Analysis and Journalism

The final chapter, Chapter 8, raises questions drawn from the discussion of the preceding chapters, attempting to etch out a space from which the academic discourse on journalism's study might proceed.

Briefly, these chapters trace the ways in which different kinds of inquiry have promoted different ways of thinking about journalism. Positioned here largely as a heuristic device, the different kinds of inquiry are separated in a way that proposes more mutual exclusivity than exists in real practice. While most inquiry tends to blend the different explanatory modes to a greater degree than suggested here, nonetheless each kind of inquiry does appear to follow patterned and systematic lines of explanation.

Sociological inquiry by and large has examined people over documents, developing a regard for the patterned interaction of groups. The most far-reaching template for thinking about news, the sociology of news, focuses on the relationships, work routines, and other formulaic interactions across

members of the community who are involved in gathering and presenting news, as well as the organizations, institutions, and structures that guide their work. Sociological inquiry has shaped journalism scholarship by favoring the study of dominant practices over deviant ones and by freezing moments within the news-making process for analysis rather than considering the whole phenomenon. It has emphasized behavior and effect over meaning and has produced a view of journalists as professionals, albeit not very successful ones in that they have not displayed the formal attributes of professionalism. This inquiry has also generated substantial work on the nature, functions, and types of news audiences.

Historical inquiry into the journalistic setting has established the longevity of journalism and journalistic practice. Largely dependent on documents rather than people, this kind of inquiry uses the past—its lessons, triumphs, and tragedies—as a legitimating impulse for understanding contemporary journalism. Within this frame, what has drawn academic attention has tended to be that which has persisted. The contemporary, then, has tended to be seen through a visor situated at some point in the past.

The study of language and journalism has emphasized the texts of journalism in several ways. Inquiry within language studies has assumed that journalists' messages are neither transparent nor simplistic but the result of constructed activity on the part of speakers. Some studies engage in close and explicit textual, linguistic, or discursive analysis of news language; others examine the pragmatics of language—patterns of language use in news as they are shaped by narrative storytelling, framing, or rhetorical conventions. This inquiry thereby stresses not only the shape of language itself but also its role in shaping larger social and cultural life.

Political scientists have long held an interest in journalism. Branching from broad considerations of the role of the media in different types of political systems to studies of political campaign behavior or research on the sourcing patterns of reporters and officials, the shape of political science inquiry into journalism has had numerous strains. Each has been invested in considering journalism's larger "political" role in the making of news. Political science inquiry tackles journalism at its highest echelons—the publishers, boards of directors, managing editors—more often than through its low-ranking individual journalists. At the same time, many studies are motivated by normative impulses and conclude on notes of recuperation, which suggest that journalism is and should be in tune with more general political impulses in the society at large.

Finally, the cultural analysis of journalism has been actively involved in querying the givens behind journalism's own sense of self. The inquiry here assumes that journalism is ultimately relative to the assumptions of the

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cultural groups engaged in its production. Inquiry focuses on contextual factors that shape journalistic practice, and it necessitates some consideration of the blurred lines between different kinds of news work. Much of this scholarship seeks to examine what is important to journalists themselves, by exploring the cultural symbol systems by which reporters make sense of their profession. Cultural inquiry often assumes a lack of unity within journalism—in news-gathering routines, norms, values, technologies, and assumptions about what is important, appropriate, and preferred—and in its research perspective, which uses various conceptual tools to explain journalism.

As cultural criticism, *Taking Journalism Seriously* examines what many of us know about journalism, and how we have agreed on what we know. In tracking some of the cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary threads through which scholars have examined journalism, it offers a fuller way of reconsidering much of the existing scholarship. It is thus hoped that the book will shed light not only on our understanding of journalism but also on the more general workings of academic authority. And in so doing, it will establish that taking journalism seriously is an endeavor worth pursuing, not only for the journalists and journalism scholars of today but for those in generations to come.