The International Journalism Handbook

Concepts, Challenges, and Contexts

Rodrigo Zamith

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To Anamaria Georgescu, for your immense kindness and understanding.

Contents

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Introduction

International journalism is crucial to our understanding of the world beyond our own borders. Such understanding is increasingly important because modern societies are deeply interconnected. For example, an earthquake near Indonesia matters to a mother in Brazil not just because she (hopefully) cares about her fellow humans. It also matters because it can have cascading effects that impact supply chains and results in a shortage of a medicine her son relies on. Moreover, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us, it is impossible for a country to fully isolate itself. And, some of our most pressing challenges (like climate change) hardly limit themselves to national borders.

However, international journalism is not just about the events and developments that begin outside of our own borders. It's also a way to learn about how people in other parts of the world chronicle those developments, make sense of what is happening, and present information in a truthful and clear way. Put another way, it offers us the chance to imagine how journalists here, at home, might think about (and perform) their jobs differently. It's a chance to recognize that, maybe, the way(s) in which journalism is enacted in one place could be enriched if it whisked in some ingredients from another place. Conversely, it's also a chance to recognize the pitfalls of adopting certain ideologies and practices.

This book is designed to explain key theories and concepts that allow us to understand the general practice of journalism around the world, and to illustrate some of the challenges that arise from practicing journalism in those contexts. It begins by providing a theoretical foundation that helps us understand why international journalism matters and the key forces that shape what it looks like; highlights some of the key challenges to bearing witness to developments, sourcing information, and simply doing 'the job' of journalism; and describes important similarities and differences in how journalism is imagined and performed in different regions of the world.

Unit I establishes a conceptual foundation for understanding journalism. This requires defining terms like "news" and "journalism," and reckoning with implications of the fact that such terms mean different things to different people. For example, if a person considers something to be "journalism" (rather than just simple "news"), they may be more willing to accept its author's version of events. This unit also explores the broad constellation of entities involved in journalism, such as its social actors (e.g., journalists and software developers), technological actants (e.g., news recommendation algorithms), and audiences (e.g., news consumers and policymakers). Finally, the unit illustrates the rather large array of potential journalistic activities involved in the practice of journalism.

Unit II introduces multiple theoretical frameworks for understanding the potential impacts of journalism. It begins by discussing media dependency theory, which helps situate journalism within a broader system of information and identifies the conditions that make some people more dependent on journalism to make sense of the world. It then evaluates framing theory, agenda-setting theory, and priming theory. These three frameworks offer sociological and psychological explanations for how news content can impact individuals' evaluations of, and attitudes toward, a topic or issue. They are also useful in illustrating some of the limits of journalism's impacts on individuals and on society. The unit concludes with an examination of the phenomena of news avoidance and fatigue, helping to explain why some people choose to opt out of consuming journalism.

Unit III begins to flip that script around by examining journalism through the lens of journalistic cultures. The unit draws heavily upon the outstanding work done by the Worlds of Journalism research team, who have spent almost two decades systematically breaking down some of the similarities and differences in how journalists in dozens of different countries think about and perform journalism. The unit begins by introducing the notion of journalistic cultures and why they matter. It then focuses on three particular intrinsic dimensions of journalistic cultures that shape how journalists think about their jobs (and, to some extent, how they perform them). These dimensions are: their role orientations (how journalists think about their social purpose), their ethical considerations (what journalists believe to be appropriate responses to tricky situations), and their trust in institutions (journalists' willingness to believe information provided by important public actors).

Unit IV continues flipping that script by introducing theoretical frameworks that help explain some of the extrinsic dimensions of journalistic cultures that shape what journalistic content is produced, and how it is produced. The unit begins by describing the Hierarchy of Influences Model, which is a useful framework for describing the many forces that affect the news content that audiences see, hear, and read. It then examines some of the news values that are factored into journalists' determinations of newsworthiness. The unit then critically evaluates the notions of truth, bias, and neutrality by highlighting that facts are not 'natural' things that just 'exist' and underscoring the value of truth-seeking in journalism. The unit concludes by examining the increasing fragmentation of a mass audience into many smaller audiences as a result of diverging media consumption habits, which has resulted in greater competition and optimization for audience attention.

Unit V explores the economic aspects of journalism. It begins by chronicling the commodification of news in the United States and discussing the role that advertising has played in subsidizing journalism over the past century – a role that it is arguably no longer able to play as effectively. The unit then examines the impacts of audience measurement, highlighting how new technologies have enabled broader and more immediate quantification of audience wants. It then describes the influence of third-party platforms (e.g., Apple News) on journalism, highlighting the structural roles they now play as intermediaries in the information ecosystem. The unit concludes by describing two alternative economic models for supporting journalism: non-profit journalism and state-supported journalism.

Unit VI centers on global journalism, or journalism that is intended to cross borders and reach audiences around the world. The unit begins by describing what is unique about international news coverage, both in terms of what influences its production as well as the distinct impacts international news can have on citizens' understandings of public affairs. The unit then illustrates some different kinds of global journalistic outlets and describes how they can be instrumentalized by governments to increase their power. It then explains what foreign correspondents and news bureaus are, and highlights some of the challenges they face in modern times. The unit concludes by explicating the practice of parachute journalism, highlighting some of its problematic tendencies while also challenging some critiques lodged against it.

Unit VII examines the practices of news sourcing as they commonly manifest in the context of international journalism. It begins by conceptualizing news sources, examining the exchanges of power that are involved in the act of news sourcing, and describing common news sourcing biases. Then, the unit describes a key conduit foreign correspondents turn to in order to source information and gather information abroad: the fixer. The unit proceeds to describe a crucial type of typically reliable source that correspondents turn to for information: non-governmental organizations. The two following chapters describe another type of source (and sourcing practice) that correspondents are increasingly turning to: user-generated content and crowd-sourcing information. The unit concludes with an explication of misinformation and disinformation, terms that help us better capture the range of inaccurate information that pollute information ecosystems.

Unit VIII evaluates the challenging labor conditions that modern journalists face, especially when working abroad. It begins by offering a primer on the legal landscape for journalists around the world, highlighting trends in legal frameworks and how laws are sometimes applied selectively to silence critical journalists. The unit then describes how modern laws and technologies are being used to surveil journalists and, in the process, make potential sources think twice before communicating with a journalist. It then highlights the acute challenges faced by journalists who report on war and conflict, from truthfully depicting the events to managing their own physical and psychological health. The unit concludes with a chapter on the increasing incidence of violence against journalists – a phenomenon we have seen more of in the United States in recent years but that journalists abroad have experienced for a long time.

Unit IX concludes the book by examining the press freedoms and constraints, professionalization and labor conditions, and sociotechnical trends being experienced in five different regions around the world. While the unit is not intended to be comprehensive – neither in terms of all the regions around the world nor in the countries within each region – it does help to concretely illustrate some of the diversity in the ways journalism is thought about and practiced around the world.

I hope this book proves useful to anyone who is curious about what journalism is and how it is practiced around the world. I also hope that it inspires you, the reader, to want to be better informed about developments around the world and about how the rest of the world sees the developments happening here. I believe information is central to communication, and communication is key to approaching our future collective challenges as a community. I hope you will join me in helping make that happen.

Unit I

Conceptual Foundations

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Chapter 1

News

News refers to *novel information about recent affairs*.

News has been a part of human societies for as long as we've been able to communicate complex ideas. Going back to our early times, you can think of travelers, priests, and soldiers as individuals who would learn something about a recent affair – such as the outcome of a battle or the emergence of a plague nearby – and would share that news with others. Perhaps you have even heard about the 'town criers' who would learn some news – perhaps an official decree from the king – and share it with a public audience.

News is the lifeblood of journalism. And, in the context of journalism, news usually entails novel information about recent affairs *that is in the public interest*. This emphasis on 'public interest' is influenced by Enlightenment principles, which emphasize objectivity and rationality in order to engage with social problems in a fruitful way. Moreover, this view considers *newsgathering* to be an important activity within a democratic society. That activity involves having individuals (news gatherers) *systematically collect* novel information about recent affairs and convey that information in a way that allows citizens to engage productively in debates about matters that impact the public.

That interpretation of newsgathering is similar to what we tend to call *reporting* today. However, if we were to require news gatherers to be hired and dedicated reporters – basically, limit them to people who get paid to report the news – then we would find that there was fairly little newsgathering until the 1800s, and only in a few places around the world. Put another way, our current imagining of newsgathering (or reporting) as a distinct, semi-professionalized activity is a historically recent development.

News and The News

While we can define "news" in these more-academic terms, it's important to keep in mind that it also has a colloquial meaning, and also to distinguish between "news" and "*the* news." It is not uncommon to hear "news" be used colloquially in reference to *a particular way of conveying* novel information about recent affairs, and "*the* news" as some monolithic aggregation of it. For example, the phrase, "What's 'the news' today?" implies that there is one relatively small group of news stories, drawn from a much-larger pool of possible news stories, that a large group of people would accept as being particularly important at that moment in time.

It is thus important to recognize that "news" and "*the* news" are modern cultural constructs that reflect particular understandings of what is news and what is *newsworthy*. Those understandings, in turn, are shaped by the histories and cultures of particular places and peoples. Put another way, "news" and "*the* news" are *not* natural things but rather things a group of people collectively agree to accept as "news" and "*the* news."

For example, a news story is rarely understood to mean a simple chronological listing of observations. You wouldn't expect the lead news story in *The New York Times* to read that Dr. Zamith woke up, went to his office, ate lunch, stubbed his toe, and found the cure for dementia. Instead, most people expect "news" to resemble a particular format. In the United States, you would likely expect a journalistic account of that news to start with the fact that Dr. Zamith found the cure to dementia – and probably not even mention the fact that he ate lunch that day. Moreover, given the prevalence of dementia in the United States and the significance of the discovery, such a story would likely be considered a part of "*the* news" for that day.

The News and Newsworthiness

What is understood as "*the* news" varies considerably across and within places because it reflects not only different ways of thinking about what "news" should look or sound like but also who has the authority to define what "news" is, as well as what is *newsworthy*. Some stories tend to have more universal appeal – for example, dementia is a serious concern in much of the world, and not just the U.S. – but other stories (e.g., stories about violence against transgender people) may be treated as more newsworthy in some societies.

Returning to that earlier question, "What's *the* news today?" we must therefore recognize that there is a finite space for "news" – because, after all, we only have so much *time* to consume news and newsgatherers can only follow up on so many stories — and that "*the* news" consequently requires someone (or, more accurately, some group of people) to define what matters, both in terms of what news is important as well as what is important about that news.

While "news" can be understood as simply being novel information about recent affairs, it can therefore also be understood more broadly as *a form of knowledge* about the world we live in. Consequently, those who are recognized as the primary definers of "*the* news" — be they journalists, some other group of people, or a mix thereof — are granted power in shaping how we understand the societies we live in as well as those we've never seen ourselves.

Key Takeaways

- Within the context of journalism, the term "news" usually refers to novel information about recent affairs that is in the public interest.
- While news has long been traded by different people, the notion of news-gathering as a distinct professional activity is a historically recent development.
- "News" is an evolving cultural object. It is rarely just a chronological listing of observations. Instead, it reflects local ways of thinking about things like presentation formats and ways of organizing information.
- There is also the notion of "the news," which suggests that there is a collection of particularly important news. Those who are recognized as the primary definers of "the news" have power in shaping societal priorities and what is particularly important about emerging developments.
- News can be understood as more than just a collection of information. It is also a form of knowledge.

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Chapter 2

Journalism

The term "journalism" can mean very different things to different people. As such, you will often get a wide range of responses when you ask a group of people to define "journalism."

For example, you can define "journalism" as a *product*. Under this view, an investigative news story about the mayor taking bribes might be treated as "journalism" because the product (an online article) contains certain things thought to be journalistic, like a clear headline and quotes from multiple interviewees. Similarly, that story might be treated as "journalism" because it appears on a television show that looks a certain way – maybe it has someone dressed professionally sitting behind a long table describing the incident – or follows certain linguistic patterns.

"Journalism" can also be defined in terms of the *people* who are involved in the creation of a news product. If something is produced by a certain kind of person, perhaps someone with a college degree in Journalism or some related form of professional training, then some people might treat their work as "journalism." In some countries, people have to be recognized (or certified) by the government in order to legally produce "journalism" or receive certain legal protections.

Similarly, "journalism" can be defined in terms of the *institutions* that create such products. If something is produced by a particular kind of organization, such as *The New York Times* or BBC News, then some people will treat that product as a form of "journalism."

More broadly, "journalism" can be thought about as a *set of activities* through which news is collected, organized, presented, and circulated. For example, someone might believe something to be "journalism" only if it involved first-hand observation by the would-be journalist, or interviews with multiple witnesses. That person may also require all accounts to be subjected to verification practices by the would-be journalist.

Even more broadly yet, "journalism" can be understood as a *service* that is guided by certain goals and values, such as identifying issues that are important to a community and holding elected officials to account, or connecting citizens with opportunities for civic engagement. From this perspective, "journalism" is less about what the product looks like, who made it, or how they made it, but rather about what one hoped to accomplish through their endeavor.

Finally, "journalism" can also be understood as an *occupation* that is bound together by a particular ideology spanning different elements of product, people, practice, and service. For example, in the United States, this might entail values like seeking to provide a public service to citizens; striving to be objective, fair, and trustworthy; working independently from governmental officials; being committed to an approach that emphasizes gathering first-hand accounts of events in a timely fashion; and deferring to a shared, professional sense of ethics. In other contexts, that ideology might be different. For example, the ideology may instead seek to promote societal stability by having journalists be more deferential to government authorities and less critical of the status quo. Those who act in line with the dominant occupational values of journalism within a society – whatever that may look like – may thus be seen as practicing "journalism."

Why Definitions Matter

As we can see, there are many ways to define "journalism." Not only do different places and different groups of people within those places often understand the term differently, but those same places and groups have also understood it differently through history.

What this tells us is that *journalism is a fluid and contested thing*. Changing social, cultural, economic, political, and technological conditions change how people understand journalism. For example, technological advances have made it possible for a kindergarten teacher to regularly blog about their city's public Board of Health meetings to a large online audience – in effect, arguably allowing that teacher to perform *acts of journalism* in ways that were not previously possible.

This matters because the way journalism is broadly understood within a society impacts how *symbolic resources* are translated into *material rewards*. For example, think about a press conference or a trial that has limited seating. Some of those seats may be reserved for those who practice journalism. To determine who is eligible for those seats, someone has to first define what "journalism" is.

Definitions and Expectations

In many societies, journalism also receives a special social status as being the *authority* on "news." You can see evidence of this in the way journalism is enshrined in foundational documents and legal protections of some countries. For example, in the United States, the First Amendment protects a "free press" because of its presumed importance to a well-informed democracy.

With such status comes expectation, and perhaps even deference, from individual citizens and the broader public. For example, if someone considers *The New York Times* to engage in journalism but does not consider Fox News to do so, then they will typically hold *The New York Times* to a higher standard when the *Times* makes a mistake. At the same time, they will be more likely to give the *Times* the benefit of the doubt when that someone can't independently verify some reported information themselves. Put another way, that someone is effectively granting *The New York Times* a degree of legitimacy that they are not granting Fox News because of how that someone understands journalism.

The consequence of this is that it grants the individuals and organizations that are perceived to be legitimate brokers of journalism considerable power as they are deemed to be authoritative by some group of people. That, in turn, allows those organizations to become the primary definers of "news" for that group. This is why different news organizations, commentators, and public figures expend so much energy casting some things as journalism and other things as not-journalism (sometimes with disparaging labels like "fake news").

Journalism as Plural

Although we have talked about "journalism" in the singular form, it is important to recognize that journalism is not some monolithic thing. Thus, one could very easily talk about *journalisms* – that is, journalism in a pluralized sense.

For example, we often hear about "sports journalism," "data journalism," and "advocacy journalism." These prefixes refer to more than just genres or technologies. They recognize that there is something substantively different about that particular rendition of "journalism," whether in its purpose, people, processes, or products. Those differences, in turn, result in distinct symbolic associations, material rewards, and social expectations within that area of journalism. Put another way, what is considered to be desirable practice within one area of journalism – like adopting a neutral tone or using an inverted pyramid story structure – may be considered undesirable in another.

As such, there is no one "right way" to do journalism, but certain ways are privileged over others in particular contexts.

These definitional challenges and considerations thus help us to appreciate that "journalism" is actually a very dynamic and multifaceted thing.

Key Takeaways

» Journalism can be defined in many ways, which means that "journalism" is a contested term that means different things to different people.

» In the U.S. and many liberal democracies, journalism is associated with certain occupational values that stress a public service orientation, objectivity, independence, immediacy, and professional ethics.

» How journalism is generally understood within a society matters because it affects how symbolic resources are translated into material rewards and expectations.

» There is a plurality of journalisms (e.g., "data journalism" and "advocacy journalism"), each with distinct norms, values, and processes. This points to a recognition that journalism is not a single, monolithic entity.

Chapter 3

Social Actors

Human beings play a central role in journalism, and we can refer to *the individuals* who help shape the renditions of news we come across (and the organizations those individuals work for) as *social actors* within the space of "journalism."

The most obvious social actor in journalism is the journalist. But what constitutes a "journalist" is often debated both within and across societies, and it changes over time. For example, 50 years ago, it may have been enough to say that anyone who was employed to do editorial work for an organization that primarily produced news was effectively a "journalist." However, news organizations and the journalism ecosystem are simply too complex today for that to be a good definition.

Scholars have traditionally found two particularly helpful approaches for defining who a "journalist" is.

From a *sociological approach*, one could say that journalists are individuals with *particular skills and knowledge* who both *adhere to the shared ideals of what is recognized as journalism* within a given context and *believe they are participating in shaping the profession's standards of proper practice*. Put another way, the sociological approach looks at a combination of what the individual does, how they do it, and the role they play in shaping the profession.

From a *normative approach*, one could say that a journalist is simply someone who reports news *while holding certain values associated with journalism* in a given society. For example, in the United States, such values might include seeking to report honestly and independently from commercial and social pressures, committing to verifying information before disseminating it, and being responsible, methodical, and transparent in their work. Put another way, the normative approach focuses less on what a person does and more on the values they adopt and *try* to apply in their work. Those norms, in turn, serve as identity markers for the individual, helping them define who they are as professionals (or semi-professionals). Those norms also serve as boundary markers separating journalists from non-journalists, helping those individuals define who they are *not*, as well as who is *not* one of us.

While this distinction may seem strictly academic at first, it has two broad practical implications. First, individuals viewed as journalists by one group of people may not be viewed as journalists by another group because they apply different definitional criteria. Second, journalists often try to present themselves as journalists (or not-journalists) in relation to norms and/or professional standards – which underscores the 'soft' power of those cultural constructions.

Editorial Actors

News organizations have a range of social actors who are typically associated with the label of "journalist" – whom we may call *editorial actors*. These include reporters and correspondents, who collect and analyze information, and then produce news reports about newsworthy events; photojournalists, who try to capture those events through still and moving images; and anchors and presenters, who serve as the faces and primary interpreters in broadcast news programs.

In addition to those more front-facing social actors, you also have individuals who work behind the scenes but are nevertheless also grouped under the "journalist" umbrella. These include editors, who assign stories to reporters, review their work, and have the ability to make substantial changes to the news reports that reporters produce; copy editors, who review news reports for accuracy, grammar, adherence to the organization's journalistic style, and often write the headlines; community engagement editors, who help tailor content for social media and build community around stories; and news designers, who employ different aesthetics like fonts and visual hierarchy in order to call attention to certain aspects of a story.

There are also some content producers whose work is regularly featured alongside that of journalists but whose practices, norms, or styles result in their being considered "journalists" only some of the time (if at all). These include columnists, who write regular analyses of news that typically convey an explicit point of view or personal experience; cartoonists, who often seek to convey an explicit point of view on an issue through creative illustration; and a news organization's editorial board, which may write anonymous editorials that convey the organization's view on some issue. The work from these individuals is often – but not always – explicitly separated from that of the aforementioned actors, such as by being included in an "Opinion" section.

Economic and Technical Actors

In addition to those social actors, there are also individuals who are crucial to the operation of a news organization but are less likely to be labeled a "journalist." Two important groups of such individuals are *economic actors* and *technical actors*.

Some of the key economic actors within news organizations are managers and proprietors. Management covers a broad category of social actors who play a role in defining and implementing the organization's business strategy, including its revenue model, economic targets, budgets and resource allocations, and hiring choices. Proprietors, in turn, refer to the actors who own news organizations. These actors may be hands-off and allow the organization to operate with considerable independence – provided they reach specified economic targets – but they may also actively engage in the day-to-day decision-making by assigning stories of interest to them, shutting down stories that hurt their interests, and serving as the 'final word' in different newsroom affairs.

News organizations also require a range of technical actors in order to operate successfully. These include camera operators, who set up and work the cameras for news broadcasts; sound mixers, who record, synchronize, and edit audio for news segments; and web and app developers, who design and operate content management systems and user-facing applications. Simply put, these individuals help design and operate the tools needed to create the news products that an organization wants to put out – and without whom there likely would not be a polished product.

Interlopers

These are just a small sampling of the many social actors involved in journalism, all of whom could easily fall under a single news organization's umbrella, provided the organization is large enough. However, it is imperative to note that not only are there many different social actors involved in journalism but that these (and related) actors can work either inside or outside of a newsroom.

For example, consider a news organization's content management system. Such systems are commonplace in modern news organizations. They allow a reporter to easily write their story on a digital platform, pass it on to an editor who reviews it, and then quickly publishes it on the organization's website. Although commonplace, the software supporting a system like this is often developed by a different organization – and one that likely produces software for businesses in different industries. That software development organization thus *generally* operates outside the space of journalism. As such, the coders who create that content management system may rarely ever interact with journalists, and they may even produce the software with a different user base in mind, such as food bloggers. Nevertheless, the coder's decisions partly shape what the reporter can and cannot do. For example, the editor may not be able to use a 'track changes' function while editing a story because the coders never considered that need, and thus did not program the system to allow that functionality.

We could call such a software development organization (and the coders who worked on the content management system) an *interloper* because they would likely be seen as a non-journalistic actor that operates outside of typical journalistic spaces, even though that organization contributes meaningfully to journalism (despite that contribution perhaps being unintentional). While some interlopers stumble onto journalism – perhaps as a result of a job or a passion project – others do *intentionally* seek to contribute to journalism, even as they may not seek recognition as journalistic actors. An example of this might be an open-data advocate who digitizes records of complaints against police officers so that data journalists can write stories about that issue.

Interlopers are important because they often challenge the orthodoxies of journalism. They may do this by explicitly critiquing those orthodoxies or by implicitly introducing new practices and ways of thinking as a result of their non-journalistic background and training. Those challenges, over time, have the potential to structurally reshape aspects of journalism, allowing it to develop in unforeseen ways.

It is important to note, however, that some outsiders may seek to interlope and gain recognition as journalistic actors – if not as outright "journalists." An example of this may be a comedian who claims to be a "journalist" because they regularly feature news material in their performances and provide news analysis through the lens of comedy. Another example may be YouTube personalities who claim to be both an "outsider" and a "journalist," and therefore not subject to the media problems they critique. Such efforts are sometimes successful. However, they are more often *unsuccessful* because the interloper's interventions may be deemed too extreme, and instead serve as an example against which a boundary for what does constitute "journalism" is set. Over time, such boundaries do change, though.

Networks of Actors

Given that there are so many kinds of actors within journalism, it can be helpful to think about journalism through a network lens, wherein different actors are connected to one another. Such an exercise not only helps to make sense of the many different actors involved in journalism but, crucially, helps illustrate that *producing news is rarely a solitary endeavor*. Instead, it involves interactions, interrelations, and tensions among a range of actors. That, in turn, leads to frequent reshapings of the ideas, norms, and practices that define who is (and is not) a "journalist" and what "journalism" is (and is not).

For example, as web developers became more central to creating interactive data visualizations in some newsrooms, they were physically moved to desks that were closer to the data journalists in that newsroom. That, in turn, gave those coders reputational credit within journalistic spaces – they began being seen less as support staff and more as journalists in their own right – and gave them a greater ability to reshape the journalistic culture within those newsrooms.

Finally, although some actors may be thought of as being central to or on the periphery of that network encompassing "journalism," it is important to recognize that their positions within the network are often fluid. This means that they can move from the periphery to a more central position over time – or, the network may become re-centered toward certain kinds of actors. Those fluid linkages within the social network can thus grant different actors different forms and amounts of power over time. For example, as U.S. journalism progressed in its digital transformations, actors who were technically proficient with the so-called 'new media' began to have a stronger voice within newsrooms. Similarly, individuals whose informal writing styles may have relegated them to the periphery of journalism in the past – they may not have been considered 'serious' journalists because of how they wrote – may now find a place closer to the center as a result of the large and engaged online followings they can attract. Journalistic networks thus adapt as the institution of journalism evolves.

Key Takeaways

- The term "social actors" refers to the human individuals (and the organizations they work for) that operate within a given space, like journalism.
- There is a wide range of editorial, economic, and technical actors in journalism, and those actors may operate within and outside the newsroom. Examples of these actors include reporters, proprietors, and web developers.
- In addition to traditional actors, there are also interlopers, or actors who are not typically recognized as journalistic actors and may operate outside of typical journalistic spaces but nevertheless exert substantial influence

on journalism.

- Journalistic spaces are shaped in large part through the interactions, interrelations, and tensions within the assemblage of actors in that space.
- Over time, actors can move between central and peripheral positions within the network encompassing the space of "journalism" (or some subset of it). Alternatively, the network can also become re-centered in favor of certain kinds of actors.

Chapter 4

Technological Actants

Although journalism is often associated with human beings, non-human entities also play an important role in shaping journalism – especially today. We can refer to *the material, non-human technologies* that make a difference to how news is produced and disseminated as *technological actants* within the space of journalism. Examples of technological actants in journalism include word processing applications (used to produce news stories), search engine algorithms (used to find news), and smartphones (used to consume news).

While that definition may seem quite abstract, at its heart is a simple truth: Nearly all of today's journalistic work is shaped in some part by technology. This isn't a recent development, though. Technological actants have played a major role in the historical development of journalism. For example, the development of the printing press made the mass distribution of journalism theoretically possible, even as it restricted the formats that journalistic products could take on due to the technology's limitations. Another technological actant, the telegraph, enabled newswire services like *The Associated Press* to develop and allowed reporters to transmit their reports relatively quickly from afar. Conversely, the proliferation of the telephone allowed more reporting to be done from within the newsroom since reporters could just call their sources instead of having to meet them in person.

Technological actants are important because they both enable, restrict, and shape different forms of journalism in both visible and invisible ways, and they very much impact the social actors (human beings) who interact with technology. Moreover, although technological actants are often described as neutral entities – after all, they're machines presumably acting in predictable ways – technological actants are very much shaped by the social actors who create them.

Technology Shaping Human Behaviors

In the aforementioned examples of the printing press, the telegraph, and the telephone, *technological actants shaped the behaviors of human actors* by creating new possibilities and restricting others.

For a more detailed example, consider the following scenario: A news organization uses a content management system to facilitate its workflow, and all reporters at that organization must submit their stories through that system. When a reporter sees that a star athlete announced, via a video on Instagram, that they're signing a new contract, the reporter quickly writes a news brief for the website and plans to embed the Instagram post so readers may see the athlete's excitement with their own eyes. However, it turns out that the particular content management system used by the news organization does not have the technical capacity to embed social media posts in a story – perhaps the person who created the system just never thought to add the functionality. Thus, the reporter must either describe the video through the text in the story or send the reader away from the story through a link to the post.

In that example, the technological actant (the content management system) shaped a particular human choice by making it impossible for the reporter to pursue their preferred course of action, which was to embed the post with the video. Instead, it provided the reporter with a limited set of alternative courses of action that the system could accommodate: linking out to Instagram or presenting a written description of the video. Over time, that system may end up discouraging the use of social media in reporting – such as embedding posts that illustrate a point made by the reporter or that include reactions by other people – and thus impact the way the reporters working for that organization relate with their sources and audiences.

It is crucial to note, though, that just because a technological actant is designed to promote a particular way of doing things does not mean that its users will use them in that way – or use that actant at all. Many innovations in journalism are not actually adopted by journalists. And, when they are, those actants are often adopted in ways that allow journalists to continue doing the things they are used to doing, and in the ways they are used to doing them. In that sense, technological actants can take on the values, operational logics, and biases of their users when they are put to particular uses. For example, when mainstream journalistic outlets began adopting the then-novel blogging format in new sections of their websites, its journalists tended to use the new functionalities in very traditional ways – such as by linking primarily to mainstream organizations, limiting audience participation, and using the same journalistic writing style they were already used to.

Humans Shaping Technology

The relationship between technological actants and human actors is not a one-way street, though. That is, *human actors also shape technological actants*.

It is easy to think of technological actants as neutral tools due to their mechanical nature. However, they are created and refined by human actors, and thus take on certain cultural norms, politics, and ideological values. These may be intentionally inserted into the technological actant by those humans in order to advance certain commercial, technical, or journalistic objectives. They may also be added unintentionally as a result of the human creator's biases and ways of thinking.

To illustrate this, consider a scenario wherein a freelance coder is contracted to create a web tool that helps journalists at a news organization quickly produce interactive data visualizations. The coder intuits that most journalists at that organization are not tech-savvy, and thus chooses to limit the range of customization options so as to not overwhelm the journalists. The coder similarly intuits that many of the journalists lack a design background, and thus implements a feature that will quickly inspect the dataset and recommend the chart form that best illustrates the data. Finally, the coder is told to optimize the tool for "a mobile-first experience," and the coder thus further restricts the customization options to ensure that the journalist can only create visualizations that look good on a smartphone.

In that scenario, the coder – a social actor – has shaped the tool – a technological actant – in different ways. First, their biases and perceptions lead them to promote a restrictive logic of simplicity within the tool. Second, the coder's background shapes the tool's suggestion for which kind of chart to use for a given dataset, and those suggestions may be more oriented to scientific visualizations than journalistic ones if the coder's background lies outside of journalism. Third, the economic logic of the news organization instructs the coder to optimize the tool's outputs for smartphones; the coder, in turn, programs the tool accordingly.

As these examples show, not only do technological actants take on the biases and logics of their users when they are put to use but they are also infused with the logics and biases of their creators as they are built.

Mutual Shaping

By acting upon one another, technological actants are constantly shaping human actors and human actors are constantly shaping technological actants. This is called *mutual shaping* and it operates in an iterative manner.

Returning to our data visualization tool scenario, the coder's choice to have the software recommend pie charts when presented with data about proportions may result in that visual format becoming a popular form in data visualizations created by that organization. However, one of the journalists may find that they want the doughnut chart form (an alternative to pie charts) to be an option, and eventually convince the coder to include that functionality. Over time, the journalist's peers may try that option and come to prefer it. They thus convince the coder to set the doughnut chart to become the default recommendation, which in turn socializes future hires in the organization to consider the doughnut chart first – even as they continue to stay within that general visual aesthetic initially proposed by the non-journalist coder.

As the scenario now shows, a human actor shaped a technological actant, which shaped the behaviors of other human actors, who in turn used the actant in particular ways and had the coder reshape the actant, which had subsequent impacts on yet more human actors. As such, they were influencing one another over time, with the technological actant taking on the ideas, biases, and logics of different people – even as it influenced those very same people in important ways. While this is a fairly simple example, you can imagine similar mutual shaping processes for more complex technologies (e.g., search algorithms, communication platforms, virtual assistants).

Given that technological actants act and are acted upon human actors (as well as other technological actants), it is unsurprising that those dynamics introduce fluid power relationships. Those relationships are oftentimes asymmetric, meaning that a technological actant may ultimately have more power over the human actor – and vice versa.

For example, Google's search algorithms may play a major role in determining how many clicks a reporter's story gets, and the reporter may thus try to optimize the language in their story to get more attention from Google. (This is called search engine optimization, or SEO.) However, Google's algorithms are hardly influenced by that individual journalist, or perhaps even the journalism industry as a whole. Thus, that algorithm has more power over the reporter than the reporter has over the algorithm, as the reporter must adapt to remain relevant but not the other way around.

Such power relationships are particularly important to examine as particular technologies become more and less central to the profession and to everyday life, and as certain kinds of human actors become more and less central to journalism.

Key Takeaways

- Technological actants refer to material, non-human technologies that make a difference to how journalism is produced and disseminated.
- Technological actants shape human actors by structuring their behaviors, both in terms of making it easier to do some things and impossible to do others.
- Technological actants are not neutral. They are developed by humans and take on those humans' values, biases, and preferred ways of accomplishing tasks. Moreover, they are sometimes intentionally employed within organizations (including newsrooms) to address different commercial, technical, and/or journalistic imperatives.
- The mutual shaping of human actors and technological actants creates power relationships that are fluid and dynamic, and are of consequence to the development of journalism.

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Chapter 5

Audiences

The term *audience* refers to the individuals and groups to whom products and services, like journalism, are produced for or in the service of. Within the space of journalism, this would typically be the readers, listeners, viewers, and so on that a journalistic outlet seeks to serve.

News audiences in particular are sometimes interchangeably called "the public" or *citizens*. Those designations typically imply a civic objective: they are individuals that journalists should seek to inform *so that they may participate intelligently in democratic processes*. However, audiences may also be referred to as news *consumers*, which sometimes implies a more commercial logic – after all, the consumption of a product is what is highlighted – and thus emphasizes the organization's economic objectives over its social ones. More recently, the term "news *users*" has received attention because it moves away from the passive connotation of consumption and instead offers audiences more *agency* by suggesting that they can actively participate in media use.

Although these terms differ, they all orient themselves toward something we can call "news audiences."

News Audiences Over Time

Although journalistic outlets often depend on their audiences for their financial success – whether directly through subscriptions or indirectly through advertisements – the newsrooms within those organizations have historically wanted little to do with their audiences.

News audiences have historically been treated in a fairly passive sense, as recipients of media or commodities. Put another way, they were often thought about as just people who consumed the work of journalists, and with whom the journalists rarely ever interacted – save for the occasional letter or phone call that a journalist might receive.

Going back to the 1930s, much of the thinking about mass media (which includes journalism) was oriented around a hypodermic needle model wherein 'the audience' was seen as a passive, monolithic group that simply accepted media messages as intended by the sender – in this case, the journalist. This view became progressively less influential throughout the 1950s.

Today, audiences are typically seen as having more agency in how they encounter and interpret media messages. Put another way, they are seen as being more able to determine how they find news, being more able to participate in how news is produced and distributed, and having greater ability to interpret news through their own filters, which in turn are shaped by their individual background and beliefs. This has profoundly changed how news audiences are thought about, both professionally and academically.

Additionally, there are now greater commercial pressures on journalists and journalistic outlets to think about their audiences as potential active participants in news production and distribution, and to enlist their help in order to lower news production costs and increase the organization's reach. As advertising revenue declined for many traditional media sectors and in many parts of the world, commercial journalistic outlets have begun relying more on audience subscription revenue, which generally increase when audiences feel more engaged (and thus see greater value in a subscription). Even among state-supported and non-profit journalistic outlets, audience engagement is becoming an increasingly important marker for legitimizing those outlets' requests for funding.

News Audiences and Participation

However, just because audiences *can* participate does *not* mean that news producers will seek or even want their participation.

It has been argued that part of what gives a journalist a professional sense of identity is that they have a 'sixth-sense' for news, and the training needed to produce it well. Journalists have thus historically rejected high degrees of audience participation in news production because they perceived such participation to be an affront to their independence and expertise, and thus to the quality of the news content they produced.

In recent years, however, there has been a cultural shift within the industry toward welcoming participation – and doing so in ways that are not simply optimized toward economic benefits. Journalists today are generally more open to the idea of co-production with audiences since they have seen first-hand the quality of the work that citizen journalists have been able to produce. They also now have access to technological actants that make it easier to enlist the help of audiences to engage in certain tasks, like reviewing large troves of public documents released by whistleblowers and activists. Furthermore, there is greater acceptance of the idea that audiences have more to offer journalism – whether through story ideas or their own social networks – than they have been able to contribute in the past.

However, just because audience participation is welcomed does *not* mean that audiences will themselves want to participate. This is especially true if there is no incentive for participation, or if they're treated as an appendix of sorts in the broad scheme of things. Put differently, audiences are attune to *exploitation* – such as being asked to simply do grunt work for free – and participatory forms of journalism are therefore most successful when the relationships are perceived as being reciprocal, with both journalists and audiences feeling like they have gained something as a result. As such, discussions about "participatory journalism" now also include terms like "reciprocal journalism."

Fragmentation of News Audiences

Today's media ecology has also complicated ideas about audiences and the experiences they have. For one, the rapid growth of media choices people have and the ease with which they may access those choices has resulted in the *fragmentation of news audiences*. No longer do tens of millions of people in the U.S. tune in to see a single news broadcast at the same time, as was the case for CBS Evening News in the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly, news audiences are no longer bound to the handful of channels their TV or radio antennas might pick up, to the delivery zones of their local newspapers, or even to the cultural tastes of the owners of local stores that distribute magazines.

Instead, news audiences today can easily navigate their way to the *New York Times*' website for national news, the *Boston Globe*'s website for regional news, ESPN's website for sports news, and SCOTUSblog for news about the Supreme Court. If they want to stream local news from the National Public Radio member station in Minneapolis in the morning, and then download a recorded broadcast from its Miami affiliate in the evening, they can do that, too. If they want to see how the British Broadcasting Corporation, or BBC, covered a particular issue, they can likely find that on YouTube or the BBC's website.

In short, news audiences have access to far more news content, and far more sources, than ever before – and the cost of switching between journalistic outlets, in terms of both money and convenience, is also lower than ever before in many regards. This makes it difficult for a single journalistic outlet to gain a near-monopoly on audiences. However, it has resulted in a media ecosystem wherein a few large organizations are able to capture fairly large audiences due to brand recognition, followed by a steep drop-off to a long tail made up of tens of thousands of journalistic outlets that can only capture niche audiences and are, in many cases, deemed to be interchangeable by users.

Furthermore, not only do audiences now have access to more options for *news* but they also have more options for *other media*. This includes entertainment media, such as a popular show on Netflix or a streamer on Twitch. Such media compete with news for a finite amount of audience time and attention. That, in turn, can further fragment audiences as they turn to many different organizations to satisfy particular media desires instead of relying on a single source, like CBS or NBC, to single-handedly satisfy their want for news, culture, and entertainment.

Technological Actants and Audiences

Although news audiences now have more agency, it is also important to be aware that technological actants play an important role in *mediating the interactions* between news audiences and journalistic actors, including journalistic outlets. For example, when an individual searches for news about a recent event on YouTube, algorithms developed by engineers at YouTube decide how to order the presentation of the search results. Crucially, those algorithms are optimized to promote certain kinds of content, including provocative or controversial content that will keep users on the platform longer. Thus, news audiences are sometimes given a false sense of control, as the search algorithms work invisibly to promote certain kinds of content while deliberately obfuscating alternatives.

Similarly, the experiences that news audiences have may be personalized in small but important ways. Consider the following example: Dr. Zamith goes to the *New York Times*' website and finds that the first opinion piece listed is about climate change, an issue he cares deeply about. Other users might be shown a different opinion piece, but Dr. Zamith is shown one about climate change because a technological actant's analysis of his past browsing behavior estimated that he's interested in that particular topic. When Dr. Zamith clicks on that opinion piece, he finds that the third paragraph of the story is tailored to describe the average highs and lows over the past few decades in Amherst. That's because a different technological actant guessed Dr. Zamith's location based on his IP address, and yet another actant looked up the climate information in that area and generated a paragraph of text describing it. Then, as Dr. Zamith scrolls to the middle of the article, he encounters an image of a map-based data visualization that is automatically zoomed into Amherst. That's because yet another technological actant determined that Dr. Zamith is using his phone to access the story. Had he used a device with a larger screen, like a laptop, Dr. Zamith would have been shown an interactive map of the entire United States, which casts a broader lens on the issue.

Throughout that example, a series of technological actants intervened in Dr. Zamith's news experience in fairly invisible ways. These interventions may be seen as positive. By personalizing the news experience, the story may feel more engaging to Dr. Zamith and get him to care more about the issue. However, such personalization can be highly problematic if the technological actants are used to mediate experiences by offering audiences highly different stories based on characteristics like political ideology, race and ethnicity, or economic status. In the extreme, such interventions would make it harder for a *public* to have a shared sense of reality — something that scholars have argued is important for democratic deliberation.

Technological actants have also altered the way news audiences and journalistic actors communicate with one another, and thus the kinds of relationships they tend to develop. For example, audience members are now more likely to give feedback on a story through brief, immediate, public exchanges directed at the journalist using a platform like Twitter, as opposed to longer, slower, private exchanges like a letter or e-mail. This can result in more meaningful and direct audience participation. However, it can likewise promote negative forms of participation, such as 'brigading' and strategic harassment of journalists.

Key Takeaways

» Audiences are the individuals and groups to whom products and services, like journalism, are produced for or in the service of.

» Historically, journalistic audiences have generally been thought about as passive recipients of media or commodities. In more recent times, journalistic audiences have gained greater ability (and recognition) as active participants in media production and distribution.

- Just because audiences can participate does not mean that producers will want or seek their participation, or that audiences will themselves want to participate.
- Today's diffuse media ecology permits greater news audience fragmentation, as audiences not only have more choices but also tend to consume different kinds of news from different journalistic outlets. Additionally, journalistic media are competing with even more (non-journalistic) media than ever before for a finite amount of time and attention.
- The relationships between journalistic actors and audiences are mediated to a great extent today by technological actants.

Chapter 6

Journalistic Activities

Journalistic activities refer to the *routinized practices* that help shape both news media messages and the ways they are distributed and consumed.

The phrase "routinized practices" underscores that journalistic activities tend to follow certain routines, or ways of doing things. They're often deeply influenced by long-standing institutional logics, processes, and cultural values that make it possible for different kinds of social actors and technological actants to not only *work together* but also *work efficiently* across the multi-stage process of producing journalism.

Although journalistic activities are influenced by their past, they are not static or unchangeable. In fact, they frequently iterate as new configurations of social actors, technological actants, and audiences emerge as a result of social, political, economic, and technological changes within media industries and society at large.

For example, journalism was historically a more insular practice, with journalists often writing for an audience they knew relatively little about and received relatively little input from. Put another way, after the journalist identified a story *they* perhaps thought was important, the journalist would report it and write it in a way that would help answer questions they thought their audiences probably had. After the editors and production staff processed the journalist's story, it would appear on somebody's doorstep. That was often the end of that story's lifecycle.

In contrast, that same journalist is today more likely to be looking at social media trends to identify story ideas, put out open calls to solicit help in running down a tip, and even receive frequent audience feedback about their story after it has been published. Moreover, that journalist may go on to respond to questions about the story on social media and later tweet small updates to the story based on audience interest. Journalistic activities today are thus more social and less insular.

From Production to Consumption

We can broadly place many of the most consequential journalistic activities into five distinct stages: *access and observation*, *selection and filtering*, *processing and editing*, *distribution*, and *interpretation*.

Access and Observation

Access and observation pertains to the information gathering stage of news production. This involves gathering source material, like attending a press conference, being present at a protest, or gaining access to confidential government reports. It also involves identifying patterns in those source materials, like the members of Congress who routinely receive more political donations from certain industries. Regular citizens are now far more likely to participate in this stage than in times past because they can easily serve as observers by streaming events or capturing incidents that professional journalists may not be able to observe first-hand themselves. For example, a Minneapolis teenager received a special citation by the Pulitzer Board in 2021 for filming the murder of George Floyd. That video was crucial to journalistic coverage of that incident, and it helped generate a great deal of media attention to the issue of police violence against people of color in the summer of 2020.

Selection and Filtering

Selection and filtering pertains to the stage wherein gathered information is winnowed down to its most interesting and/or important parts. This involves looking at all potential stories that might emerge from an event, like a protest, and deciding what to include in a news product and where to include it. For example, a journalist may choose to focus the story on the size of the turnout at a protest, on the police response to the protesters, on the history of the issue that is being protested against, on the potential solutions to the issue, and so on. Even if the journalist has the time or space to cover every one of those angles – and they often do not – they still need to decide which aspect of the issue to the lead the news story with.

Processing and Editing

Processing and editing pertains to the stage wherein the gathered and filtered information is turned into a news product, often by following certain stylistic guidelines. For example, the journalist may be expected to organize the information using the inverted pyramid schema, wherein the most timely and important information is placed near the very top of the story, followed by decreasingly important details until you get to the non-essential background information at the end. The journalist may also be expected to generally use non-emotive language, like claiming a policy proposal was "dismissed" instead of "lambasted" in order to signal their neutrality. Within this stage, there may be multiple individuals (from the supervising editor to a copy editor to the layout or web editor) modifying the news product as it moves through the news production chain.

Distribution

Distribution pertains to the stage wherein news products are disseminated to audiences, such as by broadcasting a news story on a television show or trying to place it on a user's social media feed. Historically, newsroom personnel had a limited role to play in this stage as organizations had a dedicated group of people to handle these activities. For example, dedicated print workers would set up the printing press, print thousands of copies, and stash them in bunches at a delivery dock. Delivery workers would then pick up and drop off individual copies at subscribers' homes. Today, however, newsroom personnel often participate directly in the distribution process by linking to their own stories on social media and sometimes even trying to draw attention to the stories by engaging in online communities where would-be audiences might congregate. Additionally, audiences themselves now play a crucial role in distribution: They're often the ones driving attention to a story by sharing it, helping some news products go viral.

Interpretation

Interpretation pertains to the discussion around the distributed news product, and more broadly about how it becomes widely understood and accepted by the general population. Journalists can certainly influence the interpretation of a news product based on the specific words and story angles they use in describing an issue or event, and editors can similarly play a major role based on the headline they write for the story and the pictures they choose to accompany it. However, audiences also play a crucial role in this process based on how they talk about the product in associated 'comments' sections, the contexts within which they share the stories on social media, and the rebuttals they may choose to issue themselves via blogging platforms and the like.

Changing Nature of Activities

At the heart of these examples are human actors. This is because journalistic activities have historically been human-led, with technological actants acting largely in a support role to help enact the human-led objectives more efficiently. For example, content management systems made it possible for journalists to quickly write their stories – perhaps with some automated spell- and grammar-checking help – and easily move it up the chain to a human editor. However, human beings were still doing much of the core labor.

This is changing, however. In some instances, the roles are now outright inverted, with the human social actor playing the support role and the technological actant taking the primary journalistic role, and sometimes acting with a remarkable degree of *independence*. For example, newswriting algorithms are already able to take in large numbers of electronic financial reports, identify the most interesting changes from the previous financial quarter, and write thousands of news stories that look very similar to what a human journalist might have produced. Another algorithm may then take those stories and post them to an organization's website – with a clever headline and all – and automatically promote it on social media. All of this can be done with limited human intervention, beyond the work that goes into setting up the algorithm.

While algorithmically led user-facing activities are still the exception within the *general* space of journalism, they have become central in some sectors. For example, *The Associated Press* publishes tens of thousands of algorithmically written news stories about finance and sports each year, and a major journalistic media chain in Sweden employs algorithms to automatically organize news stories on their homepages using a mixture of personalization and algorithmic editorial judgment.

Thus, while journalistic activities are often organized around predictable routines shaped by history, they're also continually iterating before our eyes.

Key Takeaways

» Journalistic activities refer to the routinized practices that help shape news messages as well as their distribution and consumption.

» Journalistic activities are often governed by long-standing principles, values, and ways of doing things. However, they also evolve to accommodate new arrangements of social actors, technological actants, and audiences.

» When it comes to journalism, we can broadly place the most consequential activities within five stages: access and observation, selection and filtering, processing and editing, distribution, and interpretation.

- While technological actants have historically been used to support human actors, in some cases they are now able to work fairly independently from them.

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Unit II

Media Effects

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Chapter 7

Media Dependency Theory

Media dependency theory offers a helpful way to think about *the relationship between media and the fulfillment of different audience needs and goals*.

At the heart of the theory is the proposition that in industrialized and information-based societies, such as the one we presently live in, individuals come to rely on media to satisfy a range of different needs and goals. These include learning about where those individuals should go to vote as well as staying up-to-date about the latest fashion trends.

Before diving into this theory, it is helpful to be mindful of the fact that journalistic outlets are just *one group of social actors within a broader system of information*. This broader system includes other mass media actors, like movies and books. It includes other institutional actors, like politicians and non-media corporations. It includes personal contacts, like your friends and family members. It even includes your personal experiences, like your attendance at an event or a study abroad experience that exposed you to a different culture. There are many other potential actors in that system, but this helps illustrate the notion that journalistic outlets operate within an environment made up of many different entities, each of which can offer at least some information that might be of interest to a particular audience member.

This perspective is helpful because it underscores the importance of understanding the *context* around people's interaction with information, which is crucial to understanding journalistic media's role in informing people. That, in turn, is an explicit rejection of earlier, more simplistic theories about the effects of mass media. For example, in the 1930s, scholars and popular intellectuals argued that mass media were incredibly powerful and that people generally accepted the information disseminated by mass media as-is. (This is called the *hypodermic needle* perspective.) At the same time, this systems perspective rejects the view that mass media have little to no effect – the *limited effects* perspective began to take hold as the hypodermic needle perspective lost popularity in the 1940s and 50s – as the magnitude of the effect is dependent on the context.

Journalistic Media and Relationships

Returning to media dependency theory, it posits that the impacts of journalistic media on people (and of people on journalistic media) depend on the context and the nature of the relationships within a network of social actors, technological actants, and audiences *that are relevant to that context*.

The theory further posits that *an individual's characteristics and goals* (e.g., how interested they are in some topic), *their personal environment and interpersonal network* (e.g., whether they know people with first-hand experience with that topic), and *the dominant media and social systems they live within* (e.g., how free they are to access news media they believe would be informative about that topic) all impact the extent to which they may depend on media for information about that topic.

For example, let's consider the topic of foreign election interference in the 2020 election. Perhaps, as someone passionate about politics, you were very interested in that topic – and thus have a personal goal of learning more about it. However, because you were (most likely) not an intelligence officer and lacked the security clearance needed to review intelligence reports yourself, you probably didn't have the ability to gain first-hand knowledge about that issue. Moreover, you might not have had any such intelligence officers in your friend or familial networks, so you didn't personally know someone with first-hand knowledge, either. You thus had to depend on people other than yourself (*third parties*) and those close to you for information. One such third party might have been a journalist who has been covering the topic of election interference for months as the National Security Correspondent for *The Washington Post*. As such, you might have come to depend on that journalist for what you believed to be trustworthy information about the topic. (Or, perhaps, you depended on other journalistic outlets who themselves depended on the *Post*'s reporting for key details.)

However, that could change over time. Perhaps a reputable whistleblower leaked a series of private intelligence reports online. Now, you may find yourself dependent on the whistleblower for access to the information, as they controlled which of the intelligence reports were made available to the public. As you review the leaked documents, you may become less dependent on others' interpretation of the issue – including *The Washington Post*'s reporting. Put another way, as your information network changes, the kinds and degrees of dependence also change.

Importance of Journalistic Media

Although journalistic outlets are just one of many sets of constituents within information systems, they are often important. That's because people generally need journalistic media to function in modern societies, which are more co-dependent than ever before due to increased specialization and globalization. Put another way, personal contacts and experience are no longer enough to satisfy all (or even most) of the things a person needs to know in order to fully participate in modern social life.

Crucially, media dependency theory contends that *the degree of ambiguity about news information impacts the degree of media dependency*. Put another way, as news information becomes more ambiguous (less clear to you), audiences are presumed to become more dependent on journalistic outlets for understanding that news.

Ambiguity can come from many different sources. It might involve lack of knowledge about some phenomenon, such as whether a new technology developed by a rival nation poses a threat to your nation's security. It might involve rapid change associated with a phenomenon, such as whether an emerging coup d'état in a friendly nation might impact the diplomatic relationship between them and your nation. It might also involve simple disagreement among institutional elites about some phenomenon, such as which political group is more likely to be correct about the costs and benefits to a proposed renewable energy plan.

That proposition from media dependency theory can further be extended into an argument that *journalism can be especially influential on people's understanding of emerging international affairs*. That is, people typically have less certainty (and thus more ambiguity) when it comes to the world beyond their immediate geographical sphere because they might not have recent (or any) personal experience in those contexts – perhaps they have never been to Cambodia – and they might not have any personal contacts who have expert knowledge or experience in those contexts. Because of this, people become more dependent on media depictions of those places, peoples, and issues, and on journalistic outlets when new developments are emerging about those places, peoples, and issues.

Exclusivity and Dependence

According to media dependency theory, *when a media organization has exclusive information, it tends to have more power within its relationship with an audience member* (and the broader ecosystem) because it increases the degree of information asymmetry. This is particularly true if the information is in demand to satisfy that individual's valued goals, and doubly so if access to such information is tightly controlled.

Exclusive information does not have to mean classified information, as with the earlier example. It might simply mean that they are the only source for that information at a given time, such as in the early hours following a chemical explosion at a local manufacturing plant. While local officials may eventually put out their account of the event via a televised press conference, people are likely to first hear about it from the breaking news coverage provided by journalists.

However, journalistic media do not inherently get to have exclusive information about breaking news (or confidential affairs). Indeed, some institutional actors, such as governments or private companies, can restrict both media access to important resources and individuals' access to certain journalistic outlets. In doing so, those institutional actors can try to reorient dependency away from journalistic media and toward their own version of events. For example, a private company may prevent news media from accessing that manufacturing plant or speaking to its employees. Similarly, government officials in some countries may even prevent journalistic media from broadcasting information about the incident until those officials give their approval. Such intervention happens quite often in practice, to varying degrees.

It is important to note that media dependency theory was first proposed during a time of high media concentration, when there were relatively few major broadcast networks in places like the United States. Today's media ecology is far more complex, though. In particular, mobile devices (e.g., smartphones) and networked media (e.g., social media and messaging apps) have become important elements in today's media ecology. They allow individuals to serve as *intermediaries* between mass media and other people. That is, individuals and aggregators with large online followings can become key brokers of news information during an event and thus gain power – even if only temporarily – by virtue of others' dependence on them. Additionally, people can now more easily find videos and accounts of an event posted by a range of other people who observed it first-hand, thus reducing the exclusivity that any one actor might otherwise have.

Key Takeaways

- Media dependency theory is a systems-level theory that views journalistic outlets as just one group of actors within a broader system of information.
- Media dependency theory focuses on understanding relationships within a system, with the strength of the relationships impacting the degree of

dependency.

» Media dependency theory contends that the degree of ambiguity impacts the degree of media dependency. Journalism can be especially influential on people's understanding of things that they have limited personal experience with, such as international affairs.

» When a journalistic outlet has exclusive information, it has more power in a relationship as the relationship becomes asymmetric. However, different institutional actors, like governments and private companies, can restrict access to important media resources.

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Chapter 8

Framing Theory

Framing theory provides us with a helpful lens for understanding *how people develop their perception of reality,* and the role that journalistic outlets play in shaping those perceptions.

Framing is deeply indebted to another theoretical perspective – the *Social Construction of Reality* – which was formalized in 1966 by sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman. At its core, this perspective argues that a person's perception of reality is not entirely, or even mainly, objective. Instead, what we perceive to be reality is actually a human and social construction that is deeply shaped by our previous lived experiences and the ways in which we are socialized via everyday interactions. As such, the theory contends, reality becomes socially constructed as we experience it and learn about it, and we each therefore develop differing perceptions of reality. Those differences may be fairly minor: Perhaps two witnesses agree that a police officer acted with the needed force in response to a threat but one of them thinks the officer could have toned things down a little. However, they might also be significant: Perhaps those two witnesses disagree over who the aggressor was, and whether any force was needed on the officer's part.

This perspective is important because it presumes that *individuals act based on their unique perceptions of reality*. For example, if someone perceives the officer to have acted with unnecessary force, they may be more likely to protest against police brutality than someone else who perceives that exact same situation to have involved an appropriate response. As this example suggests, the theory posits that different people experience different constructed realities – even when they inhabit the same spaces under the same present circumstances.

A World With Multiple Realities

It follows from this theoretical perspective that *the world consists of multiple perceived realities*. Those perceived realities are shaped by a range of factors, operating from an individual level (e.g., one's preconceptions, perhaps resulting from their particular upbringing) to a social systems level (e.g., the dominant systems of thought within their culture). In short, while there may indeed be a singular 'true' reality out there, made up of material things and governed by the laws of physics, an individual's perception of that reality is just an *approximation* of it. And, sometimes, it's not a very accurate one.

A crucial implication of this perspective is that *it is simply impossible for journalism to mirror reality*. That is, if a journalist cannot fully capture a 'true' reality because of their human shortcomings, then they cannot possibly replicate it in their work. Instead, journalism is, at best, a good approximation of reality, with the journalist's job being to approximate that reality as best they can.

Even if one rejects the proposition that individuals inherently cannot mirror reality, there is also a practical issue at play that makes framing theory useful: Even if journalists could accurately replicate reality, they simply do not have the time or space to show *everything* about that reality. Instead, they can only show a small portion of it.

For example, consider a televised broadcast of a protest against police brutality. One may think that setting up a camera and pointing it at the crowd offers a mirror of reality – after all, it is a simple, mechanical recording of what's happening. However, the camera can only show one angle of what is happening. Depending on where it is placed, it may be too close and miss the entire scope of the crowd – or, it may be too far and make the crowd appear small or miss important details about the interactions. As such, the journalist must make a choice to place the camera in the place that they believe offers the best representation (approximation) of the 'reality' of that event.

But journalists rarely ever just point a camera at something and call it a day. A large part of their job is *to make sense* of what is happening. Put another way, even if they just report 'facts' – and facts are themselves contentious things – they must still connect those facts. The process of making sense of reality is inherently an interpretive (and thus constructive) act.

Media Framing and Frames

One way to conceptualize that process of sense-making is through framing theory and, specifically, *media framing*. Sociologist Robert Entman refers to media framing as the process by which an individual "*selects some aspects of a perceived reality and makes them more salient in a communicating text*, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." That's a lot to take in, so let's break it down.

First, this conceptualization of the framing process – and there are other ways of conceptualizing it – involves two key sub-processes. The first is *selection*, or the choices about what to include or exclude about that perceived reality. The second is *salience*, or the choices about what to emphasize about that perceived reality and what to downplay. These choices, again, are often driven by the necessity of communicating something within a finite amount of time or space – like a handful of live tweets or a 30-second broadcast segment.

Second, this conceptualization describes four main acts of framing. The first is *diagnosing problems*, or defining the issues associated with a topic. For example, the aforementioned broadcast segment on a protest may choose to diagnose the problem as police using excessive force against detainees *or* as the vilification of police. The second is *diagnosing causes*, or identifying what or who are the main forces driving the problem. For example, that segment may choose to focus on a hurtful culture within policing *or* an inadequate amount of police training. The third is *making moral evaluations*, which may include asserting whether the causal agents or the consequences of an issue are good or bad. For example, that segment may assert that these protests are good because they may serve as catalysts for change, *or* bad because the protests are divisive within society. The fourth is *recommending treatments*, which describe potential 'solutions' to the identified problems. For example, that segment may assert that systemic reform is necessary *or* that police should receive more support from other actors and institutions.

The result of that process is the *media frame*, which refers to the *written, spoken, graphical, or visual message that a communicator uses to contextualize a topic*, such as a person, event, episode, or issue, within a text transmitted to receivers by means of mediation.

Again, there's a lot to unpack there, but the key takeaway is that media frames are the tools that communicators – including journalists – use to simplify and contextualize an issue or event. A single frame (or media text, like a news story) does not need to include all four of those acts of media framing. In fact, news stories rarely do, especially when they aim to be as neutral as possible.

Moreover, media framing and frames involve both conscious and subconscious processes of selection and salience. Put another way, a journalist may consciously adopt a particular frame because it addresses questions they believe their audiences will want answers to, even as they subconsciously reject alternative frames because they recall seeing those frames in recent coverage by a competitor.

Finally, it is crucial to recognize that news stories often include information from different sources, which in turn shapes the frame. For example, a journalist may only diagnose the problems associated with the aforementioned protest with their words but add elements of moral evaluation to the story's frame by including quotes from a source that asserts the police acted in a brutal and unprofessional way.

Impacts of Journalistic Frames

Journalistic frames *often impact audiences' understandings of and attitudes toward a topic or issue*. In this way, they influence the realities that those audience members construct. This may include interpretations not only of basic elements, like what happened, but broader (and no less impactful) notions about what is most important or problematic about a topic or issue, who are the good and bad people involved, and what are or aren't sensible solutions to a given problem.

To illustrate this, consider the two following news briefs about two emerging treatments for a group of 600 people who have been infected by a dangerous virus.

The first news brief notes that if Treatment A is adopted, 200 people will be saved. However, if Treatment B is adopted, there is a 1/3 chance that all 600 people will be saved and a 2/3 chance that nobody will be saved.

The second news brief notes that if Treatment A is adopted, 400 people will die. However, if Treatment B is adopted, there is a 1/3 chance that nobody will die and a 2/3 chance that all 600 people will die.

The depictions in those two news briefs are functionally equivalent, with Treatment A being the risk-averse option and Treatment B being the risk-seeking option. However, if a random set of 50 readers were shown the first brief and another 50 random readers were shown the second, the theoretical expectation is that the people shown the first brief – which is more positive – would be more likely to select the risk-averse option (Treatment A). In contrast, the readers who were shown the second depiction – which is more negative – would be more likely to select the risk-seeking option (Treatment B). This is an example of what we call gain/loss framing, one of the many different approaches to framing in psychology.

However, the extent of those impacts is neither uniform nor universal. Modern theories of message processing reject the view that audiences are passive and just accept journalistic frames. Instead, audiences process those messages in light of their existing knowledge and attitudes, which is in turn shaped by their lived experiences and non-media messages (e.g., discussions with friends and family). For example, a person who has had a negative encounter with the police is generally more likely to accept a frame that centers them as the aggressor – or, conversely, to reject such a frame if their experiences have been exclusively positive.

Repeated exposure to particular frames can develop associations over time. For example, seeing repeated images of police brutality may link the concepts of police and brutality over time, such that when the concept of police is triggered – even in other contexts – the individual will also think about brutal actions. Alternatively, that repeated exposure may make it so that when the concept of brutality comes up, the individual may think of the police as an example. Such connections can be both strengthened and weakened by frames. For example, if that same individual is repeatedly exposed to media examples of police engaging in good deeds, the existing negative connections are challenged and may thus become weaker.

Journalistic frames tend to be most impactful in situations where individuals are highly dependent on journalistic media for their understanding of an issue, and especially when there is greater ambiguity around an issue. That is because there are fewer preexisting associations, allowing the media associations to serve as the primary driver. Thus, journalistic frames are especially impactful when they involve contexts, people, and ideas that are new or foreign to an individual.

Finally, it's also important to keep in mind that journalistic actors are themselves audiences. They therefore not only have their own lived experiences to draw upon but also regularly consume media messages crafted by other actors. As such, they are also impacted by repeated exposure to certain frames and associations. They may consequently go on to subconsciously repeat elements of dominant frames and associations within their work, which in turn reifies those frames and makes those associations even more salient within society. Conversely, those journalistic actors may seek to use their awareness of the dominant frames to challenge them by including counter-frames that weaken problematic associations.

Key Takeaways

» According to the Social Construction of Reality perspective, an individual's view of reality is not entirely (or even mainly) objective. Instead, it becomes socially constructed as that individual filters things through their own existing knowledge and experiences.

- The framing process involves both conscious and subconscious processes of selection (what to include or exclude) and salience (what to emphasize or downplay). Journalistic outlets can thus depict the same topic in different ways.
- Media frames may impact individuals' understandings of and attitudes toward a topic or issue, but those impacts are not uniform or universal. That's because media frames interact with existing knowledge and attitudes.
- Journalistic actors are themselves influenced by frames, and may therefore reinforce (or challenge) dominant associations through the framing choices in their work.

Chapter 9

Agenda Setting Theory

Bernard Cohen famously wrote in his 1963 book, *The Press and Foreign Policy*, that journalistic media "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about."

Although that statement came before the formalization of agenda-setting theory, it aptly captures its essence: Even if journalistic outlets have a limited ability to shape their audiences' attitudes toward an issue, they nevertheless exert influence over how important the issue is *perceived* to be by those audiences. (That perceived importance may be very different from the actual importance of that issue according to other measures.)

While agenda-setting theory and framing theory both address the potential impact of journalistic media coverage, they are very different. Agenda-setting theory focuses on the relationship between media coverage and the perceived importance of an issue, while framing theory connects media coverage to the formation of attitudes toward those issues.

Agenda-Setting Theory

In a nutshell, agenda setting refers to the process by which mass media – including journalistic media – present certain issues (e.g., gun violence) frequently and prominently, with the result being that large segments of the public come to perceive those issues as being more important than others.

The central causal mechanism is a very simple one: *The more media attention an issue receives (issue salience), the more important it is perceived to be (by audiences).* For example, if there is sustained journalistic coverage of immigration over the course of a few months, then news consumers will think that immigration is an important issue at that point in time – even if they don't have strong opinions about it.

Although the term 'agenda-setting theory' may be seen to imply a conspiratorial effort to manipulate public opinion, this is far from the case. It simply reflects twin processes: First, journalistic media are bound by time and space. For example, an evening news broadcast often has just 22 minutes to transmit information about the day's most important issues and events. This forces journalists to focus on specific issues and simplify them, and thus make decisions about what they believe matters most to the audiences they serve. Even with a news website, where space and time to cover a topic are less restricted and an online editor could theoretically cram 500 stories on the homepage, journalists must still make decisions about how to organize the information they publish. Indeed, the decision about which story to place at the top of a website's homepage offers a salience cue – it is placed first because it is presumed to be the most important story.

The second process occurs on the audience side: Audiences turn to journalistic media because they have a need for orientation, or a desire to understand new or emerging situations. That need for orientation, in turn, is impacted by two elements: *relevance* and *uncertainty*. Relevance pertains to the question, "Do I think this issue is personally or socially important to me?" Uncertainty pertains to the question, "Do I feel I lack the information I need about this topic?" When both relevance and uncertainty are high, audience members pay greater attention to journalistic outlets' cues about salience, and thus the resulting agenda-setting effect is stronger.

Similarly, when the issue at question is *unobtrusive* – that is, it is an issue people have little to no personal experience with, such as international affairs – then they are more likely to rely on media cues for assessing the importance of that issue. This may be countered by certain contextual factors, though. For example, scholars have found that agenda-setting effects are weaker in closed media systems (those tightly controlled by governments) with the idea being that people trust those journalistic media less. They thus actively seek out other sources of information and draw even more upon personal assessments.

Agenda-setting effects are therefore not uniform or universal. They are instead dependent on the context. Indeed, as Cohen wrote about the relationship between journalistic media and foreign affairs, "the world will look different to different people depending on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the paper they read."

Intermedia Agenda Setting

Journalistic outlets do not just influence ordinary citizens, politicians, and the like. They also influence one another. Within the context of agenda-setting, we refer to the process by which journalistic media influence one another as *intermedia agenda-setting*.

The core argument for this hypothesis is that just as regular citizens turn to trusted journalistic outlets for cues about what is important, journalistic outlets themselves turn to other journalistic media that they perceive to be leaders within a given context. For example, *The New York Times* may cover a story about U.S. troops withdrawing from Syria, which leads a local newspaper to perceive that to be an important issue and thus devote resources to covering a local angle about the same topic (e.g., covering local families who might have a spouse or child returning home from deployment).

This has led to a broader argument that audiences have historically developed reasonably consistent perceptions of which issues are most important at a given point in time because journalistic outlets generally follow similar issue agendas. This does not mean that they all cover the exact same issues, and certainly not in the same way. Instead, it contends that dominant coverage patterns often emerge across media – such as a period of intense and widespread journalistic coverage of climate change, before that attention wanes and the issue later re-emerges as a priority – and that many people within similar contexts will often identify similar sets of issues as being "important" at a given point in time.

Intermedia agenda-setting has required some reconceptualization in recent years, though, because the news ecology has become more complex. The perspective was initially proposed during a time when traditional media dominated audience attention. This is no longer the case, as niche and alternative media have grown immensely – leading to more specialized information sources – and social media have transformed the ways people engage with news.

As such, while elite journalistic outlets like *The New York Times* may still shape the initial perception of issues and their import, active audiences will blend messages from a greater range of journalistic and non-journalistic media. This ostensibly weakens the *Times*' agenda-setting power. Additionally, the transformation of the distribution of news – which is also more social today – and the emergence of new ways for audiences to engage with journalistic actors has enabled those active audiences to increasingly shape media agendas themselves.

Key Takeaways

- » Agenda-setting theory proposes that issues that receive relatively more media attention tend to be perceived by audiences as being relatively more important.
- » Framing theory shares some conceptual similarities with agenda-setting theory, but they differ in that agenda-setting emphasizes the relationship between media coverage and the perceived importance of an issue, while framing theory connects coverage to attitude formation.
- » The magnitude of an agenda-setting effect depends on the context. Agenda-setting effects are neither uniform nor universal.
- » Journalistic outlets do not just influence ordinary citizens and politicians; they influence fellow journalistic actors. They can therefore create a feedback loop.

Chapter 10

Priming Theory

In order to more fully understand the underlying processes for key theories about the impacts of media coverage and depiction, it is helpful to learn about how human memory works. Priming theory is a particularly helpful tool in that regard.

It is worth noting that priming theory – and associated models theorizing about the workings of human memory – come from social psychology and cognition, and it is not the only explanation for how humans make sense of the world. However, such models of human memory have proven to be enduring and influential when it comes to understanding the processing of information disseminated by journalistic outlets.

Priming Theory

In a nutshell, priming theory contends that media depictions *stimulate related thoughts in the minds of audience members*. For example, talking about "climate change" with a person might activate their thinking about "extreme weather" because, for that person, those two concepts have become related. Media depictions can strengthen (or weaken) the association between those concepts.

In this associative network model of memory, the *direction* and *strength* of the ties between ideas and concepts matter. For example, thinking about "extreme weather" may trigger "bad" most of the time, but thinking about "bad" may not trigger "extreme weather" (or trigger it only some of the time). Additionally, stronger ties between two ideas or concepts will result in the faster recall of the association between them.

This model also differentiates between *explicit* and *implicit* memory. Explicit memory refers to things an individual actively tries to recall. This would include the answer to the question, "Who is the best professor you've ever had?" The key with this type of memory is that the individual can consciously recall the associations between "best" and "professor" and explain that information.

Implicit memory refers to things an individual does not try to *purposely* recall, such as how to ride a bicycle. The key with this type of memory is that it might take an individual a while to explain the related concepts (and they may not even be able to explain them well or at all), but they are able to subconsciously draw on all the requisite associations to not fall over when they start pedaling.

Priming theory contends that people do not make use of *all* of the associations they have developed. Instead, they take shortcuts to connect an information need – for example, how to make sense of a professor's quality – to the previously stored associations *that are most readily available*. Thus, there is a strong emphasis on *recent associations* – such as recent journalistic coverage of the relevant issue(s).

Agenda Setting, Framing, and Priming

Agenda-setting theory connects to these understandings of how human memory works in two related ways. The first proposes that repeated journalistic coverage of an issue results in an individual associating that issue with more concepts. That, in turn, increases the likelihood that the issue will be triggered later (as there are more opportunities to trigger it). The second proposes that repeated journalistic coverage of an issue increases the availability of information related to that issue by bringing it to the top of an individual's mind. That, in turn, increases the likelihood that the issue will be triggered later (as the issue, and its related concepts, are relatively easy to access). Both of these ways influence perceptions about how important an issue is because of how easily it is recalled.

While framing theory draws upon many of the same core propositions about the causal mechanisms in human memory, it differs from agenda-setting theory in that it takes an extra step. Framing theory is not simply about the availability of information. Instead, it argues that media can also influence *attitudes toward those issues* by rewiring the associations between that issue and different concepts, such as by relating "climate change" to "bad" and "anthropogenic."

Framing theory and priming theory have been connected to examine issues of stereotypes in journalistic depictions. For example, scholars have used those frameworks to assess journalistic outlets' role in promoting associations between the concepts of "people of color" and "poverty," "crime," and "urban blight." Those associations may result from the over-representation of crime involving people of color in local television news coverage. Conversely, primes may be used strategically to counter stereotypes, such as by depicting people of color as being successful, serving as community leaders, and inhabiting pleasant neighborhoods. In some cases, however, primes can result in the rejection of *the message* being primed. For example, a news story about a police officer acting in self-defense may be rejected as being false to someone who has had multiple negative encounters with police, as the depiction of the officer's actions may appear off-base to that person.

Limitations of Priming Effects

The effects of priming are neither uniform nor universal, though. In isolation, priming effects are often short-lived. They can last as little as 90 seconds and weaken over time if they are not triggered. However, repetition strengthens associations, and that can lead to more lasting effects over time. Indeed, many of our strongest associations are those promoted during our youth and reinforced over the course of our lives as a result of the contexts within which we live.

For example, higher amounts of local television news viewing will often involve more exposure to stories about crime that feature people of color as perpetrators. That, in turn, can result in greater concerns about people of color – or, at minimum, the perception that crime by people of color is an important issue.

Such an effect is not predicated on the words and associations made by journalists themselves, though. Although journalists may use careful language and avoid stereotypes, they may choose to quote individuals who intentionally or unintentionally use language and frames that strengthen and weaken associations between concepts. Audiences often do not meaningfully differentiate between the journalists' words and those of their sources. This underscores the responsibility journalists have when selecting who and what to quote.

Additionally, media priming is most powerful when individuals have little existing knowledge about a target concept (e.g., "nuclear power") and are therefore more susceptible to media-driven associations. Put another way, media primes are especially impactful when they involve contexts, people, and ideas that are new or foreign to audiences – that is, when audiences are most dependent on journalistic outlets for their understanding of something.

Individuals do not develop associations between topics through journalistic media consumption alone, though. First, news is incredibly complex, and there are often many competing cues within a single journalistic message (e.g., an article), which in turn trigger multifaceted responses. Second, media environments are also complex, with journalistic outlets operating alongside entertainment, popular culture, politics, and so on. Third, individuals establish associations – and, often, the strongest associations – based on their personal experiences or those relayed by other trusted sources, like their family and friends.

Thus, in order to fully understand a priming effect, one must understand the environment and context around the prime.

Key Takeaways

» At its core, priming theory posits that media depictions develop relationships between concepts and stimulate related thoughts in the minds of audience members.

» Both agenda-setting theory and framing theory are premised on associative network models of human memory, which focus on the associations between concepts and the ease through which they may be recalled. However, they presume different pathways for the activation of concepts.

» Priming effects are often short-lived, but repetition strengthens associations and thereby allows effects to become more lasting.

» Priming effects are not uniform or universal. The magnitude of the effect of a prime depends on the context surrounding it.

Chapter II

News Avoidance and Fatigue

News avoidance refers to a phenomenon where *audiences reduce their consumption of journalistic media over a continuous period of time* due to either an active dislike for news or a preference for other kinds of media content.

Although many theories about the impacts of journalistic media implicitly assume that large portions of the public regularly consume those media, it is important to recognize that large segments of the population don't actually do that. Indeed, although more journalism is produced today than ever before, the number of people who avoid journalism has also increased in recent decades.

Moreover, audiences' journalistic media use is usually characterized by a combination of genres, such as sports journalism, political journalism, and environmental journalism. News avoidance is typically linked to the exclusion of certain genres and issues (though it may be extended to all journalistic media use). Put another way, some people (in fact, many) may routinely take in sports journalism but intentionally seek to avoid political journalism.

This development can have profound impacts on democratic societies that presumably rely upon a well-informed citizenry to self-govern because higher levels of news exposure have historically been linked to greater amounts of political knowledge and engagement. Second, news avoidance has negative economic consequences for journalistic outlets as it reduces the potential size of its audience. That, in turn, can also have consequences for non-avoiders, as journalistic outlets have fewer resources with which to produce quality journalism.

Intentional and Unintentional Avoidance

There are many reasons why an audience member may engage in news avoidance, but they can usually be placed into one of two categories: *intentional avoidance* and *unintentional avoidance*.

Intentional avoidance is the consequence of individuals consciously tuning out news media. There are three main reasons why they engage in such behavior, all of which are linked to negative dispositions toward journalistic media.

The first reason is that they perceive news coverage to be too negative and pessimistic. While some audiences are drawn to particularly negative or pessimistic news (e.g., violent crime), such news has been linked to increases in negative emotions and decreases in an individual's well-being over time. The desire to seek positive emotions can thus result in intentional avoidance of news that is presumed to be too negative.

The second reason is that some audiences do not trust journalistic outlets. This may be due to a perception that certain groups of journalistic outlets – if not "the media" as a whole – are pushing their own political and economic interests by being selective about the topics they cover and the information they include in their coverage. The perception that such coverage will be biased against a person's viewpoints or perception of reality can thus encourage intentional avoidance.

The third reason is that there is always a massive amount of readily accessible journalistic products out there, which can create a feeling of information overload. Not only is there a seemingly endless pool of issues being covered at any given moment, but there is also a seemingly endless pool of stories about each issue – which is impossible for any single person to consume or process. That perceived overload can create stress, confusion, and anxiety, and thus result in intentional avoidance in order for a person to reclaim a positive emotional state.

There is also unintentional news avoidance, which is based on the audience member's relative preference for non-journalistic media. Put another way, the avoidance isn't because a person is actively seeking to avoid journalistic media but rather because their preference for another choice – perhaps a new movie featuring Ryan Gosling – is stronger. Indeed, scholars have argued that the large audiences drawn by television news broadcasts in the 1960s and 1970s were due in part to audiences watching the news while they waited for the evening entertainment programs to start (which followed the nightly newscasts).

News Fatigue

News avoidance does not have to reflect a permanent state wherein audience members *always* avoid certain kinds of journalistic products, or journalistic media altogether. Quite often, it is a temporary state, as when individuals feel overwhelmed and need to take a break from an issue.

For example, consider the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. After being exposed to several stories about the pandemic every day for months, a person may have felt the need to disconnect from their preferred news sources to keep their mental state from deteriorating. However, after taking a break, that person may have resumed taking in such stories – and perhaps needed another break later on.

We can call this phenomenon *news fatigue*, which connotes a temporary feeling of exhaustion that can be addressed through a period of disconnection (recharging). News fatigue can occur in relation to any kind of issue or genre, such as a royal wedding or political journalism. However, it is typically most pronounced when it comes to natural disasters, illnesses, poverty, and political issues that, by their very nature, already tend to engender negative emotional responses.

Compassion Fatigue

Similarly, there is a phenomenon called *compassion fatigue*, which refers to *the gradual lessening of compassion over time as a result of repeated exposure to traumatic phenomena*. For example, consider the refugee crisis resulting from the Syrian Civil War, wherein at least 13 million Syrians were estimated to have been displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance. As the war dragged on over years, audiences around the world moved from being shocked to becoming numbed in order to psychologically protect themselves from repeated exposure to the death and destruction featured in news reports about the war.

Compassion fatigue has been associated with increased feelings of hopelessness and negative attitudes. That, in turn, can lead to desensitization and even resistance to helping those suffering if the issue is perceived as being intractable, or impossible to manage or change. Consequently, individuals may seek to turn off certain emotions as best they can. Compassion fatigue can also impact political and economic support for initiatives to address that issue. For example, in the aforementioned example of the Syrian Civil War, well-informed but fatigued news consumers may be less likely to become involved in protests against the war than their less-informed but non-fatigued counterparts.

This phenomenon is not limited to news audiences or to journalism. It has been found to impact a range of professionals, including doctors, child welfare workers, and lawyers. However, it has been found to have profound impacts on journalists themselves – and especially foreign correspondents who are shuttled from one crisis to another. Those impacts involve not only their emotional and mental states but also the depictions (and tropes) they incorporate into their journalistic work.

Combating News Avoidance

Several strategies have been proposed to reduce the likelihood of news avoidance. The first is to engage in approaches to journalism like *constructive journalism* and *solutions journalism*.

Constructive journalism aims to rebalance journalism by accompanying a selection of predominantly negative news stories about an issue with more positive coverage that illustrates the bright spots – however few they may be – related to that issue. For example, this might involve stories about how some Syrian refugees were able to successfully relocate themselves and start new lives, or how a local non-profit helped provide needed aid to displaced refugees.

Solutions journalism aims to not only diagnose problems – like the reasons for the displacement of Syrians during the war – but also adopt a forward-looking perspective that identifies possible solutions. Solutions journalism also tends to offer concrete suggestions to audiences for how to become a part of possible solutions. This may include providing contact information for local nonprofits or identifying specific humanitarian aid legislation that is under consideration.

The second strategy is to look for ways to increase trust in news organizations, such as by being more transparent about how stories are reported and explaining the journalistic processes behind them. For example, this might entail appending an information box to a story that contains anonymous sources that explains the journalistic organization's policy on granting anonymity. It may also include an explanation that a product reviewer was not paid for the review, but that the outlet may receive money if audiences purchase the product from an affiliated online store.

A third strategy that has received more attention in recent years is to provide *slow journalism* alternatives. This approach moves away from providing many short and episodic breaking news products (e.g., breaking news stories or tweets). Instead, it promotes providing fewer, longer, and more holistic news products (e.g., a well-reported and in-depth story published a couple of days after the news first broke). The approach is not intended to replace traditional journalism but simply to offer a complement for those who feel stressed by information overload.

Key Takeaways

- News avoidance refers to a phenomenon whereby audiences reduce their consumption of journalistic media over a continuous period of time.
- News avoidance may be the result of intentional and unintentional efforts, such as an active dislike for news or a simple preference for other media content.
- Intentional avoidance may be the byproduct of perceived over-negativity, lack of trust in news, and information overload.
- Individuals may develop either or both news fatigue and compassion fatigue as a result of over-exposure to a particular issue.
- There are different strategies that journalistic actors can employ to reduce the likelihood of avoidance, though some measure of avoidance is inevitable.

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Unit III

Cultural Models of Journalism

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Chapter 12

Journalistic Cultures

According to media scholar Mark Deuze, journalism – especially in Western societies in the Global North – is generally made up in part by five central values. Together, those values add up to what Deuze calls the *occupational ideology of journalism*.

The first value Deuze identifies is that journalists should provide a public service to the citizens of a given country. The second is that journalists should be impartial, fair, and objective. The third is that journalists must be autonomous and independent in their work. The fourth is that journalists must have a sense of immediacy and the ability to be expedient in their reporting. The fifth is that journalists must have a strong sense of ethics that is consistent with broader professional codes of ethics.

It is important to note that just because such an ideology exists does not mean that the way in which journalism is practiced in those places actually reflects those values. Put another way, in some places, journalism is hardly impartial in practice even if journalists in those places consider that value to be important. However, those cultural values are important to how the majority journalists in those places self-identify, how they think about their work, and how they collectively try to legitimize themselves to their society. Such values also come up in popular media about journalism, such as American movies that portray journalists as independent truth-tellers.

Breaking Down Journalistic Cultures

What Deuze is effectively suggesting is that although journalism may be performed differently in different places, there is a general *journalistic culture* that spans many of those places.

However, although useful as a starting point, Deuze's theorizing is a reflection of Western ideology rooted in the Global North. For example, those values implicitly assume a separation of powers that is accomplished through systems of checks and balances, with journalistic outlets informally serving as one such check. Additionally, those values also assume that journalistic outlets have the ability to remain independent from government. This is obviously not the case in many places.

Scholars have thus sought to move away from trying to find some universal journalistic culture and instead move toward demarcating different aspects of journalistic cultures that allow for comparisons across contexts.

One such model comes from the Worlds of Journalism project, which has examined dozens of countries. The researchers behind the project break journalistic culture into two sets of dimensions: *extrinsic* and *intrinsic*.

Extrinsic Dimensions of Journalistic Culture

The extrinsic dimensions of journalistic culture include their *perceived influences* and *editorial autonomy*. We refer to these as extrinsic dimensions because they pertain to journalists' experiences of, and reflections on, the external constraints placed upon them.

Perceived influences refer to journalists' (or other journalistic actors') *subjective perceptions of the various forces that can shape the news production process*. These include the media laws that govern those actors, the feedback they get from their audiences, and the availability of newsgathering resources. The emphasis here is not only on the extent to which journalists are aware of those influences – that is, whether they know about a specific law – but also on the degree to which they think those influences play an important role in their work. For example, a journalist may be aware of what their audience thinks about their work but they may not care a great deal about it.

Journalists' perceptions serve as a filter through which real, external pressures are translated into consciously experienced influences. Notably, scholars have found that there is often a gap between those real, external pressures and journalists' perceptions of them. Put another way, journalists sometimes perceive external pressures to be more or less constraining than they actually are, and they act in accordance to those perceptions rather than the reality.

Editorial autonomy pertains to *the degree of independence that journalists believe they have when performing essential journalistic acts*, such as selecting the stories they want to cover, which aspects of those stories to emphasize, and which sources of information to draw upon. This is closely related to journalists' perceived influences, but it focuses on the organizational level. That is, this dimension underscores the extent to which journalistic organizations within a culture typically have owners, managers, and editors (as well as organizational structures) that give journalists the necessary freedom to perform their work independently.

Intrinsic Dimensions of Journalistic Culture

The intrinsic dimensions of journalistic culture include journalistic *role orientations, ethical considerations,* and their *trust in institutions*. We refer to these as intrinsic dimensions because they represent discourses of professional self-awareness in which journalists internally negotiate the appropriateness of certain journalistic norms, values, and practices.

Role orientations refers to *how journalists think about their social purpose within a society, and to whom and how they direct their journalistic ambitions*. For example, in the United States, this may involve being a detached observer of events. In contrast, in the United Arab Emirates, this may involve seeking to influence public opinion. Such roles often feel evident, natural, and self-explanatory to the journalists within a given context.

Ethical considerations refers to *journalists' perceptions of the appropriate responses to situations in which their actions can have potentially harmful consequences* for individuals, groups, or society as a whole. For example, when covering the murder of a minor, journalists need to weigh the public's 'right' to know against the family's 'right' to privacy. That calculus may be different across contexts. This dimension thus underscores both the degree to which journalists should adhere to professional codes of ethics as well as the extent to which they believe certain controversial journalistic practices – like bribing officials for information – are acceptable.

Trust in institutions refers to *the willingness of a journalist to believe the information provided by public institutions*, such as the federal government, the judiciary, and political parties. For example, in countries where journalistic media are likely to trust public institutions, journalists are more likely to defer to those institutions' accounts of events and statistics – especially if the journalist has no way of bearing witness first-hand. Conversely, when that trust is low, journalists are more likely to be critical of such information, or simply choose to ignore it altogether.

Why Journalistic Cultures Matter

Journalistic cultures *shape (and are shaped by) how journalists think and, consequently, influence how they act*. There is, again, often a disconnect between what journalists think and what they do. Nevertheless, what they do is often influenced – at least initially – by what they think. For example, a journalist may choose to *not* go undercover or lie about their identity because they believe that would go against a professional code of ethics. They may thus try to get the story through other means first.

Additionally, journalistic cultures impact *what is seen as legitimate work among fellow journalistic actors*. That, in turn, impacts who and what are symbolically celebrated – that is, who are treated as "good" journalists or what is treated as "good" journalism. This has material implications, such as the kinds of job offers, promotions, awards, and so on that might be extended to a certain kind of journalist or journalism.

Finally, journalistic cultures impact *how journalistic actors legitimize their work to society*. This, in turn, affects how societies think about journalism and the kinds of access and protections that other institutional actors (e.g., governments or even sports teams) are willing to grant those journalists. For example, in a society where journalists are seen as an unofficial branch of government for the purposes of checks and balances – as is the case in the United States – then that society is likely to support limited government interference in news production and distribution.

It is important to note that such cultures are not static, though. They can and do change over time. For example, the journalistic culture in the United States only generally adopted the journalistic value of neutrality in the early 20th century. More recently, there have been rumblings within that culture to shift away from the value of "balance" and toward a "weight-of-evidence" approach, especially when it comes to scientific issues like climate change.

Similar kinds of transitions have occurred elsewhere in the world. Specifically, as the world has become more interconnected – and journalism from other places has become more easily accessible – there has been some natural blending of journalistic cultures. In some cases, there is pressure to adopt values and practices from other journalistic cultures, as with private media in some countries in the Global South taking a more consumer-oriented approach to journalism from the Global North. Additionally, as the reach of some global journalistic outlets like *The New York Times* and the BBC increases, so does the cultural influence of their approach to journalism. However, although we find increased interconnection to perhaps promote the formulation of a more homogeneous culture, research has shown us that important distinctions remain.

Key Takeaways

- Different countries have distinct journalistic cultures. There is no single, universal way of doing journalism, though some values and norms are more common than others across contexts.
- Scholars have broken journalistic cultures into two sets of dimensions: extrinsic and intrinsic.
- Extrinsic dimensions include journalists' perceived influences as well as their editorial autonomy.
- Intrinsic dimensions include journalists' role orientations, their ethical considerations, and their trust in institutions.
- Journalistic cultures matter because they shape (and are shaped by) how journalists think, act, and legitimize themselves to their peers and to society.

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Chapter 13

Role Orientations

The concept of role orientation refers to *how journalists think about their social purpose within a society, and to whom and how they direct their journalistic ambitions*.

It is important to distinguish between role orientation and role performance, though the two are linked. Role orientation refers to how journalistic actors *think* whereas role performance refers to how they *act*, which may be limited by a range of structural factors. As such, the role orientations journalists believe most strongly in may not entirely reflect the reality of what those journalists actually do in a given context. Nevertheless, they play a major role in determining how journalism and journalists are legitimized within that context.

Types of Role Orientations

The Worlds of Journalism project has identified four main journalistic role orientations: the *monitorial* role, the *collaborative* role, the *interventionist* role, and the *accommodative* role. These roles are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they operate on continuums, such that a journalist may adhere strongly to both monitorial and interventionist roles. Additionally, these roles refer to the *most prevalent* ways of thinking within a country but recognize that there is also a lot of variation within countries and within specific subfields or genres of journalism.

It is also important to note that other scholars have come up with different typologies. However, the Worlds of Journalism typology is particularly useful because of its theoretical rigor and the global scope of that project, which allows for broad comparisons across countries.

Monitorial Role

The monitorial role is broadly grounded in the ideal of journalism acting as a "Fourth Estate" that holds those in power to account, keeps citizens aware of major political and social developments, and strives to foster a critical-minded citizenry. Put another way, the legitimacy of journalists to act in a monitorial role is anchored in journalism's relationship with political authorities. Journalists may act as critical observers of political decisions and other political conduct, publishing objective stories as they become aware of transgressions. They may also act more proactively to investigate and scrutinize government claims and gather information about issues they consider suspicious. The 'watchdog' function of journalism is thus closely associated with this role.

Journalists who subscribe to this role are thus more likely to say that their job is to "provide political information," to "monitor and scrutinize politics," to "monitor and scrutinize business," and to "motivate people to participate in politics." The countries that tend to subscribe strongly to this role orientation include Denmark, Sweden, and the United States.

Collaborative Role

The collaborative role is quite different from the monitorial role. In this role, journalists act as partners of the government and support it in its efforts to bring about socioeconomic development and social well-being. This role orientation calls on journalists to support authorities in defense of the social order against threats of crime, conflict, and natural emergencies. Put another way, in this role, journalists *may* (but do not always) actively defend the government and its policies by acting as propagandists. However, they may also serve as simple facilitators by voluntarily assisting the government in its efforts to maintain social harmony, preserve national unity, and promote nation-building. Furthermore, journalists may see it as their responsibility to provide legitimacy to the government by explaining political decisions to citizens and helping guide public opinion. This may involve adopting a 'mouthpiece' function, whereby journalists simply aim to improve one-way communication from government officials to citizens.

Journalists who subscribe to this role are thus more likely to say that their job is to "support government policy" and "convey a positive image of political leaders." The countries that tend to subscribe strongly to this role orientation include China, Qatar, and Singapore.

Interventionist Role

The interventionist role is characterized by a strong inclination toward pursuing a particular mission and promoting certain values. Interventionist journalists are typically involved, socially committed, and motivated to engage in social affairs by thinking of themselves as active participants in political life rather than as neutral scribes. These journalists may thus act as advocates for particular groups and causes, as missionaries for certain values and ideologies, and as agents for social change. This can include thinking of oneself as a spokesperson for the socially disadvantaged but also as active promoters for causes like the preservation of indigenous cultures or for political positions associated with certain political parties. Put another way, journalists who identify with this role orientation seek to move society toward what they think it can become, rather than just trying to mirror a contemporary social reality.

Journalists who subscribe to this role are thus more likely to say that their job is to "advocate for social change," to "influence public opinion," to "set the political agenda," and to "support national development." The countries that tend to subscribe strongly to this role include Croatia, Cyprus, and Tanzania.

Accommodative Role

The accommodative role is, among all these four role dimensions, the one most strongly oriented toward viewing journalistic audiences as consumers (rather than citizens). Journalists who embrace an accommodative role strive to provide their audiences with the sort of information that appeals most to the public. This role could take the form of consumer journalism, which features reviews of commercial products and evaluations of leisure-time activities, as well as 'news-you-can-use' content like advice columns and information about the management of everyday social life. Put another way, this role orientation places less of an emphasis on public service journalism and more emphasis on so-called 'soft news' journalism – provided that is what journalistic audiences want.

Journalists who subscribe to this role are thus more likely to say that their job is to "provide entertainment and relaxation," to "provide news that attracts the largest audience," and to "provide advice, orientation, and direction for daily life." The countries that tend to subscribe strongly to this role orientation include Austria, Germany, and Iceland.

Synthesizing Global Roles

The Worlds of Journalism research has found, through their study of 66 countries between 2012 and 2016, that the ideological core of journalism is still linked to journalism's political obligations. Journalists around the world generally link, at least in their minds, journalism to the promotion of political self-governance by articulating support for such journalistic functions like being an informer, a watchdog, and a disseminator of information. Overall, their results show that journalists around the world generally share a common understanding of how journalism should serve society via an emphasis on values connected to the monitorial role.

However, this does not mean that there is a single, universal understanding of role orientations that permeates all journalistic cultures. While the monitorial role receives the greatest amount of support overall, it is more prevalent in the Western world than the non-Western world. Meanwhile, the collaborative role receives far less support overall but it is valued more in the non-Western world than the Western world. The interventionist and accommodative roles find similar levels of support around the world, but the interventionist role is more strongly supported in countries with lower levels of economic development as well as those that have recently faced disruptive political changes. In contrast, the accommodative role is more likely to garner support in more economically developed and stable countries.

Taken as a whole, the Worlds of Journalism project finds that while there are important commonalities across the globe when it comes to journalistic role orientations, political, economic, social, and cultural factors all influence the extent to which those values are subscribed to within those countries. This lends support to the basic proposition that social systems leave an imprint on journalistic roles even as some roles, like the monitorial role, do transcend local contexts.

Key Takeaways

- There are four main, overarching role orientations for journalism, according to the Worlds of Journalism project. They are the monitorial role, the collaborative role, the interventionist role, and the accommodative role.
- Role orientations do not necessarily reflect practice. Instead, they reflect ways of thinking about journalism, which is presumed to have some effect on its practice as well as on how journalism is legitimated within a society.
- Different countries adhere to distinct role orientations, which are influenced by that country's political, economic, social, and cultural development. However, the monitorial role of journalism is prevalent in the

majority of journalistic cultures around the globe.

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Chapter 14

Ethical Considerations

The concept of ethical considerations refers to *journalists' perceptions of the appropriate responses to situations in which their actions can have potentially harmful consequences*.

Journalists are required to make ethical decisions every day as they go about covering the news. Such decisions can involve whether it is okay to pay a source for information or whether it is okay to misrepresent oneself in order to gain the access needed to report a story. Indeed, journalism is often described rather pointedly as a "moral calling."

The notion of ethical considerations covers two distinct dimensions. The first is one's *ethical orientation*, or the philosophy that a journalistic actor draws upon to ascertain if something is ethical or not (i.e., moral or amoral). The second is one's *justification of controversial newsgathering practices*, or how appropriate a journalistic actor believes specific techniques to be within the context of journalism.

It is important to distinguish between these ethical considerations and what journalists actually do, though the two are linked. Ethical considerations cover how journalistic actors *think*, which may differ from the reality of what they do, perhaps because of particular structural constraints those journalists face. Nevertheless, the dominant ethics-related ideological patterns still play a role in broadly legitimizing journalism and journalists within a society, and influence how journalistic actors self-regulate within a professional context.

Ethical Orientations

The Worlds of Journalism project has examined the concept of ethical orientations by focusing on four philosophies: *absolutism*, *situationism*, *exceptionism*, and *subjectivism*.

Absolutism contends that moral rules are to be followed the same way at all times. Journalists who subscribe to this perspective are more likely to say things like, "journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context." This was the dominant ethical orientation in nearly all of the 66 countries evaluated by the Worlds of Journalism team in a series of large-scale surveys of journalists between 2012 and 2016. The countries that subscribed to this orientation most strongly included Italy, Portugal, and the United States.

Situationism argues that it is the situation that determines which solution is most ethical. Journalists who subscribe to this perspective are more likely to say things like, "what is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation." The countries that subscribed most strongly to this orientation included Bhutan, Moldova, and Russia.

Exceptionism contends that there are some moral rules that should be followed *most* of the time but it is acceptable to occasionally waive them if needed. Journalists who subscribe to this perspective are more likely to say things like, "it is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it." The countries that subscribed most strongly to this orientation included the Czech Republic, Ethiopia, and Singapore.

Subjectivism posits that moral judgments should depend primarily on one's own personal values rather than any objective code that all people (or journalists) should adhere to. Journalists who subscribe to this perspective are more likely to say things like, "what is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment." This is the ethical orientation that is least commonly subscribed to across the world, according to the Worlds of Journalism research. However, the countries that subscribed most strongly to this orientation included Oman, Qatar, and Sudan.

Justifications of Controversial Practices

The Worlds of Journalism project also evaluated the extent to which a few controversial newsgathering practices were perceived to be justifiable by asking journalists to evaluate them as either always justified, justified on occasion, and not justifiable when reporting on an *important* story.

The practice that was seen to be most justifiable overall – that is, it was seen as being justifiable either all of the time or at least some of the time – involved "using hidden microphones or cameras." Globally, that practice was deemed to be always justified by 10% of journalists and justified on occasion by 57% of them. It received the most approval in Latvia, Norway, and Denmark during the 2012-2016 surveys.

Another practice that was seen to be justifiable at least some of the time by most journalists worldwide was "using confidential business or government documents without authorization." That practice was deemed to be always justified by 13% of journalists and justified on occasion by 52% of them. It received the most approval in France, Japan, and Sweden.

A third practice, "claiming to be somebody else," received lower approval ratings worldwide. That practice was deemed to be always justified by 7% of journalists and justified on occasion by 41%. It received the most approval in China, Romania, and South Korea.

The practice of "paying people for confidential information" also received lower levels of approval. Globally, that practice was deemed to be always justified by 6% of journalists and justified on occasion by 36% of them. It received the most approval in Albania, Bhutan, and China.

Finally, the practice of "accepting money from sources" received exceptionally low levels of approval worldwide. That practice was deemed to be always justified by 4% of journalists and justified on occasion by 6% of them. The only country in which this practice was seen as being justified by the majority of journalists was Tanzania. In the majority of countries, less than 5% of journalists said it was acceptable even just on occasion.

Synthesizing Ethical Considerations

After examining 66 countries between 2012 and 2016, the Worlds of Journalism researchers concluded there is hybridity in journalists' ethical orientations and their acceptance of controversial practices. Put another way, although there was a broad inclination toward an absolutist ethical orientation worldwide, different countries and regions had unique combinations of absolutism with situationism, subjectivism, and exceptionism — and those combinations further intersected in different ways with proclivities toward controversial practices.

Regionally, countries in the Global North were the ones most associated with absolutism. Additionally, the researchers found that democratic and journalistic freedoms, professional values toward autonomy and independence, and the cultural value of uncertainty avoidance also played an important role in determining ethical orientations. In countries that impose fewer constraints on journalists, most journalists privilege absolutism in their ethical orientation. Adherence to subjectivism, which was the orientation least accepted by journalists, was more evident in countries in the Middle East and North Africa, where political and press freedoms are more limited, there are often greater levels of corruption, and the professional values of autonomy and independence are rated lower.

With regard to controversial practices, the relationships were less clear-cut. Journalists in countries that score higher in press freedom, and in which journalists experience greater autonomy and fewer internal pressures, tended to believe that some controversial practices sometimes associated with watchdog journalism – like using confidential documents without authorization and using hidden recording devices – were justifiable for *important* stories. Again, many of these are countries in the Global North, though there were multiple exceptions to that pattern. Conversely, many other controversial practices – like misrepresenting oneself, paying for sources, and receiving payment from sources – were typically found in countries with lower levels of socioeconomic development.

Taken as a whole, the Worlds of Journalism project found ethical ideologies in journalism are multidimensional and pluralistic – meaning that they are very dependent on the context. That context, in turn, is shaped by a country's degree of press freedom, democratic development, corruption, human development, and emancipative values. This helps to explain why there are still significant differences among some countries, even as there does appear to be at least some agreement among many journalists around the globe about what it means to be an ethical journalist.

Key Takeaways

» Globally, absolutism is the most prevalent ethical orientation. However, that orientation is sometimes mixed with values associated with other orientations, creating some diversity in ethical approaches.

» There is considerable variation across countries in terms of support for controversial newsgathering practices. Some practices, like using hidden microphones and cameras, are seen as being justifiable at least some of the time for important stories. Others, like receiving payment from sources, are almost always frowned upon.

» The degree of adherence to certain ethical orientations and support for controversial newsgathering practices is influenced by a range of factors, including a country's degree of press freedom, professional values toward autonomy and independence, and cultural values regarding the avoidance of uncertainty.

Chapter 15

Trust in Institutions

The concept of journalistic trust in institutions refers to *the willingness of a journalist to believe the information provided by public institutions*.

Journalists are important intermediaries between public institutions – like the government, the judiciary, and political parties – and their audiences. In most places, they serve as crucial links between ordinary citizens and the authorities who are supposed to represent them and who govern their lives. Indeed, citizens often do not get to meet those institutions or the individuals within them, nor do those citizens partake in the day-to-day work of governance. For example, few of us have ever met a sitting president of the United States or been part of a private Senate Intelligence Committee hearing. Instead, we rely on journalistic media to keep us informed about those institutions and officials.

In this context, journalistic media can play both constructive and destructive roles. For example, sustained pessimism about the motivations of public institutions and negative coverage of their actions can contribute to public disdain for political actors. Conversely, journalism can also create and consolidate people's trust in those same public institutions and ensure that those institutions live up to certain standards.

Additionally, the way in which journalists depict public institutions is often connected to their own level of trust in them. Indeed, in many journalistic cultures, a certain degree of skepticism is built deeply into their journalism's professional ideology. In such places, journalists must therefore walk a tightrope between exercising a healthy amount of skepticism and instigating cynicism.

Kinds of Public Institutions

The Worlds of Journalism project has examined two distinct types of public institutions in a series of surveys between 2012 and 2016: *representative institutions* and *regulative institutions*.

Representative institutions are those that are responsible for democratic representation and political decision-making. They include institutions like parliament (or, in places like the U.S., Congress), government (or, in places like the U.S., the Executive Branch), political parties, and politicians (in general). Overall, journalists around the world have tended to have fairly little trust in representative institutions. Among them, the most trusted was parliament, which received an average rating between "low trust" and "some trust." This was followed by institutions most akin to the U.S.'s Executive Branch. Political parties tend to receive the lowest ratings.

Regulative institutions are those that implement the decisions made by representative institutions. They include the judiciary, military, and police. Overall, journalists around the world have tended to have the greatest amount of trust in the judiciary. However, even then that trust was low, with the average rating being "some trust." This was followed by the police and the military, both of which actually received higher ratings than any representative institution.

Synthesizing Trust

After examining 66 countries, the Worlds of Journalism researchers concluded that journalists around the world are generally skeptical of public institutions. Overall, their ratings tended to fall between "little" to "some" trust in institutions. They did, however, have relatively more confidence in regulative institutions than in representative ones. In particular, journalists in most countries tended to have especially low trust in politicians (in general) as well as the political parties they belong to. These findings are consistent with journalists' general preference for a monitorial professional role orientation since it calls attention to journalists' perceived need to keep tabs on what government and the powerful are up to.

However, although these findings were consistent across many countries, they were not unanimous. The researchers found no significant linear relationship between journalists' trust in institutions and contextual factors like press freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and economic performance. The only factor that was consistent had to do with corruption: Countries in which corruption was low tended to have the highest levels of trust in institutions among journalists.

There were, however, many exceptions to that finding, too. For example, journalists in the United States, which has historically been considered to have low levels of corruption, exhibited relatively low levels of trust in institutions. This is likely due to the United States' emphasis on watchdog reporting and the history of how professional journalism developed there. Indeed, this attitude is well captured by former *Boston Globe* journalist Bob Anglin, who wrote more than thirty years ago: "Show me a reporter with a respect for authority, and I'll show you a lousy reporter."

Conversely, journalists in countries like Bhutan and India, which have *not* been historically considered to have low levels of corruption, exhibited high levels of trust in institutions. In the case of Bhutan, the researchers hypothesized that it had to do with the fact that it was still a new democracy when they interviewed journalists, and they thus suspected that it was due to a "honeymoon" period of sorts. However, they have generally found that journalists in the younger democracies, and particularly in Eastern and Central Europe (e.g., Albania, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Kosovo, Moldova, Romania, and Serbia), tended to have relatively lower levels of trust in public institutions. In many of those cases, the political, economic, and cultural transitions have been complicated and resulted in social inequalities, which in turn raises skepticism toward the public institutions charged with representing citizens and implementing political decisions.

Taken as a whole, the Worlds of Journalism project thus finds that there is near-universal skepticism of public institutions by journalists, but that the degree of trust (or lack thereof) is still dependent on different contextual factors – even as it remains unclear exactly which contextual factors best explain the differences. The broader implication is that journalists may approach those institutions with a critical eye – at least as far as other structural factors (e.g., protections from government interference) will allow them to – but they must take care to not simply reproduce that skepticism and, in turn, breed cynicism.

Key Takeaways

- Globally, journalists are generally very skeptical of public institutions. This is consistent with their proclivity toward the monitorial role of journalism.
- Trust is lower for representative institutions, or those responsible for democratic representation and political decision-making, than for regulative institutions, or those responsible for implementing and adjucticating those decisions.
- Levels of trust in institutions are dependent on contextual factors, though scholars have yet to identify exactly which factors are most explanatory.

Countries with low levels of corruption do tend to have higher levels of trust, though.

Unit IV

Influences on Journalistic Media

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Chapter 16

Hierarchy of Influences Model

The Hierarchy of Influences Model is a useful framework for describing many of the things that affect the news content that audiences see, hear, and read. The model was proposed by media scholars Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese in their 1996 book, *Mediating the Message*. The crucial intervention of this model is that it helped formalize the idea that *there are a number of different factors that influence news content*, and that those factors *operate across different levels*, from the micro (individual) to the macro (society).

Put another way, individuals operate within larger social, economic, political, and technical systems and structures. Those systems and structures in turn influence how journalistic actors think and how they go about their work. That, in turn, influences the journalistic products that those actors produce.

The Hierarchy of Influences Model wasn't designed to propose or explain causal relationships, such as if X happens then Y will happen. Instead, it is particularly useful in helping us appreciate that journalism isn't shaped just by journalists or the organizations they work for. It is also shaped by a number of other factors.

Levels of Analysis

The Hierarchy of Influences Model identifies five levels of influence: the *individual* level, the *routine* level, the *organizational* level, the *social-institutional* level, and the *social systems* level. These levels are ordered from the micro (smallest in scope) to the macro (broadest in scope), and the model presents them as a series of concentric circles.

Individual Level

The individual level refers to *the biographical, psychological, and sociological characteristics of an individual social actor*. For example, a journalist's age, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and class status can all impact the news that person produces because previous life experiences associated with those attributes may color that person's interpretation of an issue or what they choose to prioritize when covering it. That journalist's personal values and beliefs (e.g., their religious beliefs or political attitudes) may similarly impact how they think about things. Even their role orientations, or what they think the purpose of journalism is and how journalism should be done, will impact how a journalist will seek to cover an issue.

These factors, like many others in the model, are not always conscious influences. For example, a journalist may not knowingly decide that they have to adopt a particular story angle because they lean toward liberalism or conservatism. Instead, their political preference may subconsciously orient them toward a particular story angle precisely because they believe certain philosophies – like personal choice or the social good – are especially important (which is probably what led them to hold that political preference to begin with).

Routine Level

The routine level refers to *the patterned, repeated practices, forms, and rules that journalistic actors use to do their jobs*. For example, this may include news values, or the set of criteria journalists apply to determine the newsworthiness of information. If they deem controversy to be an important news value, then they are generally more likely to cover issues and events that are controversial. This is especially true when there is disagreement among institutional elites, such as political party leaders, regarding an issue.

Another such factor may be an institutional preference to appear balanced by offering "both sides" of an issue an equal voice. That often results in coverage that positions both voices as equally legitimate, even when that is not the case. For example, anthropogenic climate change has long been considered a real phenomenon by leading scientists. However, for many years, journalistic coverage of climate change often gave voice to skeptics (who implied a lack of scientific consensus) to appear balanced.

Yet another such factor is a preference for certain styles of presenting information to audiences. One such style of writing is the inverted pyramid, which organizes information from most recent and important to least recent and important. This style is perceived as being efficient at quickly conveying important information, but it often comes at the expense of developing a compelling narrative. These factors operate at a higher level because they reflect what is seen as appropriate or normal among fellow journalistic actors.

Organizational Level

The organizational level refers to *the policies, unwritten rules, and economic imperatives within journalistic organizations* (or whatever other entity a journalistic actor works for). Journalistic outlets must balance commercial concerns with professional ones. This balancing act is often most difficult for for-profit organizations, as they are expected to generate profits even as important journalism is often *not* cost-effective. However, even non-profit media have to work within a set budget to remain viable and promote their work in a way that can attract funding from different benefactors (e.g., foundations). As such, media ownership is often an important influence. While some owners (or ownership groups) are fairly hands-off (as long as economic objectives are met), others are more active in dictating coverage priorities and may even become directly involved in shaping the reporting of specific issues.

Additionally, the primary medium associated with a journalistic outlet (e.g., whether they see print as their primary media vehicle or if they focus on an online-first strategy) may also impact how they present information. After all, you wouldn't expect an organization that focuses on print journalism to invest much in interactive data visualizations that only work online.

A third factor might be the geographic location where that organization is based, and whether they have news bureaus (satellite offices) elsewhere. For example, if a journalistic outlet is based in a major East Coast city, the social make-up of the journalists will be more likely to reflect the values and priorities of that place, even when they cover stories elsewhere in the country or abroad.

Social-Institutional Level

The social-institutional level refers to *the norms, individuals, and organizations that operate outside a given journalistic organization*. There is some overlap here with the aforementioned routines level, but this level includes information sources, other journalistic organizations, advertisers, and media policy, among other actors. For example, information sources (e.g., the witnesses a journalist may interview) can shape a news product by virtue of the words they choose to use and the information they choose to share – or, more simply, by being willing or unwilling to talk to the journalist in the first place. Some journalistic outlets can influence general news coverage themselves by serving as 'pack leaders' that other outlets seek to follow or imitate. They can also influence coverage by publishing stories that competing organizations may then choose to avoid (because those stories will be thought of as 'already having been done').

Advertisers can impact coverage by demanding that their ads only be shown alongside positive coverage. After all, they likely do not want their products to be associated with negative emotions or connotations. That, in turn, can result in important (but typically exhausting) stories receiving inadequate coverage, or having portions of a news product be reserved for more-positive feature stories. Conversely, advertisers can threaten to withdraw ads if they perceive that a journalistic outlet represents values that do not reflect their own.

Media policy can restrict what journalistic outlets can report on, or how they may report on those things. For example, some countries have strict state secrets laws that prevent journalistic outlets from publishing anything that the government deems to be threatening to national security. Similarly, some countries around the world have adopted "fake news" laws that enable government authorities to fine (or shut down) journalists and outlets that produce news the authorities do not agree with. In both of these examples, media policy can have a "chilling effect" on what journalists choose to write (or write about). Conversely, some countries can adopt media policies that protect journalists from frivolous lawsuits by implementing serious penalties for individuals who sue journalists in bad faith.

Social Systems Level

The social systems level refers to *the symbolic frameworks of norms, values, and beliefs that reside at the societal level*. This is the most macro level, and it simply reflects the sorts of ideas that are more generally accepted within a broad society. For example, in the United States, capitalism remains the dominant economic system. This results in different issues being more likely to be framed in terms of how they might affect private ownership, free markets, and the pursuit of profit. Similarly, democratic values remain dominant within U.S. politics. That, in turn, leads to beliefs that the role of journalistic media in the U.S. is to inform citizens so they may better participate in self-governance. In less-capitalistic social systems, those same issues may be more likely to be framed primarily in terms of the collective good. Similarly, in autocratic social systems, journalists will be more likely to believe that their job is to help the government maintain social order.

Importance of Levels and Factors

The Hierarchy of Influences Model does not presume that any of the levels discussed here is more important than another. It also makes no claims about the directionality of influences. (For example, the social systems level is not theorized to be the one that shapes individuals, nor the other way around.) Instead, it views those levels as frequently acting upon one another: Individuals collectively shape values and norms at the social systems level, even as those values and norms help enable and restrict the behaviors of individuals within that society.

Similarly, each factor can operate independently from the other factors or in conjunction with one or more. For example, the influence of advertisers on a particular organization may be entirely independent from the dominant presentation style of that organization. Regardless of who is advertising or how much advertising there is, the organization may continue to use the inverted pyramid style of writing. However, if an organization is for-profit and has aggressive profit targets, then the existing influence of advertisers may become even stronger.

We have only covered a few of the factors identified by the Hierarchy of Influences Model here. There are dozens more, and you can learn more about them in the most recent edition of *Mediating the Message*. While it is less important to know how to classify each potential influence into a particular level, it is very useful to simply recognize that a great many things can influence journalists and journalism, and that these influences can emanate from individuals to society as a whole.

It is important to note that journalism is rapidly changing as new social actors, technological actants, and journalistic activities emerge or become increasingly important. For example, companies like Facebook and Google have staked important positions within news production and distribution, even though they claim they are not media organizations themselves. Similarly, some new digital advertising technologies have made it harder for advertisers to know exactly where their ads will be placed online, and for online news organizations to know which ads will appear alongside their stories.

In short, as journalism (and the environments it operates within) changes, so do the factors that might influence it, as well as the nature and extent of the influence those factors exert. However, what remains unchanged is that journalism is regularly influenced in important ways by an array of different things.

Key Takeaways

- The Hierarchy of Influences Model describes the various factors that affect news content, organized on a continuum from a micro level to a macro level.
- The model identifies five levels: the individual level, the routine level, the organizational level, the social-institutional level, and the social systems level.
- The model does not presume that any one level is more important than another, or that influence runs in one direction. Instead, all of these forces are simultaneously acting upon the production of news content.
- Journalism is rapidly changing, and the nature and extent of each influence is changing with it.

Chapter 17

News Values

News values are *the benchmarks of newsworthiness against which journalists measure potential stories*.

News is not a 'natural' thing that just 'exists.' In the context of journalism, news is something that is constructed by editorial actors (e.g., journalists) and even by some technological actants (e.g., newswriting algorithms). The use of the term "constructed" here is not intended to imply that news is arbitrarily invented or that it is "fake" information. Instead, it simply recognizes that news is the product of human and technological interventions, and it is shaped by the contexts within which it is identified, gathered, verified, structured, and presented as a product that is recognizable as "news" by audiences.

After all, only a tiny fraction of the developments and events happening in the world at any given moment ever get covered as news by editorial actors and actants. First, journalists are unlikely to be aware of most of those developments. Second, only a small portion of the things they are aware of are deemed to be worthy of being constructed as news stories. To help them decide which developments are worthy of their time and their audiences' attention, editorial actors apply the set of criteria we can call *news values*.

News Values

According to media scholars Tony Harcup and Deirdre O'Neill, most published news stories tend to include *at least one* of the following 15 elements:

- *Exclusivity*: The development is available first (or only) to a particular news organization (e.g., an exclusive interview with Mark Zuckerberg).

- *Power elite*: The development involves powerful individuals and organizations (e.g., the president of the United States).
- *Magnitude*: The development potentially impacts a large number of people, or impacts a few people significantly (e.g., a court ruling affecting thousands of immigrants' citizenship rights).
- *Relevance*: The development involves issues or groups that are perceived to be relevant to the organization's audience (e.g., a major local employer relocating to another state).
- *Surprise*: The development deviates from the norm or shows stark contrasts (e.g., a man who bites dogs).
- *Conflict*: The development involves controversies, arguments, fights, or insurrections (e.g., a politician breaking away from their party).
- *Drama*: The development concerns an unfolding drama, such as battles or court cases (e.g., a major criminal trial).
- *Bad news*: The development has especially negative overtones, such as a death or tragedy (e.g., a plane crash).
- *Good news*: The development has especially positive overtones, including rescues or cures (e.g., development of a new vaccine).
- *Entertainment*: The development highlights human interest, unfolding drama, opportunities for humor (e.g., how to spend 36 hours in Bucharest).
- *Celebrity*: The development concerns people who are already famous (e.g., Ryan Gosling).
- *Audio-visuals*: The development has compelling photographs, video, audio, or can be illustrated with data visualizations (e.g., large protests).
- *Shareability*: The development is likely to generate sharing and comments on social media, e-mail, and messaging apps (e.g., content that is likely to 'go viral').
- *Follow-up*: The development advances a story already being covered by that journalistic outlet or other news organization (e.g., the result of a vote on legislation previously covered).
- *Journalistic outlet's agenda*: The development fits the organization's agenda and/or journalistic identity (e.g., it focuses on a particular issue, like foreign policy).

In addition to these values, *timeliness* is a crucial factor. After all, *news* is typically presumed to be *new*, and journalists are thus sensitive to how recent the information is. However, news may also be *evergreen*, or not connected to breaking developments but part of an ongoing issue or event. For example, a timely story about homelessness may be produced when the city council approves additional funding for homeless shelters. However, a general story about homelessness can also be evergreen because homelessness is a persistent issue in many places. In practice, evergreen stories are also useful because they provide content for slower news days.

The more news values a potential story contains, the more likely it is to be seen as *newsworthy* and therefore receive coverage. News can therefore be understood as *a highly selective version of events* (and, arguably, nonevents) that have been chosen and packaged to match a news organization's objectives, its output requirements, and the information needs or entertainment wants that its target audiences are believed to have. This, in turn, highlights that the material attributes of a development or event – that is, what actually happened – only has *some* bearing on whether it is covered, how it gets covered, what information is emphasized, and who receives a voice in that coverage. For example, an online rant about immigrants may be seen as newsworthy solely because it was tweeted by a sitting U.S. president, and the coverage may focus on the controversy around that rant (rather than the substance of its claims) because opposing party leaders subsequently traded barbs over it.

These news values also help us to appreciate why certain developments *do not* receive coverage. For example, an evening TV news broadcast may decide not to cover an event simply because it is unlikely to produce good visuals (e.g., a corruption investigation) or if the organization does not have access to those visuals (e.g., a governmental detention camp in a remote area of a foreign country). Instead, it may allot the limited time in its broadcast to an arguably less-important event that can produce more visually captivating images (e.g., an accidental house fire).

News Values as Ideology

News values are a reflection of the dominant ideologies within a journalistic culture. However, they have also been critiqued as examples of journalistic media straying from their stated missions. For example, in their influential Propaganda Model of news media, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky argue that mainstream journalism tends to support the status quo in large part because, they argue, the selection of topics for news coverage ultimately privileges the perspectives of the most powerful while marginalizing the voices of less powerful sections of the population.

Crucially, Herman and Chomsky are not arguing that mainstream journalists do this intentionally or as part of a deliberate conspiracy to manipulate audiences. Instead, they argue that there are structural filters that impact what is selected as newsworthy, which in turn creates distortions that favor existing power brokers and marginalizes points of view regarded as being outside the mainstream. This is an example of critical theory, which seeks to interrogate power structures in media industries.

It is important to note that news values are relative. The aforementioned values identified by Harcup and O'Neill are most reflective of journalistic cultures in democratic Western societies in the Global North, since those are the cultures that scholars have most studied. News values in autocratic regimes are likely to be different, as there may be less emphasis on values like conflict or exclusivity. We still have much to learn about news values in other parts of the world.

Key Takeaways

- News values are the benchmarks of newsworthiness against which journalists measure potential stories.
- The more news values that a potential story is deemed to fulfill, the higher the likelihood that it will be seen as newsworthy and receive coverage by journalistic media. Conversely, stories are sometimes ignored precisely because they do not clearly adhere to these values.
- News values are, and serve as reflections of, ideologies within a journalistic culture.
- News values are relative. The values identified by Harcup and O'Neill are most representative of Western journalistic cultures in the Global North.

Chapter 18

Truth, Bias, and Neutrality

The concept of "truth" is central to journalism, and audiences expect journalists to provide truthful accounts and analyses of recent developments. And, yet, truth can be a very messy thing that is difficult to grasp.

According to the *realism perspective*, truth is a judgment that accurately describes, or corresponds with, the way the world actually is. That is, under this perspective, truth is a universal reality that is separate from subjective human perspectives. Most journalists in the United States subscribe to the realism perspective. They typically argue that "facts" exist, and that conveying these facts is an important aspect of doing journalism and of getting at the "truth."

However, "facts" can be tricky things themselves. For example, consider the unemployment rate in the United States right now. One might think that to be a pretty simple, measurable "fact." And, yet, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the primary body charged with measuring the unemployment rate in the United States, offers six different calculations of it. Its primary calculation refers to the percentage of the labor force that is without a job and *has actively looked for work within the past four weeks*. However, it also considers the percentage of the labor force that has *been unemployed for 15 weeks or longer* to be a valid measure, as well as a the percentage of the labor force that is unemployed *and is not actively looking for work because of discouragement* due to economic conditions.

In short, when audiences say they "just want the facts," the question becomes: Which facts?

Subscribing to this more critical view does not require a person to reject the idea of "facts," or to suggest that they are meaningless or entirely relative. But it does call attention to two things. First, *there are often multiple ways to measure complex facts*. (In contrast, it is typically easier to measure something simple like the number of students enrolled in a journalism course.) Second, *journalists have to work within the confines of time and space* – a story can only be so long – and this limitation naturally requires them to select some facts at the expense of others. Put another way, they rarely have the ability to list all the different permutations of the unemployment rate; they focus on the 'best' one.

Moreover, journalism involves more than just listing facts. It typically requires journalists to make sense of those facts, in order to help their audiences understand how certain information fits into a broader context and what the implications of those facts might be. Indeed, this is the very basis of framing theory and the sense-making function of journalism.

It is important to be cautious of arguments that "facts" do not exist, that "truth isn't truth," or that we should embrace "alternative facts," though. While the critical view described above promotes inquisition, simplistic rejections of factual knowledge are often made in bad faith, in order to make competing measures of truth (or interpretations of it) seem equal when they are not actually equally supported by the evidence. This is especially true when people in positions of power (or grifters looking to develop a following) urge people to dismiss unfavorable or inconvenient information. Instead, it is important that audiences (and journalists) think critically about how "facts" were arrived at, and to avoid reflexively accepting or rejecting them.

Bias

Journalists' inherent need to be selective often leads to allegations of journalistic bias, especially when audiences perceive news products to deviate from their worldviews and preconceptions. For example, in the United States, there is a widely held belief in public circles that journalistic media have a liberal bias. (To be clear, nonpartisan studies of media bias have historically found little evidence of this. While journalists in the U.S. generally hold more liberal values, the professional emphasis on neutrality, balance, and a systematic approach to newsgathering limits one-sided coverage.)

Journalistic bias can be defined as *prejudice toward certain ideas, issues, perspectives, or groups or individuals in the production and distribution of journalistic content*. Allegations of journalistic bias often fall into one or more of the following three categories. The first, *issue bias*, pertains to a proclivity toward certain kinds of issues, such as an overemphasis on crime or immigration. The second, *framing bias*, refers to the propensity to frame issues through particular prisms, such as the threat immigrants might pose (as opposed to the benefits they might offer), or to routinely use certain language, such as "illegal immigrants" instead of "undocumented immigrants." The third, *source bias*, refers to the differential treatment of a story depending on who the main actors are – as with offering more positive coverage to members of a certain political party. Source bias can also refer to a proclivity toward giving certain kinds of sources a larger (or any) voice within a news product, such as a journalist being more likely to quote government officials than activists or demonstrators.

Connecting all three of those categories is *visibility bias*, which involves the amount of attention or prominence given to certain kinds of issues, frames, or sources. For example, although a journalist may quote an equal number of sources from two opposing parties, they may routinely offer longer quotes in more prominent parts of a news story (e.g., near the top, which more people are likely to read) to one of the two parties. Similarly, visibility bias may become apparent when prime-time shows on cable news networks focus on stories about immigrant misdeeds, with more positive coverage of immigrants relegated to less-watched daytime shows.

Neutrality and Balance

In order to combat allegations of bias, journalists often claim to be neutral and to offer *"a view from nowhere"* – that is, to offer a perspective without a position or that takes no side. A common way to enact that claim is to try to occupy a middle ground by simply capturing and broadcasting opposing viewpoints, and trying to give equal weight to competing sides of an issue. Crucially, such attempts take care to not convey the journalist's own opinion on a matter.

This proclivity toward neutrality and balance is, itself, a form of bias, and it is especially prevalent among journalists in places like the United States. This is not to say that such an approach to doing journalism is bad but rather that it represents a predisposition toward a particular way of presenting news.

There are downsides to that approach, though. In trying to be neutral and balanced, a journalist may promote *false balance* by assigning equal blame or acclaim when one side is more culpable or deserving of it. For example, by taking the position that "all politicians lie" or that "both sides share blame" in order to appear neutral, a journalist may obfuscate the fact that some politicians make more verifiably false claims than others, or that one side is more responsible for an outcome (e.g., by being less willing to negotiate a compromise). Put another way, journalists distort reality when promoting a false balance and they thus do a disservice to truth – and to news audiences.

Bad-faith institutional actors, including some political candidates and public officials, have taken advantage of this "view from nowhere" approach through concerted efforts to "work the refs," especially in recent decades. If journalists are seen to be arbiters of truth – much as referees are the arbiters of rules within a game – then subjects of news coverage (e.g., a politician) can allege news media to be biased against them in order to intimidate journalists from scrutinizing their claims. (After all, critical evaluations by journalists can be pointed to as 'further evidence' of the alleged bias.) This is important because false or inaccurate claims carried by trusted journalistic outlets are granted legitimacy – that is, they may be seen as true (or be evaluated less skeptically) by audiences who presume journalists to have filtered out untruthful information.

Accuracy and Truth-Seeking

One element found in most definitions of "truth" is *accuracy*, or a focus on precision and the avoidance of errors. Accuracy is indeed central to journalism, and many aspiring journalists have failed a college assignment because they submitted a news story with a factual error in it.

However, accuracy is not, on its own, enough for satisfying truth. For example, it may be accurate to report that one person said that 75% of peer-reviewed studies about climate change say it is not a real phenomenon. After all, they may have said such a thing. However, it is not *true* that such a proportion of peer-reviewed studies say that. Similarly, it may be accurate to point a camera at a small crowd of people and zoom in so as to have them fill the frame, or to zoom out so as to make it look sparse. After all, neither picture was doctored or manipulated after the fact in any way. However, the resulting image's *connotation* that there was a large or small crowd may be an 'untrue' depiction of the event. Finally, it would be equally accurate to show a mug shot of a dejected person in a crime story or their happy, upstanding family photo. However, it can be difficult to ascertain which photo best represents the truth about what that individual is like.

In short, *accuracy must be supplemented by commitment to truth*. We can call that commitment "truth-seeking." This approach views truth as more of a process wherein the journalist aims to *approximate* truth as best as they can. Truth-seeking typically involves an objective approach to journalism, where journalists seek to systematically observe and record developments; interview sources with intimate knowledge about that development (like eye-witnesses); verify claims by seeking out generally accepted facts and official documents; and ultimately produce a story with the most truthful (plausible) representation of that development.

The process of truth-seeking recognizes that journalists are inherently biased. Put another way, it accepts the proposition that it is impossible for journalists to be unbiased because of their backgrounds and the structural constraints they work within. However, it recognizes that by systematically adopting what are regarded as best practices in journalism, journalists can *mitigate* some of those biases and not fall into traps like false balance, all the while striving toward the ambitious goal of reproducing truth.

It is important to note, however, that in some countries, journalistic outlets are openly biased and explicitly reject the values of neutrality and balance. For example, in countries like Pakistan and Indonesia, journalists typically believe that openly advocating for social change and staking clear positions regarding which side in a dispute has the superior argument – and sometimes substantiating those positions primarily through intuition or their agreement with ethical or religious principles – is a better way of serving truth. Put another way, different journalistic cultures approach truth-seeking in different ways.

Key Takeaways

» Facts are not 'natural' things that just 'exist.' Journalistic actors (and audiences) should therefore critically evaluate facts and approach them with a healthy dose of skepticism.

» There are multiple forms of journalistic bias, such as issue bias, framing bias, and source bias.

» In the United States, journalists typically strive to appear neutral and to offer balanced accounts. However, bad-faith actors have taken advantage of this approach in various ways. This has forced journalists to reconsider whether that approach still serves citizens well.

» Accuracy is, by itself, insufficient for getting at the truth. However, it is an essential component of truth.

» Journalists will typically strive for truth-seeking by systematically adopting best practices in journalism, such as interviewing multiple people, verifying their accounts, and offering the best approximation of truth.

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Chapter 19

Audience Fragmentation

The term audience fragmentation describes *a process whereby a mass audience (or few audiences) is broken up into many small audiences by virtue of divergent media consumption habits*. With the proliferation of online journalism and digital devices, audiences have become empowered to access more content from more publishers and on the audiences' terms. Consequently, individual news consumers have developed more specific tastes and consumption patterns.

Consider asking your friends where they get their political news from. There's a good chance they'll each list a different set of sources. (There will likely be some overlap, since people generally befriend individuals who share their interests, but it is unlikely to be a uniform set of outlets.) Then, consider asking your parents and their friends where they get their political news from. There's a good chance they will not only list an even more distinct set of sources but also a different set of media vehicles (e.g., television vs. online) and on a different schedule (e.g., live at a certain time vs. on-demand). If you were to swing by a retirement community a few towns away, you'll likely find an even more distinct media diet from your own.

In short, today's news audiences have fragmented from a few mass audiences to many small audiences. And while that fragmentation may immediately sound like a net positive – after all, more choices should be a good thing, right? – it has introduced important challenges not only to the journalism industry but to democratic institutions.

Civic Implications of Fragmentation

The explosion of media options is still a relatively new phenomenon. For example, back in the 1960s, the majority of Americans regularly turned to one of just three evening TV newscasts (from ABC, CBS, and NBC). Broadcast news was so pervasive that 96% of the American population watched TV news coverage of President John F. Kennedy's assassination.

That level of concentration and small number of options is hard to fathom today given the present array of broadcast news options (and even wider spectrum of media vehicles and journalistic outlets). Today's audiences can seek news from text-based, broadcast, radio, and digital outlets. They can watch the news through live video, social video, 360 video, and even virtual and augmented reality. They can turn to mainstream or independent outlets and partisan or non-partisan outlets. They can choose between international, national, local, and even hyper-local coverage of a topic. They can often consume those news products live or on-demand. The list goes on and on.

However, having access to so many options has a major downside. The *paradox of choice* can make it tough for news consumers to leave their comfort zones or even avoid news altogether. For example, how often do you sign on to Netflix to watch something, only to realize that you've spent 10 minutes browsing and are no longer in the mood to watch anything at all? A similar process of fatigue occurs in what can sometimes feel like an over-saturated news ecosystem.

Having so many options also allows people to more easily turn to slanted news sources that support their existing points of view. This phenomenon is called *selective exposure* and involves people *actively choosing* to pursue a fraction of the available information or information sources, typically along some lines of preference (e.g., political preferences). This can trap news consumers in echo chambers that limit their exposure to new and divergent perspectives. That, in turn, can also lead to increased polarization within societies, particularly when it comes to political affairs. Such polarization can make it difficult for citizens to engage with one another because not only do they approach opposing viewpoints with greater antipathy but they also tend to draw on very different bodies of information about the world. This makes dialogue, debate, and compromise – the cornerstones of democratic society – difficult.

Professional Implications of Fragmentation

Audience fragmentation also poses economic and professional challenges for journalists and the organizations that employ them. It provides incentives for journalistic actors to specialize. Generalist outlets that provide overviews of many different topics are less desirable to audiences that know what they want and want in-depth or exclusive information about that topic. By specializing in niche areas, journalistic outlets can capture smaller but loyal audiences. While generalist outlets will still continue to exist, there are likely to be fewer of them in the future than in the past.

The fragmentation of audiences and increased availability of options also place even more pressures on journalistic outlets to stand out within an *attention economy*. Outlets must compete furiously with one another because there is a greater supply of news content than there is attention to take it in. This competition is magnified exponentially when you also factor in non-news media competitors, such as beauty vlogs, video game streams, and history podcasts. (Consider that in 2019, 500 *hours* of video were being uploaded to YouTube alone every *minute*.) Consequently, journalistic outlets are not only competing against one another to produce good journalism, they are also competing with one another (and other media organizations) to have their content capture the attention of a sufficiently large number of increasingly fragmented audiences.

It is unlikely that the processes underlying the fragmentation of audiences in recent decades will be reversed in the coming years. In fact, the opposite is more likely: Audiences will probably become even more fragmented as new technologies give audiences more agency and as technological actants further personalize audiences' news experiences. This will require journalistic outlets and society at large to continue to adapt to the existence of niche audiences that frequently draw upon divergent bodies of knowledge about current affairs and the broader world.

Key Takeaways

- The term audience fragmentation refers to a process whereby a mass audience (or few audiences) is broken up into many small audiences by virtue of divergent media consumption habits.
- The paradox of choice can make it tough for news consumers to leave their comfort zones. More choices also make it easier for people to turn to news that supports their existing points of view through selective exposure.
- Audience fragmentation has required journalistic outlets to adapt to an attention economy, which involves increased competition from many media options and promotes professional specialization.

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Unit V

Journalism Economics

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Chapter 20

Commodification of News

The phrase "commodification of news" refers to *the process through which news is translated into a commodity*, or a good or service designed to earn its producer a profit when it is sold in a market.

News has been treated as a commodity in much of the world in recent decades. However, it is different from most other commodities. Since the invention of the telegraph, news has been a weightless product that can be transported over vast distances nearly instantaneously. It also has limited exclusivity and a short individual lifespan, as news quickly loses value as it ages and can be quickly repackaged by competitors. Additionally, one person's consumption of news does not diminish its supply to the next person (unlike a pint of ice cream from Trader Joe's). As such, the economics of news is unique in many ways, especially in a digital environment.

Commodities are responsible only to the marketplace. They are indifferent to the quality of democracy or the values of a society so long as buying, selling, and private profit-making are permitted. Put another way, the more news is treated as a market commodity, the less certain it is to supply the kind of information a democratic society requires.

Audiences and Advertising

Within the context of commodities, commercial journalistic organizations typically operate in a *dual-product market*. They produce and market one product (*news*) so they can produce another product (*audience attention*) that can then be sold to advertisers, who covet audiences for their products.

This relationship is particularly important because the majority of revenue for most commercial journalistic organizations today comes from advertising, and not *directly* from audiences via things like subscriptions. Indeed, since the invention of mass advertising, news has generally been subsidized (e.g., newspapers) or outright paid for (e.g., broadcast TV newscasts) by someone other than the audience. This has allowed news content to be more affordable for – and thus accessed by – mass audiences, who receive the content for *far* less than it costs to produce it.

This dual-product market is further characterized by *mutual interdependence*: Journalistic organizations need advertising revenue to subsidize their journalistic activities, but the amount of advertising revenue is often related to the amount of audience attention that the organization can deliver. Put another way, in order to increase the revenue necessary to produce quality journalism, journalistic outlets must deliver larger numbers of readers, viewers, or listeners – even as, one would hope, quality journalism is what helps to bring in larger audiences.

The Newsroom 'Wall'

To combat the potentially negative influences of this interdependence on journalists' ability to serve as truth-seekers, professional journalistic organizations tended to implement throughout the 20th and 21st century *a metaphorical 'wall'* separating the business side of the organization from its newsroom operations. On one side of the wall, journalists and editors developed content for citizens, with limited regard for the business implications of their reporting. On the other side, managers and sales staff worked with advertisers to sell the audience attention.

The purpose of the 'wall' was to grant journalists greater autonomy, or independence from business concerns, which would allow the organization to produce *journalism*. The 'wall' itself was often implemented through different social rules (and even physical obstacles) that reduced interactions between members of each side. This might include placing business personnel on one floor of a building and newsroom personnel on another, and having them report to different sets of supervisors. This was possible in large part because journalism was already a *very* profitable enterprise for much of the past century. (Although it may seem comical now, major newspapers were regarded as cash cows three decades ago.)

Such a separation was reasonably effective for much of the past century. However, it was not always impervious. For example, the *news hole* (the amount of space available for news in a product like a newspaper) was often dependent on the amount of advertisements that were sold for that edition. If there were more advertisements, there would be more newspaper pages, and thus more space for news content. Additionally, workers on the business side would sometimes pressure editors, with varying success, to push for content that was advertising-friendly. This did not necessarily mean producing stories that were favorable to specific advertisers, like a happy story about

Trader Joe's. Instead, it meant ensuring the news product had *some* happy stories in it. That's because Trader Joe's would be happier if its advertisement appeared next to a story that already left the audience member in a positive emotional state, which in turn would make them more likely to transfer that feeling of happiness to the product being sold by Trader Joe's.

The industry's economic challenges have resulted in that line becoming even more blurred in recent years, though. For example, one source of revenue newsrooms now tap into is called *native advertising*. This involves a newsroom having a team of 'content creators' (sometimes comprised of former journalists) who work directly with potential advertisers to create semi-advertisements that look and feel like a typical journalistic story. Such stories are often distinguished by being labeled as 'sponsored content' or with some other aesthetic signifier to show that they are not journalistic stories produced by the journalists at that organization. However, readers and viewers do not often make that distinction – indeed, the very appeal to advertisers is that those distinctions will not be made and that audiences will mistake native ads for editorial content. Although profitable, the downside to such efforts is that they may erode audiences' trust in a journalistic organization.

Market Failure

The tension between treating news as a market commodity and practicing journalism as a public service has been a central dilemma in journalism for over a century. Notably, advertising was first welcomed rather than criticized because it promised to end, or at least ease, the dependency of journalism on the political parties that used to finance newspapers. In the Utopian vision of ad-supported journalism, advertising would enable market forces to empower audiences, resulting in the production of news information that was even more useful to them. Conversely, others worried that market sensitivities would seed market-driven journalism characterized not by "all the news that's fit to print" but rather "all the news that's fit to sell."

Scholars have argued that quality journalism provides multiple fundamental benefits to a democratic society that the market fails to adequately compensate. For example, all members of a society benefit when voters are well-informed and thus able to choose wise leaders and reward good governance. Similarly, all members of a society benefit from the deterrence of corruption and abuse that results from an actively monitorial journalistic environment, as bad-faith actors weigh the costs of getting caught against the benefit of doing a bad thing. Yet, in a market-oriented system, not everyone pays for news. In fact, only a very small proportion of people do. This creates a *free rider problem*, where people can experience many of the benefits of a product without having to pay for it. Consequently, what is civically valuable but goes unrewarded in the marketplace – such as expensive public-service journalistic investigations – ends up being under-produced, since there's no economic incentive for it.

Scholars have also found that the more responsive a newsroom is to market forces, the less it tends to serve the public interest through civic-minded efforts like 'watchdog' journalism. Again, this makes sense on multiple levels under *rational-choice theories* of economics. Rational managers and owners who seek to maximize their (or their investors') economic return should produce the least expensive content that can generate the largest audience of subscribers and/or consumers that are attractive to advertisers. Rational advertisers should seek the largest audience of potential customers at the lowest cost while favoring outlets that produce softer, simpler stories that leave potential consumers in a positive emotional state. And, audiences are not themselves paragons of rational self-interest. They do not always financially reward the content that benefits them the most in the long run.

The confluence of these factors results in what economists call *market failure*, where there is inefficient production and distribution of goods and services within a free market resulting from the fact that the individual incentives for rational behavior do not lead to the best outcomes for a group (or society). This has become especially apparent as the economic underpinnings for commercial journalism in many parts of the world, including the United States, have been significantly challenged by sociotechnical disruptions.

For example, the newspaper advertising market enjoyed robust growth from 1950 to 2000, and then declined to the 1950 levels in the next 12 years alone. Consequently, newsroom employment in the United States declined by 51% between 2008 and 2019. Additionally, hundreds of small community newspapers in the United States have been forced to close, creating a situation where in 2019, almost half of U.S. counties had a single local newspaper (that was often only published weekly). The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 only increased those economic pressures: A third of U.S. newspapers experienced layoffs that year, with large-circulation newspapers being most affected.

This has required commercial newsrooms to significantly rethink how to serve their civic objectives while remaining economically viable – efforts that have, at least recently, guided them toward further diversifying their revenue models in order to make up for drastic losses in advertising. Even among local and national television journalism outlets, which have been less affected by those trends, there are more intense economic (and political) pressures to move away from expensive public-service journalism. There have been many calls to address the market failures within journalism, but the challenge has persisted.

Key Takeaways

- News is a unique commodity in that it often has a short lifespan, it is easily copied, and its supply does not diminish as it is consumed.
- Commercial journalistic organizations often serve two markets at the same time: audiences and advertisers. Advertisers subsidize the content that audiences need and audiences give advertisers the attention they seek.
- Historically, professional, commercial journalistic organizations separated journalists from business-people by creating a metaphorical 'wall' in the newsroom that promoted newsroom independence and autonomy.
- In many countries, including the United States, commercial journalism operates within a context of market failure in terms of serving of the public good. A number of happy coincidences allowed that system to work reasonably well for many decades. However, those coincidences no longer hold true.

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Chapter 21

Audience Measurement and Bundling

The term "audience measurement" refers to *the goal-oriented process of collecting, analyzing, reporting, and interpreting data about the size, composition, behavior, characteristics, and preferences of individuals interacting with particular media brands or products*.

Historically, journalists and journalistic organizations had only very crude measures of what news audiences were interested in – and how (and to what extent) they were engaging with that content. For example, journalists would often turn to their friends and family, or perhaps to letters to the editor, for cues about what people were interested in and how their work was resonating with audiences. Journalistic organizations, in turn, would hire consultants to conduct focus groups, survey their readers, or ask broadcast audiences to keep a diary of the programs they watched.

Those methods came with significant limitations. First, they only provided partial data because they drew on small samples of people, who were often sampled in ways that made it hard to generalize findings to an entire audience. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the information was self-reported. This meant that people might say they wanted more information about international affairs because they thought that's what they *should* say – after all, most of us want to seem cultured, even to strangers – when in fact the news they craved was information about Ryan Gosling's latest film.

Audience Analytics and Metrics

The digitization of news has significantly changed how audience interests and consumption are measured. Specifically, digital systems enable *passive, mass tracking*. This means that when a person accesses a story, the infrastructure helping to serve that content – that is, the computer systems belonging to the journalistic organization and, often, other companies as well – will automatically record the fact that the content was accessed. These systems also often record additional information, including when that person accessed the content, where (roughly) they accessed it from, on what device, and how much time they spent with that content.

Those systems and information aggregation efforts are often called *audience analytics*, which is effectively a form of audience measurement that was not possible before the internet age. While it comes with its own limitations – for example, this system alone cannot give journalists a clear picture of how people *feel* about the content they access – it differs from past approaches in that it can gather information about *all* members of the audience, and that information is not limited to what audiences *want* to report. It is a more complete record, quantitatively speaking.

These systems can be used to automatically personalize content by linking it to past records of a news consumer's behavior. For example, if the journalistic organization's tracking systems know a specific audience member frequently accesses content about Ryan Gosling, it may choose to put that content in more prominent positions on its website (or suggest it as the next article for this user to read) because the system infers from past data that this individual wants to stay on top of news about Ryan Gosling.

Additionally, those systems produce what are often called *audience metrics*, or aggregate measures about the audience. These include the number of unique people who were exposed to a particular piece of content, where those individuals came from (not just geographically but also the website or platform that led them to that content), and how much time the average person spent with that content, or perhaps even how far the average person scrolled down the page. Thus, a journalist or journalistic organization can have a more quantified sense of how many people read their story and how they interacted with it, instead of just assuming a lot of people did because their group of friends, who likely share the same interests, found it interesting.

Journalists and newsrooms historically marginalized audience measurement data because they often viewed it as an intrusion on their journalistic autonomy and independence. Put another way, drawing on their role orientations and occupational ideology, they would often believe they had to give audiences certain kinds of news – regardless of how popular it might turn out to be – because it was a civic necessity to do so.

While there was always some tension over this, the high profitability of journalism made it easier for journalists to resist perceived intrusions in the past. The combination of these new technologies and the economic challenges faced by commercial media in recent years have resulted in even greater pressure to use audience analytics and metrics to *more efficiently* cater to audience desires – and made it riskier for journalists to resist such pressures.

Such systems and information do not exist to solely further economic objectives, though. Audience analytics and metrics *can* and arguably *should* be used to find ways to better understand what audiences want *in order to make civically important content more appealing to them* – whether in terms of its substance or simply how and where it is presented, as well as to encourage greater audience engagement and loyalty. Additionally, researchers have found little evidence that highly professionalized newsrooms like *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* are blindly making news decisions based on audience metrics alone. Nevertheless, it has become apparent that these technologies and cultural artifacts have changed how journalists think about their work and the ways in which they perform it.

Bundling and Journalism

For much of its history, commercial news media has been a *bundled product*. What this means is that a person rarely bought a single piece of news, or even *just* news. Instead, they bought a single product that included local news, national news, sports news, and arts news – as well as comics, classifieds, and advertisements. This allowed journalism to be produced in an efficient way insofar as it allowed journalistic outlets to make money from two mutually dependent sources – audiences and advertisers – with a single media vehicle (e.g., a newspaper). Classifieds are emblematic of this: A local business would pay the journalistic outlet a fee to list a job opening in the newspaper while local citizens would pay the outlet for the cost of the newspaper to find a new job openings. A similar arrangement existed for engagement announcements and obituaries, which were also bundled in.

Content that was cheaper to produce (e.g., post-game reports from local high school football games) also helped subsidize more expensive content (e.g., an investigative series on local corruption). Put another way, citizens often bought the newspaper because they cared about their local sports teams and would perhaps stick around for, and benefit from, the investigative series. The journalistic organization, for its part, tended to see the investigative series as more central to its mission and as a potential status marker – such stories are usually the ones that receive major journalism awards – and viewed its cheaper and more popular content as a way to pay for it.

This dynamic has changed considerably in recent years. Audiences are now less likely to go directly to a journalistic outlet's homepage or app, and they are far less likely to seek out a single source to satisfy all of their information needs. Put differently, an individual may go to *The Boston Globe* for coverage of regional politics and policy, to BuzzFeed for entertainment news, to a local sports enthusiast's blog for analysis of high school football, and to the British Broadcasting Corporation, or BBC, for coverage of international affairs. As such, news has become *unbundled* in many ways as journalistic outlets place all of their news online for free or under a 'soft' paywall knowing that individuals will only access *some* of the content. That, in turn, results in advertising revenue only being generated for those things that *are* accessed, putting pressure on commercial outlets to focus on narrower sets of content that can pay for itself.

Moreover, journalistic outlets have lost their monopolies on some of those key dual-channel revenue sources. For example, people now go to websites like Craigslist and Indeed for classifieds, and to Facebook to discover who is getting engaged (and perhaps who has died). There is also a plethora of free and paid entertainment alternatives that far exceed what journalistic outlets have ever been able to offer.

Because of this evolution in the news industry, the structural advantages and subsidies that enabled commercial journalism to operate as it did in the past no longer exist in such advantageous ways.

Key Takeaways

» Journalistic outlets have always tried to measure different aspects of their audiences and their audiences' wants, but audience analytics and metrics have enabled more quantifiable measurements of individual audience members and of audiences as a whole.

» There is now great economic pressure on journalistic outlets to make use of audience metrics in guiding editorial decisions. However, professionalized newsrooms still draw heavily upon their conceptions of newsworthiness when making those decisions.

» Journalistic products are no longer bundled in the ways they were before. This has both reduced their ability to subsidize expensive, civic-minded news through cheaper, more popular content and reduced the opportunities to generate revenue from non-news content.

Chapter 22

Third-Party Platforms

Today's journalism environment is deeply influenced by *third-party platforms*, or *technical systems that mediate exchanges between content producers and consumers*. Those platforms have significantly altered how news is monetized, distributed, and engaged with, and have consequently disrupted key financial support mechanisms for journalism in market-oriented media systems around the world.

Many journalistic organizations have experienced what may appear to be a paradox at first sight: They now have access to a far larger *potential* audience than ever before through their digital distribution channels – and, in fact, often have more readers, viewers, and listeners than ever before – yet they have seen a drastic reduction in advertising revenue.

The reason for this is two-fold. The first reason is that the cost for placing an advertisement on an organization's digital offerings is exponentially lower than the cost for placing an advertisement on that same organization's analogue offerings. Put another way, it is a lot cheaper to place an ad on the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*'s website than it is to place that same ad on its newspaper. This is due in part to the fact that online audiences have historically been seen as less valuable by producers and advertisers alike. However, it is also due to the increased supply of content online. If an advertiser wants to reach a particular kind of audience offline, they have a far more limited set of media vehicles – such as the lone newspaper for an entire county and the few broadcast channels that cover that area. Conversely, there is a seemingly limitless supply of media vehicles online, such as the billions of websites that exist.

The second reason is that much of today's advertising is managed through third-party platforms that not only govern pricing but also take a hefty cut. For example, if UMass wanted to promote its excellent Journalism Department to an international audience, it might work directly with *The Japan Times* to publish an advertisement in its newspaper. However, if UMass wanted to advertise on *The Japan Times*' website, it may need to work with an intermediary like Google's AdSense, which might handle all of the online advertising for *The Japan Times* (as well as for millions of other websites).

This is the case for many journalistic organizations today, and it comes with many implications. The most important of these is that there is downward pressure to keep ad rates low online. Specifically, UMass may reason that its goal is to reach people outside the U.S. who are interested in journalism – and it may not care if those people are found on *The Japan Times*'s website or elsewhere on the web. Thus, they will use an ad-tech intermediary (like Google's AdSense) to target their ad to a certain demographic and set a maximum price. Google's AdSense may then allow *any* website visited by *any* user matching that demographic – based on a profile that the ad-tech company has created from different data points – to show UMass' ad so long as a website accepts UMass' pricing limits. (Ad-tech systems do allow for black-listing, too. This means that some websites are not eligible to show an ad if they contain certain keywords. While this is usually restricted to offensive language, it can be extended to sensitive topics, like human rights abuses. That, in turn, may discourage the production of news stories about those topics.)

All of those decisions are made by automated systems in microseconds through what is called *programmatic advertising*, and it often results in lower ad prices because a rational advertiser will seek to advertise on the websites that require the least amount of money while delivering the desired audience. This pushes websites to accept lower rates in order to ensure they have advertisements to serve. On top of this, those intermediaries charge the websites a service fee for each ad shown. Thus, not only are journalistic outlets receiving less money for each ad but they also receive just a portion of that amount.

It is therefore unsurprising that while digital ad spending has grown immensely, much of those gains have been highly concentrated among a few companies. Specifically, Google and Facebook alone are estimated to receive more than half of *global* digital ad spending, with China-based Alibaba coming in a distant third.

In short, many of the gains in digital advertising are not being realized by journalistic outlets; the uptick in online ad revenue has not come close to replacing the losses in offline ad revenue for many journalistic outlets; and many journalistic outlets still rely on their offline products for the majority of their advertising revenue, even as they have much larger audiences online. This helps us understand why some traditional media companies still orient themselves, at least in part, around media vehicles that are widely seen as being phased out along generational lines (e.g., a newspaper): Such outlets generally have more control over, and can extract more value from, their legacy products.

Distributional Intermediaries

Third-party platforms are not limited to advertising, though. In the United States, much of Europe, and elsewhere in the world, a small group of Silicon Valley-based companies – namely Google, Facebook, Apple, and Twitter – largely control the social media, web search, and mobile application platforms that audiences use to find and access news.

Because of their positions as intermediaries, *those companies generally realize many of the economic benefits from news production while not suffering its costs*. For example, a platform like Facebook benefits from user-generated content like its users' posts (including any news they may break); from the fact that many people rely on Facebook to be their primary news source, via the links that are shared by their friends; and from the many journalistic outlets that use Facebook themselves in order to promote their content (often by offering portions of it for free on the platform). All of this participation comes at relatively negligible cost to Facebook, because it does not pay any of these people for the very content that makes its platform worthwhile.

At the same time, platform owners seek to avoid expensive legal and gatekeeping responsibilities by claiming to be distinct from media organizations. Put another way, they often claim to only offer neutral, technical infrastructures in order to avoid the public interest obligations that governments have historically placed on broadcasters and that society expects from traditional journalistic outlets. After all, such platforms tend to claim, they do not produce journalistic content of their own, and their platforms are governed by supposedly impartial algorithms, rather than humans, to determine what to show audiences and how to show it. Therefore, the argument is that such neutrality should shield platforms from journalistic responsibilities, or from legal risks like accusations of libel. (This is, of course, a weak argument. Their algorithms reflect the values and/or economic interests of platform owners, and the algorithms exercise a form of judgment when they promote content that is expected to elicit further engagement on the platform.)

Third-party platforms also create loyalty challenges for journalistic outlets. In the past, audiences tended to go directly to trusted outlets to find information. Put another way, they *actively* sought it out. Today, audiences increasingly go to news aggregators like Apple News, or they *wait for news to find them* on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. As users are shown an array of news from a lot of different news brands, they begin to disassociate the content from the brand itself. Put differently, researchers have found that, after reading a news story, less than half of people would remember the journalistic organization that published the story if the individual found the story on social media. (However, most people could remember which social media platform they used to find it.) In contrast, 80% of people who found that same story on a journalistic organization's website were able to remember who published it. In short, social media platforms end up receiving more of the credit for the content published by journalistic outlets than the journalistic outlets themselves. That, in turn, reduces the worth of the organization's brand and the incentive to produce high-quality content in order to help the brand stand out in a crowded marketplace.

The massive size of these third-party platforms – Facebook alone counts billions of users worldwide – and their structural positions as intermediaries make it difficult for journalistic outlets to ignore them. Moreover, they are difficult to displace. Such platforms are subject to *network effects* in which a product or service becomes more useful as more people use it, creating conditions for monopolies or outsize power. Consequently, many journalistic outlets believe they must not only have a presence on those platforms but that they must engage with audiences there, too, even as such participation further tethers them to these platforms. Put another way, journalistic outlets are forced to weigh the short-term benefits of tapping into new audiences and remaining relevant on popular platforms against long-term concerns about ceding further control over their content and processes. While more journalistic outlets have begun to distance themselves from *some* third-party platforms in recent years, such efforts often come at great risk.

Key Takeaways

» Third-party platforms refer to technical systems that mediate exchanges between content producers and consumers. This includes social media platforms like Facebook, search platforms like Google search, and ad-tech platforms like Google AdSense.

» Although digital advertising has grown immensely over the past decade, it has not come close to replacing the revenue lost from non-digital advertising for most journalistic outlets. This is due in part to different pricing regimes and the ad-tech intermediary platforms that pervade online spaces.

» Distributional intermediaries like Facebook and Apple News have benefited greatly from the economic benefits of news production yet bear little of its costs. They have also sought to reduce their media-related responsibilities by claiming to be neutral platforms rather than media companies.

» Although these platforms have introduced many challenges to a range of journalistic outlets – especially traditional organizations – those outlets have often found the cost of non-participation on platforms to exceed those of participation.

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Chapter 23

Non-Profit Journalism

Non-profit journalistic outlets *are not driven by commercial concerns but are instead dedicated to furthering a public-service mission, filling gaps resulting from market failures, or advancing a particular social cause*.

Non-profit outlets have long been a part of many media systems. For example, in the U.S., *The Associated Press* was founded as a non-profit cooperative in 1846 in order to lower newsgathering costs among its commercial and non-commercial members. Over time, it has helped ensure that audiences in different parts of the country have access to high-quality information from around the U.S. and abroad. Globally, journalism outlets like *The Guardian* in the United Kingdom and *Malaysiakini* in Malaysia operate in the spirit of promoting high-quality journalism and providing alternative voices, especially in tightly controlled media environments where commercial and state-sponsored media are afraid of challenging those in power.

Non-profit media have seen considerable growth over the past two decades as the economics of commercial journalism have been disrupted. Put another way, for much of the 20th and 21st centuries, a happy coincidence enabled the market, via advertising and subscription revenue, to support the existence of a robust, ad-supported journalistic sector. There is, however, no reason why that model *has* to work to adequately support journalism's public-service responsibilities. Indeed, the drastic drop of advertising revenues and the reluctance audiences have shown for paying for online content in high-choice environments has illustrated how vulnerable that model is.

Objectives, Norms, and Funding

Many of the non-profits established over the past two decades have been founded by journalists who used to work for commercial outlets and became concerned about the ability of commercial media to provide public-service journalism. This is especially the case in democratic societies that lack a strong, state-supported, public-service broadcasting system. Non-profit journalistic outlets often seek to produce the types of content that their founders are concerned is in short supply elsewhere – often because such content is perceived to go unrewarded by market forces. This includes expensive genres like investigative journalism and international journalism, as well as topics that are deemed to be intractable or less-captivating to mass audiences, such as homelessness and mass incarceration.

Many non-profit journalistic outlets share some of the dominant role orientations, norms, and news values associated with journalism in a particular context. For example, conceptions of newsworthiness at non-profits are not wholly different from those at their commercial counterparts. Instead, they are tweaked and, most importantly, less encumbered by economic concerns. Moreover, for these outlets' content to be considered journalism by audiences, it must still resemble to some extent the forms and formats recognized as journalism within that context – which the dominant, typically commercial or state-supported, outlets play a large role in shaping.

Non-profit outlets often raise funds from an array of sources. The two primary sources tend to be *audience-derived contributions* and *philanthropic grants*. Audience-derived contributions may include the subscription fees often found in commercial media, but it typically also includes voluntary donations and crowdfunding campaigns. Philanthropic grants often come from other non-profit organizations and foundations that are devoted to promoting the civic good. For example, the Knight Foundation is a major philanthropic organization in the United States, and it will sometimes provide upwards of $100 million in grants each year to help advance journalism in the U.S. For most other foundations, journalism constitutes a portion of their giving, which is often related to a focus on democracy, community, or education. Researchers have estimated that between 2009 and 2017, foundations provided more than $9 billion worldwide in order to advance journalism – though a significant portion of that was in the United States.

However, those two sources alone are rarely sufficient for non-profit journalistic organizations. Many also draw upon advertising and sponsorships as supplemental revenue sources, though their dependence on advertising is generally lower than that of their commercial counterparts. They also engage in a range of additional revenue-generating activities, like hosting conferences, social events, workshops, and webinars – though these activities usually only account for a small proportion of overall revenue. Additionally, non-profit journalistic outlets benefit from favorable tax status in some countries (including the United States), meaning that contributions to them are tax-deductible and they themselves have to pay fewer taxes.

Impact and Sustainability

The dependence on philanthropic funding does not come without entanglements. Such funders typically receive more requests for funding than they can fund, and they thus tend to require organizations to justify the merit of their requests by demonstrating their *impact* and *sustainability*.

Impact is immensely difficult to measure and demonstrate. Funders will often develop different ways of understanding impact, which may include measures of the reach of a project (i.e., how many readers, viewers, or listeners it attracted), the impact(s) it had on policy and governance (e.g., if it resulted in the passing of new legislation or ousting of a corrupt figure), and the coverage it helped generate from other news organizations (e.g., local investigations resulting from a national dataset compiled by the non-profit). However, such developments can be difficult to track and to tie directly to the non-profit's work, and they may not become apparent for a long time. Moreover, the measures of impact imposed by a funder can significantly shape the journalism produced by a non-profit journalistic outlet – in both positive and negative ways.

Many (though not all) funders also ask non-profit organizations to demonstrate a path toward self-sustainability. A substantial amount of the funding comes as so-called 'seed grants' that are intended to help an organization get off the ground, with the expectation that the organization will find sufficient revenue sources over time to no longer require assistance from that particular funder. Indeed, many non-profit journalistic outlets tend to face an inflection point around their fourth or fifth year of operation, and many that fail to establish themselves financially by then are forced to close. Philanthropic funding can thus be an unstable and temporary source of revenue.

Impact and sustainability often become linked in practice within the context of non-profit journalism. One way to demonstrate impact is to point to a growing, loyal audience, which can then be monetized through donations and subscriptions. Additionally, in order to reach a larger audience and increase the impact of a story, non-profit journalistic organizations will often partner with larger, commercial journalistic outlets to distribute the work. For example, the non-profit ProPublica launched its first investigation in 2008 in partnership with the popular CBS television program 60 Minutes, and it has since worked with *The New York Times*, BuzzFeed, and NPR to increase its reach. In some instances, the works are collaborations – both the non-profit outlet and the commercial outlet devote some resources to producing a story – but oftentimes, the non-profit provides the content for free simply to reach more people. This is because some non-profits tend to publish infrequently, and their own websites and distribution channels tend to have smaller audiences. Thus, even when funders are directly supporting a non-profit like ProPublica, they are also offering indirect subsidies to the commercial organizations that use the non-profit's work.

Finally, it should be noted that although we have focused on funding for *organizations*, there is also a robust sector of philanthropic funding for *freelance journalists* (journalists who work independently and are not attached to any one organization). Such journalists may then work with an established journalistic outlet, such as PBS, or even a non-traditional partner (e.g., Netflix) to ensure wider distribution of their work.

Key Takeaways

- Non-profit journalistic outlets are not driven by commercial concerns but are instead dedicated to furthering a public-service mission, filling gaps resulting from market failures, or advancing a particular social cause.
- Non-profit journalistic outlets typically get the majority of their funding from subscribers or donors and from philanthropic foundations that support issues and perspectives they believe are not adequately covered by other media.
- Non-profit journalistic outlets must often demonstrate their impact and pathway to sustainability in order to receive financial support from philanthropic foundations. They will also sometimes work in partnership with commercial outlets to increase their reach.

Chapter 24

State-Supported Journalism

State-supported journalism refers to *journalism that is directly supported by state governments*. This includes both public funding for independent, self-governed journalistic outlets and ventures as well as direct management of state-owned and state-supervised media apparatuses.

State-supported journalism is often promoted by governments that feel responsible for safeguarding and fostering sustainable, critical, and high-quality journalism options that serve the public instead of commercial media owners, shareholders, and advertisers. In these cases, state-supported journalism is argued to be a necessary response to the market failure paradigm wherein self-regulated markets prove to be inefficient or incapable of producing news that serves the public interest. Therefore, state support is needed as a correction, in order to support journalism that can monitor and hold accountable the institutions of government, commerce, and civic life.

However, state-supported journalism can also encompass what are commonly called *state-controlled media*, wherein the government funds media organizations to more efficiently reach large audiences with the government's messaging. Under that information regime, the media organization often works to advance the political interests of the state by serving as the state's mouthpiece. Those interests may be advanced both domestically and internationally.

Independent State-Supported Journalism

Many countries around the world, from Argentina to Afghanistan to Albania to Australia, have some kind of state-supported journalistic outlet. These outlets are typically rooted in radio and television broadcasting, though there are some instances of state-supported print media and digitally native media. This is due in large part to the natural scarcity of broadcasting frequencies: There are only so many airwaves that broadcasting devices can use, and those frequencies have historically been treated as public goods.

However, any form of government support for journalistic media raises questions about the independence of the media producers. Put another way, how can a government foot the bill for journalists without unduly influencing (if not outright intervening in) the editorial process?

One way to do this is to establish an *independent governance model*, as is the norm in many European countries. For example, the British Broadcasting Corporation, or the BBC, operates as a public service broadcaster that is funded directly by citizens through an annual license fee that is set and collected by the government. Those funds are then transferred to an independent company with a board of directors that oversees the general direction of the BBC and an executive committee charged with overseeing its day-to-day operations. By creating a managerial structure that is largely separate from the British government, the BBC is generally able to remain independent from it. Additionally, it operates under a royal charter that charges it to produce public-interest journalism that advances the interests of the citizens of the entirety of the United Kingdom. While it is not free from criticism (especially from public officials who feel scorned), its journalistic arm (BBC News) is not only well regarded internationally but is the largest broadcast newsgathering operation in the world.

Europe has been particularly successful in developing a public policy framework that grants state subsidies to journalists and journalistic outlets that serve the public interest, advance accountability and transparency, and contribute to critical thinking and well-informed debate among citizens. Such efforts may include direct cash payments to selected projects or general incentives (e.g., reduced rates for mailing news media) that play a vital role in creating favorable economic conditions for a public-interest culture in journalism.

Moreover, those frameworks often help support *public-service broadcasters* – organizations like the BBC in the United Kingdom, France24 in France, and NRK in Norway – that are designed to produce public-service journalism and are often among the biggest news producers in their countries. Researchers have found that countries with well-regarded public-service broadcasters tend to have better-informed citizens.

While the United States does offer some level of government support for journalism, its efforts pale in comparison to its European counterparts. For example, less than 1% of National Public Radio's (NPR) funding comes from the federally funded Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) or from federal agencies and departments. Most of NPR's funding comes from corporate sponsorships and dues paid by member stations across the country. Those member stations, in turn, receive just 12% of their funding from the CPB and other federal, state, and local government sources. In short, public media in the U.S. receives a relatively small amount of state support. Instead, most public and non-profit journalistic outlets in the U.S. rely on charitable contributions from individuals, corporations, and foundations (e.g., crowdfunded journalism and philanthropic funding).

State-Controlled Media

In the absence of structures to protect the independence of journalists, state-supported media can become state-controlled media. Under this environment, organizations will seek to *appear* journalistic but functionally serve as propagandist organs of a government. This does not need to involve fabrication on the part of the organization, or the production of disinformation. Instead, it may simply involve the systematic exclusion of stories and perspectives that are critical of the state, and the systematic over-inclusion of stories and perspectives that are favorable to the state. (However, such outlets may, and some often do, produce false information that reflects positively on the government.)

For example, the Xinhua News Agency serves as the official state-run press agency of the People's Republic of China. It is by far the biggest and most influential media organization in China, and it is arguably the world's largest news organization in terms of personnel. In addition to operating within China, it also has more than 170 news bureaus – or satellite offices – worldwide, making it one of the most international news organizations in the world.

Xinhua has been routinely criticized for its deep connection to the Communist Party of China, and its governance structure places it under the direct supervision of party officials. As such, Reporters Without Borders has called it "the world's biggest propaganda machine." Nevertheless, it has served as a crucial instrument for communicating its citizens' needs to party officials, and for (favorably) conveying the party's policies and initiatives to citizens.

Xinhua has also served as an instrument for increasing China's foreign influence. It delivers its content through multiple mediums, including print, broadcast, and online, and in multiple languages, including Arabic, Chinese, French, English, Japanese, Portuguese, and Russian. In recent years, Xinhua has acquired commercial real estate in New York's Times Square, bolstered its English-language reporting staff, and started an English-language satellite news network. Such efforts are capable of producing strong journalism – especially about matters only loosely related to China – but they are generally driven by a desire to spread perspectives that are aligned with those of the Chinese state.

State-controlled journalism is not limited to China. It is present under many authoritarian regimes, including Eritrea, North Korea, and Turkmenistan. Additionally, even in semi-democratic societies, state-controlled media may exist and reflect the political positions of ruling parties. In some cases, the dominant perspectives conveyed by such outlets change drastically as political power transitions between parties, making state-controlled media a bellwether of power.

Key Takeaways

- State-supported journalism refers to journalism that is directly supported by state governments.
- Strong, independent public-service journalistic outlets can emerge in media systems that receive substantial state support. Many European countries have well-regarded public-service broadcasters that promote a well-informed citizenry.
- State subsidies can also support state-controlled media outlets that are designed to promote the viewpoints of ruling parties and serve as instruments for advancing foreign influence.

Unit VI

Global Journalism

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Chapter 25

International News Coverage

International news coverage has received considerable scholarly and professional attention because it is a unique category of journalism. It not only tends to be *processed and prepared by specially trained professionals* but *involves particular newsgathering and distributional challenges*, and it *can arguably produce a deeper and wider impact* than any other news category.

International news coverage introduces some unique news values to the general journalistic repertoire of news values. That general repertoire draws on values like conflict, magnitude, and surprise to determine the newsworthiness of an event or issue – which must be tweaked in the context of international news. Additionally, journalists will often face greater journalistic restrictions than they otherwise would at home. (Even if they are working in a more open media environment, pressures from home may still influence reporting.) Finally, the influence of international news coverage can be felt in matters from war to peace, from global predicaments to synergistic cooperation, and from ecological collapse to sustainable environments for all global citizens. Put simply, no other news genre can wield such a large-scaled and profound influence on so many aspects of human lives.

Determinants of International News Coverage

According to media scholars Tony Harcup and Deirdre O'Neill, most published news stories tend to draw upon a set of journalistic values about what makes something newsworthy. One such value is conflict, where developments that involve controversies, arguments, fights, or insurrections (e.g., a politician breaking with their party) are seen as being particularly newsworthy. A second value is magnitude, where developments that potentially impact a large number of people (e.g., a court ruling over abortion rights), or impact a few people significantly (e.g., a court ruling involving an indigenous tribe's land rights), are seen as being more newsworthy. A third value is surprise, where developments that deviate from the norm or shows stark contrasts (e.g., the man bites the dog) are seen as being more newsworthy. Harcup and O'Neill identify 15 such news values in all.

However, international news coverage further complicates those general news values. Analyses of international news content have found that events that involve a foreign country that is *culturally proximate* and *geographically close* tend to receive greater news coverage than events in non-proximate/close countries. For example, U.S. audiences are often exposed to more stories about the United Kingdom than Japan in part because the U.S. and the U.K. share more of their language, cultural values, and history than the U.S. and Japan.

However, there are important structural factors at play: Countries that are seen as being more economically or militarily important (*economic clout* and *military clout*), or are of *geopolitical significance*, also tend to receive more coverage. Put another way, Japan may receive more coverage in U.S. journalistic media than Brazil because it is a more important economic partner to the U.S. and because it is a significant partner in containing China's influence in Asia – which is a major U.S. interest. Similarly, Middle Eastern countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yemen are relatively tiny economic partners with the U.S., have relatively limited cultural proximity, and are certainly not geographically close. However, they have received considerable journalistic attention in the U.S. because of their significance to the U.S.'s geopolitical interests.

It is difficult to say which of these so-called 'determinants' of coverage is most important because they vary across subject matter, situation, and timing. However, researchers have found them to be of particular import across countries, meaning that this is not just a U.S. phenomenon. Many countries, for example, devote significant portions of their news hole (the space available for news within a news product) to the U.S. because the U.S. is deemed to be an economic and military superpower that is often entangled with the domestic country through trade deals and international aid.

Representation of Countries and Issues

An important finding from decades of analyses of international news coverage is that there is a great deal of unevenness in the coverage of the world's countries, and that dramatically different depictions of the same world are often presented to audiences in different parts of the world.

For example, scholars have found that European media tend to focus more on Europe, North America, and the Middle East, while East Asian media are more likely to cover China, Japan, the Koreas, and so forth. There is thus considerable evidence for a geocentric tendency and regionalism in international news coverage across the world's media.

More broadly, the majority of international coverage has historically centered on world powers. Emerging countries, mostly those in the Global South, are generally far less likely to be covered by the world's elite media and leading news agencies than those in the developed Global North. Therefore, limited coverage of emerging countries is an issue that has been repeatedly pointed out by scholars – though it remains a thorny concern. Additionally, when emerging countries are covered by foreign media, there is often a good chance that the topics of the stories will focus on something negative or disastrous (e.g., coup d'états, national disasters, or plane crashes).

Scholars have also concluded that the immense variance of international news coverage about identical events is the norm. A number of empirical studies have demonstrated that particular issues and events – for example, the Olympic Games, climate change, or war – are often covered in meaningfully different ways across countries. This is often a reflection of the journalistic cultures of those places, and the ways in which the given issue or event intersects with local interests. The consequence of this is that audiences from different countries may get meaningfully dissimilar stories (and even opposite perspectives) when reading, watching, or listening to news coverage of the same events.

The existence of the aforementioned 'determinants' or the variance in coverage should not be taken as evidence of national governments meddling with or dictating journalistic coverage. Instead, it is a particular manifestation of existing news values like relevance, where developments that involve matters that are perceived to be relevant to the organization's audience tend to be seen as being more newsworthy. Put another way, countries with greater cultural proximity tend to have more familial ties, and countries with more economic clout tend to be important trading partners, which have local impacts by way of things like import and export contracts with regional businesses.

A Declining News Hole

Both academic and professional observers have also witnessed a gradual and steady decline in the amount of international news coverage, relative to other news genres, since the turn of the century. A number of interconnected factors have been identified as contributing to this decline. First, the production of international news is far more expensive than that of domestic news, such as lifestyle news and news commentaries. For example, international news requires obtaining access to other countries, recruiting experienced and specialized reporters or trustworthy local journalists, providing them with local fixers or translators, and budgeting for security and unanticipated costs. Such costs are magnified in the case of television, which often requires additional equipment and personnel.

Second, the audience for international news is typically smaller than that of domestic news (especially relative to genres like politics and sports), which leads to lower ratings and less online traffic. One view of this phenomenon is that the interest for international news needs to be cultivated, and international coverage must therefore be designed to better resonate with audiences. This can be accomplished by *domesticating* international news, or making those foreign developments more relevant and accessible to local audiences by connecting them to domestic developments. This view thus argues that journalistic outlets must invest more in international news and make it more interesting or relevant, and a larger the audience would follow. This, of course, introduces something of a chicken-and-egg conundrum that dissuades journalistic outlets already facing economic challenges.

Third, the Internet – and social media in particular – has also introduced greater competition since freelance journalists and citizen journalists can now quickly produce and distribute their own news content. This can promote a form of news coverage that is more akin to aggregation, with professional journalists trying to gather and contextualize observations made by non-professionals. However, this is sometimes seen as a 'lesser' journalistic product by other professional journalists since there was no first-hand observation by news professionals. Consequently, such work can become marginalized (made less prominent and afforded fewer resources). Moreover, it is now far easier for audiences to go straight to a local source in another country – though language barriers still exist, of course.

Impacts Of International News Coverage

Different theoretical perspectives, such as media dependency theory, underscore that international news can be particularly influential to people's awareness and understanding of issues, developments, and problems going on around the world. Central to such perspectives is the notion that people generally have little contact with those parts of the world (whether through direct experience by visiting those places or indirect experience by meeting immigrants from those places). They must therefore rely on mediated accounts of those places to shape their understandings. Consequently, there has long been a fundamental concern that the distortions in the way international news gets covered produces important distortions in the way local citizens understand the rest of the world. In particular, it may lead to certain parts of the world being unfairly ignored or misunderstood. This includes stereotypes of 'backwards' or 'technologically illiterate' people living in 'third world' countries.

Conversely, placing the international media spotlight on a particular location can also introduce problems. For example, instantaneous coverage of an unfolding event – like a terror attack, the kidnapping of villagers, or an outbreak in civil conflict – can shape public opinion in dramatic ways, leading to public calls for governmental intervention by world leaders. Such demands can result in hasty and ill-considered decisions and actions that have profound impacts on those places and on broader international relations, as the world has seen in places like Afghanistan, Somalia, and Syria in recent years.

The concentration of the production of international news among a few global journalistic outlets (e.g., *The New York Times* and the BBC) and international news agencies (e.g., *The Associated Press* and *Agence France Presse*) also introduces some concerns for international news coverage. Such arrangements not only emphasize Western perspectives but tend to result in global news flows that go primarily from the Global North to the Global South, rather than the other way (or horizontally within the Global South). The Internet has helped to balance some of these flows by making local publications more accessible to international audiences. Additionally, some journalistic outlets have been established precisely to serve as counter-flows, such as Qatar-based Al Jazeera English. Moreover, we now see more journalistic cooperation across borders, as with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

Ultimately, as different parts of the world become intricately interconnected, it becomes increasingly difficult to truly separate domestic from foreign news. However, work is needed to reverse the trend toward downsizing news holes for international news, and to promote more equitable information flows.

Key Takeaways

- The amount of international news coverage of a foreign country is affected by the relationship and history between that foreign country and the domestic one. Traditional news values are thus reinterpreted to some extent when it comes to international news.
- International news coverage typically focuses on superpowers and a subset

of countries of geopolitical interest. Much of the Global South is underrepresented in international news coverage (including within the Global South itself).

» The amount of time and space dedicated to international news has declined considerably among journalistic outlets in many parts of the world, including the United States.

Chapter 26

Global Journalistic Outlets

Global journalistic outlets refer to those outlets that either have – or have access to – staff members or contractors and informational resources *that are sufficiently widespread to justify a global status*. In the case of news agencies (also called newswire services), such outlets often supply information to clients around the world. In the case of individual journalistic outlets, they typically have audiences that are themselves global in nature.

Such organizations are deserving of special attention because they are major sources of international news, and thus often come to be among the primary definers of the world outside one's national borders. Put another way, these outlets often see it as their mission to help inform individuals about the world and, as a consequence of their output, play a major role in shaping those individuals' understandings of it.

International News Agencies

While journalistic outlets like *The New York Times* can be said to be global in nature, there is another category of journalistic outlets that is particularly influential when it comes to international journalism: *news agencies*.

News agencies are effectively wholesale suppliers of news. They have large staffs of reporters and freelancers who gather the news, package it, and distribute it to their clients: other news organizations. Put another way, much of the international (and domestic) news a reader of the *Boston Globe* might come across is actually originated by a journalist working for a news agency. This is especially true for journalistic outlets that do not have their own foreign correspondents – which are most journalistic outlets these days, due to the cost of maintaining a correspondent network. As such, international news agencies are particularly influential given their direct and indirect reach.

Three of the leading international news agencies today trace their roots to the mid-nineteenth century. The first, *The Associated Press*, was established in New York in 1846 as a cooperative comprised of member newspapers and broadcasters. Basically, members of the non-profit cooperative (which are mostly daily newspapers and online news sites) may contribute a portion of their coverage to the cooperative, which other AP members can then republish in their own publications. Moreover, they also pay subscription fees, which allows the AP to employ hundreds of foreign correspondents – in addition to domestic journalists – and operate more than 60 foreign news bureaus (satellite offices) around the globe. *The Associated Press* produces more than 2,000 news stories each day (though only a portion of that is international in nature), and its content appears in nearly all major print and online media.

Another major news agency is *Reuters*, which was established in London in 1851 but is now a part of a publicly traded, Canadian-based multimedia conglomerate. Reuters has an even larger international footprint than the AP, employing hundreds of foreign correspondents in more than 80 different news bureaus around the world. While Reuters has historically specialized in financial news, it also provides coverage of a large range of subjects, from international conflicts to sporting events.

A third major news agency is the *Agence France Presse* (AFP). AFP is the successor to *Agence Havas*, the world's oldest news agency, having been established in 1835. Today, AFP employs hundreds of foreign correspondents in more than 60 foreign news bureaus. Although it derives a portion of its revenue from the French government, it has a fairly independent governing structure that includes representatives from the French press, French public service broadcasters, the French state, AFP staff, and external experts.

More recently, two other major players have joined these historical outlets. The first, *Bloomberg News*, was established in New York in 1990 and specializes in financial news. Although it has fewer foreign news bureaus than its competitors – and those news bureaus are primarily located in financial centers – it has a comparable number of foreign correspondents. The other recent addition is the China-based and state-owned *Xinhua News Agency*. Although it was established in 1931, *Xinhua*'s rapid growth is a more recent phenomenon. Today, it rivals those other international news agencies in size, scope, and reach.

Four of these five major international news agencies are based in the U.S. or western Europe, and they largely adhere to similar news cultures despite being head-quartered in different countries. The AP, Reuters, AFP, and Bloomberg tend to focus on so-called 'hard news' (e.g., stories about public affairs, politics, business, and so on), though they also cover some areas of so-called 'soft news' (e.g., sports and entertainment). They also tend to adhere to a very neutral approach to reporting and writing, and typically use the inverted pyramid style of writing, where the 'who,' 'what,' 'when,' and 'where' tend to appear at the top, followed by quotes from different sources, and then some background information near the bottom to contextualize the story. Stories tend to feature a terse writing style and short paragraphs. Although these agencies also produce news analyses that are more interpretive in nature, they clearly label them as such. This neutral and systematic approach enables news agencies to serve a wider range of clients (member outlets), and consequently reduce those clients' newsgathering costs by providing them with a steady stream of prepackaged news that cover even expensive genres, such as international news.

There are, of course, smaller news bureaus that serve more regional clients and are often less Westernized. Put another way, while they may not be as significant globally, they are highly significant in bringing the world to their regions. These include the state-supported EFE agency in Spain, the state-supported Anadolu Agency in Turkey, the non-profit Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) in Germany, the non-profit cooperative Kyodo News in Japan, and the non-profit cooperative Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata (ANSA) in Italy.

Global Broadcasting

Another subset of particularly important global journalistic outlets includes international broadcasters. When it comes to 'wholesale' international television news, the market has been largely dominated over the past three decades by subsidiaries of the print news agencies.

For example, *The Associated Press* has a subsidiary called Associated Press Television News, or APTN. APTN produces more than 200 video stories per day, each with an average run-time of two and a half minutes. It also broadcasts more than 11,000 hours of live video per year, which can be tapped into by any of its member outlets. Reuters Television, a subsidiary of *Reuters*, produces more than 350 video stories per day, in addition to thousands of hours of live video. Reuters TV's content is used by nearly 800 broadcasters around the world. Other major suppliers to the global wholesale television news market include AFPTV and Bloomberg TV. In short, the most significant providers of televised international news are outgrowths of the dominant suppliers of print international news.

However, some individual broadcasters have also developed into global newsgatherers and disseminators. Of these, the two largest are state-supported BBC World News, which is part of the London-based British Broadcasting Corporation, and the commercial CNN International, which is part of the Atlanta-based Cable News

Network. BBC World News claims to reach 99 million weekly viewers in over 200 countries and territories through its satellite, cable, streaming, and, in the U.K., free-to-air channels. It further claims to be available to more than 440 million homes worldwide, and BBC World News also produces more than 10 live news programs of 30 minutes or longer, in addition to several prerecorded news programs. CNN International has a similar global footprint.

Many nations also have sizable international broadcasting outlets that may operate as commercial, state-supported, or state-owned organizations – or in some hybrid fashion. Some organizations that are especially notable for their influence and reach are Qatar-based Al Jazeera, Russia-based RT (formerly Russia Today), China-based CCTV, and Venezuela-based Telesur.

Global News Systems and Soft Power

Global journalistic outlets are major components of what can be thought of as a global news system that incorporates print, broadcast, and online gatherers and disseminators of news. Once published by a global outlet, the information is made available to member organizations as a resource they can republish or adapt (in the case of news agencies) and/or to the general public via packaged news stories. Even when the news content is not directly republished or rebroadcast, it often inspires further information gathering – as with an *Associated Press* story about the spread of an animal-borne disease in Europe inspiring an editor to assign an original local story about the effects of the disease on local meat exports.

In light of their reach, global journalistic outlets can serve as instruments of soft power as they help seed and distribute certain ideas, values, and perspectives. The historical dominance of Western outlets, for example, played a major role in the diffusion of capitalistic and democratic values around the world, especially after World War II. Such efforts do not have to be concerted or planned, such as by forcing journalists to publish stories in support of certain policies or perspectives. They often emerge naturally from the journalist's socialization and biases, and are diffused over time. Critics will sometimes describe this phenomenon as a form of cultural hegemony.

However, some governments have instrumentalized global outlets as vehicles for intentionally exerting soft power. This is especially the case for large, state-owned media. For example, after the 1916 Russian Revolution, the Soviet Union-based *TASS* news agency became a leading supplier of international news for the communist world, and especially for countries in eastern and central Europe. *TASS* did not operate on a commercial basis. Instead, it was a subordinate of the Communist Party of the

Soviet Union and tended to produce news that aligned with (if not promoted) the Party's perspectives. Today, critics contend that the *Xinhua News Agency* has received substantial state backing in recent years to support its rapid growth in order to advance China's growing soft power around the world. *Xinhua*'s extensive newsgathering and distribution operations have made it particularly influential in the emerging economies of Africa, Asia, and South America.

Other commercial and state-supported outlets have emerged in recent years that are widely seen as credible news sources while challenging perspectives from the Global North, even as they adopt some of its techniques. For example, the Qatar-based, state-owned Al Jazeera (established in 1996) and Al Jazeera English (established in 1999) recruited many reputable journalists (including a number of BBC veterans) and granted them a considerable amount of autonomy to produce impactful pieces of investigative journalism. In some cases, Al Jazeera's journalism (especially that of its English-language sibling) pointedly challenges policies favorable to Qatar, which adds to the outlet's credibility around the world. The rise of global broadcasters like Al Jazeera have helped promote the dissemination of counter-hegemonic perspectives across international news ecosystems.

Key Takeaways

» Global journalistic outlets refer to those that either have (or have access to) staff members or contractors and informational resources that are sufficiently widespread to justify a global status.

» International news agencies are especially influential since they produce the majority of international news. Their work is subsequently disseminated through a large number of member organizations or subscriber outlets, making them important definers of reality.

» Global journalistic outlets may also be instrumentalized to promote soft power. This sometimes happens unintentionally as journalists naturally impart the values and perspectives they have been socialized into, but it can also happen intentionally as states instrumentalize those media to promote the state's interests and values.

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Chapter 27

Foreign Correspondents and Bureaus

Foreign correspondents refer to *journalists who are employed to send news or comment from a foreign country*. Historically, being a staff correspondent was a highly desirable job for journalists. It was also a status symbol since journalists were often only given major correspondent postings if they had gained substantial experience and had proven themselves in the newsroom. The position also had particular professional prestige as correspondents were seen to be trustworthy enough to carry out the journalistic outlet's mission with even greater autonomy. Finally, it had a certain degree of personal glamor. Being a foreign correspondent allowed journalists to report from exotic (and sometimes dangerous) locations – and, sometimes, with a rather nice expense account.

In the past, foreign correspondents would typically be based in news bureaus, or *satellite offices set up for newsgathering operations*. For example, *The Associated Press* may have a Cairo bureau where a reporting team (sometimes as small as a single reporter with support staff or as big as dozens of reporters) would be based and charged with covering Egypt – or even North Africa more broadly. For media organizations, a good spread of foreign bureaus has also traditionally translated into cultural capital, as it was evidence of the organization's resources and commitment to serious newsgathering. Practically, however, it was an important resource for allowing correspondents to establish themselves in a location, develop sourcing networks, and become immersed in a culture. While many organizations with a major international presence still have foreign news bureaus today, they are typically fewer and smaller than in the past.

Foreign Correspondents and Values

Historically, foreign correspondents were journalists from the same country where their parent organization was based. Those journalists were then stationed abroad for a temporary period. For example, the U.S.-based *New York Times* would often take one of their American journalists and station him – and, historically, it was usually a man – in one of their foreign news bureaus. In British, American, and Australian media, the usual term of a posting was three years or less. After that time, newsroom managers would often move that correspondent to another foreign bureau. As correspondents gained experience, they would be sent to more desirable postings like London, Washington, and Jerusalem.

The logic behind these rotations was that news managers historically feared that if a posting lasted too long, the foreign correspondent might become too much of an insider and thus lose their ability to report objectively on that foreign country (due to natural socialization processes). By rotating correspondents, they argued, news managers could mitigate those negative effects (whether real or perceived) while allowing countries to be covered through fresh perspectives over time. While there are obvious flaws with this reasoning, it underscores the idea that foreign correspondence has always required journalists to be insiders and outsiders at the same time.

The emphasis on such rotations – and on the broader phenomenon of sending local reporters to cover foreign affairs – is more contested today. Critics contend that this design results in mainly Western correspondents from the Western Global North reporting on countries that they cannot understand as well as local reporters would. While foreign correspondents are typically well-versed in international affairs (many were students of regions they cover), critics contend that such knowledge is not an adequate substitute for local lived experience and the more extensive sourcing networks brought by local journalists. Such a perspective aligns with a tradition of political economy that views international journalism through the prism of global dominance. From that perspective, the major global journalistic outlets and global news agencies – the most dominant of which are based in the Western Global North – use their privileged positions to not only set the news agenda for the rest of the world's media (by virtue of their sizable news output) but also potentially shape, and sometimes distort, how the rest of the world is depicted (to align with its Western perspective).

In more recent years, there has been a move to hire more locals as foreign correspondents (e.g., a full-time Moroccan journalist tasked with covering North Africa from a regional bureau), as well as more part-time correspondents from foreign media outlets (e.g., a local Moroccan journalist who files a certain number of stories from Morocco and is on standby, in addition to their existing day job at a Moroccan news outlet). While such moves have been largely driven by economic motives – such correspondents are far cheaper to employ – it has led to a change in attitudes about where foreign correspondents should be from and how their job ought to be performed.

Foreign News Bureaus

Historically, news organizations sought to establish foreign news bureaus in order to have a stable newsgathering operation that could unearth important regional stories and react quickly when there was a major development.

Such bureaus are also valuable in that *they offer a long-term perspective on the politics, economics, and social issues of places and regions*. First, bureaus are often established in carefully selected cities that reflect geopolitical importance (e.g., Beijing and Brussels), are important financial centers (e.g., London), or are locations where there are frequent conflicts (e.g., Baghdad and Jerusalem). Second, while foreign correspondents at those bureaus may rotate, supporting staff often do not. Such staff can play important roles in interpreting the significance of stories, in connecting correspondents with local sources, and by offering helpful context to stories. Third, bureaus offer a stable base of operations. Journalists can travel lightly to other parts of a region – and, often, more dangerous parts of that region – to cover a story knowing that they have a safe place to return to and a reliable support team nearby.

The value of foreign news bureaus is aptly illustrated by instances like the 2003 Iraq War. Outlets like the BBC, CNN, and *The Associated Press*, all of which had Baghdad bureaus, were well-placed to chronicle the invasion of Iraq by U.S., U.K., Australian, and Polish forces. They had good regional sourcing networks that enabled them to get insights from different parts of the country and to triangulate information being fed by both Iraqi and Coalition officials. More importantly, however, is that those bureaus allowed journalists to remain safely in Iraq for a lengthy period after the invasion and thus bear witness to a worsening situation – even though the dangers still required them to rely extensively on local journalists and 'fixers' to help capture a broader picture.

Although foreign news bureaus exist worldwide, the majority of bureaus – and certainly the largest and best resourced of them – are in western Europe and the U.S. According to a recent survey, the cities with the most news bureaus were Brussels, London, Moscow, Rome, New York, Washington, Beijing, Berlin, and Madrid. As one might expect, this results in an over-representation of news from those countries since foreign correspondents are more likely to identify and report on stories near to the places where they are stationed.

Economics of Bureaus and Correspondents

At the height of the boom in international news coverage in the 1980s and 1990s, even regional and metropolitan newspapers in the United States had foreign bureaus. For example, *The Chicago Tribune* had offices in places like Baghdad, Buenos Aires, and Moscow. However, by the 2010s, most newspapers – and even some newspaper chains – had shuttered all of their foreign news bureaus and many stopped employing foreign correspondents full-time. Today, only elite newspapers in the U.S., such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, maintain a sizable number of bureaus and correspondents, as well as some major broadcast outlets like ABC and CNN.

The reason for this decline is not a shortfall in public interest in foreign news – though some scholars have observed a downward trend of audience interest in foreign news – or a reduction in the newsworthy foreign news events. Instead, many journalistic outlets have simply elected to devote their dwindling budgets to more 'efficient' newsgathering efforts through the use of freelancers, stringers, and so-called 'parachute journalists' instead of supporting the expensive infrastructure needed to support a news bureau. Indeed, supporting a bureau means paying for office and house rentals, a permanent staff, health care and education for said staff, and auxiliary services like drivers, translators, and sometimes security personnel. Such high costs must now be negotiated against (much) cheaper subscriptions to global news agencies or aggregation-based practices that rely on user-generated content (e.g., tweets, Facebook posts, Instagram pictures, and YouTube videos) posted by citizens in locations abroad. The latter phenomenon has led to concerns about the *de-professionalization* of international journalism.

This is not just a U.S.-based phenomenon, though. In the United Kingdom, for example, there has been a similar reduction of bureaus among the country's newspapers. This includes bureaus in nearby European nations that are deeply intertwined with the U.K. and its affairs. Instead, there has been a move toward teaming up with other organizations to develop newsgathering partnerships, alongside the broader trend toward relying on global news agencies for material.

As such, foreign correspondence is an area of journalism that has been particularly affected by the industry's economic challenges, and it has seen substantial changes in recent years as a result. What was once an international symbol of organizational prestige and a reward for being a good journalist is now an easy target for budget cuts. Nevertheless, though fewer in number, both full-time, bureau-based foreign correspondents and news bureaus remain important features of international journalism.

Key Takeaways

- Foreign correspondents refer to journalists who are employed to send news or comment from a foreign country. Historically, these have been Western-born individuals working for Western-based outlets covering different parts of the globe.
- News bureaus refer to satellite offices set up for newsgathering operations. They help offer a long-term perspective on the politics, economics, and social issues of places and regions.
- As a result of dwindling budgets, there has been a decline in the number of full-time, bureau-based foreign correspondents and foreign news bureaus. Nevertheless, they remain important features of international journalism.

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Chapter 28

Parachute Journalism

Parachute journalism refers to *the practice of briefly dispatching journalists to cover a news story far from their home base*. For example, this might involve sending a journalist who regularly works out of New York into Venezuela to cover a political uprising, and then extracting them back to New York in a few days' time.

Parachute journalism has gained more attention as traditional news media have cut their budgets for international news, and consequently the number of full-time foreign correspondents and foreign news bureaus, due to economic constraints. Parachuting journalists in typically entails far lower costs as it does not require the outlet to pay for a permanent office, support staff, an apartment, and allowances for spouses and children. Instead, parachute journalists may simply be based at a journalistic outlet's headquarters or, as is often the case for television broadcasters, near transportation hubs like Atlanta, Dubai, Paris, and Tokyo.

Parachute journalism is often used pejoratively in connection to a broader critique of foreign correspondence that highlights its emphasis on sensational stories of coups and natural disasters that are lacking in context and deeper understanding. However, parachute journalism can be leveraged in positive ways.

Critiques of Parachute Journalism

Critics of parachute journalism contend that journalists who parachute into foreign news sites often lack a fundamental understanding of the culture and history of those places. Moreover, they often have a limited grasp of both the language skills and social customs of the places they cover, which forces them to rely extensively on intermediaries like translators and 'fixers.' Sometimes, the journalists parachuting in may have little experience working abroad. Finally, such journalists are typically not given the opportunity to stick around long enough to acquire the necessary background to deeply report out a story, or to follow up on its consequences.

The broader implication of this is that *parachute journalism can result in shallow stories that focus on episodes rather than themes*. Put another way, it can result in de-contextualized coverage that is driven more by incidents than by a broader trend. In addition to an increased likelihood for making journalistic errors, critics also content that parachute journalism can promote stereotypical and ethnocentric versions of events that present international affairs as 'exotic' things, promote 'otherness,' or focuses on clashes of cultures and an 'us' versus 'them' framework. Furthermore, the journalists' lack of cultural understanding can result in the omission of nuance and important contradictions. Lastly, parachute journalists may feel less pressure to consider the impact of their reporting or to correct their mistakes, as they will typically quickly move on to another place after they have finished their reporting assignment.

These critiques are not just philosophical in nature. Scholars have found that parachute journalists tend to rely more on government sources and social elites since they are more readily available and such journalists have not had the time to establish a more diverse sourcing network. The consequence is that such accounts tend to reflect the perspectives of those in power – and, in some instances, result in the recirculation of propaganda. Moreover, scholars have found that stories by parachute journalists tend to offer less context and are more likely to mischaracterize events and misreport details while disproportionately making use of shallower, conflict-oriented news frames.

Value of Parachute Journalism

However, parachute journalism also offers some benefits. The chief benefit is that it at least allows for *some* form of eyewitness journalism by professional journalists during a time of cutbacks to full-time, bureau-based foreign correspondents and to international news coverage more broadly.

For example, journalistic outlets in small and midsized markets can no longer afford to spend a quarter of a million dollars per year permanently stationing a foreign correspondent abroad. However, they can afford to fly a reporter (and production team, in the case of television) abroad to report on a few stories that are significant to their community but might not receive adequate coverage from global news agencies. This might include, as one example, a health program that a local community church is organizing abroad in response to a humanitarian crisis. While such stories may come with some shortcomings, they at least increase coverage where there might have been none. (That said, sometimes no news coverage is often better than poor news coverage.)

Moreover, while parachute journalism is typically associated with general assignment reporters — that is, reporters who do not specialize in a particular beat or topic — it can involve parachuting in subject experts. For example, a journalistic outlet may have a dedicated energy reporter or an environmental reporter who would be better able to cover the impacts of a nuclear power plant meltdown than the bureau-based correspondent assigned to that region. Similarly, an art critic may be able to offer greater depth in covering a new fashion trend in Mozambique than the bureau-based regional correspondent more used to covering politics.

Critics of traditional foreign correspondence have also argued that international journalism has always involved some form of parachuting. Indeed, a country like France has a number of local cultures, yet correspondents parachuting in to a small town from Paris may have little understanding of that town's culture. Moreover, many outlets have a single bureau and correspondent to cover regions made up of many countries, each with a different history and set of customs — such as by using Jerusalem as a hub for covering the Middle East. Put another way, those critics contend that some form of parachute journalism is inevitable even under good circumstances, and that it is therefore just part of international journalism.

Ultimately, parachute journalism has become a significant and growing aspect of international journalism. While the practice has evolved largely as a response to financial constraints, it has not fully substituted the value of full-time, bureau-based foreign correspondents that at minimum tend to have deeper understanding of the regions they cover. Nevertheless, amid those constraints, it does offer some coverage where there otherwise would be none.

Key Takeaways

- Parachute journalism refers to the practice of briefly dispatching journalists to cover a news story far from their home base.
- Parachute journalism has been critiqued for producing shallower stories that focus on episodes and for being more likely to stereotype other countries and peoples. Scholars have also found that stories written by parachute journalists tend to rely more on official sources of information.
- In light of financial constraints, parachute journalism has served as something of a replacement for a dwindling corp of full-time, bureau-based

foreign correspondents. This allows for at least some news coverage where there otherwise might be none.

Unit VII

Sourcing Information

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Chapter 29

News Sources

The term 'news source' refers to *any person, organization, document, or object that provides information to journalists*. This may include the spokesperson for an international aid group, an academic, or a regular citizen who witnessed an event. It may also include press releases, court filings, reports published by interest groups, or datasets produced by government agencies.

Sources are crucial to journalism for several reasons. First, journalists cannot observe everything first-hand. For example, they may be asked to write a story about an individual killed by an on-duty police officer, even though the journalist did not witness the shooting. As such, the journalist must seek out individuals who may have seen the shooting and triangulate their accounts to approximate the truth about what happened. Second, journalists lack expertise in certain matters, and they must therefore speak with an expert source (e.g., a climate scientist) in order to better inform news audiences. Third, sources are sometimes the center of a story, as with the head of a government agency who is alleged to have engaged in corrupt acts and should be given a chance to respond to the allegations.

However, the relationship is not unidirectional. Sources also need journalists. First, sources often depend on journalists to spread their views. Without the support of international media, for example, a climatologist's research findings may not receive a great deal of attention or impact policymakers around the globe. Second, sources gain legitimacy by being featured in respected news media. For example, a rebel leader in Kyrgyzstan may be seen as important (and possibly legitimate) if they're deemed worthy of being profiled by *The New York Times*. And, third, sources often have agendas of their own and seek to promote them by gaining media attention. For example, the head of an agency may play up international tensions for a news story in order to secure more funding for their agency.

Sourcing is particularly important because some scholars have argued that what a source is quoted as saying can be even more important than what the journalist writes. That is, news audiences may view the source as being more knowledgeable than the journalist, and thus view the quote as more authoritative than the surrounding context offered by the journalist. (Conversely, audiences may also view the source as more self-interested, especially if they already have low trust in that kind of source.) Moreover, even when they are not quoted, sources often influence how journalists think about a development and consequently produce news about it.

Sourcing, Power, and Authority

Given that both journalists and sources often have something to gain and lose in their exchanges, *the practice of sourcing can also be thought about as an exchange of power*. The journalist-source relationship can be adversarial as well as mutually beneficial. For example, a journalist may benefit from having frequent access to a high-ranking official, who in turn benefits from having a sympathetic ear during times of distress. Conversely, a journalist may receive public acclaim for producing a story that details a previous source's dishonesty.

This negotiation of power is further implicated by notions of *reputation* and *authority*. Journalists are more likely to receive access to sources and cooperation from them if the journalist (or the organization they work for) is perceived to be prestigious, or if they have access to an audience of interest to the source. For example, a highly partisan commentator on YouTube may get an exclusive interview with a high-profile politician because the politician is trying to increase their outreach with younger members of their base. There is considerable inequity in who is able to draw on specific information sources, and often in ways that favor high-profile, mainstream journalistic outlets or news media with desirable niche audiences.

In a similar vein, *sources are themselves more likely to be selected by journalists if they are located prominently within a power structure*. Put another way, the closer a source is to the locus of power, the more likely it is that a journalist will believe that they are worthy of being interviewed. This is because cultures of journalism often treat those with power as being particularly worthy of attention (given their ability to influence society or some development), and because their position of power is often seen as an indicator of some measure of 'legitimacy' (at minimum to some group of people).

Scholars have found that *individuals who occupy positions of authority are more likely to have their versions of 'truth' be more readily accepted* both by journalists and news audiences. Conversely, those who are seen or treated as 'outsiders' or 'underdogs' are typically not taken as seriously. For example, journalists have historically been more deferential to a police officer's account of an officer-involved shooting than the victim's.

Growing polarization has challenged this, however, especially when it comes to political actors. In such cases, powerful individuals are simultaneously more likely to have their version of 'truth' readily accepted by one group and readily rejected by another. Nevertheless, the apparent existence of a hierarchy of credibility points to a journalistic bias to be more deferential to institutional sources like police officers, military commanders, and other government officials — even in cases where journalists do not fully trust them.

While deference to sources in positions of power (or produced by people or organizations in positions of power) is a common finding across countries, scholars have also found that journalistic trust in institutional structures can vary considerably across countries. For example, journalists in some countries (e.g., Estonia and the United Arab Emirates) express a relatively high degree of trust in the police, while those in others (e.g., Argentina and Tanzania) express low trust. Journalists in the U.S. tend to have relatively low levels of trust in the institutions they cover. Put another way, most U.S. journalists approach claims with a healthy skepticism, even if they're coming from powerful institutions like the U.S. government or the military.

Congruence and Availability

Sourcing practices aren't defined solely by power structures, though. Journalists and their sources are human beings, and they are thus subject to a range of human biases.

One particularly important bias is homophily, or *the tendency of individuals to associate and bond with people who are similar to them*. In the context of journalist-source relations, it produces a phenomenon wherein journalists are *more likely* to interview people who share their characteristics. Put another way, male journalists are more likely to interview male sources while female journalists are more likely to interview female sources. Similarly, journalists of color are more likely to interview sources of color, and so on.

There is less and less-clear evidence about how this phenomenon impacts how sources respond to journalists — that is, if it impacts their willingness to speak to a journalist who does not share their characteristics. However, there is enough evidence from psychology and sociology to presume that sources would be less willing to open up to someone who appears to be a stranger. This, in turn, raises important concerns about the historic over-representation of white, male journalists both domestically (in the case of the U.S.) and internationally (as foreign correspondents reporting on developments around the globe).

Another important consideration has to do with the simple availability of sources. Reporters typically operate on deadlines, be it a fixed deadline in the case of traditional media or a continuous, ASAP deadline in the case of many online media. Because of this deadline pressure, journalists are drawn to sources who are predictable and responsive.

Put another way, *journalists will often turn to sources who respond often and quickly*. They maintain address books with recurring sources, which in turn increases the likelihood of the same sources being interviewed. This is especially the case for public information officers or press agents, or public relations professionals whose job it is to respond to media requests and whose training allows them to promote perspectives favorable to their employer.

The growing resource constraints and inequities within journalism has thus resulted in an even greater reliance on sources who are readily available, since journalists continue to be pressed to do more work with fewer resources (and the same, if not quicker, time restrictions). That, in turn, benefits official and privileged sources who have the resources to respond often, quickly, and with a well-managed message. Indeed, empirical studies of news coverage – both domestic and international – routinely find an over-representation of government sources and spokespeople.

Key Takeaways

» News sources refer to people, organizations, documents, or objects that provide information to journalists. This may include a spokesperson or a report produced by an agency.

» News sourcing involves exchanges of power, with both journalists and sources having something at stake. Additionally, both journalists and sources are more likely to be interacted with if they are located in high places within their respective power structures.

» Journalists are more likely to interview sources who share important visible characteristics with them. Additionally, sources who are more readily accessible are usually more likely to be interviewed by journalists.

Chapter 30

Fixers

International journalism is often associated with foreign correspondents who visit new locations and doggedly unearth important stories through their enterprising individual labor. However, international journalism actually depends heavily on local workers. So-called 'fixers' make up one such group of workers that is crucial to the production of international news.

Fixers are *local workers who are hired by foreign correspondents (or their organizations) to serve as translators or guides, or who provide other kinds of reportorial assistance*. Fixers frequently work for local media outlets in the country, and are often staff journalists themselves for those outlets. However, in the context of working as a fixer, they will usually help explain the context to the foreign correspondent, connect that correspondent with the contacts and sources the fixer has developed over the course of their career, and serve as translators during interviews conducted by the correspondent. Sometimes, they are given more menial, logistical tasks, such as reserving a vehicle or hiring protective services for the foreign correspondent. They may also play a role in safeguarding the correspondent by being more sensitive to worsening conditions during an interview or site visit.

Fixers as Ad-Hoc Laborers

Fixers play key roles in *setting up a story* but they are seldom given the opportunity to become deeply involved in *how the story is told*. Put another way, their involvement in the latter stages of news production, such as the writing of the story, is limited. A major consequence of this is that unlike stringers or freelancers, who are typically credited by name in a story (either as a co-author at the top of a story or as a contributor at the bottom), fixers typically receive little or no public credit. They are often only known to the journalists they work with and are discovered largely through word-of-mouth. For example, a foreign correspondent visiting Bolivia may ask fellow correspondents who are part of a Slack channel or Facebook group about the Bolivian fixers they would recommend. The foreign correspondent would then establish contact with the suggested fixers, and work with whomever is available or best suited for the given story. Thus, despite their crucial contributions, fixers occupy one of the lowest ranks within the hierarchy of international journalists and have limited opportunities for advancement.

For example, consider the case of a white, Christian foreign correspondent working for *The Washington Post* who is sent to Egypt to cover the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood as a political force during the country's parliamentary elections. That correspondent may not speak Arabic, and thus may not be able to ask many of the locals about their impressions of that political party. As such, someone fluent in the local language is necessary. The correspondent may have done some background research on the Muslim Brotherhood and recent political trends in Egypt, but the information they are coming across is likely written in English and filtered through a Western perspective. As such, someone with local expertise would be helpful in order to not perpetuate some important biases. The correspondent may not be allowed to enter certain areas because they do not share the local faith, or because they are not a local citizen (as might be the case for a voting site). In such cases, someone who meets the requirements to ethically enter those places in order to observe things first-hand (or speak to a more diverse cast of sources) is necessary.

Given the circumstances in that example, a fixer would be a crucial aide in reporting that story. However, even if they performed all of those tasks – translating, contextualizing, and even doing some original reporting – they may still not receive any credit on the published story. Instead, they would be employed for a couple of days' work, and perhaps paid as little as $50 each day (depending on how big of a deal the event or incident was). They would likely not be eligible for any additional benefits, such as extended medical care if they were to get hurt in the course of reporting of the story. And, often most importantly to some fixers, they may not have much of a voice in how their country is ultimately presented to an international audience.

Fixers and Consequences

While the lack of recognition presents both monetary and professional issues for fixers, perhaps the even bigger issue is that they often feel greater repercussions when things go wrong than the correspondents and outlets that hire them.

For example, a fixer may be willing to leverage their connections with a local militant group to connect a foreign correspondent with the group's leader. During the course of the interview, the correspondent may break an agreed-upon arrangement, such as by capturing video of the group's compound despite pledging to not record anything. The correspondent may also mischaracterize important aspects of the interview or depict that group under an unduly negative light, in ways that the fixer would never have done if they were reporting the story themselves. By the time the story is published, the correspondent may have returned to a safe location in their home country. In contrast, the fixer may not be able to go anywhere else. The correspondent's actions may thus not only jeopardize the fixer's sourcing network but potentially put them (and their family) in harm's way.

Foreign correspondents must thus be sensitive to the harms their actions and reporting can cause to their local collaborators. While many foreign correspondents are cognizant of this and behave accordingly, the pressures to do more with less and to provide news reports that stand out in a crowded information ecosystem can push correspondents to neglect their impacts on fixers. Thus, there is arguably an ethical imperative for the institution of international journalism to offer more structural support for fixers, both in terms of the reward mechanisms for their work and harm-minimization solutions.

Key Takeaways

» Fixers are local workers who are hired by foreign correspondents (or their organizations) to serve as translators or guides, or who provide other kinds of reportorial assistance. They frequently work as journalists for local media organizations in a country but are hired on an ad-hoc basis to support the correspondent.

» Despite their crucial contributions to the reporting of a story, fixers receive little public credit or monetary reward for their work. They are rarely given a byline on a story and receive small stipends and few benefits. This, in turn, limits their professional development opportunities within journalism.

» Fixers often feel greater and stronger consequences for the actions of a foreign correspondent than the correspondent themselves because the fixer may have to stay in the country long after the story is published. This may involve losing future access to some of their sources as well as being placed in harm's way.

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Chapter 31

Non-Governmental Organizations

Contemporary journalism – whether domestic or international – draws heavily on information subsidies, or *ready-to-use information products created by third parties interested in gaining access to media time and space*. An information subsidy may take the form of a press release by a company that includes quotes from its chief executives, which a journalist can easily copy into a story involving that company. Alternatively, it may take the form of video or audio produced by that company that can be used as B-roll, or supplemental content that journalists intercut with their main content when producing an audiovisual story. Such content is thus typically designed to be used directly by journalists. That is, they are produced in a journalistic style but are either designed to promote narratives that are favorable to their authors or to highlight issues, problems, and solutions that the authors advocate for (e.g., providing ready-to-use footage of a starving polar bear to call attention to climate change). In addition to information subsidies, *journalists also increasingly rely on the reports and observations of third parties*.

One particularly important set of third parties in this context is NGOs, or *non-governmental organizations*. An NGO refers to *entities that are at least nominally independent of government, voluntary in nature, and interested in the pursuit of some public good* (e.g., advancing human rights, mitigating climate change, reducing poverty). This includes entities like Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders, and The Red Cross.

The Journalist-NGO Relationship

While NGOs' primary mission is to advance their respective cause – such as fighting disease in the case of Doctors Without Borders – they also often seek media coverage to achieve a range of objectives. This may include boosting awareness of the issues they care about, lobbying political and business leaders to take certain actions, raising funds from would-be donors and foundations, and promoting their organizational brands.

As a result of declining revenues, journalistic outlets in many countries – and especially in Western Europe and North America – have reduced their coverage of topics that are important to many NGOs because those topics often fail to generate large audiences. Moreover, budget cuts have reduced journalists' ability to visit places that are of particular interest to NGOs – and often the places where conditions for a particular issue may be worst. Consequently, NGOs have ramped up their information offerings in recent decades in order to provide journalistic outlets with highly professional information subsidies that are easy to integrate into the outlet's journalistic work. Indeed, larger NGOs often have individuals who monitor news coverage to identify advocacy angles and have taken to hiring former journalists who can produce content that mimics typical news formats and norms.

NGOs also routinely employ researchers who produce rigorous, factual reports that are of great use to journalists. These reports are often sent directly to journalists who regularly cover related issues (in addition to other stakeholders), with accompanying fact sheets and summaries. NGOs will often make the authors of those reports available to journalists so the journalist may interview the researchers themselves. While this is less certain to generate positive coverage than a direct information subsidy, it at least increases the likelihood that the issue will receive coverage.

The relationship between NGOs and journalists can be beneficial to both parties. For journalists, it provides them with cheap, yet often useful and reliable, content for their stories. Indeed, many NGOs are rigorous in their work and produce reports that are at minimum factually sound. Moreover, they often provide action recommendations from experts, which can be useful to journalists' desire to offer potential solutions in their reports (in addition to the usual objective of identifying problems). Finally, they provide journalists with a network of potential sources who are on the ground and can describe situations in places journalists cannot access, such as areas where conflict, disease, or natural disasters have broken out.

NGOs and News Coverage

There are important journalistic downsides to the relationship between journalists and NGOs, though. For one, it risks turning journalistic outlets into a platform for advocacy and fundraising, especially if the proximity between the two parties ends up promoting uncritical coverage. Indeed, while NGOs often produce rigorously researched, factual information, they are not designed to be journalistic outlets. They thus sometimes have objectives and employ practices that are inconsistent with what is considered ethical journalism. Moreover, many NGOs now have their own information channels via their websites and platforms like Facebook and YouTube for distributing the content they produce, which potentially allows them to bypass news media altogether.

However, scholars have found that NGOs often struggle to either make the news or draw large audiences to the information products they distribute via their own channels (e.g., Instagram account). Instead, government officials (who frequently dismiss critical claims by NGOs) tend to receive far more attention and deference from journalists, such as by being quoted more often and more prominently within a story. This puts NGOs at a relative disadvantage in their quest to generate publicity and acceptance of their recommendations. However, research has found that NGOs have been more effective in shaping the news agendas for particular kinds of issues, such as those related to the environment.

Key Takeaways

- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) refer to entities that are at least nominally independent of government, voluntary in nature, and interested in the pursuit of some public good. An example of an NGO would be Reporters Without Borders.
- NGOs, and larger NGOs in particular, often produce their own information materials and actively work with journalists to promote both their causes and perspectives. This relationship can be beneficial to both parties, such as by generating attention for the NGO's work while providing journalistic outlets with high-quality information subsidies.
- Journalists must be careful not to approach NGOs uncritically, though. While NGOs can be helpful and trustworthy, they may have objectives and employ practices that are inconsistent with those of journalists.

Chapter 32

User-Generated Content

User-generated content, also known as UGC, refers to *content that is created and shared by users of platforms and products*, including social media and news websites. UGC may come in an array of forms and formats, such as text, photos, videos, audio, and memes.

The proliferation of networked devices and interactive platforms has led to an explosion of user-generated content. Many of today's most popular service-oriented websites are based in whole or in part on user-generated content. For example, TikTok's content base is largely comprised of user-submitted videos; Yelp revolves around citizen reviews of businesses; and Rotten Tomatoes features movie ratings from regular people alongside reviews by professional film critics. Even major platforms like Facebook and Twitter could not exist without user-generated content.

The explosion of user-generated content has led some scholars to argue for an in-between category of individuals called *produsers*, who readily interchange from being the users of a product to producers of product-related content. For example, highly motivated fans of the TV show My Little Pony can create a wiki-based community around the show that details each pony's backstory and offers original analyses of the show's main themes. As such, scholars have argued, the distinction between producers and audiences has been further blurred in recent decades.

UGC in Journalism

Although user-generated content is common across all digital domains, it plays a unique role in the context of online journalism. Journalists utilize user-generated content to complement, augment, inform, and even provide the basis for their own journalism. Meanwhile, audiences use it to make their own voices heard and to engage in the process of reporting and sharing information.

To illustrate the evolution of user-generated content within the context of journalism, consider the letter to the editor. Before the internet, such letters were the most common means for audiences to get in touch with news producers. People wrote letters to the editor reflecting on the news, sharing their own stories, complaining about specific types or topics of coverage, asking questions for clarification, and sharing news tips with journalists. Some of those letters would then go on to appear in the newspaper – typically in a designated area within the Opinion section – making them an early form of user-generated content. However, those letters were limited to text as a medium, depended on the publisher's schedule for publishing letters (and willingness to publish a letter), were generally subject to an editor's alterations (they would often abridge the letters), and were frequently in competition with other letters about the same topic. In short, space constraints meant that only a tiny fraction of letters were ever published and rarely on the letter-writer's terms.

In contrast, today's news websites, apps, and social media pages regularly solicit and share user-generated content alongside journalist-produced news. Journalistic slideshows of sporting events (e.g., a local high school football game) frequently feature fan-taken photos. Comments sections at the bottom of articles invite readers to share their thoughts about (or responses to) news. Journalistic outlets' Facebook accounts ask readers for their worst weather-related disaster stories. Hashtags allow Twitter and Instagram users to connect their own stories and images to coverage of a topic appearing on news websites through different widgets on the page. Some news websites even allow community members to upload events to be included in the outlet's online calendar page. And, some news aggregation websites focus largely on user-generated content, as with sports news portals that source from popular fan blogs.

As such, some journalistic outlets have turned to user-generated content as a way to advance their objective of providing the public a forum for engaging with civic information and to make journalism more participatory. Others have turned to UGC primarily as a cheap source of content or to increase the time users spend on the website. In short, the extent of the use of user-generated content, and the ways in which UGC are incorporated into news products, does vary widely across outlets, but the industry as a whole makes use of *a lot* more user-generated content today than in prior decades.

Benefits and Complications

There are many reasons why user-generated content is valuable for journalistic outlets. At an ideological level, it can be a way to give news audiences a voice in the coverage and dissemination of information, and engage them with the news and the process of reporting it. For example, CNN's iReport was an early attempt by a journalistic outlet to create a digital platform designed to help audiences easily share their own video-based citizen journalism.

At an economic level, research suggests that creators of user-generated content tend to become more active and loyal members of the spaces they contribute to (e.g., an online community or news website). That engagement and loyalty can help generate positive financial outcomes as well, since such users may visit more frequently and feel even more motivated to pay a subscription fee or make a donation. Moreover, user-generated content can be a free alternative to professionally produced content (e.g., fan photos from a game that replace a photojournalist's work) or inexpensive filler (e.g., free opinion columns or a replacement for person-on-the-street interviews).

However, user-generated content also presents journalistic outlets with some challenges. It has the potential to blur the traditional boundaries of journalism by elevating the work of non-professional actors who aren't trained in the professional norms and ethical standards of journalism. For example, user-generated photos or embedded social media posts are usually clearly distinguished as such by credit lines and other signals that make clear that the author of the work is not a journalist. However, research has shown that audiences often do not meaningfully distinguish messages produced by different authors (who may employ different standards). That is, while audiences can accurately identify that a news story and a tweet embedded within it were produced by different people, they often muddle the messages together.

This can become especially problematic when it comes to forum-style user-generated content appearing alongside news products (e.g., comments under an online news story). Such content may feature personal opinions and stories, many of which are much more overtly biased than journalistic standards allow. They may also include misinformation and disinformation, as well as deeply unprofessional elements, such as insults or curse words. Journalistic outlets therefore have an ethical duty to engage in some form of content policing. This can be both morally problematic (e.g., determining what kind and amount of moderation is appropriate) and economically challenging (e.g., having to hire a team of moderators). It can also be legally problematic if a journalist excerpts user-generated content that is defamatory without engaging in basic fact-checking measures.

Finally, journalistic outlets must increasingly cope with the fact that user-generated content and online discussions about news are increasingly being produced or taking place on platforms outside their own. Put another way, while letters to the editor were previously sent to the journalistic outlet (giving them control over if and how to use that content) more of today's engagement is occurring on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (not only resulting in less journalistic control over the content but increasing their dependency on third-party platforms). Thus, in a way, professional journalistic work is becoming a content subsidy of its own for discourses that largely take place on forums outside the outlet's own.

Key Takeaways

» User-generated content refers to content that is created and shared by users of platforms and products. It can include text, photos, videos, audio files, memes, and other types of content.

» Journalistic outlets are not just destinations for consuming news. They have become platforms for user engagement and interaction with news. However, that engagement is increasingly occurring on other platforms.

» Creators of user-generated content tend to become more active members of the online communities they contribute to and become more engaged with those sites. There is thus an economic incentive for creating opportunities for users to engage and produce content.

» User-generated content has blurred some of the boundaries of journalism and creates challenges for professional journalistic outlets.

Chapter 33

Crowdsourcing and Ambient Journalism

While journalists have historically worked in a more solitary fashion, this is becoming less so the case today. Journalists are now more likely to work within teams in their organization, participate in collaborations across organizations, and involve their audiences in different aspects of news production.

This latter development – the incorporation of active audiences – is largely the result of new communication technologies and platforms that make it easier for audiences to engage with each other and with journalists. However, it is also the product of cultural changes and economic imperatives that have made audience participation appear more beneficial to – and in some cases necessary for – the production of 'good' journalism. Moreover, in addition to inviting contributions from audiences, new kinds of journalists have emerged whose job it is to tap into, and synthesize, the collective wisdom of the general public by monitoring their exchanges.

Journalistic Crowdsourcing

Within the context of journalism, the term crowdsourcing refers to *a practice by which the cultural (i.e., knowledge), social (i.e., networks), or economic (i.e., money) capital of some public is harnessed for a specific task in the news production process*.

Here, 'crowd' refers not only to the audiences of a given journalistic outlet but to the broader public they can reach via multiple communication channels, such as Twitter, Facebook, or even their own media products. 'Sourcing,' in turn, refers to the practice of collecting the resources (such as knowledge, material, or money) needed to advance an organizational or news production task. Journalistic crowdsourcing can thus involve the participation of non-journalists in identifying news, gathering news information, verifying and making sense of the gathered information, and distributing the produced form of that information. In the case of its sister act, crowdfunding, it can involve soliciting ad-hoc contributions to support a particular news production task, story, or project.

There are many reasons why a journalistic outlet might want to engage in crowdsourcing. For example, they may have access to more material than their reporting team can process, as is the case with large leaks of private documents or when governments aim to hide embarrassing information by overloading journalists with materials following a public information request. In this sense, crowdsourcing can be a free form of labor. Alternatively, journalistic outlets may believe that having more eyes will reduce mistakes and perhaps help their reporters identify important things that they missed. In this sense, crowdsourcing can be a way to improve traditional journalism. Or, journalistic outlets may find that they can build a following and increase brand loyalty by making audiences feel like they're part of a team. In this sense, crowdsourcing can be a way to make journalism more sustainable.

For participants, the reward is often non-monetary since journalistic outlets rarely ever pay or reimburse participants for their labor. Instead, the reward is usually symbolic, such as by receiving some form of recognition for the work. This might be something as small as an icon or 'badge' next to their username on the website. It may also be more intrinsic, such as a feeling of satisfaction from having contributed to a social good or addressed a social problem. Sometimes, participants simply believe they've gained a skill or knowledge as a result of their participation.

Crowdsourcing can go very wrong, however. For example, shortly after the Boston Marathon bombing, online crowds on Reddit pored through pictures of the event to identify the perpetrators. They eventually zeroed in on two men and published photos of them that supposedly offered proof that they were the bombers. The *New York Post* famously took one of those pictures, enlarged it to cover its entire front page, and suggested that those two men were responsible for the bombing. It soon became evident that those men were not the bombers. However, by that point, their names had become public, their reputation had been tarnished, and they began receiving online and offline abuse. That abuse did not go away even after the actual perpetrators of the bombing were charged and convicted.

Kinds of Participation

The majority of crowdsourcing efforts to date have sought to incorporate audiences into the formative stages of news production, such as when stories are being identified, basic information is collected, and collected information is verified. Sometimes, journalists will solicit audience help for disseminating stories, in order to increase its reach. However, audiences rarely ever have a chance to participate in the editing stages – though it is theoretically possible for them to do so.

Scholars have identified five kinds of crowdsourcing activities that are designed to help non-journalists share their individual knowledge to create a form of collective knowledge. The first kind is voting, wherein the crowd helps prioritize the stories that reporters should tackle or flags phenomena of interest. The second is witnessing, or the sharing of first-person accounts of what happened during a breaking event. The third is sharing personal experiences, or the conveyance of experiential knowledge to reporters. The fourth is offering specialized expertise, wherein members of the crowd are able to contribute expert knowledge drawn from their professional experience or hobby. The fifth is completing a task, where the support comes by way of volunteering time to engage in semi-structured (and sometimes menial) efforts, such as sorting documents, cleaning datasets, or flagging information that may be of journalistic interest.

One of the first major examples of news organizations engaging in large-scale crowdsourcing occurred when *The Guardian*, a newspaper based in the United Kingdom, published 700,000 pages of information related to an information request about the expenses paid by members of the British Parliament. They asked members of the public to read through those pages and flag information of interest, such as overly expensive dinners or the use of government funds to pay for seemingly personal expenses (e.g., a mortgage). *The Guardian* created a website that would randomly assign a document in their trove to a visitor. That visitor could then flag particular pages from the document and note why they thought it was interesting. Each document would be reviewed by multiple people, and the system would average out the scores to surface the most flagged documents and pages to the professional journalists. *The Guardian* got more than 20,000 people to look through the expenses, and they were able to cover 170,000 pages within the first four days alone. Participants received no reward beyond feeling like they were part of something bigger. If they were particularly involved, they also received some symbolic resources by having their username appear on a leader board appearing on *The Guardian*'s website. (*The Guardian* thus gamified the experience to increase participation.)

Ambient Journalism

The ability, and willingness, of crowds to participate in journalism has also helped spawn new kinds of journalism. An example of this is *ambient journalism*, or *journalism* *that is produced, distributed, and received continuously via new communications technology, such as social media and microblogging, and within which the journalist serves as the clearinghouse for crowdsourced information*.

Ambient journalism is different from traditional forms of journalism because it is both more fragmented in nature and it *requires* audience participation. It is fragmented in that news is typically – though not necessarily – presented in small bites, as with tweets. It requires audience participation because ambient journalism focuses on gathering news information from the streams of collective intelligence made available through social media platforms. The journalist's primary functions within this form of journalism are to actively monitor networked media (e.g., Twitter) for newsworthy information, triangulate and verify that information with the help of other actors using those media (e.g., other Twitter users), and serve as an authoritative source of information within that platform. It is thus a particular approach to crowdsourcing journalism.

To illustrate the value of ambient journalism, consider the case of Andy Carvin's coverage of the revolutions in Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt in 2011. Few Western journalistic outlets had people on the ground in those countries during the initial stages of their revolutions. Moreover, it quickly became difficult to report from those places as governments cracked down on reporters and restricted outside communication. Some of the foreign correspondents who were able to report on-site also did not fully understand the many facets underlying the anti-government movements.

Andy Carvin, who was then a digital media strategist at National Public Radio – so not even a foreign correspondent himself – quickly noticed that there were *a lot* of people in those countries who were tweeting about their experiences and capturing video of what was going on. Instead of hoping that NPR could dispatch journalists to those countries (and hoping that those journalists could find their way to the right places at the right times to capture breaking news), Carvin opted to tap into the collective intelligence of the citizens of those places.

Carvin recognized that the majority of the people tweeting information about those revolutions were either anti-government activists or pro-government activists. Put another way, the would-be sources had a stake in the issue and evident biases. However, what Carvin realized is that there were so many people in the network that he could work with them to triangulate the information he was seeing. If he saw video about government forces attacking protesters in a particular city block, he could ask others to share videos from different angles or even ask people to visit that block and capture additional video of the aftermath. If he did not understand what was being said by a source – or whether it was coded speech – he could ask the Libyans, Tunisians, and Egyptians on the network to translate or contextualize that speech. As sources demonstrated their reliability, Carvin would return to them.

Carvin's work earned him a huge online following during those revolutions. He was seen as a reliable and trustworthy clearinghouse for information during a tumultuous and confusing event. Amid a constant stream of information, audiences could have confidence that the material he was putting out there was either verified or reliable, or clearly qualified as unvetted information. Moreover, journalists working for other outlets also kept a close eye on Carvin's Twitter feed, following his lead as he helped break information.

Carvin later left NPR and started his own journalistic outlet that existed primarily on social media. Similar efforts have followed. Some of these are comprised of larger teams covering international affairs, such as Bellingcat. Others are led by individuals who cover smaller communities and local issues. As such, ambient journalism and crowdsourced journalism have become distinct forms of journalism that help unite contributions by journalists and their publics.

Key Takeaways

- Journalistic crowdsourcing refers to a practice by which the cultural, social, or economic capital of some public is harnessed for a specific task in the news production process. It often comes as a direct benefit to journalistic outlets, with participants typically receiving only symbolic rewards.
- Journalistic crowdsourcing can involve the participation of non-journalists in identifying news, gathering news information, verifying and making sense of the gathered information, and distributing the produced form of that information.
- Ambient journalism refers to journalism that is produced, distributed, and received continuously via new communications technology, such as social media and microblogging, and within which the journalist serves as the clearinghouse for crowdsourced information. It has been used by journalists to cover developments from local protests to international affairs.

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Chapter 34

Misinformation and Disinformation

In 2017, the Collins Dictionary selected "fake news" as its word of the year. This was a nod to the popularization of the term in the United States during that time, and to broader concerns that the U.S. was entering a "post-truth" or "post-fact" era where inaccurate information was overloading the system, disrupting everything from journalism to business to politics.

However, *the term "fake news" is highly problematic*. First, its common use is highly imprecise: It covers a spectrum from simple and accidental mistakes to negligent behavior to planned and strategic manipulation. Second, the term carries a particular cultural meaning that was intentionally crafted to discredit journalistic outlets – regardless of how broadly (and imprecisely) the term is applied.

Scholars and linguists alike have thus cautioned against using the term "fake news," and to instead draw upon more-specific terms to cover the associated issues. Chief among these are "misinformation" and "disinformation," which similarly comment on the (in)accuracy of information while being cognizant of the *intent* (or underlying motivations) of the communicator. While intent can be difficult to ascertain, the distinction is nevertheless useful in separating sloppy and accidental work from bad-faith efforts designed to confuse audiences, all the while carrying less of the cultural baggage connected to the term "fake news."

Misinformation

Misinformation refers to *information whose inaccuracy is unintentional*. As media scholar Caroline Jack notes, journalists (and people in general) often make mistakes in the course of reporting new information. This may result from the journalist's lack of understanding of a topic to their misinterpretation of a source's claim (or failure to independently verify it) to their inability to disentangle conflicting information.

In all of these cases, the journalist may have made a simple error or been naive. At worst, they were negligent in not double-checking some information they opted to publish. However, the key for categorizing something as misinformation is that the journalist did not intend to deceive but simply made an error. Ideally, and under most journalistic codes of ethics, such errors will be quickly and clearly corrected.

An illustrative example of this was when the *Chicago Daily Tribune* famously misreported in an early edition that Governor Thomas Dewey had beat incumbent President Harry Truman in the 1948 U.S. presidential election. The deadline for the early edition forced the newspaper to be printed before many states had reported results from their polling places. The *Tribune* therefore relied on the conventional wisdom of the day – many polls indicated Dewey would win by a wide margin – and the assessment of one of its veteran political analysts, and boldly proclaimed Dewey's victory. When the *Tribune* realized that the race was far closer than anticipated, it changed the headline of the late evening edition to reflect the closeness of the race. (By that point, however, more than 150,000 copies of the paper had already been printed with the erroneous headline.) Truman eventually won with a narrow margin, leading to much embarrassment for the *Tribune*.

More recently, major journalistic outlets have erroneously misidentified the perpetrators of attacks. For example, the *New York Post* famously featured, on a large cover photo and story, two individuals that were said to be the duo behind the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013. The assertion, which came out of a crowdsourced investigation led by online sleuths on Reddit, turned out to be false. The *Post* also played a role in unintentionally promoting false rumors by retweeting claims that the New York Stock Exchange trading floor had been flooded during Hurricane Sandy in 2012. While these examples should not be simply excused as inconsequential mistakes – they can and do cause real-world harm to both the subjects of a story and to audiences – it is crucial to distinguish that they are not malicious errors designed to sow confusion. They were instances of sloppy journalism.

As these examples also show, misinformation is most often produced during periods of unfolding crisis or fast-moving developments. Journalistic outlets have a duty to keep people informed, especially when their safety or well-being may be placed at risk (e.g., as news about a bombing begins to break). They thus face pressure to report and publish quickly, which increases the likelihood of making errors. This is doubly true when they compete for audience attention during those news-breaking stages, and are thus incentivized to "scoop" competing outlets by being the first to report a story.

Disinformation

Disinformation refers to *information that is deliberately false or misleading*. In these cases, the would-be journalist (and, more often, communicators operating outside of the journalism industry) are not simply making errors in the heat of the moment. Instead, they are seeking to sow confusion or promote a particular narrative that *they know* to be untrue (or, at best, only partly true).

For example, in the aforementioned case of news organizations misinforming the public about the New York Stock Exchange trading floor being flooded, the false information was deliberately seeded by individuals doing it "for the lulz." Put another way, those individuals had the intent to sow confusion – the confusion was their source of amusement – and they thus sought to disinform others by leveraging the naivete of some journalists (who were then retweeted by other journalists who trusted them, creating a cascade).

There are far more malicious examples of disinformation, however. For example, in September 2014, a number of sock puppet (fake) Twitter accounts began systematically spreading false reports about an explosion and toxic fume hazard at a chemical manufacturing plant in Louisiana. The coordinated effort also included stories appearing in spoofed (fake) versions of local news websites, fabricated YouTube videos, and even text messages that were sent to some local residents. No explosions had actually taken place, though. Researchers later traced those efforts to a state actor: a Russia-backed organization called the Internet Research Agency. Many intelligence services have identified the Internet Research Agency as being behind a number of efforts to destabilize U.S. politics by flooding social media with disinformation.

Disinformation is not limited to complete fabrications that lack any factual basis, though. It also includes the notion of *enrichment*, wherein information is selectively (and, again, intentionally) added or omitted in order to alter the meaning of a message. This may include intentionally decontextualizing information – which is a separate matter from failing to offer full context due to space constraints – as well as intentionally casting information in a misleading (or unfair) light. Enrichment is more commonly found in disinformation produced by pseudo-journalistic outlets (especially highly partisan ones) than complete fabrications because it is easier for those would-be journalists to deny intent.

Discrediting Journalism

The term "fake news" is thus designed to lump together both intentional and unintentional errors in order to discredit the institution of journalism. Put another way, it is designed to blur lines in order to more easily ascribe malicious intent to journalists – and especially those who publish information that is critical of the accuser.

While the term may seem new to popular communication (or at least newly rediscovered in it), the denouncing of media and journalism through derogatory language is part of a long-standing strategy observed both within and beyond the United States. Allegations that the press are liars have been used as a political device by numerous leaders (especially in autocratic regimes) to silence oppositional and independent voices. Indeed, the very inception of the press was marked by allegations from political and religious leaders that 'the public' should not be allowed to publish unfiltered information and opinion, and that 'the public' would only be harmed by lower barriers to publication. Newspapers in particular were often charged as being full of lies, bias, and distortion – or, more simply, as being vehicles for "fake news."

However, the resurgence of the term is of particular concern to free press advocates who have observed important social consequences. Legally, the popularization of the term is credited with facilitating the passing of so-called "fake news" laws that give autocratic and pseudo-democratic states more power in regulating news media. Politically, the term is credited with increasing polarization and the fragmentation of audiences, which may now gather in echo chambers to avoid what it considers "fake news." Socially, it has resulted in more acts of violence against journalists by regular citizens. This last change has been so pronounced even in the United States that global organizations like Reporters Without Borders have begun tracking domestic attacks against U.S. journalists.

Additionally, the term "fake news" is today applied in a wide array of contexts – many of which do not involve journalism at all. For example, it is not uncommon to see the term used to marginalize dissenting opinions, as with a political candidate who might charge their opponent with promoting "fake news" when they simply assert that their health care policy is better. It is even sometimes used in day-to-day disagreements between friends, like when one asserts that their preferred team is better. ("That's fake news!") Scholars have argued that the term has been deliberately seeded in such a wide array of contexts in order to equate any form of inconvenient information with journalism and, in turn, make it easier to discredit journalism via the rhetorical device of "fake news."

Seeding Mass Confusion

The strong resurgence of the term in recent years has been led largely (but not exclusively) by conservative commentators. It has been used most vociferously (and effectively) by former U.S. President Donald Trump who, in 2018, awarded what he called the "fake news award" to traditional U.S. media outlets.

Trump's repeated claims that major news outlets lied about numerous aspects of his political and personal lives even as he made a range of demonstrably false claims at an unprecedented rate (for a high-ranking elected leader) has been linked to the notion of *gaslighting*. As media scholar Caroline Jack argues, this rhetorical and psychological strategy relies on the intentional orchestration of deceptions and biased narrations to not only confuse individuals but further distort audiences' trust in their own perceptions and memories. The term "gaslighting" is also not new – it has been traced to a 1938 theatrical play – but it is useful in conceptualizing attempts by political actors to use misdirection, denial, and disinformation to help sow confusion and undermine trust in institutions.

More broadly, the use of systematic campaigns to confuse the public and undermine trust in institutions has occurred multiple times throughout history and across different international contexts. (These are different from *propaganda*, which is a more common effort to strategically use information to *increase* trust in institutions or build support for (or against) a cause.) For example, the former Soviet Union used the term *dezinformatsiya* to conceptualize coordinated state efforts to disseminate false or misleading information to journalistic media (among other forms of media) in targeted countries or regions. This was just one of their *activnye meropriyatiya*, or 'active measures,' employed by the state to strategically undermine and disrupt governance by opposing nation-states while strengthening the positions of allies. These measures included spreading disinformation through multiple channels (e.g., through fake grassroots campaigns, a practice also known as astroturfing) to widen existing domestic rifts, stoke existing tensions, and complicate international relations.

More recently, scholars have used the term *xuanchuan* (a nod to an existing Chinese term) to describe the use of coordinated posts on social media to flood conversational spaces with a mix of positive messages, negative messages, and attempts to change the subject as part of a broader misdirection strategy. Under this approach, the goal is not to simply promote false information but rather to overwhelm the system with information, making it harder for individuals to come across certain kinds of information. For example, analysts have pointed to China's so-called "50 Cent Army" (or "50 Cent Party") – groups of online commentators thought to number in the millions who are regularly employed by Chinese authorities – as an example of the mobilization of large groups to systematically promote echo chambers, hijack hashtags, and steer public discourse away from sensitive topics.

It is important to note that although they can be useful in capturing specific approaches to seeding mass confusion, terms like 'dezinformatsiya' and 'xuanchuan' can also promote negative stereotypes and limit conversation. For example, there are also related non-state efforts to disrupt specific social campaigns, as when K-Pop fans banded together to hijack hashtags used to coordinate white supremacist activity. These terms should thus be used with care due to the cultural associations they elicit. Easier and cheaper access to powerful computers and high-speed internet connections have made it easier for individuals and small teams around the world to automate the production and amplification of disinformation in digital environments.

The resurgence of the term "fake news" and high-profile, coordinated disinformation campaigns have helped promote a rise in civic and governmental attempts to counter online misinformation and disinformation. In particular, several fact-checking organizations have emerged in recent years. These organizations aim to authenticate statements made by institutional sources (e.g., elected leaders), debunk social media hoaxes, and assess the legitimacy of particular information sources. However, several scholars have found that such interventions have made little headway in combating large-scale disinformation campaigns or restoring trust in journalistic institutions. Thus, journalistic outlets are still seeking effective solutions to countering disinformation, all the while struggling to adapt to a fast-paced environment that makes it easier for them to produce misinformation themselves.

Key Takeaways

» "Fake news" is a highly problematic term that was crafted with the intention of discrediting journalism and blurring the lines between professional news products and general information. Its popularization has been credited with reducing trust in journalism and increasing violence against journalists.

» The terms "misinformation" and "disinformation" help to capture the range of inaccurate information in an accessible way. Misinformation refers to information whose inaccuracy is unintentional (e.g., getting some information wrong during a breaking news event). Disinformation refers to information that is deliberately false or misleading (e.g., an individual fabricating a statement or altering the meaning of a statement by intentionally omitting information in a selective way).

» Coordinated campaigns to disinform audiences have been credited with promoting polarization, stoking domestic tensions, and undermining trust in a range of democratic processes. Such campaigns have been enacted by both state and non-state actors.

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Unit VIII

Labor Conditions

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Chapter 35

Legal Landscape for Journalists

The freedoms of speech and of the press are recognized as fundamental human rights by a number of national, regional, and international legal instruments. In a nation like the United States, it is most aptly captured by the First Amendment, which states that "Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." In regions like Europe and Africa, it is captured by pacts like the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), respectively. Internationally, such rights are protected by pacts like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

However, while such documents provide legal instruments for protecting journalists, they are often enforced in selective ways. Moreover, national laws often supersede broader regional and international agreements in practice, and such laws are shaped by different traditions, norms, and histories, and are designed to deal with competing interests in different ways. Put simply, the legal constraints journalists operate within can vary immensely depending on where the journalist is based.

Legal Frameworks and Their Application

The freedoms of speech and press are recognized by a variety of legal instruments, such as treaties, conventions, constitutions, statutes, regulations, and judicial precedent. However, the extent of those freedoms, and the ways in which those freedoms are protected, vary immensely depending on where a journalist is operating.

For example, Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights states that "every individual shall have the right to receive information" and "to express and disseminate his opinions within the law." Yet, restrictions on expressive activities in African countries are common. When Egypt signed on to the ACHPR in 1984, it incorporated some important press freedoms into its legal framework. However, it signed the Charter with the reservation that "the right to receive information" would be confined "to such information as could be obtained within the limits of the Egyptian laws and regulations." In recent years, Egypt has become one of the top jailers of journalists in the world and has targeted independent and critical news outlets for closure, blocked citizens from accessing a number of news websites, and nationalized a number of large news organizations. Egypt has both passed new, and more restrictive, media laws and violated existing, less restrictive, laws with impunity. Egypt is not alone in this regard. A number of African nations, such as Algeria, Somalia, and Sudan have long histories of censorship and control of speech, even when the targeted activities were protected under its laws.

Africa is hardly alone in this regard, though. In the Americas, Article 13 of the American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR) protects the "freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds." Yet, there is a considerable amount of violence against journalists, criminalization of expression that insults public officials, and the targeting of journalists who reveal sensitive information about government officials and policies. Among the worst offenders in the Americas are Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. Similarly, signatories to the Arab Charter on Human Rights include Lebanon, whose national laws forbid the publication of news contrary to "national ethics" or "religious feelings," and Libya, where the targeting of journalists has resulted in many of them being exiled.

In Asia, there are presently no *regional* guarantees for speech and press, because there is no regional human rights instrument akin to the aforementioned ones. However, international agreements like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have favorably shaped media laws in many Asian countries, including South Korea and Japan. Nevertheless, those countries still have national security laws that can significantly restrict speech. For example, in South Korea, the national security laws have been used to limit speech that promotes communism. Moreover, in countries like China, Pakistan, and the Philippines, journalists (and citizens) are routinely targeted by the state through legal and extra-legal means because of what they publish.

International Journalists and Legal Regimes

Notably, journalists working abroad often have to operate under the most restrictive conditions of multiple legal regimes. First, they are governed by the country where they are operating. For example, a Pakistani journalist working in Iran for a British outlet could be detained by Iranian authorities for violating one of its many national security laws in the process of reporting a story. That same journalist, and the outlet they work for, could also be sued in the United Kingdom under that country's libel laws. And, in their home country of Pakistan, they could be targeted under its anti-blasphemy laws, which could result in their assets (and perhaps even their family members' assets) being seized. This helps make international reporting a potentially legally risky endeavor.

A helpful resource for assessing the legal risks of reporting from a country is the Reporters Without Borders' annual World Press Freedom Index. The Index measures more than just legal risk – it also takes into account things like violence against journalists and government transparency – but it proves insightful. Its 2021 Index ranked Norway, Finland, and Sweden as the nations with the best conditions for practicing journalism. In contrast, Turkmenistan, North Korea, and Eritrea had the worst conditions. As a point of comparison, the United States ranked 44th out of the 180 countries evaluated by Reporters Without Borders.

Trends in Legal Frameworks

Following a period of general liberalism in press freedoms (i.e., offering stronger protections for journalists and their outlets) at the conclusion of World War II, and then again following the Cold War, there has been *a general trend toward more restrictive media laws* and *more exemptions to existing press freedoms* in recent years. This phenomenon appears to cut across all continents, though it has not impacted all countries.

At the heart of this shift has been more stringent national security laws that have criminalized, or increased the penalties for, a range of activities that overlap with journalism. These include activities like revealing information about classified government programs, protecting anonymous sources, and, in some cases, even visiting and interviewing individuals classified as terrorists or enemy combatants.

For example, in 2020, Hong Kong became subjected to a new national security law by the Chinese Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. The new law criminalized the leaking of "state secrets," which is a vague term that had been unevenly applied in China to jail journalists. Critics of the law alleged that it could not only be used to go after journalists who engage in critical reporting but that it also promoted self-censorship within Hong Kong. Sure enough, by the end of 2021, more than 100 individuals, including many journalists, were arrested under the law or had their assets seized, and many others flew into exile. This led Reporters Without Borders to allege that press freedom was in a "free fall," with several (and predominantly pro-democracy) journalistic outlets being shut down in the span of a year.

In similar vein, Australia passed 82 different national security laws between 2001 and 2019. Those laws have been used to justify government raids of both the homes of individual journalists and the newsrooms of major journalistic outlets. Australian journalists have been threatened by senior government officials with prosecution simply for *receiving* top-secret government documents. The country also passed a highly restrictive defamation law in 2018 that has made it riskier to report on public figures.

More recently, multiple governments have used the so-called “fake news” phenomenon to criminalize certain speech and publication. For example, Singapore’s Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act requires companies – including journalistic outlets – to issue corrections or remove content that the government deems false, or face fines in excess of $700,000. Individuals who do not comply can face fines of up to $60,000 or prison for up to 10 years. A central issue with such laws is that the ‘falsity’ of information can be sometimes be subjective, and the arbiters of truth (i.e., the appointed officials who evaluate the information) are hardly objective themselves. Nevertheless, similar laws have been enacted from Egypt to Nicaragua to Thailand to Zimbabwe (among other places) and have been repeatedly enforced selectively against journalists who speak out against political and business leaders.

Finally, the digitization of journalism has also presented important challenges to existing laws that protect journalists. A 2017 UNESCO report found that international media laws were failing keeping up with technology in defining who qualified for special legal protections for journalists. This resulted in journalists working for newer, digital organizations not receiving the protections afforded to their counterparts in traditional media. It similarly resulted in erosions to protections for journalistic sources depending on who interviewed them and how they were interviewed. Thus, not only are media laws in parts of the world becoming more restrictive and being applied unevenly, the scope of legal protections is also being limited by questions about who is a journalist in the modern media environment.

Key Takeaways

» There are national, regional, and international legal instruments that are designed to protect journalists and the broader freedom of expression. However, in many countries around the world, those protections are only applied selectively.

- » Journalists are often subjected to multiple legal regimes, including frameworks in the country where the journalist operates, the country where their journalistic outlet is based, and the countries in which they may still have assets and familial connections.
- » Broadly speaking, there has been a recent trend toward more press restrictions around the world, often under the guise of national security and preventing so-called 'fake news.' Moreover, the digitization of journalism has led to important legal protections for journalists becoming outdated.

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Chapter 36

Surveillance of Journalists

Journalists (and their sources) have become increasingly vulnerable to digital attacks from state and non-state actors that can compromise their security, threaten source confidentiality, and ultimately undermine journalistic activities. These threats range from digital surveillance and the tracking of their activities and interactions to the hacking and theft of their data to the disruption of journalistic activities through denial of service attacks and account hijacking. These attacks have become especially problematic as researchers have found many journalists to lack even basic knowledge about how to integrate defensive measures like using encryption and identifying 'spear phishing' digital attacks.

Surveillance and Journalism

In many parts of the world, unearthing wrongdoing and challenging powerful individuals within government and society at large can carry great risk. For example, as a consequence of his efforts to shed light on secret U.S. government activities, whistleblower Edward Snowden (a contractor who worked with the National Security Agency) was forced into exile in Russia. The journalists Snowden worked with were subjected not only to legal threats of their own by the U.S. government but also to smear campaigns by a range of political actors as well as death threats from people around the country. This example is indicative of broader trends around the world where, in many countries, protections for typical journalistic activities are being eroded and, in some cases, critical journalistic activities are being criminalized.

Within this context, it is important to recognize that there has been a parallel trend across the world in recent years to strengthen the surveillance powers of government agencies. (Moreover, even private companies now have access to a wealth of granular information about individuals.) Those efforts are not always designed to target journalists but nevertheless affect them and their work. Specifically, increased surveillance has made it not only harder but riskier to do journalism around the world.

For example, the United Kingdom's Investigative Powers Act (which is also sometimes called the "Snoopers' Charter") came into effect in November 2016 and granted comprehensive and far-reaching digital surveillance powers to police and intelligence services. While the IPA offers some safeguards for sensitive professions, including journalists, those protections are widely regarded as being inadequate for journalists and would-be whistleblowers. The IPA legally forces communication service providers to assist with targeted interception of data and makes it illegal for those providers to reveal when a user is the subject of an investigation.

The U.K. is hardly alone in this regard. In fact, at the center of Snowden's revelations was a coordinated global mass surveillance effort led by the National Security Agency in the United States, GCHQ in the United Kingdom, and allied intelligence services in the Five Eyes Group. Those surveillance efforts indiscriminately targeted all citizens' communications instead of just those belonging to citizens suspected of wrongdoing. They also consequently ensnared journalists reporting on a range of topics, including those that showed governments and social elites in a negative light.

Fears about such technologies being turned on journalists are not unjustified, either. For example, in 2006, *New York Times* reporter James Risen wrote a book about U.S. efforts to combat terrorism that included details of a secret failed plot to disrupt Iran's nuclear weapons program. Alarmed by the revelations, federal prosecutors sought to identify the source of the leak. They eventually obtained a grand jury indictment of a former Central Intelligence Agency employee based records of phone calls and emails between Risen and that employee. Risen was subpoenaed to testify at the employee's trial – the employee was charged with disclosing classified information illegally – but ended up striking a deal to avoid revealing his source. Nevertheless, the government prosecutors were able to obtain a conviction primarily through the use of the communication records obtained from service providers who, under federal law, were not allowed to tell Risen or the employee that their records had been seized. Consequently, neither Risen nor the employee could challenge the data collection used to implicate them (even if they had legal standing to do so, which American courts have said they did not due to the lack of information).

The broad consequence of these efforts is that engaging in sensitive journalistic activities has become even riskier in recent years. Not only have many governments increased the number of analysts dedicated to digital surveillance under national security laws, who can be turned to focus on specific journalists, but they have deployed large-scale, indiscriminate nets that can turn journalists into persons of interest based on their online activities. This becomes especially problematic as more journalistic activities take place online, from basic research for news stories to e-mails and messages scheduling interviews.

Moreover, it has also had a chilling effect on sources' – and especially whistleblowers' – willingness to talk to journalists since they are more likely to fear that their communications (and activities) might be monitored. This is especially true under more repressive regimes around the world. Indeed, several repressive regimes and wealthy individuals have been shown to be clients of NSO Group, a highly secretive Israeli technology company that produces exploit-based spyware that can be surreptitiously installed on targets' phones. Journalists in countries spanning the political spectrum (e.g., Bahrain, England, Mexico, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Spain, and Yemen) have all been found to have been targeted by the technology – even though it is legally a restricted export that supposedly must be approved by the Israeli government.

Protections Against Surveillance

In order to protect themselves against surveillance, journalists around the world have increasingly turned to tools designed to encrypt communications and to obscure online activity. However, researchers have found that both journalists and their sources tend to have a very limited understanding of how those technologies work and generally find them hard to use in day-to-day activities. This, in turn, has limited their uptake within journalism, even as their non-use puts journalists and their sources at risk.

The lack of uptake is particularly problematic because widespread use of encryption is widely regarded as being important to truly circumvent surveillance. That is, increasing the amount and complexity of encryption and anti-surveillance tools makes mass surveillance more expensive and difficult, thereby offering a form of herd protection. Perhaps more importantly, it helps protect those who most need protections since the use of anti-surveillance technology can attract unwanted attention to the very activities it is designed to protect. Put another way, in the absence of mass encryption, a journalist may inadvertently draw government attention to themselves and their sources through the very effort of circumventing surveillance.

Technologies like the mobile messenger apps Signal and Telegram (and, to a lesser extent, WhatsApp) have begun to normalize secure communication by providing user-friendly end-to-end encryption with strong privacy controls. Similarly, the popularization of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and TOR (The Onion Router) has made it easier for journalists and sources to anonymize their online activities. Many journalistic outlets around the world – from *BuzzFeed* in the U.S. to *The Guardian* in the

U.K. to NRK in Japan – now use technologies like SecureDrop to help whistleblowers easily submit information securely and anonymously over encrypted communications. Taken together, these technologies have helped journalists around the world regain some measure of security and the trust of their sources. Indeed, many investigative journalists now publicly link to secure communication channels via insecure platforms, as with a journalist posting their Signal number on their Twitter profile.

However, those technologies can also be repurposed by bad actors. For example, the Telegram messaging app was purportedly used by the terrorist group ISIS as a group messaging tool to spread propaganda, and it may have been used by terrorists to plan the 2015 Paris attack. Consequently, many countries, including China, India, Malaysia, Singapore, and Sudan have used national security justifications to impose severe restrictions on the use of encryption. Those restrictions include banning encryption outright or requiring a license for its use. Even in the United States, encryption is classified as a 'dual use technology' that can ostensibly be used as a weapon, and its export is therefore heavily regulated.

In short, journalists around the world must now contend with a form of mass surveillance that was not previously possible. While they are becoming more security-minded and have access to technologies that make surveillance harder, most journalists are still only scratching the surface of what is needed to offer a herd form of protection. Moreover, as the tools have evolved, so have the government responses to them, creating a race for protecting journalists.

Key Takeaways

- Journalists around the world are increasingly subjected to mass surveillance efforts by their governments and other governments around the world. Even when they are not the targeted for surveillance, they may be ensnared by indiscriminate algorithms.
- The specter of mass surveillance promotes self-censorship on the parts of both journalists and their potential sources.
- Journalists now have access to easy-to-use technologies that can help circumvent surveillance. Although the uptake of those technologies has increased dramatically in recent years, they are not yet mainstream in most places. Additionally, the technologies have drawn the attention of many

governments, some of which have restricted their use.

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Chapter 37

Journalism, War, and Conflict

The reporting of war and conflict displays some of the best and worst aspects of journalism in their most acute forms. The courageousness of journalists to enter conflict zones and their commitment to telling the truth about various forms of human distress shows journalism at its best. However, the stresses it places on journalists' mental and physical well-being, as well as their potential instrumentalization by powerful actors (e.g., army commanders), shows journalism at its worst.

Given the dramatic possibilities, it is unsurprising that media depictions of such reporting are often romanticized in movies that show the swashbuckling journalist rushing to the front line of history (even as that hardened journalist is frequently subjected to intense criticisms back home). The reality of the reporting of war and conflict is rarely so simple or extreme, though. Nevertheless, such reporting matters a great deal given the impact it has both on public understanding of affairs involving literal life and death as well as on the health of the journalists who engage in such reporting.

War, Conflict, and Independent Journalism

The emergence of war reporting dates back centuries, but historical accounts of its modern form typically begin with William Howard Russell's coverage of the British expeditionary forces during the Crimean War in 1853. Less than a decade later, war correspondents covering the U.S. Civil War also helped establish important precedents for the way war correspondence is practiced and the forms such stories typically take. In both of these instances, journalism served both as a mobilizing force to drum up patriotic support for a war effort and as a platform for challenging ideas about such efforts and about war itself. This dual role continues to be taken up in war reporting today.

Historically, reporters covering war were actively involved in the war effort itself, sometimes going to far as to serve as military assets themselves. For example, during World War II, journalists from many countries would wear military uniform, follow military law, and occasionally carry weapons themselves so that they could be called upon to fight on behalf of an army if needed. Similarly, there is some evidence that, during the Cold War, journalists covering conflict in the Americas, Africa, and Asia were actively recruited as spies.

However, journalists have also tried to maximize their independence under their constraints. For example, during the Vietnam War, journalists often had access to military transports and could sometimes follow soldiers on missions, even as they had considerable independence, such as the ability to detach from their military escorts to get a different view of the proceedings. This independence allowed reporters to go where they wanted and speak with whomever they pleased (though at great personal risk). That, in turn, resulted in considerable negative coverage of the Vietnam War, which had a measurable impact on public support for the war effort back in the United States. Military commanders even gave a name to this phenomenon: the 'Vietnam syndrome,' where they argued the U.S. public's aversion to war was a consequence of journalistic depictions of its bloodshed and horrors.

Today, journalists covering war and conflict often find themselves stuck in between the desire to be independent and structural efforts to control them within conflict zones. In particular, it is now more common for journalists to serve as 'embeds,' or reporters who, with the permission of military officials, are assigned into a selected military unit for a specified period of time to cover the course of a military operation. These embedding programs offer journalists the opportunity to gain a firsthand, eyewitness perspective from a relatively safe vantage point. However, such programs are not borne from the kindness of a military. The access to the war zone often comes at the expense of journalistic independence, and includes restrictions on where the journalist can go, who they can speak with, and, to a certain extent, what they can write about. Moreover, the expectation of such programs is that by being socialized into a military unit, journalists would be more likely to adopt perspectives that favored the military – or at least engage in greater self-censorship so as to not alienate the individuals they were embedded with (or even risk getting kicked out of the unit).

In contrast to the 'embeds' are the so-called 'unilaterals,' or reporters who do not embed with the military. These journalists do not benefit from military protection or assistance but have far more journalistic independence. However, their independence is limited by a different set of factors, the chief one being that entering conflict areas without support can be a deadly proposition.

A good example of war journalism in recent times was the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. During that war, journalists in the field claimed professional independence but were subjected to considerable micro-management by Coalition forces. Such management came through mechanisms like codes of conduct, strict controls over the movements of journalists, and the use of reporting pools (where a single reporter would be escorted to an area or event, and their notes would be shared with a group of other reporters). Such efforts to 'manage the message' have been a direct result of the increased use of public relations strategies by military forces following the failures of the Vietnam War.

Mediating War and Conflict

It can be immensely difficult for journalists from a country at war to step outside (much less challenge) the conduct or the rightness of a war. Such efforts can quickly lead to accusations of treasonous and seditious behavior on the part of the journalist, especially at the onset of conflict.

The calculus changes when there are powerful domestic voices raised against it by political leaders and societal elites, though. Accounts of war are typically dominated by the voices of the powerful and the actions of militaries, and having powerful voices speak both for and against war allows journalists to cover 'the controversy' from a more neutral place. Such controversy also gives journalists greater leeway to capture the voices of ordinary soldiers and others caught up in conflict, which often don't make it into much of the coverage of war and conflict.

Scholars have long found that it can be exceptionally difficult for correspondents to secure accounts of conflict that deviate from official narratives, or those provided by actors who are promoting war efforts. This does not necessarily mean that journalists become pawns of political and military elites but it does mean that journalists often infuse their work with those elites' preferred ideas and terminology. For example, in the aftermath of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, scholars repeatedly found that journalists used military jargon in their news reports. This included the use of terminology like "surgical strikes," "collateral damage," "soft targets," and so on. The use of such terminology could easily come as a subconscious or reflexive act resulting from their frequent socialization among military personnel, which would become further entrenched as other reporters repeated them.

Nevertheless, the willingness to use the military's preferred terminology resulted in the promotion of ideological presuppositions that were favorable to the war effort. This, in turn, helped to sanitize the reality of the conflict for news audiences. Scholars have found that such 'sanitized' news coverage can lead news audiences to perceive such conflicts to be 'clean wars' that are waged with 'pinpoint accuracy,' and thus reduce their likelihood to oppose such efforts. (In more recent times, we have seen this play out in the context of drone attacks, with officials repeatedly emphasizing their accuracy and the quality of the intel supporting drone strikes.)

Despite these criticisms, it is important to note that frontline journalists do have a strong ideological disposition toward "telling things as they are" and often adhere closely to notions of objectivity. They often recognize efforts to control them and take active measures to reduce the impact of those efforts. And, since war correspondents often meet regularly in different conflict zones, they typically form close-knit groups designed to offer important forms of mutual support. In short, it is important to recognize that they often adopt thoughtful measures and take great risks to help mediate events that are incredibly difficult to cover.

Risks of War and Conflict Journalism

Journalists who cover war and conflict place themselves in great risk. The most obvious risk at the front lines is death. For example, the Committee to Protect Journalists identified 64 journalists who died covering the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq between 2006 and 2007. Such death counts tend to underestimate the reality, especially among freelancers and stringers, who typically receive less institutional support and must place themselves closer to the action to have their work get picked up by major journalistic outlets. Freelance photographers and videographers, who produce a substantial amount of conflict journalism, are especially at risk because of the visually oriented nature of their jobs.

However, journalists also find themselves at the center of an "information war" involving both state and non-state actors. For state actors, independent journalists wandering freely and broadcasting images and accounts of a conflict presents a strategic risk. State actors are thus willing, and increasingly so in recent decades, to turn their advanced military technologies against journalists — such as by tracking them through satellite phone signals — in order to either kill or capture those journalists. Moreover, journalists are sometimes deliberately targeted as proxies for their home country's military, or even to stop them from testifying in trials over war crimes or human rights abuses.

Journalists have also become attractive targets for non-state actors, including kidnappers who seek publicity for their cause. The kidnapping of journalists will often produce coverage in the journalist's home country, which often unintentionally helps elevate the kidnappers' message. (At minimum, it sparks a debate within newsrooms over whether to cover that story, which elevates the perception of the kidnappers' newsworthiness within editorial meetings.) For example, during Syria's civil war, more than 100 journalists were abducted between 2013 and 2017.

Beyond the physical threats posed to journalists, covering war and conflict takes a serious toll on journalists' mental health. For example, scholars have estimated that more than one-quarter of war journalists experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder – a rate that is *much* higher than journalists covering other genres. They also experience higher rates of depression, substance abuse, and divorce. This should come as no surprise given the nature of the work. Journalists covering war and conflict are not only subjected to the worst aspects of humanity in very graphic ways but they are routinely forced to make sense of those intense and disturbing experiences in order to carry out their job. Moreover, many journalists covering war and conflict quickly become disillusioned by the response (or lack thereof) their work frequently receives from news audiences. One need only read the memoirs of reporters who covered the 1994 Rwandan genocide to see the toll that the perceived inability to motivate people to take action against the genocide can take on a journalist.

In response to these growing risks, journalistic outlets – and, in particular, larger Western outlets – have developed more substantial training programs for journalists assigned to conflict zones. This includes military-like bootcamps as well as training programs for identifying threats, using protective gear, and soliciting emergency assistance. Additionally, those organizations will occasionally invest in private security for a journalist, and there are now far more counseling options for journalists when they return home. However, those gains – many of which followed the 2003 Iraq War – typically only apply to staff reporters, and even those have become more limited in recent years due to budget cuts. Freelance journalists and stringers rarely benefit from such programs. As such, war and conflict journalism remains an immensely risky and complicated, but highly important, endeavor.

Key Takeaways

» Journalists covering war and conflict today often find themselves stuck in between the desire to be independent and structural efforts to control them within conflict zones. This includes 'embed' programs that offer military assistance to journalists in return for certain restrictions on their work.

» Coverage of war and conflict often reflects official narratives and perspectives about them. Even when journalists want to deviate from those narratives, it can be difficult for them to do so – and it often comes at great personal risk.

» Covering war and conflict is incredibly dangerous. Journalists not only risk getting caught in the crossfire but they are today increasingly targeted by both state and non-state actors. Moreover, such reporting often comes at immense psychological cost.

Chapter 38

Violence Against Journalists

To be a journalist is to doggedly pursue important information intended to inform and serve the public. Sometimes, that information might place an individual or organization in a negative light, threaten their reputation or livelihood, or otherwise create conflict as a result of its publication. Pursuing and exposing the truth therefore comes with risks.

Journalists across the world face threats and intimidation while doing their jobs. Sometimes, this comes as general public disdain or name-calling by members of an audience or a person implicated in a story. But, in some cases, journalists face physical, mental, and emotional violence both online and offline in the course of reporting. A global trend toward violence against journalists is especially acute in countries where the freedom of the press is not well protected (e.g., Egypt and the Philippines). However, it is growing as a problem in the United States as well.

Attacks Against the U.S. Press

Although the United States has historically been seen as a beacon for the free press, its ranking on press freedom indices in recent years suggests that is no longer the case. For example, the 2021 World Press Freedom Index ranks the United States as the 44th most free country for journalists (out of 180). This places the U.S. below countries like Taiwan, Botswana, and Trinidad and Tobago. Furthermore, the 2021 ranking is not an aberration: the U.S. has not been ranked better than 40th since 2013.

The World Press Freedom Index takes multiple factors into account, one of which is violence against journalists. According to the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, nearly 400 journalists were assaulted and more than 130 were detained during 2020 alone. This was a significant increase from even just five years earlier, and it points to changing attitudes – and, namely, increased animosity – toward journalists by different segments of society.

Some of these attacks are encouraged (if not driven) by popular figures and media personalities who decry journalists as "enemies of the people." Indeed, former President Donald Trump's use of such language and frequent public attacks on specific journalists, specific outlets, and the institution of journalism have been credited with influencing the exceptional amount of violence against journalists during his time as president. During Trump's rallies, it was not uncommon to hear supporters yelling at the journalists tasked with covering those political events. Similarly, photojournalists captured striking photos of supporters wearing t-shirts with slogans like: "Rope. Tree. Journalist. No assembly required."

However, the violence against U.S. journalists was not strictly enacted by partisan supporters. Scores of journalists were detained, arrested, and sometimes attacked by police officers and security services when covering protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. In one exceptional case, a foam bullet left one photojournalist blind in the left eye. More frequently, journalists were shoved to the ground and prevented from doing their jobs despite being clearly credentialed. (In Minneapolis, police officers arrested a credentialed CNN reporter live on air while he was reporting.)

What was perhaps most striking to media observers about these incidents is that the journalists' behaviors (e.g., encroaching upon the locus of action while respecting authorities' commands) were not too different from times past. What seemed to have changed was the response they faced from the authorities – and the fact that such attacks were not publicly elected by some social and political elites, or even large segments of U.S. society.

While only some of those assaults were captured on video (often by protesters engaging in acts of journalism), their frequency and violence resulted in government officials in a number of European countries calling on American officials to better protect journalists and respect the freedom of the press. Put another way, the U.S. was no longer being seen as a beacon of press freedoms; it was seen as a place where journalists needed support in order to carry out their duties. These sentiments were echoed in editorials by multiple journalistic outlets, as well as watchdog organizations (e.g., Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists).

Online and Offline Violence

Research shows that violence against journalists is correlated with rhetorical attacks against journalists in elite discourse. Put another way, as rhetorical attacks against journalists have risen, so have different forms of violence against them. This is of particular concern as partisan rhetorical attacks against journalists have become more frequent and sustained in recent decades. This is not just a recent phenomenon, though. Right-wing radio has consistently assailed "the mainstream media" since at least the 1970s.

However, mainstream politicians, especially among the Republican party, have become increasingly bold with their attacks on news media over the past two decades. For example, in 2019 alone, former president Donald Trump used the insult "fake news" on Twitter 273 times and called the press "the enemy of the people" 16 times. Trump's administration also barred well-regarded journalists from covering certain events and canceled the historically traditional daily White House press briefing, all under the guise of fighting unscrupulous journalists. Indeed, that same year, an edited montage video depicting then-President Trump shooting and stabbing journalists was played publicly at an event for his political supporters.

Scholars and advocates of press freedom worry that actions from the upper echelons of major political party, and those of some of their political supporters, serve to vilify journalists and incite public attacks against them. A study from Pew Research backs up this perception: People who supported Trump while he was president perceived journalists to be less ethical. Moreover, mainstream journalists who covered Trump's administration were frequently subject to an array of online name-calling every time they posted a new story.

The violence is not just rhetorical, though. For example, in May 2017, a Republican candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives, Greg Gianforte, body-slammed a journalist covering his campaign. The attack was fierce enough to send the journalist to a hospital. Although Gianforte was later convicted of assault, his actions were publicly praised by then-President Donald Trump and celebrated in some corners of society. Moreover, Gianforte would go on to win two terms to the U.S. House of Representatives and become governor of Montana.

Violence Against Journalists Abroad

Violence against journalists is even more prevalent and pernicious in some places outside of the United States, though. The Middle East, Latin America, and parts of Asia have proven to be especially dangerous for journalists. It is estimated that more than 800 journalists around the world have been *killed* on the job during the past decade alone. (Such numbers likely underestimate the reality.) There are many more global incidents of violence against journalists that include kidnapping, detention, and torture.

The disappearance of Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi has become a terrible symbol of the need to increase protections for journalists worldwide. *The Washington Post* writer reported critically about political corruption in the Middle East. In October 2018, he was assassinated in gruesome fashion by Saudi government actors who wished to silence his voice. Despite the evidence linking Khashoggi's murder to the Saudi crown prince, few concrete sanctions were placed on Saudi Arabia by countries that advocate for press freedom.

In another high-profile case, Maria Ressa, a Filipino-American journalist who founded a journalistic outlet called Rappler, was convicted of cyberlibel in the Philippines in 2020 after years of reporting critically on Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Press freedom advocates allege that the Duterte government was behind the lawsuit – which was advanced by a businessman who was the subject of one of Rappler's stories – and pressured the courts to interpret a 2012 law intended to combat child pornography, identity theft, and libel in a "Kafkaesque" way that could criminalize critical journalistic conduct. The National Union of Journalists of the Philippines, as well as international watchdog groups, have decried the ruling as an example of authorities using legal mechanisms to restrict critical journalism.

While a range of journalists face violence, there is one group that is particularly vulnerable: freelance journalists who cover conflict zones. Declining news budgets have resulted in more conflict journalism being performed by freelance reporters. Such reporters receive limited institutional assistance relative to staff reporters at mainstream international journalistic outlets, such as limited legal support, little access to on-the-ground resources like a security detail, and lack of access to services like emergency extractions. However, freelancers often need to take greater risks in order to gather information (e.g., photographs) from the front lines of conflict in order to have their stories get picked up by major journalistic outlets (and, in turn, get paid). Consequently, freelancers are disproportionately more likely to get killed when reporting abroad, and especially in war zones.

Female and Minority Journalists

Some research has found that women in journalism are more susceptible to violence than their male counterparts, particularly online. A study by the International Center for Journalists published in 2020 documented the variety of physical and psychological threats female journalists face online, which fall under the category of "gendered online violence."

Gendered online violence includes acts like cyber-bullying and online harassment, targeted toxic attacks, threatened sexual violence, and violations of digital security and online privacy (e.g., 'doxxing'). Such acts can further complicate the already difficult online environments that many journalists must operate within, and make female journalists especially vulnerable. These gendered online attacks occur on a variety of sites and platforms, from online news comment streams on a journalistic outlet's website to social media interactions on platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

Similarly, journalists belonging to minority ethnic groups are more likely to face online harassment than their majority counterparts. These attacks often come by way of ethnic slurs and coordinated action, and they tend to be more personal in nature. Newsrooms, in coordination with law enforcement, continue to develop best practices for preventing and reacting to this type of harassment, including creating clear standards for interactions allowed on their news websites.

All of this serves as a reminder that the practice of journalism is not only difficult but also dangerous.

Key Takeaways

» Journalists across the world face physical, mental, and emotional violence – both online and offline – as a result of doing their jobs.

» Violence against journalists is especially acute in countries where freedom of the press is less protected than in the United States, but it remains a problem in the U.S. as well.

» Offline violence against journalists is correlated with rhetorical attacks against journalists in elite discourse. Because the United States has long been viewed internationally as a bastion of press freedom, the anti-journalist behavior and rhetoric of recent years has set a dangerous example for other countries.

» Women in journalism are even more susceptible to violence than their male counterparts, particularly online.

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Unit IX

Regional Journalism

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Chapter 39

Journalism in Africa

From the early 1960s to the early 2000s, the professional practice of journalism in much of Africa was largely rooted in postcolonial structures and disseminated through communication spaces largely controlled by its governments. Such spaces, and especially the mediums of radio and television, were the primary hubs for public deliberation and political communication.

For example, governments throughout eastern and central Africa, including Burundi, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, and Tanzania, routinely adopted a paternalistic role in their country's media system by being the arbiter of what information actually 'informed' public discourses, while excluding the information it deemed to be "detrimental to the safety of the broader polity and the citizenry." They did (and some still do) so by establishing monitoring institutions and enacting media laws to curtail the free flow of information and offer a measure of soft (and sometimes, not so soft) power over journalists.

Beyond political power structures, journalism in many African countries is also heavily shaped by the economic conditions of those countries and the available infrastructure. For example, journalists in many African countries must seek second jobs or supplemental income, and there are often insufficient resources for in-depth, investigative reporting. Moreover, poor physical infrastructures can make it difficult to reach events in remote areas – though the rapid growth in digital infrastructures has been a boon for journalism in Africa.

Press Freedoms and Constraints

In recent decades, journalism in many African countries has been severely restricted by laws that limit certain kinds of content or offer government officials large loopholes for denying journalists access to public information. For example, in Chad, Gambia, and Zimbabwe, media policy is routinely leveraged to dictate what the press can report on or what subjects can be discussed on current affairs talk shows, as well as who is allowed to own media companies. Those policies are often enforced selectively to exclude political speech by activists and members of opposition parties.

Similarly, the countries of Zambia, Mozambique, and Malawi still leverage laws initially drawn up during the colonial era to criminalize journalistic attempts to expose political wrongdoing. They often do so under the guise of defamation and sedition laws. In particular, Zambia's Section 53 of the Penal Code empowers the presidency to censor publications that it considers 'contrary to the public interest,' while its State Security Act enables officials to treat large swaths of government documents as classified documents through broad national security claims.

Zambia is not alone in this regard: Gambia and Zimbabwe have received very poor ratings for press freedoms in recent years because of their liberal use of frivolous charges of sedition and libel against journalists. Put another way, legal action, and charges of sedition and libel in particular, have become major and effective tools for controlling independent media in many African countries, and especially those in sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, Burundi, Ethiopia, and Tanzania have drawn considerable attention in recent years because of politically related bans and suspensions imposed against traditional and online media that challenge its governments.

Additionally, in sub-Saharan African countries, including Eritrea, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the national government either dominates news media ownership or plays a major role in the economic sustainability of its media industries. For example, the Burundi government owns its main daily newspaper, its only national television station, and its only national radio station. While the country does have privately owned journalistic outlets, those outlets have limited reach and are sometimes only able to publish journalism irregularly.

It is important to note that some African countries, especially on the continent's southern tip, do have open and generally free media systems. In fact, Namibia (southern Africa) and Ghana (western Africa) have better rankings in the World Press Freedom Index than the United States. However, the continent as a whole tends to place serious legal and structural constraints on what journalists can and cannot do.

Professionalization and Labor Conditions

Compared to other regions, relatively few journalists in Africa possess formal college degrees or formal training. In Tanzania, for example, there are still fewer than a dozen journalism schools in the entire country. Moreover, the cost of formal journalism training is unaffordable to many aspiring journalists in Africa, and media owners in Africa have historically offered little investment in training programs for its journalists (or for professional associations of journalists).

In many countries in western Africa, the majority of journalists work as freelancers, earning an average of $2.45 U.S. Dollars per day, according to data from 2011. That adds up to a monthly salary that is often below those countries' minimum wage. Staff reporters often work without a contract and may thus perform their jobs with the fear of being replaced. In some countries, such as Ethiopia and Burundi, the wages of a full-time, mid-career journalist is roughly equal to that of an elementary school teacher.

A major consequence of these low salaries is that some journalists are more willing to accept so-called 'brown envelopes,' or bribes and gifts, in return for favorable coverage of political and business leaders. As such, adversarial and watchdog forms of journalism are not only legally risky but also economically disincentivized.

Over the past two decades, there have been concerted efforts to promote stronger professional ethics and to provide African journalists more resources to engage in independent journalism. These efforts have, by and large, been led by grassroots groups and the international community – but rarely by national governments. The international involvement, however, has raised questions about the potential 'Westernizing' of African journalism. Nevertheless, more African countries today have some form of media council or journalists' union than ever before, which has helped raise journalistic standards and offered a stronger – though often still inadequate – counterbalance against government intervention.

Sociotechnical Trends

Radio remains the primary medium for disseminating news in many parts of Africa. In particular, community radio stations are especially robust throughout the continent and have served as crucial tools for informing and mobilizing the public, especially in more rural areas that have lower literacy rates. Community radio has also proven to be one of the strongest counterbalances against largely concentrated media ownership in many African countries and against overt government influence over national media in places like Botswana and Tanzania.

Notably, the development of wireless digital technologies over the past two decades has transformed the media ecosystems in much of Africa. While wired broadband internet and cable television remains uncommon in large parts of the continent, the penetration of mobile devices and cell phone coverage has enabled more Africans to access major domestic and international media than ever before. While major digital divides still very much exist in the continent, they have been vastly reduced in recent years.

Moreover, the rapid proliferation of mobile internet has greatly expanded the reach of alternative (and opposition) media and enabled more participatory forms of journalism – which were previously uncommon. It is now quite common for newsrooms in eastern and southern Africa to actively solicit news tips and visuals from eyewitnesses, and incorporate them into their reporting. It is also increasingly common for journalists to publish more critical stories online under pseudonyms, and often through social media and blogs. Moreover, the proliferation of mobile payment systems has also made it easier for independent media to utilize crowdfunding as a business model.

Key Takeaways

- Many countries in Africa still operate under highly restrictive legal environments, and it is not uncommon for journalists in some countries to be targeted under defamation and sedition laws, or for the government to exercise a heavy hand over news production.
- It is economically challenging to do journalism in much of Africa, with journalistic labor often being unstable and poorly paid. It is not uncommon for journalists in Africa to seek out supplemental income or to be tempted by bribes in return for favorable coverage.
- Radio remains the primary medium for delivering news in much of Africa, but the rapid development of mobile internet has significantly altered the continent's media ecosystems.

Chapter 40

Journalism in Asia

Asia is home to the full range of media organizational forms and formats. Notably, the world's most read newspapers are found in Asia, including Japan's *Yomiuri Shimbun*, which has a print circulation of 9.7 million, and *Asahi Shimbun*, which has a print circulation of 7.5 million. (For comparison, *The New York Times* has a print circulation of 480,000.) It is also home to the world's most read English-language newspaper: *The Times of India*. Similarly, China-based Xinhua is today regarded as the largest international news agency in the world.

However, although it boasts a number of highly consumed journalistic products, the majority of Asian countries lack the professional norms and institutions necessary to support a strong and resilient media ecology. In particular, a combination of cultural, social, and political factors makes it difficult to practice journalism in most of the region. Moreover, many countries in Asia suffer from what the United Nations calls 'severe multidimensional poverty,' which in turn creates serious inequities in who has access to high-quality journalism as well as who gets covered in mainstream journalism.

Press Freedoms and Constraints

Generally speaking, Asian countries offer journalists inhospitable working environments that make it difficult for them to provide robust journalism and commentary on the powerful. According to Freedom House, only Japan, Papua New Guinea, and Taiwan could be said to enjoy a 'free' press as of 2017. Similarly, four of the three bottom-ranked countries in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index were Asian countries (China, North Korea, and Turkmenistan).

The constraints on journalism in Asia are applied by a wide range of actors using diverse methods. While brutal and overt forms of repression, such as jailing journalists and banning news outlets, certainly do occur in places like Myanmar and North Korea, many states opt for more subtle forms of control that draw less attention but are equally effective. For example, China and Singapore have granted journalists and citizens considerable freedom to produce and access journalism, but only about topics that do not significantly threaten the dominance of their ruling parties. Put another way, such journalists are generally free to produce business and lifestyle stories, and they may even engage in investigations of local corruption, but they are frequently barred from reporting critically about the Chinese leadership or on sensitive topics like the Uyghur genocide.

Journalists in most Asian countries must also contend with national security and state secrets laws that governments have made more sweeping under the guise of preventing terrorism. Such laws have been repeatedly applied to jail journalists and create a climate of self-censorship. Additionally, Asian countries will sometimes use tax laws to harass independent media. For example, the 24-year-old *Cambodia Daily* was forced to close down in 2017 after the Cambodian government issued a dubious bill for back taxes. Similarly, under the Rodrigo Duterte administration, authorities in the Philippines used dubious claims to investigate the owners of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* for alleged tax evasion, and the intense pressure led to the newspaper's eventual sale to a pro-government tycoon.

Governments in Asian countries have also applied economic pressure to punish critical journalism. One widespread tactic is to withhold spending on advertisements in media that are out of favor, resulting in a major loss of revenue in markets where the public sector is a major advertiser. For example, the India-based *Anandabazar Patrika* lost all state government advertising revenue after they opposed a powerful chief minister's reelection bid. In Indonesia, local governments and politicians are the main source of advertising revenue for many journalistic outlets, and it is customary for those organizations to align their editorial positions with the ruling parties.

Additionally, it is common for public television and radio stations in Asian countries to be directly controlled by political leaders who instrumentalize them as propaganda tools. Even when there is private ownership, the licensing (or regulation) of broadcasters in many Asian countries is controlled by political appointees rather than independent public bodies, which results in those lucrative licenses being given to pro-government organizations. Similarly, in countries like Malaysia and Singapore, newspapers require an annual publishing license, which can be denied or revoked at the government's discretion, with no reason given. As such, in many Asian countries, there is little obvious friction between major media outlets and the government.

Notably, many Asian governments are less sensitive about English-language media that cater to cosmopolitan urbanites and expatriates than they are about media in the local language. Thus, laws are often selectively applied, and local organizations end up being more tightly supervised because of their influence among the country's broader population.

Professionalization and Labor Conditions

In addition to legal threats from the government and interference from pro-government owners, journalists in many Asian countries are also subject to threats from citizens. Long before intolerant populism emerged as a major concern in the West with the rise of far-right politicians in Europe and the election of Donald Trump, multiple Asian countries were experiencing waves of anti-journalist sentiment. For example, in the Philippines, journalists investigating human rights abuses by President Rodrigo Duterte faced repeated threats of violence from his enraged supporters. In Indonesia, the country's largest newspaper, *Kompas*, routinely receives open threats from hardline Muslim groups. In China, nationalist sentiment can sometimes be an even greater obstacle to balanced coverage of Japan than Chinese government control. Notably, the Committee to Protect Journalists' Impunity Index, which measures the per capita number of unsolved murders of journalists, has placed the Philippines, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India among its dozen worst offenders in recent years.

While there is considerable variation in the level of journalistic professionalism within Asia, and in the values and norms that journalists in different Asian countries adhere to most, the region is generally distinct from places like the United States and Europe. In particular, Asian journalists are more likely to favor social responsibility and social stability over what they sometimes critique as an amoral set of newsworthiness values in the West. Asian journalists are also more likely to believe they play a role in nation-building and economic development, which tends to make them take a less adversarial stance toward the ruling party. Scholars have argued that this is not a simple, culture-bound act of deference or meekness. Instead, it reflects an attitude that favors more paternalistic rule, which should ideally result from competitive elections.

Moreover, many Asian journalists struggle economically. Low wages across the continent means that the practice of 'envelope journalism' is widespread, wherein bribes and gifts are offered to journalists in return for favorable coverage of political and business leaders. Moreover, some investigative journalists are motivated by the chance to uncover blackmail, which they can then use to extract 'hush money' from wealthy individuals. As such, adversarial and watchdog forms of journalism are not only legally problematic but also economically disincentivized.

Sociotechnical Trends

While traditional media throughout Asia have suffered declines in advertising revenue (like the rest of the world), the magnitude of that decline (and of declining subscriptions) has not been nearly as high. Moreover, some of those declines have been offset by the tremendous growth of many Asian economies, which has been reflected in booming media industries. As such, traditional media – and print journalism in particular – remain viable and are still major components of many Asian media ecosystems.

With the increasing development of digital infrastructures and rapid media growth, alternative online media have also emerged in some Asian countries. Such outlets have been funded in part by international media development foundations. However, rising standards of living and increasing amounts of disposable income have also offered some alternative media outlets a sustainable economic pathway. Examples of this include Malaysia's *Malaysiakini*, an online-only independent news outlet, and the Democratic Voice of Burma, a radio and television network founded by Myanmar exiles.

Notably, some Asian journalistic outlets have begun vying for a global audience through the use of different media technologies. Several countries now have state-funded external broadcasting services that serve public diplomacy interests (even as they are granted some measure of journalistic autonomy to maintain their credibility). For example, Japan's NHK now offers an English-language television channel and a radio service that broadcasts in 18 languages. Radio Taiwan International broadcasts its radio programs in 13 languages. Singapore's Channel NewsAsia reaches 28 countries and territories in the region through satellite distribution.

The biggest Asian player on the international stage today is China, though. Its suite of global media includes China Global Television Network, which offers news and documentary television channels in six languages and is available worldwide; the English-language *China Daily*, which prints 600,000 copies and is available in some major cities outside China; and Xinhua, which is now the world's largest news agency by some measures. Chinese media companies have also been at the forefront of using artificial intelligence and automation in journalism to create personalized news products that even feature computer-generated news anchors.

Key Takeaways

- Asian countries generally offer journalists inhospitable working environments that make it difficult for them to provide public-service journalism and commentary on the powerful. These restrictions are sometimes enforced through legal instruments but also via economic maneuvering.
- Violence against journalists is also prevalent in some Asian countries, such as the Philippines and Indonesia. That violence is sometimes enacted with impunity by highly partisan citizens.
- Traditional media in many parts of Asia have not been affected as deeply by changing media consumption patterns and declines in advertising revenue. Moreover, some of those outlets have begun to vie for global audiences.

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Chapter 41

Journalism in Europe

Journalism has a long and storied history in Europe, with the world's first regularly published newspaper, the *Relation aller Fürnemmen und gedenckwürdigen Historien*, being published in the free imperial city of Strasbourg (now part of France) in 1605. The *Relation* was quite international in nature, with news about politics, diplomacy, and the military coming from correspondents throughout Europe. The first daily newspaper, *Einkommende Zeitungen*, was published in Leipzig (Germany) about 50 years later. And, about 200 years later, in 1835, the French news agency Havas was founded – which later became the Agence France Press (AFP), one of the largest news agencies in the world today.

When it comes to the development of broadcast media, Europe in many ways stands out from other regions. Unlike the United States, which allowed radio to develop largely as a commercial medium, and regions like Africa and Latin America, where radio was frequently instrumentalized to advance government objectives, many European governments saw the emergence of radio as a chance to develop national public information systems. Under European *public service broadcasting* (PSB) systems, citizens were taxed in different ways and the proceeds of those taxes were devoted to creating national broadcasters whose mission was to inform the public. The prototypical example of this is the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The BBC was founded in 1922, financed largely by license fees and kept at arm's length from political interests through an independent governance structure. Public service broadcasters are still major news sources within many European media ecosystems (which also include private broadcasters and other private journalistic outlets).

However, it would be a mistake to view Europe as a monolithic entity because there is considerable variation in the media systems of European countries. For example, the more advocacy-oriented culture of journalism in southern Europe is quite different from the more detached observatorial culture of northern European journalism. Additionally, the comparably late emergence of democracy in eastern Europe has shaped the development of journalism in those countries.

Press Freedoms and Constraints

Rankings of media freedom by Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders help illustrate important differences in Europe. Northern European countries like Finland, Norway, and Sweden routinely appear near the top of those rankings – and, in fact, were the top three countries in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index. However, the eastern European countries of Belarus, Bulgaria, and Turkey (which is frequently considered part of Europe due to its participation in the European Union) are often regarded as countries where journalism cannot be freely practiced.

As a whole, though, Europe offers the most hospitable environment for journalism in the world, with countries in western and northern Europe being routinely ranked higher than the United States when it comes to press freedom. This is bolstered by the fact that some of the most active press freedom advocates are located in Europe. For example, Reporters Without Borders is based in Paris, the International Press Institute is based in Vienna, and Article 19 is based in London.

However, even in well-regarded places like the United Kingdom, journalists face growing obstacles. For example, national security laws approved by U.K. officials in recent years have made it far easier for journalists to be surveilled. Additionally, England's defamation laws – which offer journalists far fewer protections than those in the United States – have been used strategically in libel lawsuits by celebrities and business leaders to silence journalists. In fact, for many years, a practice of 'libel tourism' was used by prominent members of society to take advantage of that phenomenon. Under that practice, a journalist based in a country with strong legal protections against libel charges (e.g., the United States) would be sued in a country like England by an individual (e.g., a celebrity) because it was easier for that individual to win such cases there. Libel tourism was legally curtailed in England in 2013, but domestic journalists in England still operate with relatively weak protections from libel charges.

Moreover, the conditions for doing journalism are relatively difficult in central and eastern European countries, such as Moldova, Serbia, and Ukraine. While newly democratic eastern European countries have written constitutions that guarantee freedom of expression and of the press, there are still significant restrictions on access to government information. Moreover, overt government control in those places has in many ways been replaced with self-censorship resulting from political and financial pressures. This has created a challenging climate for journalists.

An illustrative example of this is Hungary. Even though the country's constitution protects freedom of speech and of the press, structural reforms and media legislation enacted and under the regime of Viktor Orbán largely undermined those protections. By 2017, nearly all daily regional newspapers had been concentrated into the hands of oligarchs connected to Orbán's Fidesz party. The best-selling political daily newspaper at the time, the left-leaning *Népszabadság*, was suspended by the government and its parent company was then sold to an Orbán ally, who decided to shut down the newspaper. After Orbán's landslide reelection in 2018, one of the two national opposition newspapers, the *Magyar Nemzet*, announced that it would shut down as well. Unlike other authoritarian regimes that seek to crush opposition media with blunt force, Orbán's regime sought to slowly strangle outlets not aligned with the Fidesz party's objectives.

In contrast, President Erdogan of Turkey unleashed a major crackdown against his media critics after a failed coup d'état attempt in 2016. Following the declaration of a state of emergency, Erdogan's regime shut down almost 150 media outlets, including 55 newspapers, five news agencies, 16 TV channels, and 23 radio stations. In short order, Turkey's entire news media ecosystem was reduced to a handful of pro-regime media. In 2021, Reporters Without Borders called Turkey one of the "world's biggest prisons for professional journalists."

Professionalization and Labor Conditions

The relatively unconstrained nature of western and northern European media ecosystems is a result of general political stability, state investment in independent media, and the establishment of mature institutions for media self-regulation. For example, the idea of voluntary press and media councils that monitor journalistic coverage and produce reports detailing its shortcomings has roots in Scandinavian countries, with the oldest such council having been established in Sweden in 1916. Western and northern European countries also tend to have strong, highly professionalized journalistic cultures and exhibit general acceptance of professional codes of ethics. In contrast, institutionalized forms of media self-regulation sometimes do not exist at all in southern Europe, and when they do, they are generally far less influential. Similarly, institutionalized self-regulation is relatively rare or weak in most media systems in central and eastern Europe.

In much of Europe, both public (state-owned or state-supported) and private (commercial) media coexist. In fact, the majority of media in Europe are commercial, profit-oriented organizations that get most of their revenue from advertising. Additionally, much of Europe has seen a considerable amount of deregulation over the past 30 years, resulting in greater private use of public airwaves as well as increased concentration of media ownership. For example, in the United Kingdom and in Spain, just two publishers control more than half of the print market, there are only four major publishing groups in the Netherlands. Moreover, some large companies like Germany's Axel Springer are major players in the media markets of smaller European countries.

State aid to the media sector is common practice in many parts of Europe, and especially in northern Europe. This includes not only robust public service broadcasters but also direct and indirect subsidies to commercial newspapers to promote public service journalism as well as media pluralism (e.g., a diversity of viewpoints and coverage of multiple regions). In the case of Scandinavia, journalistic outlets routinely receive tax exemptions, distribution benefits (e.g., lower postal rates), and state support for innovative experiments.

In many western and northern European countries, the question is not whether there should be public *or* private media but rather how public *and* private media should coexist. A practical consequence of this dual structure is that European journalistic outlets are among the best resourced in the world – especially in western and northern Europe. This, in turn, allows for strong, independent journalism in those places. In particular, public service broadcasters generally capture the largest share of national audiences for news programming and are widely seen as credible sources of information. Consequently, their journalists are able to conduct rigorous interviews with powerful individuals without fear of losing access to them (or being subsequently targeted). Many of these social benefits are passed on to journalists working for private outlets, too, as the journalists working for public service broadcasters frequently use their position to defend the institution of journalism in those countries.

Again, the situation is quite different for southern, central, and eastern European outlets. In particular, southern European journalists tend to adhere more strongly to overtly partisan, advocacy-oriented journalistic cultures, and while state subsidies are sometimes offered to ensure media pluralism, the amounts are significantly lower than those in western and northern Europe. In central and eastern European countries, commercial media organizations often operate on limited budgets and public service media – still shaped by their propagandist histories – tend to play more subservient roles.

Sociotechnical Trends

As of 2016, roughly 85% of households in the European Union had access to the Internet, making it the best-connected region in the world. Additionally, many

European countries benefit from advanced digital infrastructures and affordable access to mobile internet. Thus, unsurprisingly, Europe has been a pioneer in the digital transformation of journalism.

Notably, the dominant traditional media corporations are also frequently the ones topping the online news markets by offering digital versions of their print and broadcast media, as well as some new digitally native spin-offs. While European countries tend to be among the most willing to pay for online news – a 2020 survey found that nearly 45% of Norwegians paid for online news – their media markets have also suffered from declining ad revenue and a plurality of freely accessible online news sites. This has resulted in major financial challenges for commercial media in particular.

Additionally, in central and eastern European countries where (semi-)authoritarian systems exist, online websites, blogs, and social media have played an important role in giving a voice to opposing viewpoints amid crackdowns on traditional media. For example, following the Turkish crackdown on news media in 2016, a number of small-scale online journalism websites popped up and gave journalists a relatively unobstructed platform for distributing their work. Those websites have since drawn more attention from political leaders and have become targets themselves. However, European digital rights groups have played a leading role in developing privacy and anti-blocking technologies that have allowed information to flow more freely.

Key Takeaways

» Europe is arguably the most hospitable place for practicing journalism in the world, and northern European countries in particular are routinely ranked at the top of media freedom indices. This is the result of a combination of factors, including strong legal protections for journalists, stable democratic institutions, and the presence of major press freedom advocacy groups.

» Europe is home to many of the world's most well-regarded public service broadcasters. Those broadcasters are generally viewed as credible and capture large shares of news audiences. Nevertheless, a robust commercial media system helps offer media pluralism in many countries.

» Europe has relatively advanced digital infrastructures and is home to many advances in digital journalism, especially when it comes to monetizing digital journalism.

Chapter 42

Journalism in Latin America

The first printing press of the Americas began operating in 1539 in Mexico but it was not until 180 years later that the region would have its first regular newspaper, the *Gaceta de México*. Colonial journalism in the Americas was largely influenced by both the Church and the Crown, but to varying degrees depending on how isolated the town or city was. Throughout the colonial period, and especially in its latter stages, the press was crucial to the development of new Latin American nations by encouraging unity and mutual support – a phenomenon not too different from the press' role in the lead-up to the American Revolutionary War.

However, although there are some similarities in the cultures and practices of journalism in Latin America, the development of those cultures and practices diverged in important ways. Even today, scholars routinely find significant country-level differences. For example, Cuba still operates largely under a state-media system where many journalists serve as mouthpieces for government policy. In Mexico, there is ample private ownership of media companies but such ownership is also highly concentrated, with a journalism tradition that is largely loyal to ruling parties. And, in Chile, journalists have a long history of adhering to interventionist journalistic values, thereby pointedly challenging public elites.

Press Freedoms and Constraints

Many Latin American nations have histories of military dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, have experienced coup d'états, and have witnessed popular rebellions against political corruption. Put another way, journalists in Latin America have historically operated under politically volatile conditions – though much of the region is currently operating under a relatively peaceful and democratic period.

That volatility has made it difficult to sustain a tradition of public media in Latin America. Instead, the relatively few public media tends to be highly sympathetic to the government and, in many cases, are more akin to state-owned media than state-supported public service broadcasters. This is especially true in the case of television. The time frame of the medium's development in the region coincided with the proliferation of authoritarian regimes, which in turn led to the instrumentalization of television to advance nation-building strategies. Consequently, public media in Latin America routinely receive lower ratings than some commercial counterparts and are often perceived as lacking in credibility.

Private ownership of media in Latin America is also frequently highly concentrated and closely tied to political leaders. Similar to their southern European counterparts, many Latin American newspapers were family-owned, often by families with close ties to political leadership. In Colombia, for example, it was very common for a president to have some journalism background. Although officially prohibited by law, it is not uncommon for Colombian members of Congress to hold television or radio licenses. More broadly, politicians throughout the region are also either on boards of directors or are partners in media companies. As such, Latin America has historically had high levels of clientelism, where journalists write stories for the benefit of sources or owners rather than for the civic good.

Although the region saw the development of important press freedoms in the 1980s and early 1990s, many of those gains have been curtailed since then. Today, press freedoms remain limited in many parts of Latin America. Press censorship – and especially self-censorship – is rising and many elected leaders have solidified their control over legislative and judicial systems. This concentration of power has allowed political elites, and business leaders who work with government officials, to go after independent journalists and journalistic outlets. Some of the worst offenders in this regard are Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. In contrast, Jamaica, Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Suriname have relatively free media systems – in fact, all four were ranked higher than the United States by Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index in 2021.

International organizations, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, have played a major role in promoting independent journalism in the region. Those entities have successfully struck down legislation and judicial decisions restricting free speech, which in turn have had far-reaching consequences. For example, the Inter-American Court overturned Costa Rican journalist Mauricio Herrera Ulloa's conviction of criminal defamation for reporting on alleged acts of corruption. It also ordered Peru to restore a Peruvian television station owner's rights after it aired reports on corruption and human rights abuses. Notably, there are several instances where Latin American countries have complied with these and other orders and further gone on to reform some of their domestic laws. In short, external organizations have proven crucial to protecting journalists and citizens' access to information in the region.

Professionalization and Labor Conditions

Latin America is home to some of the world's most dangerous places for practicing journalism. In particular, Mexico routinely ranks as one of the most dangerous countries for journalists anywhere in the world. A lack of impunity allows criminal gangs, cartels, and corrupt officials to silence critics. Organized crime is particularly violent in places like Veracruz, Guerrero, Michoacán, and Tamaulipas. Journalists who cover sensitive subjects, and investigative journalists in particular, are routinely harassed and sometimes killed in gruesome ways in order to send messages.

Mexico is not alone, though. In May of 2017 alone, the Committee to Protect Journalists found that more than 100 journalists and media workers were threatened, harassed, detained, or attacked while covering protests in Venezuela. That number increased over the following months, during which hundreds of incidents of violence and intimidation of journalists were recorded. While state security forces and armed, pro-government civilian groups were responsible for most of the incidents, anti-government protesters also targeted journalists by robbing them and accusing them of being government sympathizers. Similar issues arose during the Venezuelan presidential crisis in 2019 and 2020.

More broadly, journalists in the region still struggle with structural issues ranging from low pay to corruption in the newsroom to varying levels of professional standards. Several Latin American countries have professional associations for journalists (in which membership is voluntary) or trade unions (in which membership is sometimes required for more desirable jobs). Such bodies have helped instill greater professional values and stronger ethical codes for journalists. In particular, those groups – together with international organizations – have helped to develop a stronger practice of investigative journalism in order to combat corruption. As such, there now more journalistic partnerships within and across countries in order to pool resources for far-reaching, in-depth investigations. While these developments have also helped promote a more objective approach to journalism, journalists in many Latin American countries still identify closely with a more interpretive approach that favors the use of pointed language and editorializing.

Sociotechnical Trends

Radio and television are still the primary vehicles for news in most of Latin America. Radio, in particular, remains its most inclusive medium as it is able to reach remote areas that still lack digital connectivity. For example, Bolivia has more than 800 radio stations in the country and, in Peru, radio remains the most commonly owned piece of media equipment in the country. As in Africa, community radio has proven to be a crucial counterweight to state-sponsored media and its highly concentrated private media, due in large part to its low barrier to entry. This is especially true for indigenous populations, rural communities, and the urban poor, whose perspectives are often missing in more mainstream media.

However, as digital infrastructures have improved, Latin America has also become a hub for innovative digital journalism. For example, Argentina's largest newspapers, *Clarín* and *La Nación*, have created online teams that routinely win international awards for their digital storytelling and data journalism. Additionally, a remarkable 94% of Latin American Internet users use some form of social media, which has opened up a range of opportunities for digitally oriented journalists and for participatory forms of journalism. At the same time, the prevalence of social media has also enabled misinformation and disinformation to spread rapidly during incidents in different Latin American countries. Those information challenges are made even more acute due to the existing low trust in news media. However, it is important to note that access to the internet (and high-speed internet in particular) remains highly uneven throughout much of Latin America.

Key Takeaways

» Latin American journalism has developed against a backdrop of authoritarian rule and state control. In many countries, public media and highly concentrated private media generally align with the ruling parties.

» Violence against journalists is not uncommon in Latin American countries, and especially in Mexico's recent history. The resulting climate of fear promotes self-censorship, which also coincides with overt censorship in some countries.

» Radio and television are the primary vehicles for news in much of Latin America, but improving digital infrastructures are also enabling new forms of journalism.

Chapter 43

Journalism in the Middle East and North Africa

The Middle East and North Africa present journalists some of the most hostile working conditions in the world. The region is generally marked by government control and threats from powerful non-state actors. While the recent so-called Arab Spring in 2011 helped enable journalistic independence in parts of the region, such freedom was fleeting and the region's media ecosystem is once again defined by close ties between news media and the government and, in some cases, overt oppression of journalists.

Modern Arab journalism emerged from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. Following World War I, the region was swept by a new sense of Arab identity and Arab journalists were at the forefront of the secular pan-Arabism movement. Newspapers such as *Halab* in the Syrian city of Aleppo openly advocated for Arab nationalism immediately after the war (with quiet support from the British, who sought to replace the defeated Ottoman Empire with a series of Arab states).

However, that Arab nationalism soon evolved into an effort to combat European colonialism, and Arab journalists played a major role in promoting a shared vision of regional political and social justice. In the decades that followed, though, such efforts gave way to divisions, and the region's elite news media generally transformed into government mouthpieces (or faced immense risks by staying independent).

Press Freedoms and Constraints

Shortly after World War II, Arab journalism enjoyed a brief window of freedom. Lebanon, in particular, emerged as a media hub – and it remains so today – because of its history of a weak central government, intellectual liberalism, and a relatively liberal culture. At the time, editors in Beirut generally expressed a more activist approach to journalism by openly advocating for different political and social causes.

However, this would soon change throughout the region as newly independent Arab states sought to impose their versions of 'truth' and legitimize their governments by muzzling independent journalism. In places like Libya, Syria, and Iraq, revolutionary governments leveraged control over the press to mobilize public opinion in support of foreign policy objectives like the liberation of Palestine. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, the government promoted private ownership but used different legal mechanisms to ensure that the proprietors were loyal to the government. This trend was only bucked in places like Lebanon, Kuwait, and Morocco, which permitted *relatively* independent journalism but still subjected them to more subtle pressures in order to maintain control of political discourses.

In short, over the past near-century, governments in the Middle East and North Africa have generally viewed news media as a tool for propaganda. Independent and more critical forms of journalism about the region thus had to be performed *outside* of it. Notably, in the 1970s, journalists and editors in the media hub of Beirut became the targets of assassinations and kidnappings during the Lebanese civil war, and newsrooms were bombed and their newspapers shuttered. Many prominent journalists and publications consequently fled to Europe. For example, the respected Arab newspaper *Al-Hayat*, whose founder had been assassinated, shifted it base to London, where it joined other prominent publications like the Saudi-run *Asharq Al-Awsat* and the Palestinian-run *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*.

Despite being run from abroad, those publications became among the most influential in the Middle East and North Africa – especially among the intellectual class. However, the outlets were still routinely targeted by state and non-state actors. For example, *Al-Hayat*'s offices in London, New York, Washington DC, and Riyadh were targeted by letter bombs and *Asharq Al-Awsat*'s Beirut bureau chief was convicted in absentia in Lebanon for "disturbing national security."

Even in Israel, which has the region's most vibrant and active media sector, journalists are sometimes subject to pre-publication military censorship, gag orders, and travel restrictions within the West Bank. Moreover, Palestinian outlets have been repeatedly shuttered by Israeli authorities and Palestinian journalists have been repeatedly arrested and detained by security forces. Consequently, as with earlier waves of journalist exiles, many Palestinian journalists have left the West Bank. However, like their predecessors, they face the risk of deportation if their reporting proves offensive to regional governments or powerful individuals, or if it harms international relations.

In contrast to Israel, Iran has offered a particularly repressive environment for journalists over the past few decades. While its 1979 revolution created a moment of journalistic freedom – more than 600 newspapers were founded within a year of the revolution – the next 10 years would be marked by arrests, abductions, and even executions of journalists. Today, Iran remains one of the world's biggest jailers of journalists, and it is not just domestic journalists who are targeted. For example, Jason Rezaian, the Iranian-American Tehran bureau chief for *The Washington Post*, was imprisoned for 18 months in 2014.

It is also important to note that broadcast media have been especially tightly controlled in the region. Up until the 1990s, most television channels in the Middle East and North Africa were owned by a government and their newscasts were tightly controlled. For example, during the first Gulf War, Saudi broadcasters did not mention Iraq's invasion of neighboring Kuwait for three days while the Saudi royal family debated its official position. The emergence of satellite television has played a major role in opening the region to new perspectives – especially as more citizens began to illegally install receivers in the 1990s and, in some cases, pirated encrypted, foreign channels.

Professionalization and Labor Conditions

While journalists in the Middle East and North Africa routinely report valuing truth and objectivity, values which are frequently featured in journalistic codes of ethics across the region, the degree to which journalists can adhere to those ideals varies widely. Journalists in the region today face many of the same pressures as their predecessors under Ottoman rule. This includes harsh penalties for criticism of the ruler (whether a king or elected president) and the selective enforcement of libel laws to target critical journalists and journalistic outlets. For example, in the past decade alone, Mauritania opted to shut down private television channels critical of the president's move to dissolve the senate; the Jordanian movement sought to disband a leading media watchdog group; and Iran repeatedly cracked down on news media shortly before elections.

In addition to legal threats, journalists in the region often fear for their personal safety. Ongoing patterns of harassment, threats, and attacks against journalists meant that the 2017 Freedom of the Press report categorized every Middle East and North Africa country besides Kuwait, Israel, and Tunisia as "not free." Additionally, between 1992 and 2017, the Committee to Protect Journalists identified at least 455 journalists who were killed during that period, and scores more who have been seriously injured. The 2003 invasion of Iraq and the recent Syrian civil war have been particularly deadly for journalists.

Consequently, journalists in that region must negotiate their professional ideals against a backdrop of widespread official censorship and unofficial self-censorship as well as the prospect of violence against journalists. Unsurprisingly, Reporters Without Borders have described Arab journalists as being trapped in a cycle of repression and servility.

There are notable distinctions between the region's dominant journalistic cultures and that of places like the United States. In particular, journalists in the Middle East and North Africa are far more likely to believe that a commitment to truth and informing the public must be balanced against (and should sometimes be outweighed by) being respectful of cultural values. For example, in 2006, a Danish newspaper published cartoons insulting the Prophet Muhammed. While many Western news organizations reproduced those cartoons on principle, relatively few journalists in the Middle East did because, they openly contended, freedom of the press did not mean the freedom to knowingly offend. Moreover, journalists in the Middle East and North Africa are far more likely to adhere to values of political and social advocacy than their counterparts in places like the United States.

Sociotechnical Trends

The launch of the Qatar-sponsored satellite broadcaster Al-Jazeera in 1996 had a transformative impact on the region's journalism. Following a bloodless coup d'état, the new Qatari emir hired a group of journalists who were veterans of the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) Arab-language service and tasked them with creating an independent media powerhouse in the region. This was done largely to raise Qatar's regional standing and counter the narratives from its neighboring media powerhouse, Saudi Arabia.

Al Jazeera brought an aggressive style of investigative journalism that was uncommon in the region's media. Specifically, it engaged in investigative journalism that targeted Arab governments and dug into topics that other regional outlets were reluctant to explore. While Al Jazeera's offices were quickly shut down in several regional capitals – and its reporters were outright banned from Saudi Arabia – the availability of satellite technology allowed its reporting to reach a large number of households in the region. Not only were audiences mesmerized but other regional journalists were inspired by Al Jazeera's pioneering work. This, in turn, increased the appetite for a more professional approach to journalism and helped spur the creation of more journalism schools in the region and the incorporation of investigative practices in university and training curricula.

Saudi Arabia responded to Al Jazeera's growing popularity by launching its own satellite broadcaster, Al Arabiya, in 2003. Al Arabiya offered parallel programming but from a Saudi perspective. These two broadcasters have had a major impact on regional attitudes toward the United States, especially during the U.S.'s 2003 invasion of Iraq. (The U.S. government, in particular, was highly critical of Al Jazeera's broadcasting of gruesome images of civilian casualties and giving voice to groups it designated as terroristic.) By 2017, there were close to 1,000 satellite channels in the Middle East and North Africa that spanned a wide range of political and religious perspectives and reached a sizable share of the region's households.

Social media have also proved instrumental to the flow of information in the Middle East and North Africa. Cell phone video of a Tunisian street vendor setting himself on fire in protest of government harassment helped spark uprisings that would shake the Arab world at the beginning of the 2010s. Citizen-captured images and videos of protests throughout the region were disseminated on social media and amplified by regional satellite channels, galvanizing citizens across the region. In particular, Egyptian activists used Twitter to both inform and mobilize their fellow Egyptians against President Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled Egypt for 30 years.

However, as authoritarian rulers regained control of some of those countries, they cracked down on journalistic independence with renewed vigor. Today, editors in Egypt report significant levels of government interference, with large numbers of media outlets being shut down and journalists facing more frequent and harsher penalties for doing their work than ever before. So-called 'fake news' laws have been used to restrict access to information for citizens and to penalize journalists who challenge the Egyptian government. More broadly, scores of journalists in Morocco, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia have been arrested as nervous governments sought to contain the spread of protests. The region's journalists have thus faced remarkably challenging conditions after a brief period of optimism.

Key Takeaways

- North Africa and the Middle East are arguably the regions with the most restrictive press laws. Despite brief moments of media freedom, the governments in that region routinely go after critical journalists and tend view media as government mouthpieces.
- North Africa and the Middle East is also one of the most dangerous regions

to report from, with journalists frequently targeted with violence. There is thus considerable pressure to self-censor as well.

» The popularization of satellite television, and the emergence of Al Jazeera in particular, has had a transformative impact on journalism in that region. Additionally, social media have helped loosen the grip regional governments have had on information.

About the Author

Rodrigo Zamith is an Associate Professor in the Journalism Department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. His research and teaching interests lie at the intersection of journalism and technology, with a focus on the reconfiguration of journalism in a changing media environment and the development of digital research methods for social scientists.

Zamith's research has been published in leading peer-reviewed journals, including *New Media & Society*, the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, and *Digital Journalism*. He has received multiple research awards from AEJMC, ICA, and other organizations. Zamith is a Faculty Associate of UMass' Computational Social Science Institute and a Faculty Affiliate of its Department of Communication.

Zamith's teaching includes both conceptually-oriented and skills-oriented courses, ranging from a broad overview of journalism to data-oriented journalistic practices. He is a former Lilly Teaching Fellow, recipient of UMass' College Outstanding Teaching Award, and finalist for the University's Distinguished Teaching Award.

Zamith holds a Ph.D. in Mass Communication from the University of Minnesota, an M.S. in Mass Communication from Florida International University, and a B.A. in Journalism from the University of Minnesota. Outside of work, he likes to exert himself on a tennis court, make odd gestures toward the television while watching Arsenal FC, and find reasons to end up on Stack Overflow.