

Diversity around a democratic core:

The universal and the particular in journalism

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Abstract

Journalism around the world is being shaped by both convergent and divergent forces. The resulting landscape, comprising a patchwork of journalistic traditions that are both similar and different, leaves scholars torn between a universalist impulse that risks imposing eurocentric benchmarks outside of their proper context, and a moral relativism that is unable to make any value judgments. When studying the relationship between journalism and democracy across the world, the challenge is to find common ground that is broad enough to include a diversity of norms and practices, but not to the extent of excusing those that perpetuate the domination of power over truth. This article suggests that the right balance can be struck with an open mind that is sensitive to differences of context, of media functions and of democratic priorities. However, in trying to globalize journalism studies, it would be a mistake to assume that official doctrines and ideologies are authentic representations of a society's culture and values. Scholars need to recognize journalists' attempts to hold on to the democratic values at the heart of the profession's dominant paradigm, especially in societies where those values are under assault and not part of the officially sanctioned discourse.

Keywords

Comparative research, democracy, journalism education, press systems, professional norms

Introduction

Journalism's special relationship to democracy has inspired both professional practice and academic scholarship. That relationship remains strong but is also inadequately problematized and theorized, threatening to obscure our understanding of journalism norms and practices around the world. The confusion is not helped by the fact that we are witnessing both convergent and divergent trends occurring simultaneously in world journalism and in democracy.

On the one hand, it is clear that democratic norms have never been as widely accepted as they are today. 'The democratic idea is close to nonnegotiable in today's world,' notes Shapiro (2003: 1). Authoritarian leaders may resist democratization with claims that their regimes are more democratic than critics allege, or that their societies are not ready for more freedom – but they rarely admit to rejecting democracy absolutely, Shapiro points out. Sen, similarly, has argued that democracy can be claimed to have reached the status of a universal value. 'While democracy is not yet universally practiced, nor indeed uniformly accepted, in the general climate of world opinion, democratic governance has now achieved the status of being taken to be generally right,' he observes (1999: 5). A century ago, colonized Asians and Africans had to struggle to make the case for collective self-determination. This is no longer the case. 'The ball is very much in the court of those who want to rubbish democracy to provide justification for that rejection,' Sen adds (1999: 5).

As for the media, Tehranian has argued that although norms and institutions must emerge from the ground and cannot be imported like technologies or commodities, there are 'certain minimum democratic and media professional values that have come to command universal respect' (2002: 72). These comprise freedoms and responsibilities to exercise professional duties, including the responsibility to promote democratic values. Empirical signs of convergence in professional cultures include the widening dialogue on journalism education, such as at the World Journalism Education Congress and in UNESCO's *Model Curricula for Journalism Education* (2007). The International Federation of Journalists has member organizations in more than 100 countries, including many with highly restricted media freedoms. The World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, WAN-IFRA, has member organizations from 120 countries. Its annual Asian Media Awards attracts editorial entries from western-based international publications such as the *Financial Times*, as well as news organizations from a wide range of media traditions, such as Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Gulf states, indicating some degree of voluntary acceptance of shared benchmarks of editorial excellence.

On the other hand, predictions at the end of the Cold War that successive waves of democratization would funnel the affected countries down a single, liberal democratic course (Fukuyama, 1992) are no longer taken seriously by scholars of comparative politics. It is by now widely accepted that democracy may manifest

itself in various sustainable hybrid forms that deviate from what some consider the ideal type (Diamond, 2002), and that these consolidated democracies comprise 'a continuum from low to high quality democracies' (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 7). Instead of a common end-point, it is more useful to think of 'multiple modernities' (Jacques, 2009). Journalism studies has responded with a surge in comparative work (Hallin and Mancini, 2011; Weaver and Willnat, 2012). The *Worlds of Journalism Study* (2011) has begun to generate a stream of valuable research. Hanitzsch et al. (2011), for example, have analyzed cross-national survey data to identify four distinct professional milieus or sub-cultures. While such studies have enhanced our awareness of diversity in journalism, it is still possible to speak of a dominant paradigm. Dahlgren says of what he calls 'classical journalism':

It is aimed at a heterogeneous citizenry that basically still shares the same public culture, and where citizens use journalism as a resource for participation in the politics and culture of society. Journalism in this mode serves as an integrative force and as a common forum for debate. Even if journalism in the real world has never operated quite like this ... it is this paradigmatic model of how it should be that has guided our understanding of it and our expectations of it ... (2001: 78)

It is timely to ask if this (Anglo-American) paradigm should be unseated from its current position of dominance, or if it remains the pre-eminent touchstone for journalistic sub-cultures (to borrow Hanitzsch's term) everywhere. This article has no pretensions of settling the matter, but aims instead to contribute to an evolving debate. It supports the idea of a universally applicable normative definition of journalism, with democratic values at its core. But it also suggests that, beyond this core definition, principles and practices should be expected to differ substantially across political regimes. It will offer a few heuristics that can help journalism scholars avoid some common pitfalls in research across national boundaries.

A democratic core

One of the main difficulties that beset attempts to rethink the relationship between journalism and democracy is the knowledge that this is an inescapably ideological question, in addition to being a theoretical one. It is hard – nor should we necessarily want – to overlook the fact that journalism is deeply implicated in democratic struggles everywhere, and that the ideas of media researchers can be used as ammunition by one side or another. This accounts in part for the hostile reaction directed at some past efforts to reform the research and policy agenda. The MacBride Report (1984), notably, was tarred in the USA as an apologia for state intervention in media industries (Preston et al., 1989). The fate of the MacBride Report is a cautionary tale for the exercise attempted in this collection of articles. It reminds us that there is a dominant paradigm, which is simultaneously the reason why critical scholarship needs to question its universality, and why such

questioning is likely to encounter significant push-back.

That risk is double-headed. On one side is the possibility of leaving too much of the paradigm untouched, as we continue to look at the journalistic traditions of the world through western liberal lenses, obscuring what makes other systems tick. This would preserve the ethnocentric tendency to assume that all norms and practices should eventually conform to the liberal democratic model, and that, until they do, they are somehow inferior. While it is good to subscribe to a strong normative vision for journalism, evangelical zeal can blind one to important historical and cultural differences to which imported institutions and practices should adjust if they are to work. At the other extreme is the risk of throwing the democratic baby out with the ethnocentric bathwater, such that any variations observed are rationalized as arising from the particular local context. This plays into the hands of authoritarian states, which are fond of justifying their restricted media systems by reference to exceptional circumstances, such as social instability or a cultural preference for harmony. An elevation of local context is often deployed as part of a strategy of ideological protectionism. Such relativistic rhetoric is sometimes gratefully endorsed by otherwise-liberal individuals and institutions that are hungry to do business in less-democratic societies – a tendency that is likely to grow as economic wherewithal shifts from North America and Europe to Asia, where media and media education are growing rapidly.

Wang and Kuo (2010) have warned that when we attempt to break free from eurocentric universalism – the practice of applying western theories uncritically to non-western contexts – the end goal should not be balkanization into culture-specific relativism. ‘While no single community should apply its criteria to others, the absence of agreement on criteria would mean that nothing is comparable and that little can be said of competing claims,’ they note (2010: 161). They propose a ‘yin-yang’ mentality instead of an either/or approach. Researchers should investigate the particularities of the local context for an in-depth understanding of its historical, cultural and social features. But just because contexts are not the same does not mean they are incommensurable or beyond comparison, they say. It is still important to pursue the unachievable goal of universal theories, and to try to reach consensus on what should be valued. In addition, it would be ridiculous to reject or accept concepts purely on account of their origin: by that token, we shouldn’t even speak of ‘Asia’, since that itself is a European construct, Wang and Kuo note wryly.

In line with their call to aspire towards universal theories, I offer here a definition of journalism that could be said to be broadly applicable across various political systems where journalists operate: journalism is the activity of reporting and commenting on current events, using observation, investigation and enterprise, in order to form a public that is capable of collective self-government. This definition says something about the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of journalism, incorporating the idea of a ‘journalistic method’ (Stephens, 1988). It echoes Schudson (2003) and Dahlgren (2001) in including a normative dimension that addresses the ‘why’ of journalism. The idea of the public is central. It is, as Carey (1987: 5) argues, ‘the

god term of journalism – the be-all and end-all, the term without which the entire enterprise fails to make sense’. Journalism exists in order to help sustain the public sphere and animate it. Thus, journalism enhances popular sovereignty: it helps citizens arrive at judgments about the common good. To that extent, there is, in the above definition, an irreducible democratic core in any journalism that is worthy of that name. This is in accord with Kovach and Rosenstiel’s *Elements of Journalism* (2007), which although described by its authors as a distillation of professional principles in the USA, has been widely cited beyond western democracies.

My definition is not so broad as to include public relations, advertising or state propaganda beneath its umbrella. Journalists should strive to work for the public, and not for political or corporate masters. At the same time, it is not so narrow as to exclude journalistic sub-cultures in societies where it is not possible for the press to situate itself in opposition to the government. It makes no prior claims about any particular institutional form being superior to any other. This is not to suggest that we must conclude any comparative exercise with a relativistic view that all different models are normatively equivalent – only that we do not impose standards from one society on another without assessing their validity. The rest of this article offers various heuristics for doing so and points out pitfalls to avoid. Examples are drawn from only a small number of countries with which the author has some familiarity. They are meant merely to illustrate how comparisons could be made, rather than attempting anything approaching a global survey.

Paradigmatic versus contextual differences

When comparing journalisms, it may be helpful to distinguish between what can be called paradigmatic differences and contextual differences. While Kuhn (1996) used the term paradigm to refer to universally recognized frameworks within the sciences, it has also been applied to the social sciences, to refer to dominant world views within a discipline (Mattei, 2001). The concept draws our attention to shared systems of thought that are legitimated and reinforced by professional organizations, educational institutions, and regulators and other government agencies. Individuals operating within the same paradigm may work on different problems, but agree on a shared basis for assessing one another’s work, using terms that are mutually understood. In contrast, those within different paradigms may, at a high level of abstraction, be seen as engaged in a similar enterprise, but their work tends to be unintelligible to one another. As for context, I mean simply the circumstances in which something occurs, which would include relevant historical, cultural, economic and political factors. Contextual factors are potentially limitless, so the analytical challenge, as in all case-oriented research, is to identify those that best account for differences in outcomes. Geographical location is the most obvious kind of context, but it is important not to exaggerate its importance or assume that other, possibly more important, details correlate with geography. For example, media organizations on separate continents may share a similar business model and ‘media logic’ (Altheide and Snow, 1979) that belie cultural

differences between the societies they are part of.

Two sets of practices may occur within the same context but answer to different paradigms, or share paradigms despite operating in different contexts. An example from another profession helps to illustrate the distinction between paradigmatic and contextual differences. In medicine, a paradigmatic difference exists between modern, western medicine and traditional Chinese medicine or Indian ayurvedic medicine, for example. While each claims to address physical health and well-being, they have different underlying epistemologies, and forms of training and accreditation that do not translate. Within modern medicine, however, contextual differences can be found. Similarly trained doctors sharing the same professional norms and worldviews could end up practising quite differently, depending on where they work. Such differences are partly due to the distinct challenges that the public expects the profession to address. Geriatric medicine, for example, is in high demand in advanced industrial countries with ageing populations, but one would not expect it to have as high a priority in a low-income country with low life expectancy. Other differences within the paradigm of western medicine could be due to cultural factors, such as religious attitudes to death, the unborn child and the role of the family in decisions concerning an individual's medical care. Then, there are differences in regulatory and financial frameworks, which may result in doctors applying markedly different protocols that are shaped by insurance and liability concerns that vary from country to country. The resulting differences in practice may be profound and consequential, yet it would still be the case that doctors functioning in these different contexts share substantial common ground. They can train together in the same centres of excellence, they are able to exchange ideas at conferences, and they can recognize best practices across borders.

In comparing journalisms, similarly, it may be useful to think in terms of paradigms and contexts. If, as the spirit behind this collection of articles suggests, journalism studies has been prone to judge all journalisms according to how closely they conform to the western liberal model, it would be helpful to recognize contextual differences for what they are. For example, the degree of elite consensus prevailing at any one time is known to have a major impact on mainstream journalism's relationship with power (Bennett, 1997; Dorman, 1997; Gans, 1979). Such a factor may explain observed differences better than presumed divergences in professional norms. This is not to say that we should abandon attempts to crystallize an irreducible core in global journalism. But what we choose to treat as paradigmatic should not be cluttered by norms and practices that are in fact contextual. Distinguishing between the two is of course a complex and contentious exercise, but that in itself is no reason for not trying.

I would argue that many past claims to have discovered distinct models of journalism – 'development' journalism, for example – have failed to state explicitly whether these supposed models amount to different paradigms in the sense that I have used the term here. That implication is sometimes contained in arguments that these models cannot be judged by the same standards as the dominant

model. Yet, when we try to understand these alternative models on their own terms, closer examination shows that there is no fundamental disagreement with the dominant paradigm and that differences seem more contextual. Development journalism, for example, distinguishes itself from western journalism not because the latter has no room for social responsibility, but because pressing socio-economic challenges such as poverty alleviation deserve a higher place on the media agenda in the Global South than it does in wealthy developed societies. Overstating the incommensurability of these journalisms is usually part of a strategy of moral relativism, aimed at deflecting criticism of political control of media.

A functional approach to democratic roles

Journalism serves multiple democratic roles. These have been sliced in various ways, with Norris and Odugbemi (2010: 15) offering this formulation:

[A]s *watchdogs*, the news media have a responsibility to help guard the public interest, ensuring the accountability of powerful decision makers by highlighting cases of malfeasance, misadministration, and corruption, thereby strengthening the transparency and effectiveness of governance. As *agenda setters*, the news media have a responsibility to raise awareness of pervasive social problems, helping to turn public attention to matters of common interest, to inform governing officials about social needs, and to inform the international community about development challenges. As *gatekeepers*, the news media have a responsibility to reflect and incorporate the plurality of viewpoints and political persuasions in reporting, to maximize the diversity of perspectives and arguments heard in rational public deliberations, and to enrich the public sphere.

Curran (2002) and Baker (2002) have noted that no single organizational form is known to be able to master all of journalism's democratic roles. Media systems comprising a diversity of forms are said to serve democracy better. Furthermore, it is not generally claimed that the press is expected to perform any of these roles single-handedly. Lippmann (1925), for example, was famously sceptical of journalism's ability to achieve its watchdog promise unaided, calling for the equivalent of an independent think-tank to aid in that task. If indeed journalism has multiple roles that each form cannot fulfill alone, we should expect to find significant variation across democracies in the way that the press goes about trying to serve its democratic functions. Democracies differ in their institutional configurations and these may in turn place different demands on journalism. Therefore, any normative account of journalism's relationship to democracy must take into account how the press in each country relates to various other democratic institutions there.

Such analyses could benefit from applying the concept of functional differentiation, as used by Hallin and Mancini (1984). In their comparison of the United States and Italy, they noted that the weaker public sphere in the USA resulted in journalism filling the vacuum, providing political interpretation and

critique; whereas Italy's more vibrant and ideological public sphere does not need the journalist to play an active interpretive role, resulting in the media acting as functionaries of parties rather than a separate political institution. Hallin and Mancini thus interpreted the observed differences in journalistic styles in the two countries not by reference to some universal standard, but as local responses to their particular environments: the media's roles were shaped in part by the roles played by other institutions, in this case political parties and civil society.

As an example of how such an approach could be applied fruitfully beyond developed democratic societies, consider how the media in two East Asian countries, Singapore and China, approach journalism's watchdog function as it relates to exposing corruption within the state. Singapore's press does not play an assertive anti-corruption role. But this is hardly because Singapore's semi-democracy is tolerant of graft. On the contrary, the island republic ranks among the least corrupt regimes in the world (Transparency International, 2011). A functional differentiation approach would invite us to look for explanations in the wider context, where we would find that Singapore has an extremely powerful and independent anti-corruption police force. Also playing a role is a political culture of zero tolerance towards even petty corruption, thanks to an effective national campaign implemented as soon as the country became independent in the 1960s. It could be argued, therefore, that a watchful citizenry backed by effective law enforcement has rendered the media redundant as a watchdog against corruption: journalists report – but are not required to initiate or lead – corruption investigations. Being an adversarial watchdog role does not rank highly among Singapore journalists' perceptions of their role (Hao and George, 2012).

As for China's press, it is on paper the propaganda mouthpiece of the Communist Party. Official doctrine aside, however, sections of the Chinese media play an important role in combating government corruption, mainly at the local level (Bandurski and Hala, 2010; Tong, 2011). Indeed, in the *Worlds of Journalism* (2011) pilot study, China emerged as the only country among the 18 (which included liberal democracies such as the USA and Australia) where being a watchdog against government was ranked as the number one purpose of journalism. With other institutions failing to tame China's rampant

corruption, the press – with the conditional blessings of the central government – has embraced that function. Functional differentiation helps explain the paradox that spirited investigative journalism is more prevalent in communist China's state-owned media than in semi-democratic Singapore where most newspapers are in private hands and controls are not as strict.

Actor-oriented accounts

One risk of applying a functionalist perspective is mistaking the empirical for the normative. Practices that should indeed be placed outside the bounds of democratic acceptability could be rationalized via functionalism as part of a larger system that works to some degree. This would push us into the kind of extreme

relativism that Wang and Kuo warn of. One corrective is to construct what Geertz (1973: 15) has called 'thick', 'actor-oriented' descriptions, to ensure that our structural analyses are not oblivious to agency. Accounts of dynamics on the ground would also help us avoid the problems that undermined the *Four Theories of the Press* project (Siebert et al., 1956). A volume edited by Nerone (1995) has critiqued *Four Theories* as really containing just one: it projects four worldviews through the prism of liberal democracy. Although the categories proposed in *Four Theories* are no longer widely used, its underlying approach continues to infect media studies. Much comparative work on media systems goes no deeper than an analysis of formal structures such as a country's press laws and worldviews as expressed in official ideology. This may be less of an issue in liberal democracies with relatively robust free-press protections and strong journalism professions. There, constitutional principles tend to be broadly in line with journalists' own understanding of their roles. The US First Amendment, for example, is both part of the structure of the media system and a rallying cry for the press. In less-democratic societies, however, laws and official rhetoric lean towards restricting the press and justifying those restrictions; it is unlikely that they reflect journalists' own values and aspirations.

Deducing national journalism norms from official ideology is a surprisingly common error. Intentionally or not, it implies that in restrictive media environments, journalists cannot be anything other than uncritical vessels of state propaganda. While prototyped by *Four Theories*, there are hints of it even in more recent comparative work. For example, Merrill et al. (2001) make claims about the libertarian model being challenged by neo-authoritarian journalism, including Asian authoritarianism. Singapore is cited as an example of the latter, based entirely on statements of an influential former prime minister. Commenting on the methodological errors of *Four Theories*, Christians et al. (2009: 16) are rightly critical of the fallacy of assuming 'one-to-one correspondence' between philosophical traditions, political systems and media forms, arguing that each has its own logic and may not translate to the other levels. But even they slip into such a trap when they relate Southeast Asian democracies' less contestatory media to an 'underlying religious and cultural consensus' (2009: 22). It is not clear who claims that there is such an underlying consensus other than spokesmen for the regimes in question.

In eliciting actor-oriented viewpoints, it is also necessary to think carefully about whom to ask. Who gets to speak for journalism? In the developed and democratic West, this is less problematic because the profession is strong and institutionalized. Even there, though, there is a tendency to privilege the perspectives of the national or elite press, and ignore local media and certainly alternative media. The problem of representativeness is multiplied many-fold in most Asian countries where the profession is less developed and cohesive. For example, alternative media in restricted environments may provide more authentic indicators of journalism norms than do mainstream media, which tend to enjoy less professional autonomy. In multilingual countries such as India and Malaysia, the norms of the English-language media can be quite different from those of the vernacular press, with the

former more likely to conform to the Anglo-American model while the latter draws inspiration from deeper literary traditions.

Also problematic is the reading of norms off content. In any setting, the output of journalism is a product of multiple influences that are difficult to isolate (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). In restrictive media environments, by definition, we cannot assume that whatever is published is a straightforward reflection of professional intentions. Editorial processes are subject to censorship and self-censorship, and content has to be read as the product of a complex interaction between independent professional judgments and various forms of accommodation to the requirements of the powerful, ranging from complete acquiescence to creative methods of resistance that escape official sanction. Analyzing published work requires deep knowledge of the context in which the publication operates and sensitivity to subtle discursive strategies. One example of such work is Lee and Lin's (2006) study of self-censorship practices in Hong Kong. The territory's commercial media had to be simultaneously supportive of democracy, watchful of Beijing's policies, and careful not to provoke China's leaders. Lee and Lin note that in the grey area within which the Hong Kong media operate, analysts need to pay close attention to how things are said, not just what is said.

The existence of what Scott (1990) has called the 'hidden transcripts' of resistance requires that researchers who are interested in restricted media systems spend more time backstage. Accounts that are sensitive to the perspectives of actors are more likely to generate evidence that can be used to build richer theories about journalism and democracy. By way of illustration, Josephi's (2002) interviews with young Singaporean journalists and their supervisors reveals them trying to negotiate various sets of values – ranging from a passion for journalism as a vocation to the need to protect their newspaper from government recrimination through self-censorship if necessary.

Democratic priorities

Explorations of journalism's relationship with democracy around the world also need to take cognisance of the theoretical complexities in that relationship. The dominant paradigm emphasizes journalism's monitorial role, acting as the public's eyes and ears and providing timely information and advice. 'The monitorial role is at the heart of journalistic activity, and this is what the profession has learned to do best,' note Christians et al. (2009: 157), adding that 'the definition of the press as essentially an instrument for conveying information in the wider public interest has shown a certain capacity to survive and to propagate itself, even against the odds' (2009: 151). However, even if this is the most basic task of the press, it does not amount to a full statement of the debt that journalism owes to democracy. Christians et al. suggest that there are at least three other modes – the facilitative, the radical and the collaborative – that media could choose to adopt to drive their operations.

The matter is further complicated by the fact that the concept of democracy itself

contains ideas and ideals that are in tension with one another. Even if one can speak of a dominant paradigm within media studies that imagines a particular relationship between journalism and democracy, the irony is that there is no equivalent paradigm within democratic theory, which has instead juggled various conceptions of democracy, acknowledging fundamental and probably irreconcilable differences in their underlying assumptions. Scammell and Semetko (2000) identify five distinct strands of thought: liberal and libertarian theories, with their faith in unregulated marketplace competition; competitive elitism, which emphasizes the role of elites in defining the common good; liberal pluralism and its focus on interest group competition; deliberative democracy, which wants to broaden and activate the public sphere; and radical pluralism, which focuses attention on traditionally marginalized and dominated groups. Baker (2002), similarly, has highlighted different normative theories of democracy, each with different implications for the press.

A more fundamental divide separates opposing perspectives on the potential of the public. Democracy bequeaths sovereignty onto the people, but it is unclear whether they will ever be up to the task of collective self-government. Even as democracy has attained a non-negotiable status in politics (and journalism), democratic theory has continued to oscillate between more sceptical and more utopian perspectives (Shapiro, 2003). Muhlmann (2010: 32) has neatly summarized the resulting confusion for journalism scholarship:

On the one hand, the schema of the innocent public/guilty journalists lends itself to a lively and focused attack, but fails to question the responsibility of the public for the mediocrity of the journalistic product it denounces. On the other, the public is implicated in the critique, is perhaps even the ultimate cause of the unease, but the risk of deviating into an anti-democratic position leads to obvious wavering.

Commenting on journalists' and journalism educators' ignorance of such debates in political theory, Schudson (1983: 12) has observed that 'the platitudinous thinking about democracy that is the coin of the realm in and around journalism' is not necessarily a bad thing. Society needs journalists to have high democratic hopes while responding creatively to the realities on the ground, he notes. Indeed, this may help to explain the resilience of the dominant paradigm: no matter how tenuous, it serves the journalism profession well as a creed. Whether it serves journalism research, though, is another matter.

Pressure to rethink the relationship between journalism and democracy has come partly from changes wrought by the internet. The widening locus of journalism, from professionals in news organizations to various other practitioners and sites, compels researchers to recognize that what they had assumed to be universal or absolute were in fact functions of particular historical factors (Heinonen and Luostarinen, 2008). Thus, for example, Dahlgren (2001) has noted that what he describes as the 'classical' paradigm of journalism, quoted above, was shaped

in the early 20th century, when it was based on prevailing liberal ideals of democracy and citizenship. Dahlgren argues that, with many of the underlying premises of modernity being challenged, we can no longer take that paradigm for granted. Hartley (2008) applies similar reasoning when he questions what he calls 'representative journalism'. Although, in theory, it is everyone's right to use freedom of speech, in practice that freedom has tended to be exercised through professional media. Just as it is practically impossible for everyone to be actively engaged in politics on a daily basis – even if all have a right to do so – it has been equally unrealistic to expect everyone to be directly involved in seeking and imparting all the information that is needed for collective self-determination. Better to outsource the job to accountable individuals with the skills and time to do so on people's behalf, than to imagine that everyone can do it, and leave it undone. Now, Hartley points out, new technologies may be transcending some of the practical limitations that had made societies shelve 'journalism as a human right' and depend on 'representative journalism'. Hartley asks us to ponder the possibility that journalism as we know it may be only a 'transitional form', filling the gap before the technical means surfaced to turn everyone into a journalist.

The suggestion that professional journalism's monitorial role is any less important today is, of course, a contentious one. Many believe that it is as vital as ever, hence the frantic efforts to find new business models to sustain it. Even if the press holds on to its traditional role, however, there is no reason why it should not supplement this with a broader understanding of its democratic mission. The emphasis on informational and watchdog journalism could be seen as a legacy of a particular historical period, when democracy was largely an intra-elite concern – when large sections of the population were disenfranchised and not considered worthy of basic human rights, let alone full participation in public life. Today, our understanding of democracy is more inclusive, more conscious of the need to bring citizens of different cultures to the table. If the democratic obsession was single-mindedly on vertical relations between state and society, it could be said that there is as great a need today to tend to horizontal ties, within society and between societies.

Currently, the monitorial burden is shared with other institutions and individuals, including civil society organizations and citizen journalists. Watchdog groups in international and domestic civil society were a non-factor when journalism's understanding of its democratic role was forged. It is not surprising that media at the time found their niche where they did. Now, however, even in less-democratic societies, non-governmental organizations play an important role in holding the powerful to account. On the other hand, the function of promoting respect for diversity and pluralism, together with conciliation and solidarity, is one that perhaps no institution can perform better than the press. And there can be no doubt that the need to reinforce such pillars of democratic life has grown into one of the most pressing challenges of social existence (Hamelink, 2011). A culture of tolerance and dialogue is increasingly vital for survival in our increasingly crowded, inter-connected and diverse societies.

The imperative to avoid violent social conflict may be a key reason why some journalists and media voluntarily collaborate with governments that are seen as offering unity and stability. This raises the question of whether press freedom is relatively less important in societies where, after experiencing particularly traumatic conflict, order is prized over liberty. Could it be said that, in such contexts, journalism does not need much democracy as a prerequisite for performing a valuable social function? This is a favourite argument of defenders of restricted media environments. But it is one that has little merit. The worst cases of extreme speech – those culminating in genocide – have occurred in the absence of pluralistic media, when voices opposing extremists, including their victims, have been forcibly silenced (Article 19, 1996; Slagle, 2009; Thompson, 2007; Tsesis, 2002). The surveillance or monitorial role of the press is essential for the fulfillment of its other roles, even if its relative importance varies from society to society.

It has become fashionable in some circles to imagine that journalism as we know it can be transcended by the abundant communicative opportunities provided by new media. Yet, journalism remains ‘a fundamental mediation between the individual and the community’ and, as such, the problem of how to conceptualize it in a way that is both theoretically sound and normatively substantive will not go away (Muhlmann, 2010: 9). Faced with multiple forms of journalism and of democracy, the challenge is to find common ground that is inclusive of diversity, yet not so morally relativistic that it excuses practices and standards that perpetuate the domination of power over truth. Such a balancing act requires that we keep an open mind to accept differences of context, of media functions and of democratic priorities, but that we also recognize journalists’ attempts to hold on to the democratic values at the heart of the profession’s dominant paradigm, in societies where those values are under assault.

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