# ACADEMIA | Letters

## *The relevance of professionalism in the changing sector of journalism*

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## Introduction

The labelling of journalism as a profession continues to come under scrutiny as the immediacy of news expands in an era of digitalization, 24/7 live feeds and the decreasing margin of distinction between professionalism and amateurism, widely referred to as citizen-journalism.

This article draws on an international sample of papers and provides an initial commentary on the emergence, and application, of the term professionalism, followed by the make-up and widely recognised attributes of a profession. The focus of journalism as a specific example of professionalism is then reviewed and reveals the ongoing and widespread changes that are impacting on this sector.

## Defining professionalism

In searching for a definitive answer to the question about professionalism, there isn't one! However, Cogan (1955) provides an insight into the complexities of the concept, that remain relevant in 2021, proffering a view that a profession is both observable and measurable. This involves an individual adhering to the rules of professional conduct, one who has participated in a specialist education and demonstrates standards of competence. Relationships are developed with clients, colleagues and the public. Cogan adds that the advantages of an operational definition has a tendency to stabilise boundaries between genuine professionalism, unprofessionalism and non-professionalism.

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Further insight into professionalism suggests that the distinguishing mark of a professional is the possession of special training which supports the acquisition of an intellectual technique and that 'a profession can only be said to exist when there are bonds between the practitioners, and these bonds can take but one shape – that of formal association.' Carr-Saunders and Wilson 1933: 298). In order to achieve membership and recognition within a profession, Cogan (1955) emphasises the completion of training, which may be arduous and require a personal commitment to an exacting ethical code, adding that failure in either of these domains is a failure of professionalism. Overall, the challenge of acceptance has incorporated effective and on-going public relations. In the absence of robustness, a profession could anticipate the gradual dissolution of the core attributes that were the original foundations of growth.

According to Trede (2012), professionalism is a fluid concept which is not bound by specific rules, is context dependent and apparent as a result of professional identity, which may be a role or accreditation via a recognised body. A competency-based approach erodes the fluid aspect of professionalism which should not be viewed in conjunction with a set of rules, the outcome being a fixed and static situation. Professionalism encompasses decision-making in context, responsible judgements and actions founded on a clear knowledge of what an individual stands for in terms of values and interests. A sense of professional identity in terms of actions, thoughts and a way of being are the underpinning aspects of professionalism. An opposing view is put forward by Power (2008) that properties of autonomy, trust, concern for client needs and a shared moral language are, at best, aspirational, more imagined than real and therefore should not be viewed as an accurate empirical description of professional practice.

Being a professional suggests an expert occupation (Evetts, 2013) linked with being worthy of trust. The expansion of the term professional and the frequency with which the word is now used in connection with marketing and advertising of products and services - where it supports segmentation and has a broader appeal is a further view proposed by Evetts (2013). In addition, the term professionalism has gained a strong foothold in the management literature providing links to positions and behaviours in many sectors and spheres. The result being further lack of clarity related to a widely agreed definition for professionalism. Power (2008) emphasises the impact of the information age enabling rapid and widespread acquisition of expertise and the subsequent erosion of the exclusivity of the knowledge base that is the foundation upon which professionals gain status. This factor is a mechanism of change which has impacted on the components of professionalism and the ways in which they relate to each other. This contributes to the compelling tension between the perception of the expert, modern professional who is independent, influential, well rewarded, respectable and client-focused and the anxiety riddled reality of being overwhelmed.

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Summarizing the insights into the constituent elements that contribute to the notion of professionalism, from a historical perspective, suggests the concept is evolving and changing which lacks uncontested definitions and traits and is, in essence, an artificial construct.

## Journalism as a Profession

Journalists were officially identified as elite professionals and transformed from previous references to literary men through the formation of the Shanghai Journalists Association under the Chinese Guomindang influence in 1920. This initiative was part of the groundswell to distinguish between profession and occupation in the Chinese language (Crook, 2008). In the western world there were initiatives to license journalists as it was widely recognised that individuals entered the field without preparation or experience of any kind. There was support for 'such emerging professionalizing agents as journalism schools, professional organizations and ethics code." (Cronin 1993:235). This era of formalization is being reconstructed against the backdrop of seismic changes confronting the field (Vos and Thomas, 2018) due to advancements and access to technology. The historical roots of newspapers and diversification of journalism have emerged in an era of digitalization and impacts on the future security of what has been a market-driven profession.

Schnell (2018) refers to journalism as a profession emerging alongside modern mass media which experiences tension between a public duty and widespread commercialization of the media, a growing change during the final quarter of the 20th century which provided tremendous development opportunities. However, alongside the opportunities came the threat of amateurs, which has resulted in the opposite situation to that experienced in sport where the rise of the professional has been exponential, (Crook, 2008).

The pathways to professional journalism, identified by Schnell (2018) are similar to those previously identified in the wider professionalism section. They are outlined as the watchdog with social proximity, objectivity which encompasses neutrality and impartiality to legitimize media practitioners, autonomy with freedom of opinion, ethics to ensure trust and immediacy with novelty. These traits can be summarized as an expert role. However, the growth in the academization of journalism introduced a fundamental change from a profession of talent to a profession of qualification, eroding the traditional view that journalism is craftwork, learned in the field.

Of these traits, immediacy is an increasing priority with the growth and expansion of 24/7, real-time publishing with complex consequences linked to social change. This stems from a transformation of audience expectations which is increasingly fragmented, complex and even participatory, which is evidenced by the growing practice of a journalist interviewing

a journalist.

Deuze (1999) identified three key differences as online influences emerged. Interaction with the audience, asking for views and exchanges, which is a cultural change with the potential to provide faster access to stories. Personalization or individualization which merges with the arena of marketing and includes the use of hyperlinks to push or pull other sources. Convergence is 'the melting of these traditional media forms of image and text into one story' (Deuze, 1999:379). In terms of skills, writing should be non-linear to enable chunks of content to be extracted and reused elsewhere. The vast array of resources is contributing to the role of the emerging opinion that the journalist is, more or less, superfluous.

As a result, journalism is increasingly prefixed with other terms. Cyber-journalism or network journalism are used by Schnell (2018), both reinforce the views previously expressed by Deuze, (1999). The format is multi-media story packages created by a team to engage in economic competition and work is measured in the countable pieces of words, paragraphs and illustrations. These work practices have the potential to result in deskilling, where the technological issues have greater prominence than writing.

An alternative term, 'citizen journalist' is gaining prominence. Luo and Harrison (2019) link this aspect of journalism to postings, hashtags, links and ratings. This is a widespread process in Western nations using media content as a starting point to participate as a content creator and ultimately generating the power to influence and reverse opinion. Darbo and Skjerdal (2019) add that professional journalists are under threat and media-houses themselves also actively encourage user-generated content which has an increasing attraction for the twenty first century multi-layered media society. Whilst opposing views linked to the hybridization of journalism where the lack of obvious distinctions results in 'some loss of relevance,' (Singer, et al., 2013) the opposing view appreciates that reader-generated content is beneficial when a collaborative approach is adopted, there is clear merit in reader retention who support circulation numbers and contribute to the sales revenue stream.

## Conclusion

From the growth and distinctive traits of professionalism, journalism has undergone extensive change where the difference between layperson and professional has narrowed so that the point of blurring is more accurately described as overlapping. According to the American Press Institute the average person works like a journalist and is now his or her own circulation manager and editor. The relationship between the journalist and the reader has fundamentally changed; it will continue to do so. The popular view that everyone is a journalist will strengthen and be endorsed by evolving practice and the continued widespread use and appli-

cation of technology.

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