

## What Are Journalists for Today?

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### 5.1 THE QUESTION

Seen from one angle, the question of journalists' purposes appears as a pressing problem for journalists. Faced with public distrust, authoritarian politicians, new technologies, and uncertain business models, journalists ask themselves – or are asked by others – how should they respond. Should they pursue the purposes they've sought previously, adapt those purposes to fit new conditions, or embrace new purposes altogether? Even in instances where their purposes seem clear, the conditions for fulfilling them often appear tenuous. A journalist might believe her or his job is to inform citizens, but she or he must still confront the reality that many citizens only consume news that accords with their preexisting beliefs and that some ignore the news altogether (Stroud, 2011). Whatever their specific reactions to these and related circumstances, the question of journalists' purposes appears inescapable.

The same question also presents itself, no less pressingly, to scholars of journalism. For them, journalists' reactions to economic, technological, social, and political changes are not merely interesting; they also offer

potential insights into the organization, disruption, and potential reproduction or renewal of a key aspect of contemporary social life. Just as importantly, though less widely recognized, the question of journalists' purposes strikes at the material basis of these scholars' existence. Most work in departments of media and communication, which were formed in part to prepare students for careers in the media, broadly understood (Waisbord, 2019). Insofar as stable enrollments help underwrite their professional activities, scholars need on some level – the salience varies across departments and by rank and specialization within them – to consider the type of training required of students interested in pursuing such careers.

The question of journalists' purposes is thus pressing, though it is hardly novel. Journalists and scholars alike have posed the problem and offered answers to it for at least a century (Lippmann, 1922; Londres, 1929; Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm, 1956; Weber, 1919). Yet however one evaluates the perspicacity of prior perspectives, none can authoritatively claim to be the final word on the issue. As Jay Rosen (1999) notes in his work on the topic, the question of journalists' purposes is one “we need to ask for every age” (1999: 281). And while contemporary developments bring to the fore a range of seemingly novel issues for scholarly analysis, they do not obviate the need to revisit old questions. Indeed, sometimes the most pressing question is also the most basic. What, then, are journalists' purposes today, in this context and under these conditions?

## 5.2 EXTANT APPROACHES

One approach to answering the question of journalists' purposes is normative. Analysts articulate what a particular society requires of journalists and specify how journalists can go about fulfilling these requirements (Muhlmann, 2010; Schudson, 2008). In Western Europe and North America, these analyses almost inevitably revolve around competing visions of democracy. Journalists' purposes are viewed, variously, as informing the public, holding political and economic elites accountable, cultivating empathy, promoting deliberation, and so forth. Journalists themselves learn these norms through discussions about the sorts of practices and standards that they should and should not engage in. Seemingly every new development – audience engagement, revenue models, industry partnerships – turns at some point into a debate about whether they facilitate or detract from the sorts of things a journalist ought to do. In highlighting such normative considerations, academics

and professionals usefully foreground the stakes at the heart of questions concerning journalists' purposes.

Yet asking what journalists ought to be for is not the same as asking what purposes they serve. Normative approaches are certainly useful in assessing the relationship between ideal and actual purposes (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2017); they are not, strictly speaking, answers to the question of journalists' purposes as such. In fact, such approaches more often than not show the purposes that journalists fail to serve. They are found, for example, to be insufficiently critical of elites and inadequate in their support of reasoned deliberation. Even when analysts do seek to answer the question, they tend to screen out a substantial portion of journalists' lived realities. Political journalism at the national level is overwhelmingly the core reference point. It is an important segment of journalism, but hardly the whole enterprise. Attention to other topics – local news, celebrity gossip, and the like – is justified on the grounds that they have implications for informed citizenship and political engagement, among other things. That all these journalistic forms have normative implications is indisputable. Yet answering the question of journalists' purposes has to explain them as they are, not just how someone would like them to be.

Another approach to answering the question of journalists' purposes – not necessarily opposed to the first – is empirical. Scholars look at what journalists understand their purposes to be and explore how these are crystallized in their beliefs and practices. Using a range of theories and methods, whose vastness we can scarcely adumbrate here, this approach consistently documents a diversity of journalists' purposes. Thomas Hanitzsch and his collaborators (2019), for example, present survey data from sixty-seven countries to show kaleidoscopic variety in the way journalists conceive of their role in society. Coming from the other side of the methodological spectrum, Nikki Usher (2014) draws on detailed fieldwork research to examine what it means to be a journalist at the *New York Times* during a period of transition to multiplatform publishing. She, too, reveals a range of orientations among journalists with respect to how they conceive of their purposes in the digital age. Taken together, these and related efforts usefully document the diverse realities that normative approaches sometimes screen out.

Surprisingly, the explanations for the observed diversity of purposes generally glaze over the unequal conditions for fulfilling specific purposes. Scholars emphasize the importance of individual motivations, organizational settings, professional norms, national cultures, and media systems, among other things, in explaining why purposes vary so widely. But they

tend not to link these diverse purposes to the individual social origins and trajectories – themselves unequally distributed across the journalistic population – that presumably shape them. To take one prominent framework as an example, journalists’ purposes are conceived in the Worlds of Journalism Study as occurring in a “discursive space” in which they are constantly “(re)created, (re)interpreted, appropriated, and contested” (Hanitzsch et al., 2019: 18). This approach accurately characterizes the dynamism and diversity surrounding journalists’ purposes yet proceeds as if these purposes have no social anchors. Without necessarily intending to do so, the unequal conditions for fulfilling distinct purposes are written out of many empirical answers.

### 5.3 A BOURDIEUSIAN APPROACH

Can the question of journalists’ purposes be answered in a way that reflects their diverse forms while accounting for the unequal opportunities for fulfilling them? A range of theoretical toolkits might be useful in answering this question. We focus here on the approach offered by Pierre Bourdieu, and our aims in doing so are modest: to illustrate what a Bourdieusian approach to the question of journalists’ purposes looks like and to suggest some ways such an approach might correct for the blind-spots of extant normative and empirical approaches. We do not claim to definitively answer the question of their purposes.

For Bourdieu (1990), social life could be analyzed in part through the metaphor of a game. He suggested that players – journalists, in our case – engage in a common endeavor to which each is committed. Such engagements are characterized most basically by struggle. Much like sports players, individuals involved in any social game compete against others as well as their own limits. The game they play imposes constraints on them – some moves are permitted, others are forbidden or discouraged – while also demanding constant improvisation to react to the specific circumstances in which individuals find themselves. It is through their participation in such games that players organize, reproduce, and sometimes manage to transform the very games in which they are engaged in playing.

In contemporary societies, Bourdieu (1993) conceived of most games as taking place within social microcosms that he termed “fields.” Such fields have their own rules and generate their own stakes, investments, and struggles. As such, they cannot be wholly reduced to forces and interests beyond them. Journalism is one such field, and has been

fruitfully analyzed as such by scholars (Benson and Neveu, 2005; Powers and Vera-Zambrano, 2018). Those in the field are committed to and engaged in ongoing struggles over what does and does not count as news, as seen, for example, in debates about whether the details of a politician's private life are newsworthy. They also struggle over the legitimate definitions of journalists' purposes (e.g., how to engage with and report on politicians who seek to discredit journalists as dishonest and untrustworthy). As they struggle over these and related issues, members of the journalistic field also compete for a range of material and symbolic rewards (e.g., career advancement, better salaries, peer recognition).

Several principles govern Bourdieu's analysis of the social games that transpire within social fields; each helpfully sheds light on ways to empirically grasp journalists' purposes. A first is that fields are hierarchically structured. For Bourdieu, fields are always shot through with power relations because individuals within them do not begin from similar starting points, nor do they hold equal amounts of the same resources, whether those resources are money, knowledge, or social networks. The different positions they occupy in the social hierarchy thus reflect this unequal distribution of resources; these positions also shape their orientation to the way the game is played.

One's view of journalists' purposes, therefore, is never neutral nor merely an expression of an abstract ideal. A reporter with limited experience, for example, might see video storytelling as an opportunity to do her job better, while an established reporter might view it as a distraction and thus refuse to use such tools. Taking such positions thus refracts and transforms the specific resources that individual journalists have at their disposal and whose use they improvise to fit the circumstances in which they find themselves.

A second principle is that fields are relational. While individuals within a field engage in a common endeavor, they pursue those ends differently. As such, the plurality of understandings regarding journalists' purposes is a constitutive feature of the journalistic field. If one wants to understand the empirical diversity of purposes that journalists pursue, they must understand how any one purpose fits among the purposes articulated by others in the field, regardless of whether these purposes accord with some normative ideal for journalists' actions. Building on the prior example, one can understand the stances that journalists take with respect to new technologies only by also understanding the positions they hold in the field or the place of the journalistic field vis-a-vis other resource holders in

society. This does not deny that specific stances might more or less closely approximate some set of normative aims; rather, it highlights the social relations and resources that underpin one's capacity to take certain actions.

A third principle is that fields are dynamic. In contrast to charges of determinism, Bourdieu recognized that fields are constantly subject to change, and that any change will force individuals to react to the conditions in which they find themselves. In the case of journalism, this dynamism is clearly apparent in the shifting economic fortunes of media organizations, the growing role played by nonjournalistic actors in shaping news content, and the possibilities presented by digital technologies for journalists to produce and distribute news in novel ways (Russell, 2016). Because journalists' purposes are one of the central stakes of struggle in the field, a key question for analysts is to apprehend the way individuals react when the circumstances in which they find themselves change (e.g., some react to shrinking newsrooms by going back to school, others launch new publications, still others leave the profession). This dynamism is embedded in the hierarchical and relational structure of the field itself. Rather than retreat to normative prescriptions regarding journalists' purposes, Bourdieu encourages analysts to identify the social conditions that enable different forms of dynamism to emerge.

Taken together, Bourdieu's approach seeks to highlight the unequal (and thus hierarchical) opportunities to assume diverse (i.e., relational) views that journalists (dynamically) pursue. While Anglophone scholars of journalism have turned to Bourdieu to explore various aspects of journalism, the approach has not explicitly been used to study the question of journalists' purposes. Moreover, their invocations typically rely on specific concepts like field and capital, whereas our effort is to use the epistemological and methodological principles undergirding these concepts to inform our framing of the problem. Given that no problem is more basic or pressing to the study of journalism than the question of journalists' purposes, we turn to it simply to explore what this framework helps us to see.

#### 5.4 AN ILLUSTRATION

In our current work, which we reference here to illustrate our approach, we ask what journalists are for in two cities: Toulouse, France, and Seattle, United States. These cities occupy an intermediate position in their national hierarchies between media capitals like Paris and

New York, which are home to major media companies and journalists with substantial professional prestige, and smaller cities and towns where news media and the journalists they employ typically possess fewer resources. Journalists in both Toulouse and Seattle also face similar economic constraints and technological transformations. Business models for their employers are uncertain, and multiplatform publishing environments present journalists with a range of potentially novel ways to do their work (Powers, Vera-Zambrano, and Baisnée, 2015). Studying journalists in these two cities thus allows us to see the shape that journalists' purposes take in these (intermediate) contexts and under these (similar) conditions.

We used semi-structured interviews to ascertain journalists' purposes. These interviews sampled a cross-section of individuals with varying degrees of professional experiences working across a range of news media. As such, we explicitly sought to include journalists on the "front line" of innovation (e.g., data journalists) as well as those resisting or ignoring such efforts (see Powers and Vera-Zambrano, 2018, for methodological details). Rather than normatively assume their purposes, we asked journalists to discuss work they are proud of, which offers insights into the purposes they see themselves achieving. Furthermore, because we assume that these purposes are relationally constructed, we also asked them to discuss journalists they admire as well as those they dislike. Such answers shed light on the purposes they would and would not like to fulfill. Finally, to explore links between the purposes expressed and the social conditions that enable them, we asked a range of questions designed to elicit information about individual origins (e.g., place of birth, parents' occupations), trajectories (e.g., educational attainment, prior professional experiences), positions (e.g., the news media for which they work), and the fields in which they compete (e.g., how and in what ways they interact with other journalists in the city).

Stating our findings schematically, we find that one set of responses articulate what we might think of as an intellectual orientation toward journalists' purposes. Such respondents conceive of their role as enlightening readers by telling interesting stories that bring broader social problems into view. Talking about a profile of a homeless person that highlighted problems with housing policy, one reporter said: "I love to do those kinds of stories that are able to tell a larger story through one person's life." Respondents also emphasize their grasp on the subject matter and their attention to details when reporting on issues of public interest. "I am the only one who knows all the details about that story,"

a reporter proudly told us about a report in which he detailed the policy minutiae of a major public infrastructure project. The journalists these respondents most admire tend to be national journalists based in Paris and New York, while the journalists they tend to dislike – and the journalism they espouse – tend to be based in their own cities or emphasize sensational news or infotainment. Talking about bloggers who accept sponsorships, one reporter grimaced: “It is just so far from journalism. It just annoys the hell out of me that they are given any credibility at all.”

Another set of respondents express a more practical orientation to their purposes. They convey their pride in telling human-interest stories that absorb audiences while accurately portraying their subject matter. “I think I told the story well,” said one journalist when describing a story about a handicapped child from a war-torn country adopted by a local family. They also take satisfaction in their refusal to sensationalize such stories. Discussing his approach to covering crime news, one reporter exclaimed: “I will never tell the sordid details.” When discussing the journalists they admire, these respondents mention local as well as nationally recognized reporters. While they also sometimes criticize infotainment and soft news, they emphasize ways such topics can be covered without sacrificing one’s principles. As a television reporter put it: “Some people roll their eyes [at soft news]...[but] I want to find somebody who can say something interesting or useful...and give them a voice.”

These diverse perspectives on journalists’ purposes are rooted in unequal (i.e., hierarchical) social conditions. Those who express an intellectual orientation to journalists’ purposes tend to be born in urban settings and raised by parents who work as liberal professionals (e.g., professors, lawyers, journalists). By contrast, respondents who emphasize a practical orientation to their purposes tend to hail from suburban or rural areas. Their parents are more likely to be employees (e.g., government clerks, factory workers, primary school teachers). These different origins shape the distinctive purposes they pursue in their careers. A reporter whose father was a university professor, for example, described journalism as an attractive option because it represented an opportunity to write about social issues that she had been raised to care about. A reporter whose father was a welder, by contrast, described the appeal of journalism as the opportunity “to write and talk with people” every day.

These origins in turn are linked with journalists’ trajectories, which also shape how they view their purposes. Those with more education and professional experience are more likely to express intellectual orientations



than those with less (see Lafarge and Marchetti, 2017, for a similar point regarding the French case more broadly). Schooling at elite institutions emphasizes the democratic mission of journalism (e.g., informing the public, fostering debate). It also frequently serves as the entry-point to internships and cultivates social networks among prestigious news media organizations. While less elite universities also stress the democratic function of journalists, their recruitment tends to focus more on storytelling. One person told us that she was inspired to go into journalism because a professor told her that she could have a career writing stories. Having been raised on a farm, she said, “it never occurred to me that it [journalism] was a job.” The social networks such institutions foster also tend to be linked with less prestigious media (e.g., community newspapers, local television outlets).

Journalists’ view of their purposes is further shaped by the position they hold. Beat reporters and editors tend to cluster more closely around intellectual orientations, as do those working for established news media (e.g., major media companies). Such positions afford these individuals the necessary time to produce the in-depth work of which they are proud. After gaining employment at a monthly news magazine that is owned by a major daily newspaper, one reporter remarked: “You have the time to have perspective, to really be sure of weighting every word and to *say something* about our society.” By contrast, general assignment reporters more commonly embrace practical orientations, as do those working for less well-known news media (e.g., online news start-ups). As one person at an online news organization put it: “I of course would love to sit around and spend weeks on a . . . story and spend a lot of time tinkering with it. It’s not realistic for my position right now.” Such a view does not reject the intellectual orientation to journalists’ purposes; rather, it pursues the most attainable version of a shared principle by getting the facts right and writing the story as engagingly as possible.

Finally, journalists’ view of their purposes is shaped by the specific field in which journalists interact. In Toulouse, the main media organizations control the lion’s share of the market and are thus able to impose their rules of field, which emphasize soft news and *faits divers* (roughly translated as human-interest stories). Journalists can challenge these rules only by seeking out different niches that are not covered by these dominant actors. For example, a group of journalists formed a print magazine dedicated to in-depth reporting after the main newspaper discontinued its own magazine. Those who directly challenge the dominant organizations generally fail, as happened to several online news start-ups that

sought to provide public interest news at precisely the moment when the main media companies were moving into the online publishing space.

Hierarchies exist in Seattle but the distribution of power is more dispersed. Journalists working at alternative newsweeklies have for decades challenged dominant news media's neutral approach to covering public affairs. Amid dramatic staffing cutbacks in both alternative and mainstream newsrooms, many journalists have struck out on their own, forming a diverse number of news organizations with distinctive orientations (e.g., covering civic affairs, local sports). In a period of resource scarcity, moreover, journalists working across news media can and sometimes do find opportunities to cooperate while pursuing distinct purposes. Content sharing agreements, for example, have existed between digitally based neighborhood news organizations and legacy news media. Where the former generally emphasize practical information for specific neighborhoods, the latter typically seek to provide middle- and highbrow content for subscribers. While such partnerships foster a diverse range of purposes, the economic conditions for their survival are less certain.

## 5.5 CONCLUSION

What, then, are journalists for? If we start by answering the question empirically, the response, as numerous other scholars note, is that it is complicated and it depends. While journalists play a shared game that stresses truth-telling and storytelling, the forms their participation take vary. Some tell detailed stories as a way to inform citizens, hold elites accountable, cultivate empathy, and so forth. They express pride in the work they do that fulfills these aims, and they admire other journalists who pursue similar aims. Others recognize the legitimacy of such efforts but focus on pursuing the most attainable version of these purposes. While they may not have the time for investigative reporting or detailed analysis, they can and do try to get the facts right and engage their audiences.

A Bourdieusian lens preserves the complexity of the empirical answer while shedding light on the way journalists' positions in the field, themselves shaped by their origins and trajectories, influence how they understand their purposes. What a journalist stands for is never simply a matter of individual volition, organizational culture, or professional values. It reflects the unequal distribution of resources that begin at birth and constantly shape how any individual plays the game. It also reflects the relations of domination in which journalists find themselves. Journalists with fewer resources, for example, accept as legitimate the sort of work

they do not have the time, resources, and training to fully pursue. Extant empirical approaches correctly note the diversity of journalists' purposes and the complexity of their reactions to contemporary transformations. Such purposes must also be understood as hierarchically ordered: Prizes are not awarded to stories that are merely accurate or entertaining. To ignore hierarchy is to ignore reality as journalists experience it.

To say that journalists' purposes are hierarchical and power-laden is not to deny the dynamism that characterizes their pursuit. Those with more resources are not simply gliding friction-free through their careers. They struggle with economic uncertainty, face varying degrees of precarity in their jobs, and make better or worse moves based on the conditions in which they find themselves. Nor are those with fewer resources inherently condemned to occupy the lowest rungs of the journalistic hierarchy. Some do move up in the field and pursue "deviant trajectories" (Bourdieu, 1996). The point is not whether such outliers exist – they do – but rather what conditions and resources make such trajectories possible.

In illustrating a Bourdieusian approach to journalists' purposes, we briefly highlight a limited range of factors that shape the diverse responses. Each of these factors would need to be examined in greater detail than we can address here. Moreover, other factors not explored here – gender, age, and religion, to name a few – are also likely to shape such responses. Finally, structural transformations not examined are crucial for explaining the specific conditions under which journalists' purposes take shape. In both France and the United States, the number of entrants into journalism has grown steadily over the past several decades; their profile has also changed (e.g., they are more educated than in the past and include a greater number of women). Yet the number of available jobs – even when accounting for the new news organizations – has not kept pace. Exploring how these transformations shape the types of purposes that individual journalists pursue is thus crucial for developing a fuller answer to the question of journalists' purposes.

Normative approaches to the question of journalists' purposes usefully articulate what journalism, at its very best, can be. As such, they provide ideals to which journalists can aspire, and that scholars can use to evaluate such efforts. Both among journalists and scholars, debates over what these ideals should entail, moreover, are crucial (e.g., extent to which journalists ought to facilitate deliberation). But such debates also need to be accompanied by the social conditions that make them more or less possible. Calls for journalists to serve democracy by providing hard-hitting investigative reporting sound admirable in the abstract; however, such claims must also

confront the uncomfortable reality that such purposes favor some journalists more than others (e.g., those coming from professional families with high levels of education). Failing to face these realities puts scholars at risk of reproducing the meritocratic myth that anyone can do anything regardless of the conditions in which they find themselves.

Conceived as a hierarchical space of unequal possibilities, analyses of journalists' purposes can contribute to a larger question concerning social order. For decades, the question of social order has been basic to scholars working across a range of theoretical perspectives (e.g., Frankfurt School, British Cultural Studies, Gramscian analyses of hegemony). Across their various points of difference, these approaches converge in their effort to explain how the cultural industries, broadly conceived and very much including journalists, maintain social inequalities in part by disguising them. To our eyes, these approaches have in recent years fallen away from the field's center of gravity. They are certainly less utilized in scholarship on journalism today than they were several decades ago. Our use of Bourdieu is one effort to bring such a focus back. It is pressing to do so in part because these approaches shed light on social hierarchies that extant approaches to journalists' purposes do not. More basically, and just as importantly, it is pressing because the hierarchies themselves – and the inequalities they perpetuate – have not, to say the least, disappeared.

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