Harcup, T (2020). *What's the Point of News?: A Study in Ethical Journalism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 165pp

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Not surprisingly, much of the news media around the world has been passing through tough times. Challenges such as collapsing business models, collapses in their perceived credibility and trustworthiness, and consistent attack from governments intolerant of criticism – or any level of scrutiny continue. Some of those governments are autocratic, but others are supposedly liberal democracies where news is traditionally regarded as an essential element in the democratic process.

Thus, now presents a timely moment to pose the question Tony Harcup presents us with: What's the point of News?

At the heart of this inquiry is an interrogation of what we understand by "news". On the face of it, the answer is obvious – it is what we see and hear and read on TVs and radios, on our screens and on the pages of newspapers. But Harcup has spent many years teasing apart the processes that put that stuff together, shape it, structure it, define it – what is selected to be news, what is rejected – and why. And today, he says, there are question marks over news when it comes to access, autonomy, trust, and democracy. These questions apply as much to ethics as to economics.

The problems with news

> "Typically, studies have found the dominant news values within mainstream media to privilege the actions and perspectives of the powerful and famous, along with the dramatic, the extreme and the novel, being concerned more with the latest symptom than with the underlying issue, more with personalities than with social structures. According to an international survey in 2019, citizens said they found the news industry to be better at telling them what had happened than with helping them understand it (Newman et al. 2019: 26), and this echoes long-standing criticisms of journalism as being a form of in-one-ear-and-out-the-other product. There appears to be scope here for some rethinking, by journalists, scholars and citizens alike. (p. 4,5)

The starting point of this book, says Harcup, is that "news selection is a series of choices" and "the aim is to ask deep questions about such choices and the nature of news" (p. 5). How and why choices are made relate to sets of criteria commonly referred to as "news values" or "news factors" – the conceptual frameworks and understandings which determine the choices made, how they are made - and by whom. What James Curran and Jean Seaton (2003: 336) describe as devices allowing journalists to "translate untidy reality into neat stories with beginnings, middles, and denouements", in the process of which they tend in effect to

"reinforce conventional opinions and established authority". (p. 6) and, Perry Parks argues, are "integral to every facet of journalistic decision-making" (2018: 2), (p. 5).

What's the Point of News? stress tests the concepts and their application - and asks if better ones are to be had.

Better ones? Harcup's argument is the point of news should be to serve the public good – and he concludes the book by identifying an alternative set of news values which would – and in some instances already do - better serve the public good. I am not giving away the twist in the tail here – Harcup makes the idea clear in Chapter 1 (p. 11). Whereas we usually know the destination when we set out – it does not make the journey any less worthwhile. And this journey is no purely academic exercise. Our travelling companions (sorry – I am straining the metaphor here) are both practitioners and academics. The sub-title, "a study in ethical journalism", points to its deeper purpose: "To draw attention to the wider role/s that can be played—for good or ill—by journalism" (p. 6). The aim is not merely to interpret the world – but to change it.

Different choices are possible

And here's how. Harcup sees its value for journalists and the field in general in enabling them to recognise that "news does not always have to be selected and reported in the ways of the past. Different choices are possible, even within mainstream industry newsrooms" (p. 144). For citizens, civil society and the public sphere(s), news "does not always have to portray ordinary people as passive victims … audiences as disengaged observers, and that an absence of scrutiny by the news media can have seriously negative social consequences" (p. 145). It should redirect journalism studies scholars from analysing what is found in the news towards exploring the values that might better inform decisions about news selection, sourcing, and framing. A "discussion of values as they relate to news, rather than accounts of how to spot a news story" (p. 145-6). For journalism educators – and here I declare an interest – Harcup says: "The best journalism education already seeks not simply to produce conformity or reproduce industry norms but to question them, and this study can add further evidence of the need to do so as well as suggesting some of the questions that might usefully be asked."

Harcup begins by setting out the scope of the inquiry and in the second chapter conducts a critical review of the literature on news values: a significant contribution in its own right. In Chapter 3, he undertakes an exploration of alternative values which have been – and are being - applied to news reporting, by alternative media, by media adopting feminist approaches and by the adoption of those approaches developed in the field of peace journalism. Chapter 4 engages directly – what can we understand by ethical journalism serving a public good. In Chapter 5, he interrogates the manner in which traditional approaches are being contested in mainstream newsrooms. In Chapter 6, he examines the manner in which the challenges and contestations have brought to light new understandings, perspectives, and challenges in the reporting of a series of stories from around the world. Examples include reporting on the 2017 tower-block inferno in London, UK, which killed 72 people from largely marginalised communities; the rescue of children from flooded caves in Thailand; the coverage of refugees, migrants, and others; the global #MeToo movement, and

the climate emergency. Exploration of the stories "indicate some of the different ways in which the news already does, at times, more fully reflect the human experience while also going some way towards fulfilling the democratic expectations placed upon it", Harcup says (p. 128).

Global reach

A particular strength of the book is that it is not just about what is wrong with journalism, but what is right – and what could be better – critiquing news values without rejecting the value of news and journalism. Another, despite its relative brevity at 167 pages, is its global reach in both the sources - scholars and practitioners - on whom it draws and the news reporting and news media it explores.

There is a critical engagement throughout with "standpoint". The standpoint of the researcher, of the practitioner, of those who feature in the news – of perspectives grounded in the global North and the global South. Of significant influence on this investigation is Meenakshi Gigi Durham, who argues that feminist standpoint epistemology offers alternative modes of praxis which have the potential to provide "a radical intervention, to subvert from within the hegemonies in current news practice" (Durham, 1998; p. 135). A requirement from journalists to "rethink themselves and their craft from the position of marginalized Others, thus uncovering unconscious ethnocentric, sexist, racist, and heterosexist biases that distort news production as it is governed by the dominant news paradigm" (ibid p. 132). (Harcup p. 39).

Alongside feminist approaches, this investigation is heavily informed by recent thinking that has emerged from within the fields of alternative journalism and peace journalism, "all of which may have the potential to be applied to an exploration of news and news values" (p. 17).

The chapter on alternative media examines ventures in India, (community radio stations *Namma Dhwani - Our Voice* - in Karnataka; *Chala Ho Gaon Mein - Come, Let's Go to the Village* – focusing on issues of gender equality and justice in Jharkhand); Brazil, (*Jornalistas Livres* in Sao Paulo reporting online for black, indigenous, feminist, and LGBT sectors that receive little attention in corporate media) and Zimbabwe (*Her Zimbabwe* and *Kubatana*, articulating everyday struggles from the perspectives of women) (p. 57-61).

The praxis of peace journalism, Harcup reminds us (p. 35), citing the later work by Johan Galtung (1998), "can be applied not only to coverage of wars between nation states but also "to violence between other groups—to rape and wife battering, mistreatment of children, racial or class conflict—where violence is reported and blame usually fixed on one side". Similarly, a cousin of peace journalism known as "constructive journalism" has been suggested as a "more solution-oriented" form of reporting a wide range of events, not just wars (From and Kristensen 2018).

Making change

I mentioned earlier in this review that this is an endeavour which reaches beyond interpretation to essay change in the world. Harcup provides examples from both alternative

and mainstream media of the development and application of journalism guided by alternative news values, delivering public benefit. It is not always easy, but he points out that "Structures, practices, and routines have a habit of appearing unchangeable — right up until they are changed." (p. 99)

Reading this, I was reminded of one the great works of investigative journalism of the last century: Everybody Loves a Good Drought: stories from India's poorest districts (1996) by Palagummi Sainath. It started life as a proposal for a series of newspaper features. Many editors rejected it - it wasn't the sort of thing their readers were interested in - until Sainath pitched it to the *Times of India*, which published them from 1990-92. His scathing accounts of the manner in which the poor people of India are preyed upon gained huge audiences for the paper, became some of the most-talked about works of journalism and had an enormous impact in the country and beyond. They are also exemplars of the alternative news values for a public good which this book lays out. Reporting based on:

> "The selection of items primarily on the basis of how useful the information is likely to be for citizens; foregrounding the experiences of those at the bottom of the pile or on the "target end" of decisions taken by the powerful; paying more attention to context when selecting and presenting news; and privileging news stories based on the arguments and actions of those citizens actively trying to change things for the better." (p. 67)

But this is not a job to be left to journalists alone: "Wider civil society actors including campaigns, social movements, trade unions, academics, press councils, charities, and others can all contribute to a climate in which well researched and properly resourced news is seen as a public good worth persevering with and protecting. Power is powerful, then, but it is not all-powerful." (p 99)

Harcup puts forward a (non-exhaustive) list of practical ways in which we might all play our part. Examples include suggestions for journalistic work, campaigning, and educational activities that are aimed at challenging existing power structures and helping the relatively powerless to empower themselves. Space here is limited to list them all – but they include

Offering journalistic skills and knowledge to help the socially or politically excluded engage with the media and have their voices included within news output;

- Broadening and deepening the journalism education curriculum to include more about listening, ethics, values, structural issues, alternatives, and the need for challenge;

- Engaging in consciousness-raising work among journalists around issues such as representation and diversity;

- Actively seeking out stories, sources, and perspectives from beyond the "usual suspects" of the most immediate or obvious.

Conclusion

Who should read this book? Well, certainly, journalists and their news editors, editors and proprietors if they wish to engage more closely with their audiences – and give those communities better grounds to support and sustain their enterprise. Those who study journalism and those who have a role in educating or training the journalists of tomorrow will find it invaluable if their aim is "not simply … reproduce industry norms but to question them". It has a contribution to make to school and higher education courses in civics, and politics. But beyond that, it has a place in public libraries and on the shelves of general bookshops. It is in large part, a manual for good citizenship.

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Suggested further reading

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