Journalists

Jane B. Singer
City, University of London
Jane.Singer.1@city.ac.uk

Abstract
In a perpetually fluid and globally accessible news environment, identifying just who can be considered a "journalist" is no longer a simple matter. This entry explores three definitions: a historical one that summarizes how the occupation emerged and developed; a sociological one that explores how journalists do their work, including their roles and practices; and a normative one that considers use ethical principles and ideals to distinguish journalists from the growing number of others who engage in similar activities.

Keywords
boundaries, journalists, journalism, norms, professional identity, sociology of news work

Not all that long ago, this would have been a relatively easy entry to write. Journalists were people paid by news organizations – that is, entities regularly producing print or broadcast news products for public consumption – to do the work needed to "make news." Many were reporters, others were photographers or videographers, some were editors or producers of various sorts, and a few additional roles such as graphic designer or cartoonist might be found at larger outlets. But the key condition was employment: Someone who was employed to do editorial work for an organization that produced news was as good a definition as any of a "journalist."

In a digital, social, and mobile media world – with augmented reality, immersive media such as virtual reality, and wearable and voice-activated information technology already well above the horizon – that definition has become woefully inadequate. Platforms are publishers. Robots are writers. Hacks are becoming hackers, gaining proficiency with data analysis and coding. And newsrooms are filled with people holding titles such as "audience engagement manager," "content strategist," and "social media lead."

In tandem with this transformation within the newsroom, an open-access, globally accessible and increasingly dominant information network means anyone, anywhere, and at any time also has the capability to produce journalistic content, as well as to contribute in diverse ways to material that originates with a news organization. "User-generated content" comes in all the same formats that traditional print and visual journalists create. Users cover breaking news, provide expert analysis, and hold the powerful to account, particularly but not exclusively at the "hyperlocal" level. Users make decisions about what to cover through crowd-funding initiatives, and they provide editorial feedback via comments.

What should an encyclopedia entry on "journalists" cover, then? Here are three options: a historical definition, a sociological one, and a normative one. This entry considers each in turn, then concludes with a brief look to the future.

Historical definitions: When did journalism become an occupation?

Every social group in history, and probably pre-history too, has undoubtedly had one or more members who took on the role of keeping others informed about occurrences near and far. But since at least the Renaissance, the stories of journalism and technology have been intertwined. As global trade spread steadily farther and faster, the first "business journalists" began to meet returning travelers, traders, and soldiers to learn the news of their voyages, which they then relayed to those with an interest not only in foreign goods but also in foreign ideas and foreign affairs.

With the advent of the printing press, this role of timely and topical messenger evolved until it became something we would recognize today as journalistic work. The single-sheet newsletters of the 16th century developed into longer newsletters, pamphlets, and prototypical newspapers in the 17th; by the 1700s, hundreds of going (and often competing) concerns needed more and more people to produce copy that could fill their pages.

The newspaper came into its own as an established, and increasingly influential, enterprise in the 19th century, particularly after the 1830s innovations of photography and telegraphy. As their capabilities expanded along with their audiences, thanks to the rise of public education and therefore literacy, newspaper publishers sought employees who were proficient at gathering information, making sense of it, and turning it into something that readers would want to get their hands on – and want intensely enough to pay for the privilege. Although the exact nature of this work varied from country to country, as well as changing over time, "journalist" was a clearly identifiable occupation by the end of the century.

Like other occupations, that of journalist encompassed practices, roles, and norms that a worker was paid by his (or, less commonly, her) employer to enact with some acceptable degree of proficiency. Practices included talking with informants or otherwise gathering material that could then be organized into a narrative, following the conventions set by time, place – and editor or publisher. Roles varied widely but in Western democracies came to be seen as related in some fashion to informing citizens about things they needed and/or wanted to know. Journalistic norms, too, have varied; indeed some, such as those around the still-prominent notion of objectivity, emerged as a corrective to others that came to be seen as less desirable. But broadly, a journalist was a person who made the intangible tangible, who turned actions, ideas, occurrences, and remarks into a piece of content that could then be compiled with other such pieces into a package and offered for consumption by an audience.

Sociological definitions: How do journalists do their work?

Over the 20th century, journalism expanded to fill other forms besides print, and the notion of a "journalist" expanded to encompass not just an occupation but also a profession. This is a somewhat loftier concept of the journalist not merely as a worker but as someone with particular skills and knowledge, particular norms of public service, and importantly, a particular claim to define standards of proper practice. The label has always been controversial, but at least in journalists' own self-perceptions, it has stuck.

Various factors helped transform the largely working-class journalist of the 19th century into the middle-class professional of the 20th. In the United States, spurred in part by reaction to the appalling excesses of the sensationalistic "yellow journalism" press, universities began offering degrees in journalism in the early years of the century, with European and Asian universities eventually following suit; the steady increase in the number of newsroom workers holding university degrees inevitably raised the occupation's status. This development also meant that a body of published knowledge about what journalism was and what journalists did soon took shape, creating a handy way to socialize newcomers. Professional organizations, both unions such as the National Union of Journalists in Britain and trade associations such as the Society of Professional Journalists in the United States, further strengthened this socialization process; they also fostered the sense that a journalistic community could be identified, with members who shared common experiences and goals. Global wars and other upheavals in the first part of the century were accompanied by not so much a rise in propaganda, which of course had always existed, but by a more widespread recognition of it – and of the need for a countervailing force of information rooted in "objective" fact rather than "subjective" perspective (Lippmann, 1922). This perceived need for trustworthy providers of "truth" provided an opportunity for journalists to position themselves as those providers, solidifying the idea that a professional journalist was someone motivated by the desire to serve the public and not just to draw a paycheck.

By mid-century, all these factors and more had come together to spark a spate of scholarly explorations, many of them ethnographic, of who journalists were and what they did. Over the past 60-plus years, an enormous body of work that can be broadly categorized as "sociology of news work" has viewed journalists as part of an identifiable collective and has set about defining what members of that collective do, how they do it, and the influences that shape them along the way. Journalists, for example, are gatekeepers (White, 1950), determining which among the day's innumerable occurrences are worth passing along to readers. Journalists approach their coverage of a selected number of those occurrences by "typifying" news, giving them a way to "routinize the unexpected" and quickly grasp how to report and write any given story (Tuchman, 1973). Their decisions have been seen as informed by a set of widely shared and inherently conservative news values that are durable over time (Gans, 1979). Yet, they also are agenda setters: shapers of public policy, political fortune, and civic life (Tunstall, 1996).

Journalism scholars also have used survey methodology to enrich the picture of journalistic activities, thought processes, and working environments. Beginning in the 1970s, researchers at Indiana University have surveyed journalists across the United States every 10 years to learn about their training, job satisfaction, roles, values, and ethics, as well as about the changing nature and conditions of their jobs. Their longitudinal findings about journalistic roles, for instance, show the prominence of the watchdog role in journalists' self-perceptions, with large majorities consistently saying that investigating government claims is extremely important (Willnat & Weaver, 2014). Around the world, however, role perceptions have been

shown to vary depending on institutional, cultural, and political situations, with speed in reporting or the ability to analyze events seen as most important in many countries; global commonalities among working journalists, on the other hand, include high levels of education (though not necessarily including a degree in journalism), a perceived need for proficiency with digital technologies, and a correlation between feelings of autonomy and job satisfaction (Willnat, Weaver & Choi, 2013). Even more recently, a massive collaborative effort has generated comparable data from more than 27,000 journalists in 67 countries around the world to create a mosaic of trans-national journalistic culture that incorporates not only practitioners' roles (as, in this construction, populist disseminators, detached watchdogs, critical change agents, or opportunistic facilitators) but also their ethical perceptions, occupational influences, and perceived autonomy, as well as their trust in other institutions (Worlds of Journalism, n.d.).

Although the professional frame has dominated recent and contemporary explorations of journalistic work, other approaches add considerable nuance. For instance, Zelizer (1993) proposes that journalists can best be understood as an interpretive community, shaped and united by a shared discourse and in particular by collective understandings of key public events in their occupational history. Observers adopting a critical or political economy perspective highlight the ways that journalists' work is shaped by external forces including markets, governments, and other powerful social structures and entities. Field theorists see journalists as continually engaged in a contested struggle with other claimants to cultural capital. In short, the work of journalists is inherently ideological, embedded in culture, and exceptionally complex.

Normative definitions: Who do journalists think they are?
But complex as they are, even these definitions focus primarily or exclusively on journalists as described in the first paragraph of this entry: people who work in a newsroom. This prominent 20th century notion of journalists as members of a particular, identifiable profession has become increasingly contested, in part because it is an inherently exclusionary framing amidst a proliferation of people doing similar sorts of things, and in part because many of the foundational understandings no longer seem applicable in an open network environment. How does gatekeeping work in an information world with no gates? What happens to the journalistic priority of reporting information quickly when anyone can send news around the world with a single click? Who are the agenda setters when every citizen consumes a personalized news diet?

So just who is a journalist, anyway? Do bloggers count? How about ordinary citizens doing journalistic things, whether it's photographing a riot, or tweeting from a public event, or writing for a hyperlocal news start-up? What role do aggregators play, or social media platforms, or news-writing bots?

The journalistic community, including practitioners as well as many academics, offers a normative response to such thorny questions. Essentially, the proposition is that what defines the journalist has become less about what such a person does and more about the values that he or she applies in going about it. Norms serve as both identity markers ("who I am") and, crucially, as boundary markers between professionals and non-professionals ("who I am not" or "who is not me"). Such distinctions typically rest on practices such as verification, principles such as autonomy from vested interests, and explicit or implicit promises such as accountability for the consequences of journalistic action (Singer, 2015).

* Verification is integral to the journalist's central and nearly universal norm of truth-telling. It involves a process of checking the provenance of information before disseminating it, typically with the goal of obtaining confirmation from multiple human or documentary sources. In a contemporary environment, this norm has given rise to dedicated "fact checkers," who typically seek to determine how close a politician's statement is to the truth, and to sophisticated processes and tools to identify potential hoaxes spread via social media, among other innovations.

* Autonomy is most closely associated with credibility, the premise being that journalists must be able to report fully and fairly, free from the influence of commercial, governmental, and other external forces. Of course, journalists have always operated under myriad personal and occupational pressures as well as the ones seen as having the potential to exert undue or undesirable influence, and that is no less true today. But the professional norm of public service positions journalists as following broadly altruistic or at least outward-facing goals, for instance in contrast to contemporary political or corporate operatives whose activities online are increasingly difficult to even detect.

* Accountability entails journalistic responsibility for both the content produced and the methods used to obtain that content. In a media environment freed of the space constraints of print and the time constraints of broadcast, this norm has been linked to transparency, the disclosure of information about sources consulted, decisions taken, and reporting practices employed. Indeed, transparency and accountability have been invoked as new foundational norms for journalists, for instance paired as one of just four guiding principles in the current version of the U.S. Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics.

This normative approach, then, delineates journalistic work in terms of its purported quality according to a set of indicators that foreground the particular normative sensibilities that journalists have been socialized to see as important. Ultimately, these sensibilities relate to claims of credibility, reliability, and trustworthiness – that is, to assertions of why journalists continue to matter in an unbounded information universe populated by millions of people who can, and do, carry out all the basic occupational tasks. In this chaotic environment, journalists thus seek to position themselves as different from non-journalists not so much because they do different things but rather because they do them better, at least according to a somewhat selective range of quality criteria.

This approach has its critics. Emphasizing the distance between journalists and their audience can serve to make those audiences less rather than more likely to trust what journalists produce, an especially risky strategy when trust in all civic institutions, the media chief among them, is plummeting around the world. Economic constraints on newsroom mean not only that journalists have less time available to gather information themselves but also that they are increasingly reliant on material from users and other outside contributors. And of course, claims to ethical probity are self-defeating when errors of judgment, content, or practice occur.

Conclusion What's ahead for journalists?

Indeed, it seems likely that journalists in the future will of necessity become closer to, rather than further from, those whom they cover and for whom they ostensibly do their work – their sources and their audiences. Quality news organizations around the world are actively seeking to engage audiences in their activities, through hosted events and other activities associated with membership schemes, through the solicitation of user-generated content in

various forms, through technologies that improve the ability to deliver highly personalized content, and more. Professional journalists may still be recognizably distinct from non-journalists, but they will surely be in ever-closer and more frequent contact, as well as necessarily more responsive to audience expectations and feedback, including the kind delivered in the form of metrics.

And as has been true since at least the invention of the printing press, new technologies also will shape both the work of journalists and the ways in which they are defined. As I write, for instance, journalists are scrambling to understand how they might best respond to voice-activated information delivery: How will journalism be done, they are wondering, when there is no product or platform to house it at all – when the intangible nature of "news" remains intangible in its iteration as "news story"?

Journalists have evolved continually over the centuries. They must continue to do so if they are to survive, and ideally thrive, in the centuries to come.

References

Gans, H. J. (1979). *Deciding what's news: A study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public opinion*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Singer, J. B. (2015). "Out of bounds: Professional norms as boundary markers." In *Boundaries of journalism: professionalism, practices and participation* (M. Carlson & S. C. Lewis, editors), pages 21-36. New York: Routledge.

Tuchman, G. (1973). Making news by doing work: Routinizing the unexpected. *American Journal of Sociology, 79* (1), 110-131.

Tunstall, J. (1996). *Newspaper power: The new national press in Britain*. Wotton-under-Edge: Clarendon Press.

White, D. M. (1950). The "gate keeper": A case study in the selection of news. *Journalism Quarterly* 2 (4), 383-390.

Willnat, L., & Weaver, D. H. (2014). *The American journalist in the digital age: Key findings*. Bloomington, IN: School of Journalism, Indiana University.

Willnat, L., Weaver, D.H., & Choi, J. (2013). The global journalist in the twenty-first century: A cross-national study of journalistic competencies. *Journalism Practice* 7 (2), 163-183.

Worlds of Journalism Study. (n.d.). Available online: http://www.worldsofjournalism.org.

Zelizer, B. (1993). Journalists as interpretive communities. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10 (3), 219-237.

Further Readings

Carlson, M., & Lewis, S. C. (2015). *Boundaries of journalism: Professionalism, practices and participation*. New York: Routledge.

Schudson, M. (2011). *The sociology of news* (2nd edn.) New York: W.W. Norton

Weaver, D. H., & Willnat, L. (2012). *The global journalist in the 21st century*. New York: Routledge.

Worlds of Journalism Study. (n.d.). Available online: http://www.worldsofjournalism.org.

Zelizer, B. (2017). *What journalism could be*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Brief Author Biography

Jane B. Singer is research lead and professor of journalism innovation in the Department of Journalism at City, University of London. Her research has traced the evolution of digital journalism over the past quarter-century, with a focus on journalists' changing roles, perceptions, norms, and practices. Before earning a Ph.D. in journalism from the University of Missouri, she was the first news manager of Prodigy Interactive Services; she began her career as a newspaper reporter and editor. She is co-author of *Participatory Journalism*, published in 2011 by Wiley-Blackwell, and *Online Journalism Ethics*, published in 2007 by M.E. Sharpe.