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Journalism Needs a Better Argument: Aligning public goals with the realities of the digital news and information landscape

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Journalism needs a better argument: Aligning public goals with the realities of the digital news and information landscape

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The traditional argument for the value of journalism is a bit like your grandparents' favourite old chair – comfortable and familiar, yet worn-through and out-of-fashion. It is so well-known that one can ask a group of first-year undergraduates 'why do we need journalism' and you will surely get back some version of an answer that has now been advanced for centuries. The potent discourse about the democratic value of journalism continues to show up in contemporary studies of audiences, wherein people report feeling guilty about not engaging with the news (e.g. Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2018). The problem is that while many still love the idea of journalism, not as many want to pay for it.

This wouldn't be a predicament if journalism actually was what many claim it to be: a public good. Yet this seems like wishful thinking. A quick look at the basic economic definition of a public good quickly disabuses one of the notion that journalism fits the criteria. Is journalism non-rivalrous, meaning if one person benefits from using it, the good is not reduced? Here we are on relatively firm footing, as multiple people can read, watch or listen to the same news, without 'damaging' the good's value or durability (although arguments about compassion fatigue, echo chambers, and populist news challenge the sentiment, if not literal meaning, of this statement). What about the second key part of the definition, namely that to be a public good, the good must be non-excludable, meaning people can't be restricted from using it? Paywalls, subscriptions, and licencing fees establish the fact that most journalism, evidently, is not. Unlike true public goods sustained by government funding, such as national defence, electrical grids, universal education, and many others, journalism has never made a convincing argument in this regard. On the contrary, for much of its history, the institution of journalism has made precisely the opposite argument, with financial independence being posited as its *sine qua non*.

This, in hindsight, is journalism's biggest mistake – from a long-term economic perspective, a singularly stupid strategy. Loudly equating editorial independence to financial independence from government (tax breaks and public service broadcasting notwithstanding) leaves the institution of journalism to compete with other information providers in the market. In the era of the mass press, perhaps largely because of its cultural relevance in everyday life, this worked. But the era of digitalization ushered in a new set of economic rules, and it seems obvious that the familiar democratic arguments for journalism's necessity have not been a sufficient bulwark against financial distress (Broersma and Peters, 2017). Although altruism and a sense of civic duty are certainly monetizable forces in capitalist societies, supporting 'worthy' endeavours is simply not why markets were designed. This places journalism in a vulnerable state.

In this brief essay to celebrate the 20th anniversary of *Journalism*, I begin to make the case for what a better argument for journalism might look like, in light of ongoing challenges to its societal and commercial value. These include the denigration of journalism by populist governments, polarization of news outlets, and more effective monetization of desirable publics by competing media alternatives. Nonetheless, anniversaries are celebratory occasions and, in this spirit, I hope to strike an optimistic if somewhat polemical tone.

The Spirit of a Public Good

Too often the spirit of a public good in a general sense – a common good, available to all citizens regardless of status, benefitting society – fails to take account what is demanded in the stricter economic interpretation of the term. While economics does not enjoy sole jurisdiction to determine what makes a good or service 'public', the discipline does provide a good place to start thinking about shaping a more

robust argument for journalism. For instance, what would be needed to make journalism a *merit good*, whereby its public provision, in theory, provides *positive externalities* such as a better-informed citizenry, more empathetic populace towards other social groups, and so forth? By the same token, what types of news provision could be viewed as *demerit goods* with *negative externalities* and higher costs that stretch beyond their usage cost? Finally, how might we sustain a form of journalism that makes it an *anti-rival good*, meaning the more people use it, the more utility it has with added benefits accruing to the individual from collective use? I quickly take each of these up in terms of speaking of journalism as a public service, an insurance, and a form of pedagogy.

Journalism as Public Service

Rather than replacing our grandparents' chair, we can simply reupholster it. Journalism's long tradition of public service broadcasting in many Western countries has substantial residual strength in public discourse, and should be unapologetically embraced. Such an argument, grounded in journalism's ethical and rhetorical sensibilities, means giving up any pretence that journalism shouldn't be sustained by government subsidy. Schools (based on a democratic principle of access to knowledge), courts (a principle of justice), hospitals (health), and even roads (movement), are viewed as essential public services for a healthy body politic. Journalism (based on informational awareness) is no less necessary or central. As Curran (2000: 143) notes of his ideal democratic media system, with public service journalism at its core, 'The universalist method of funding public service ... prevents the creation of second-class citizens excluded by price.' Such an argument for sustaining journalism is thus implicitly twofold. First, if journalism is recognized as an essential public service, people cannot be prohibited from accessing it because of lack of means. Second, a lack of economic capital for news organizations that precludes them fulfilling their public service mandate should be avoided. In short, a political case needs to be made that journalism is an essential budget item in democracies and that state-supported media is not synonymous with authoritarian media.

Journalism as Insurance

If we view journalists as having an ethical obligation to facilitate citizens' informational awareness, the fact remains that not everyone will be interested (much like doctors promoting health, people may nonetheless eat sugary foods, or simply not exercise). So while an argument for journalism around public service strives for achieving positive externalities, there should also be mechanisms to protect against negative externalities. One way to argue along these lines is Schudson's (1998: 312) idea of the monitorial citizen, a person who 'engages in environmental surveillance rather than information-gathering.' This rather pragmatic contrast to more stringent rational-critical conceptions of the 'good citizen' seems apt in a connective era of social media. The basic insurance that journalism should provide for the monitorial citizen is support when they have an 'informational emergency'. Of course, this begs the question: how can one ensure that the (textual) news environment that citizens are supposed to be monitoring is being created, and being created well? The paradox of monitorial citizenship is that it demands both the existence of an informational environment to monitor, and accountability within it. The monitorial citizen presumes that good information is available which means if journalists are to create this on levels ranging from the local to national, they need to be publicly funded in proportion to population figures, just as doctors, teachers, and civil servants.

Journalism as Pedagogy

Finally, a significant challenge facing those who want to reinforce the bedrock of 'good' journalism in a digital era is figuring out how to ensure the public demands it. While the modernist tenets of professional journalism are seemingly well-known, the critical abilities that systematic media literacy education provides are less well-established (Peters, 2015). The only way to change this is through pedagogy – demanding 'good' journalism necessitates first being able to recognize it. The idea of journalism as an anti-rival good implies crafting an argument that engagement with it is an essential epistemological foundation of society. As 'social studies' courses are increasingly integrated within secondary school curricula, it could be argued

that daily engagement with journalism is an essential part of education. While fierce battles would surely be had over which news outlets should be consumed by students, the basic argument that reading the news supports numerous pedagogical goals – from reading and writing, to knowledge of public systems and affairs – is waiting to be made.

While making such arguments will be challenging, this essay has argued that for journalism to thrive going forth – as merely surviving is too measly an ambition – new cases for its value need to be made, and made forcefully, to align the goals of the public with the digital realities of the contemporary media landscape.

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