

Beyond administrative journalism: Civic skepticism and the crisis in journalism

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ABSTRACT

From the Knight Foundation's extensive funding and research efforts around "the information needs of communities" to recent scholarly work on "computational" and "data" journalism, practitioners and scholars alike have looked to the rise of digital media and the profusion of databases as new opportunities to provide better information to the public and hold state actors and other elites accountable. While these forms of what I call "administrative journalism" are certainly valuable, the focus on "data" and privileging of cognitive and rational models of what Michael Schudson has called "information-based citizenship" has limited the conversation among reformers about what journalism is, as well as what it could and should be.

This chapter argues that the present narratives around the crisis in journalism have roundly overlooked the civic values that journalists are uniquely positioned to articulate and defend, and that provide both social solidarity and evaluative criteria for holding the powerful to account. I argue that, as an ideal, we should normatively value journalism as a form of institutionally organized 'civic skepticism,' where journalists exercise scrutiny over elites and institutions, seeking to hold them to account for the democratic values of the civil sphere – equality, liberty, and justice – through their literal and symbolic control over the publicity of the powerful. While journalism often fails to live up to this ideal, valuing civic skepticism necessarily recasts the debate over journalism's future – from an emphasis on correcting for market failures in the provision of information, to a focus on the value of a strong and enduring institution that expressly serves the democratic function of holding power to account for the values of the civil sphere. This chapter concludes with a

discussion of how the normative valuation of journalistic civic skepticism has implications for how we think about journalistic practice, the economics of the industry, and journalism as an institution.

Numbers guru Nate Silver received widespread, and justified, acclaim for his social science-based approach to election forecasting during the 2008 and 2012 U.S. presidential elections. Many pundits and scholars of journalism, as well as journalists themselves, cited Silver as a new model for a journalism that is less speculative, more ‘rigorous,’ and (quantitative) evidence-based. Indeed, after starting out independently, Silver found homes at both The New York Times and now, ESPN, for his brand of statistical reporting. Meanwhile, political scientists such as Brendan Nyhan, John Sides, and Lynn Vavreck incorporate social science theory, research, and methods into the daily rough and tumble of campaign trail journalism. These scholars sought to improve upon journalists’ and pundits’ often wild claims and counterclaims and flights into speculative fancy. For its proponents (and there seem to be few detractors), a more data-intensive, computational, and social science-driven form of journalism will provide better information to the public, helping citizens to clearly evaluate the dynamics of electoral politics and policymaking, separate empirically grounded arguments from useless prognostications, and ultimately hold pundits, campaigns, and elected officials alike to account for their factual statements and job performance.

These contemporary efforts to improve journalism are the latest in a long line of attempts at journalism reform. It is not a far leap from our own moment to projects over the last century that sought to incorporate social science methodologies, theories, and quantitative data more broadly into core journalistic practices. This history spans the social survey movement one hundred years ago (Anderson, forthcoming) to Philip Meyer’s (2002) “precision journalism” dating from the 1960s, which sought to apply social science research methods to journalism. Now, we not only have the social science approaches detailed above, but also a broad movement embracing “computational journalism” (Cohen, Hamilton, and Turner 2011), with its idea of empowering journalists to engage in accountability reporting through the use of the databases that are rapidly proliferating in all domains of social life (see as well the closely related idea of “data journalism” (Fink and Anderson 2014; Gray, Chambers, and Bounegru 2011)). The term “computational journalism” is a useful shorthand for all of these contemporary efforts given that it is the most inclusive category that spans various social science, technological, and database efforts (see Gynnild 2013 for a similar use of “computational” as an umbrella term). As a concept, “computation” gets at how contemporary journalism is increasingly a data-driven practice aimed at producing knowledge through numbers, statistics, and computers (Anderson 2011).

What unites many of these disparate efforts is the idea that with better information the public will have greater ability to hold elites and institutions accountable. Regardless of its contemporary manifestations, this model of

journalism is quite old, grounded in a progressive era “information-based model of citizenship” (Schudson 2004). Information-based citizenship, as opposed to citizenship premised upon social status, attachments, or the articulation of rights (*ibid.*), is at its heart a cognitive and rational model of what being a “good citizen” means (Schudson 1998). In this view, the normative role of journalism is to provide reliable information that citizens can use to form their own independent positions on public issues and judge elected officials at the ballot box. This progressive era ideal is deeply resonant in our own time, and not only in the efforts cited above. Consider the prominent attempts of the Federal Communications Commission and its various foundation partners to assess the “information needs of communities” (Waldman 2011), a study designed to determine whether communities across the United States are receiving the information they need to create good democratic citizens.

This chapter argues that journalism reform efforts premised on delivering better information to the public are fundamentally a form of what I call, following Lazarsfeld’s (1941) classic formulation, ‘administrative journalism.’ Administrative journalism entails journalists being primarily oriented toward such things as predicting electoral outcomes, documenting and explaining social processes, and at their best, overseeing the bureaucratic workings of the state to help citizens hold elites accountable. This journalism certainly has democratic value, as its many proponents have more than adequately made the case for. Practitioners and scholars alike have looked to the rise of digital databases as a new opportunity for journalists to produce the information that enables citizens to hold state actors and other elites accountable for such things as poorly performing public schools, wasteful expenditures, and even the potholes that mark city streets. Similar to earlier precision journalism efforts four decades ago, in this formulation journalism should operate as a quasi-scientific public institution that generates data and information for citizens, yet in a faster, a-theoretical, and more public fashion than scholarly research. Computational journalism also fits the profession’s particular understanding of objectivity, with data and information offering a seemingly value-neutral way of holding the state and powerful to account.

While the idea of equating information with journalism is old, this chapter argues that the focus on data and information and privileging of cognitive and rational models of citizenship has limited the conversation around the current crisis about what journalism is and what it should be. ‘Information’ is necessary as part of a normative vision of journalism, but alone it is not sufficient. Conceptualizing journalism in terms of information and computational data says little about the values at stake in democratic life. After all, “information” is only one of Michael Schudson’s (2008) “six or seven” contributions of the press to democracy, the remainder being more value-based: investigation, analysis, providing for social empathy, convening public forums, and mobilizing the public. Indeed, what is striking is that for all of Nate Silver’s cogent and predictive analyses of electoral outcomes, it is likely that he did not influence

many votes or give anyone a reason to actually vote, let alone help citizens choose between candidates or motivate them to go to the polls. Despite their compelling analysis and explanation of the waxing and waning of various electoral fortunes during the 2012 campaign cycle, the public work of political scientists John Sides and Lynn Vavreck (2013) likely had little effect on vote choices either.

This chapter offers a normative alternative to the models of computational journalism that many have held up as the way through the crisis in journalism. I argue that we should normatively value journalism as a form of institutionally organized *civic skepticism* that is a fundamentally moral and narrative practice (see, Schudson (2008, 58) for another discussion of skepticism). In doing so, I build on sociologist Robert Merton's (1973) idea of "organized skepticism," which he coined in 1942 as one of the four norms that constitute the ethos of science. Similar to science, journalism should entail a healthy skepticism towards the workings of other institutions. However, journalism should also ideally be, and indeed often is, a much more explicitly value-laden practice articulated in the interest of the public. Drawing on a range of works from journalism studies and cultural sociology, especially Jeffrey Alexander's (2006) work on the "civil sphere" and John Durham Peters (1999) and Ron Jacobs and Eleanor Townsley's (2011) useful analyses of the cultural genres and performative dimensions of journalism, this chapter argues that a fundamental normative democratic role for journalism should be the routine exercise of scrutiny over political elites and powerful institutions in the public's interest. Journalists should, and often do, articulate the democratic values of the civil sphere – equality, liberty, and justice (Alexander 2006) – as their criteria for evaluating the actions of the powerful. And, in performing this critical scrutiny, journalists should not only exercise control over the publicity of the powerful, they should help make politics meaningful and provide the basis for the shared ideational attachments that underlie social solidarity (Carey 1965).

To make this argument, this paper proceeds in three parts. First, I discuss what I call the model of 'administrative journalism' that has been at the forefront of thinking about the crisis in journalism and is firmly rooted in information-based conceptions of democratic citizenship. I then turn to alternative conceptions of the press and offer my own explicit normative conception of journalism as institutionally organized civic skepticism. I conclude by considering how valuing journalism in this way has implications for how we think about journalistic practice, the economics of the industry, and journalism as an institution.

ADMINISTRATIVE JOURNALISM AND ITS CRITICS

Paul Lazarsfeld (1941) famously called "administrative research" that which served the functions of extant social and media institutions and explicitly left normative questions about social and economic structures, power, values, and

the ends of social change out of social scientific analysis (for a discussion, see Melody and Mansell 1983). Lazarsfeld argued that administrative research was conducted in the service of some administrative agency that had a defined purpose, as opposed to critical research, which was fundamentally concerned with human values.

Although Lazarsfeld was writing about social science, his categories can be extended to journalism. Administrative journalism is that which is concerned with information delivery to citizens as a means, ultimately, toward improving bureaucratic services and securing formal democratic accountability at the ballot box. Administrative journalism relies on the underlying assumption that information can, and does, help secure democratic accountability. In the administrative model of journalism, journalists produce information to educate citizens about the workings of the state and politics and their choices on election day. This is a model that courses, often unanalyzed, through much journalism and political communication research. For many working under this paradigm, citizens desire this political information or, at the very least, they *need* it. As the *Information Needs of Communities* report puts it when addressing its recommendations:

Although each citizen will have a different view on which information is important – and who is failing at providing it – Americans need to at least come together around one idea: that democracy requires, and citizens deserve, a healthy flow of useful information and a news and information system that holds powerful institutions accountable (Waldman 2011, 30).

The dominant theme threaded through debates about the “future of journalism” is that the role of the press as an information provider is uniquely under threat by changing economic models for news. This idea is based on the well-established normative idea of the press as a “watchdog” that, through a primarily informational function, holds state actors to account for misdeeds, incompetence, or a failure to meet the needs of the public. In this narrative on the present crisis, a ready solution to the erosion of press capacity is computational or data journalism. As Gynnild (2013, 2) argues, there is currently a broad consensus among “researchers and media CEOs as well as political decision makers. . . that being able to retrieve information and identify patterns by cutting across immense quantities of data is crucial for the further democratic transparency of society.” In this formulation, information is the central problem of democracy – from struggles to make, and keep, governmental information public, to the development of computational skills within media organizations that will enable journalists to make sense of vast new troves of data. These central issues are reflected in the “meta-journalistic discourse” (Carlson 2006) about the profession’s present crisis and future, as reformers and news outlets seek to develop the computational capacity of the field.

The administrative idea of journalism as information is markedly generative. If the crisis in journalism is imagined primarily in terms of how failing economic

models impact information provision, new practices that enable the production of information more reliably and efficiently through social science and computational methods are seemingly appropriate and adequate responses. Even more, Seth Lewis (2012) has revealed that at times of institutional crisis defining journalism almost exclusively in terms of “information” opens the field to new entrants who can challenge incumbents. Indeed, as Lewis (*ibid.*) demonstrates, the Knight Foundation deliberately turned from speaking about “journalism” and toward “information” to open the field to outsiders in the hope that it would spur innovation. In this informational formulation of journalism, anyone with a claim on data, information, statistics, and increasingly, programming skills, can argue that they are engaging in journalism given that as a profession it historically has been premised not on a specialized domain of knowledge, but a particular means of generating knowledge (Schudson and Anderson 2009).

The question is what do we stand to gain, and lose, with this view of journalism as information? For one, computational journalism promises to open the field to innovation, but it is not quite clear that it will make journalism more diverse or democratic. As Emily Bell (2014) pointed out about a number of new high profile journalism startups, “it’s impossible not to notice that in the Bitcoin rush to revolutionize journalism, the protagonists are almost exclusively – and increasingly – male and white.” Indeed, we can imagine that computation will make journalism a more specialized phenomenon, although it often comes cloaked in democratic rhetoric that elides its underlying premise of being practiced by those who wield specialized skills. For all the failures of legacy journalism, trading the unevenly professionalized journalistic field for a more professionalized and specialized social science or computer science field will likely undermine (already limited) journalistic diversity.

Even more, as a genre of communication, computational journalism will perhaps result in the greater remoteness of journalism from broader, more diverse publics. Nate Silver’s election reporting was at its best checking the interpretative authority of the pundit class through appeals largely to hyper attentive, already politically engaged citizens (Prior 2007). Computational journalism seems poised to extend informational approaches that do little to engage or mobilize broader and more diverse publics. As Peters (1999) argued in the context of his critique of the deliberative public journalism model:

Public participation flourishes when people are moved. And people are moved by more than their minds or hearts. Crime, punishment, lust, love, rivalry, and children at risk are the stuff of Genesis, Shakespeare, and the evening news. . . Entertainment in many forms brings “tales of common life” as much as does news; more precisely, the very contrast of entertainment and information ought to be contested. . . . The potential is to think about altering not only the wellsprings of public information but the styles themselves (110–111).

Computational journalism comes in many guises, of course. Not all computational journalism projects have the narrow concerns of better information at

heart. At their best, computational journalism projects web data and analytics to vibrant storytelling, interactivity, and multi-media formats to engage the public. That said, even allowing for the many differences in contemporary forms, the discourse around much of computational journalism often casts journalism in a narrowly informational role, and even more conceptualizes audiences as “the aggregate of rationally-engaged citizens” (Curran 2011, 3), even as it undoubtedly furthers the ends of better accountability and public policy-making.

Administrative journalism and computational techniques seem to offer little improvement on the diversity and genres of journalism. Even more, an exceptionally narrow focus on information may diminish other functions of the press. Many traditions of scholarship empirically demonstrate that audiences engage with the news in ways that extend beyond mere information. Berelson’s (1948) famous study of what happened when major newspapers in New York City went on strike offers an empirical look at the social uses of the news. While people said they missed being informed about what was going on in the world, few could articulate what they cared to know more about. What Berelson found instead was that people actually missed other “functions” of the newspaper, and saw it as “a tool for daily living” (118), respite from “the boredom and dullness of everyday life”(119), and a way to impress friends. In addition, Berelson argued that newspapers:

also supply guides to the prevailing morality, insight into private lives as well as opportunity for vicarious participation in them, and indirect “personal” contact with distinguished people. One explanation of the role of the human interest story is that it provides a basis of common experience against which urban readers can check their own moral judgments and behavior (the “ethicizing” effect) (120).

More theoretically, Glasser (2000) echoed Berelson’s insights fifty years later in an essay that sought to revive Stephenson’s “ludenic” theory of media. Glasser argues that the form of news matters as much as content. Journalism needs to appear regularly and predictably so reading can become a habit – quite apart from any specific “information needs” demanding to be fulfilled. As a pleasurable habit, Glasser argues that:

In the case of journalism, this means coming to understand news, especially news stories, as a distinct and distinctively valuable opportunity for individuals to engage a very public world in a very private and personally satisfying way. And it means coming to appreciate this form of engagement as an act of discovery and affirmation, a fundamentally creative experience in which individuals contemplate, seriously and yet imaginatively, their circumstances vis-à-vis the circumstances of others (24–25).

In other words, journalism has cultural value that extends far beyond information; indeed, information is likely something that citizens secondarily acquire from the primary pursuit of a pleasurable habit that allows them to participate in the civic dramas of the world.

And, even when journalists are focused on providing information, what often gets left out of scholarly and practitioner discussions is explicit consideration of the choices journalists make in terms of what is relevant to the public and what they are holding power to account for. In their study of investigative journalism, for instance, Ettema and Glasser (1998) argue that the reporter's craft should be seen as a "moral discourse." While journalists claim, to themselves and their publics, that they are simply providing information and verified facts, "their stories help define the boundaries of the moral order" (9) by policing violations of it. Ettema and Glasser offer a sweeping critique of all informational discourse that severs the relationship between facts and values: "We maintain that any attempt to gain truly important knowledge of human affairs... is built on a foundation of facts that have been called into existence, given structure, and made meaningful by values" (11).

In other words, even the seemingly neutral provision of "information" is a value-based practice premised on particular claims about what is meaningful in terms of democracy, citizenship, and political and moral values. Journalists implicitly legitimate certain forms of information as matters of public concern and craft routines and norms to provide it on a regular basis. And yet, administrative journalism actively elides explicit consideration of the question of value that underlies all practice in seeing information provision as neutral.

CIVIC SKEPTICISM

Ettema and Glasser's work shows how even routine reporting entails journalists making a set of value-laden claims. With this in mind, it is worth thinking more explicitly about the values that often underlie journalistic practice as a way of grounding normative claims about the role of journalism in democratic societies.

Alexander (2006) argues that the civil sphere, only one of many spheres of life in a pluralistic society, is the "sphere of justice" concerned with the "common good in a democratic way" (33). In this sphere of justice, democratic societies value civil inclusion and collective obligation while protecting individual liberty (34). Regulating cultural ideals about justice and values of equality and liberty are enacted through cultural codes, narratives, and institutions. These structuring ideals, values, and codes lead citizens "willingly and without coercion, to uphold rules whose utility they scarcely understand and whose effect may be detrimental to their self-interest" (43). This comes in spite of their personal commitments, warring elites and parties, and capitalist powers.

Alexander argues that cultural codes constitute a "structural feature of every civil society" (55) and relate to the attributions of motives, perceptions of legitimate social relations, and values of institutions. These codes are organized in a binary of civil and anti-civil terms and form part of the deep cultural background that shapes the forms and content of public expression and action seen as legitimate in public life and the scripts that elected officials and

candidates can perform. These codes also provide the criteria that the regulative institution of journalism uses to evaluate elites. Alexander argues that journalism is a mediating, regulating institution that checks the representational power of elected officials and others at sites of power, holding them accountable to the universalistic values that structure the civil sphere (the law and the institution of the “office” regulate behavior).

Alexander argues that codes are worked out through narratives, the stories that give shape to political life. Citizens tell one another stories about themselves, such as that they are rational, independent, and democratic. Journalists also tell citizens that they have these qualities. These stories are constitutive of social solidarity; they create a shared “discourse of liberty” (60) that provides much of the backdrop for how we speak and act in public. Even more, journalists evaluate political leaders and those vying for civil power through stories that convey civil and anti-civil codes. Leaders vie to have their words and actions narratively situated on civil terms by other elites and independent arbiters such as journalists, while associating their enemies with uncivil pollution.

Through stories that encode and give shape to these civic codes, professional journalists are not simply purveyors of political information, but are also critics of public political performance. As Alexander (2010) argues, the democratic struggle for power and the legitimacy to govern the civil sphere is a fundamentally performative struggle. Candidates vie to become collective representations of the body politic, attempting to fuse their personae with the background cultural structures that provide the basis for democratic legitimacy. In governance, elected officials and their political parties strive to articulate civil ideals and align their policy programs with the democratic values of justice, equality, and liberty. As elites seek to achieve symbolic identification with civil qualities, they attempt to pollute their opponents and link them to the dark, anti-democratic side of the civil binaries.

Journalists not only witness the symbolic clashes of political opponents, they play the active role of critics that speak both to and for an imagined public, ideally adopting a stance of “civic skepticism” towards the performances of the powerful in the civil sphere.¹ In naming this “civic skepticism,” I am drawing on Merton’s idea of “organized skepticism,” but explicitly situating it within a conception of journalism’s *moral* role as expressly concerned with democratic values. Merton used the idea of “organized skepticism” in a dual sense. First, organized skepticism is the methodological precept of scientists who ideally act

¹ This is not the hypercritical form of cynicism that Patterson (1993) rightfully decries in media coverage. Patterson is concerned that press cynicism erodes citizens’ faith in politicians and the democratic process (after all, politicians actually do deliver on what they promise in terms of policy, and make their aims reasonably clear to voters). Skepticism offers the possibility that journalists can be convinced of credibility, purity, sincerity, and authenticity; cynicism is premised on a claim that people are base and self-interested at their core.

skeptically towards one another's claims. Second, and even more expansively, the concept refers to science's institutional skepticism vis-à-vis other social institutions. Merton explicitly argues that through organized skepticism, characterized by a "detached scrutiny of beliefs in terms of empirical and logical criteria":

The scientific investigator does not preserve the cleavage between the sacred and the profane, between that which requires uncritical respect and that which can be objectively analyzed (277).

For Merton, the virtue of science lies in its overarching skepticism, while other institutions – the religious, the political – require faith. Skepticism is a methodological value (one that is passionately held) as scientists look for empirical causes of "beliefs and values." And yet, this is not to deny the social utility of these beliefs and values, even if they are not transcendent and sacred. As Merton argues (1973, 264):

The unsophisticated scientist, forgetting that skepticism is primarily a methodological canon, permits his skepticism to spill over into the area of value generally. The social functions of symbols are ignored and they are impugned as 'untrue.' Social utility and truth are once again confused.

Unlike scientists, journalists ideally exercise a form of what I call "civic skepticism" in everything from judging the public performances of the powerful to wielding the tools of investigative reporting to police violations of the democratic moral order. By skepticism, I broadly mean "doubt" as to the truth of political performances, whether it relates to the credibility of candidates, the purity of their motives, the sincerity of their rhetoric, or the authenticity of their public personas. Journalists are skeptical of politicians and governmental agencies. Journalists need to be won over and convinced that candidates and elected and appointed leaders are on the civil side of the democratic binary. Journalists strive to determine whether elites have civil motivations and are active, rational, reasonable, calm, and self-controlled (Alexander 2006, 57). For their part, elites need to convince journalists that they are open, trusting, critical, honorable, and truthful – not secretive, suspicious, deferential, self-interested, or deceitful (58). Elites need to convince journalists that they will govern in a rule-bound, equal, inclusive, and impersonal way, not in arbitrary, hierarchical, exclusive, and deeply personal ways.

In other words, the ideal default mode of the journalist should be one of skepticism, but with the ability to be convinced regarding the motives and claims of political actors and institutions. The burden of proof is placed upon others to convince the journalist that they are acting in the public interest. What tempers the skepticism of the journalist is a deep and abiding *faith* in the goodness of the public and the structuring civic values of liberty, equality, and justice that are necessary for democratic solidarity. This faith is continually renewed through the necessary tie of journalism as an institution to its publics,

even if they are only imagined (Schudson 2004). Reich (2012, 347), for instance, argues that journalists have a “bipolar” form of interactional expertise, which entails the relationship of the journalist with both source and audience. In terms of their audiences, journalists, “like experts in other occupations and professions, they emphasize not what their clients want, but rather what they need” (ibid.) And what publics “need” is defined for journalists on ideally democratic terms, while what they “want” is defined on commercial terms (a point returned to below).

CIVIC SKEPTICISM AND THE CRISIS IN JOURNALISM

Herb Gans (1998) pointed out the shortcomings of what he calls “the journalistic theory of democracy.” This theory is premised on the underlying assumptions that “(1) The journalist’s democratic role is to inform citizens; (2) the more informed these citizens are, the more likely they are to participate politically; and (3) the more they participate, the more democratic the country is apt to be.” As Gans argues, none of these assumptions are true, and this theory leads to the broad elision of power, the failure to develop a model of democratic accountability outside of elections, and more broadly a thin understanding of democracy. What journalists need to do, Gans argues, is create news that engages potential participants, has a theory of audiences, makes policies and their consequences understandable, details a much fuller range of actors and institutions that impinge on democracy, and provides deeper analysis.

In this section, I take up the question of what would be different about our present discourse around the crisis in journalism if we not only valued the democratic importance of information and the computation required to make sense of it, but also explicitly recognized the degree to which journalism is a value-laden practice. I consider what an alternative journalistic theory of democracy formulated in terms of institutionally organized civic skepticism would entail for our ideas of journalistic practice, economics, and the institution of journalism.

Journalistic Practice

As Lisa Gitelman (2014, 4) argued in her history of documents, “information” can entail static, discrete, and disaggregated units, and can take on a seemingly objective character “because of the way it reflects the authoritative institutions and practices.” By contrast, documents:

are importantly situated; they are tied to specific settings. . . the know-show function is context-dependent in space and time. . . . Because it implies accountability, knowing and showing together constitute an epistemic practice to which ethics and politics become available, even necessary (ibid., 4–5).

The journalist's ideal normative role is "to document" in Gitelman's sense. "To document" is an ethical practice that entails a politics, which means it goes beyond the provision of "information" to consider what makes it meaningful and actionable on civil terms. The journalist's role is not to simply accept information in vast government databases, but to provide this information with meaning and context and transform it into a form of civil documenting of social life in a way that is relevant to publics. As Mike Ananny (2014, 361) puts the relationship between information and the public:

Information is news – and information processing is news making – because it is, in some way, significant to publics. It matters to people who have no choice but to share resources and consequences – to experience outcomes from which they cannot simply extract themselves as private individuals. Second, in its ideal form, news is information that self-interest, friends, markets, or algorithms alone may not reveal. Although the mainstream press often falls short of this idea, it earns institutional and cultural legitimacy (though not necessarily its economic health) from how well it helps publics hear – not how well it helps individuals speak.

"Helping publics hear" requires a conception of journalistic production and the politics of information that has at its heart a commitment to civil concerns. Journalists must evaluate performance and information in the interest of being vigilant about violations of the civil sphere and its moral binaries. Journalists evaluate and communicate to hold power to account for democratic values, foster social solidarity, and examine the moral underpinnings of civil life. These concerns go beyond the narrow limits of administrative journalism to journalists' role in creating and fostering democratic publics. This means also that journalists should look for gaps in information. As Ganz (1998, 8) argued, "power is needed to obtain access to the right information." But even more than that, journalists should ask what is not rendered into "information" and "data" in the first place: the stories of those excluded from the corridors of power, the experiences of those rendered mute. Furthermore, journalistic skepticism should extend to administrative ways of "seeing like a state" (Scott 1998), and entail the appreciation that "official" and "commercial" data are not neutral renderings of the world, but selective lenses onto it. Journalists should strive to document the social in a rich and close-to-the-ground way.

This is not to say that all of the various strains of computational journalism are formulated in ways that render information and data unproblematic. It is only to point out that the emphasis on databases and quantification privileges certain ways of knowing about the world. Even more, the uncritical acceptance of information – often produced by government agencies themselves – entails a lack of skepticism, or at least an acceptance of official categories for classifying and categorizing the world (Bowker and Star 2000).

At the same time, the orientation toward the "civic" requires journalism to engage, create, and make issues relevant to publics. Alexander (2006, 80) argues that the news draws on an "ontology of realism" that forms the basis

for journalistic legitimation, even as journalists routinely categorize actions and events according to social significance, represent public opinion, and make moral evaluations at the boundaries of civil society. And yet, in a work that challenges equating journalism with news and extant normative perspectives on democratic discourse, Jacobs and Townsley (2011) argue that opinion journalism creates master forums for dialogue and discussion that, unlike news reporting, features many communicative styles and genres. Opinion journalism features narratives, moral oppositions, arguments, and performances that make democratic life meaningful and participation possible. Jacobs and Townsley argue that performance is the precursor to deliberation; the journalistic space of opinion creates a common cultural repertoire that makes deliberation desirable and worth doing (68). Journalists not only report, they call the public into being and provide a common set of narratives that enable citizens and elites to understand themselves. Rationality is not unimportant, just not the only thing. The “language of the streets” (Alexander 2006, 551) is as important as the language of the seminar room.

The economics of the news industry

Journalists are far more aware of their audiences today than at any time in the past, and rely on a number of technologies for representing them. This likely has simultaneously undermined journalists’ confidence that they speak to and for the public in any unitary sense, but also in other ways potentially makes for greater accountability to those audiences (Anderson 2011). It does so, however, through what is primarily a form of market accountability. As David Ryfe (2008, 138–139) put it, economic conditions are no longer “diffuse or remote from the day-to-day activities of journalists” (see also Carr 2014).²

On one level, the marketization of audiences can be seen in some ways as an extension of older commercial logics that furthered the ends of civic solidarity. For example, Schudson (1998, 38) has argued that commercial journalism made neutrality the basis for publicity, and may have paved the way for acceptance of diverse viewpoints being presented in public forums. Alexander (2006, 82–83) argued that commercialization historically encouraged the solidaristic and civil functions of media by wresting it from the hands of particularistic groups and grounding journalism in market processes and professionalism.

² This is not to say that journalistic routines are solely shaped by economic forces. It is likely, for instance, that shifts in genres of news and the cultural practices of journalists are also the product of changes in political parties and governance and electoral processes over the past five decades (see Cohen et. al . 2009). There appear to be more bases upon which to ground claims for political legitimacy with the greater decentralization of party and governing processes.

That said, there is much to suggest that the present economic crisis affecting many professional media organizations has eroded journalistic capacities for civic skepticism, placing greater pressure on news organizations to serve commercial wants than democratic needs. Without harkening back nostalgically to a golden age of journalism that never existed, the market has eroded professional autonomy in recent decades. Even more, the forms that marketization takes – the digital traces that citizens leave as they navigate media properties and share content which further the ends of online advertising – are not neutral ways of knowing audiences. They are precisely the opposite. Digitalization offers greater precision in terms of measuring clicks, optimizing web pages, targeting consumers, and quantifying the effects of advertisements. And yet, there are many gaps in the data. Audience metrics say nothing, except in crudely aggregate terms, about the contexts when journalism is influential over thought or action. A story that lacks broad reach may be vastly influential in a small community that is best poised to act upon it. Aggregate metrics tell us little about the cultural value of documented information that holds power to account by the mere fact that it is published, changing actors' perceptions of the situation. Metrics tell us nothing about what is not quantified, such as the cultural and social importance of addressing publics.

What would it mean for narratives about the contemporary crisis in the economic foundations of journalism if we made a normative ideal of civic skepticism a core part of our understanding of journalism? For one, the broad concern would be with the ways in which the civic skepticism of journalists is undermined by the economic pressures that digital monetization have placed upon them. While the press has historically been organized as a commercial system in the United States, it has both been heavily subsidized by the state and long dependent upon it for its raw materials (Cook 1998). During the present crisis, the emphasis has been on journalistic entrepreneurialism and innovation rather than on how to secure journalism's economic autonomy from both the state and market so the press can fulfill its democratic role. Perhaps regrounding claims for journalism in terms of its public role of civic skepticism can help us reconsider the value of and potentials for journalistic economic autonomy. As Pickard and Williams (2013, 208) argue in the context of their critique of a narrowly commodity-based definition of news:

To ensure that the public retains access to quality journalism will arguably require a transformation from a purely commercial, for-profit press, to a public service-oriented media system. . . . Although newspaper profits might be doomed, democracy still requires journalism. Ideally, this crisis may help fuel a period of bold experimentation with new journalistic models. If news is treated only as a commodity, then it is rational to maximize profits by any means possible, like asking the government to allow for greater media concentration and policing online content. But if journalism is seen as primarily a public service, then democratic societies should try to minimize market pressures, return media production to local communities, and sustain public service media into perpetuity, just as we preserve permanent spaces in society for museums, libraries, and schools.

The institution of journalism

Journalism is only one among many institutions in contemporary democratic life that monitor social and economic power. In Keane's (2009, 743) formulation, in "monitory democracy" there is a global network of "power-scrutinising devices." While Keane argues that on balance monitory democracy is a positive development in the history of democracy given that it makes citizens more skeptical of all forms of power, it also comes with the risk of alienation and disengagement:

one of its more perverse effects is to encourage individuals to escape the great complexity of the world by sticking their heads, like ostriches, into the sands of willful ignorance, or to float cynically upon the swirling tides and waves and eddies of fashion (747).

The informational function of journalism is precisely what many other actors in civil society, and the state itself (Schudson 1994), provide in monitory democracy. Defining journalism narrowly in terms of providing timely, reliable, and accessible information contains the seeds of the institution's own irrelevance. Instead, it is with journalism's ideal normative capacity as a civic institution to provide information that is democratically meaningful and relevant to publics that we should be concerned. Journalism is one of many contemporary institutions scrutinizing power, and also one of many public-facing institutions in democratic life. Journalism is unique, however, in its orientation, for over a century in many western democracies, toward the broad values of the civil sphere and commitment to the general public as a normative ideal. Culturally, the institution of journalism's legitimacy has rested on its commitment to represent the civic values and generalized ideal public that transcends particular factions. Ideally, on normative grounds, the institution of journalism provides the public infrastructure of the civil sphere, the master forums within which many forms of civic monitoring take place and access wider publics, and the grounding in the universalistic democratic criteria through which skepticism occurs in the public interest.

It is the moral and civic orientation of journalism that grounds its value as an institution. While journalism, and certainly journalists, can be crass, craven, banal, petty, and unreliable, the public holds journalism to higher, civic normative standards and evaluates whether it is trustworthy, credible, independent, fair, nonpartisan, and objective. Indeed, the numerous surveys that detail the global public's disenchantment with journalism (surveyed by Nielsen in this volume) tell us little about the sources of this disillusionment. The public likely gauges the press's performance against the ideal, civic values that continue to animate the institution. How citizens hold journalists to civic standards and treat journalism during times of crisis reveals the robust cultural health of the institution of journalism, even in monitory democracies with many information producers. For one, citizens call the press to account when journalists fail to publicize violations of the civil sphere, such as the recent events in Ferguson,

Missouri, when public outcry prodded journalists to live up to their normative civic role. For another, the public treats journalists as sacred heroes when they fall in the course of their public witnessing duties, as the James Foley and Steven Sotloff beheadings reveal.

These moments make clear both the normative values the public expects the institution of journalism to serve in democracy, and the ways that journalism cannot be equated with information. It is journalism's civil, and ultimately moral, role in democracy that secures its institutional legitimacy and symbolic power.

CONCLUSION

Concerns over information have taken on an outsized role in the debate over the current crisis in journalism, yet it is only one function of the press among many. Even more, imagining a crisis in information has entailed solutions that are, if not exclusively, overwhelmingly focused on data and cognition. In the process, our conversation about the current crisis has generally overlooked the moral role of the press, even as it has limited our imaginations of journalistic genres. We need to expand our discourse around what journalism ought to be – a *civic skepticism* towards all centers of social power that is vigilant about violations of the civil sphere and its moral binaries and committed to making issues relevant in ways that create engaged publics.

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