

KEY READINGS IN JOURNALISM

EDITED BY
**ELLIOT KING AND
JANE L. CHAPMAN**

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Key Readings in Journalism

Edited by

**Elliot King and
Jane L. Chapman**



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Key Readings in Journalism

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT WE SHOULD KNOW

IN 1903, JOSEPH PULITZER, THE PUBLISHER of the *New York World* and one of the most powerful publishers in America asked the *World's* longtime business manager Don Seitz to join him on a train ride from New York City to one of Pulitzer's homes on Jekyll Island, Georgia. In route, Pulitzer handed Seitz a plan to bequeath to Columbia University \$2 million to establish a school of journalism as well as to establish a set of prizes for working journalists along the same lines as the prizes Alfred Nobel had endowed the year before. The sum was more than three times the university's operating budget at the time.

Pulitzer had not always been a proponent of journalism education in colleges and universities. Earlier, when a group of publishers in Missouri had proposed establishing a professorship of journalism, Pulitzer had mocked them, calling the idea absurd. Later he came to the view that while a professor of journalism could potentially teach students the technical aspects of the profession, he (or she) could not create great journalists in the same way that military schools could not produce military geniuses along the lines of Hannibal or Napoleon Bonaparte.

While perhaps grudgingly conceding that a university education in journalism could be of some use, Pulitzer had another goal in endowing a school of journalism. A school of journalism could help increase respect for journalism and journalists, enabling journalists to take what Pulitzer saw as their rightful places alongside the other learned professions like law and medicine. Not long before, Columbia had established a school of mining, so why not a school of journalism?

When Pulitzer asked Seitz what he thought about the plan, Seitz's answer was direct and to the point. "Not much," Seitz said. Endowing the *World* itself would be a much better use of the money than endowing a school of journalism, he suggested.

Since the study of journalism at the university level was introduced by Robert E. Lee at what was then Washington College in the late 1860s, learning about journalism was seen skeptically by journalists themselves and presumably little considered by most

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of the public, for whom college was out of reach. Within the journalism community, the thought was that people entering the field would do better by finding an entry level position and learning their craft under the tutelage of senior editors and reporters. In any case, as even Pulitzer suggested, many believed that being a great journalist depended on having great talent and was not an activity one could learn except by doing. As for the public at large, in that period of time, reading a newspaper was still, in many ways, a political act. Readers were less concerned with the “professional values” of a particular newspaper than with the politics it espoused.

The divergence of opinion on the value of an education in journalism made its way into the academy itself as journalism programs became more commonplace throughout the twentieth century and then, on many campuses were either joined or merged into broader-based departments of communication. On the one hand, many of the faculty in journalism programs felt it was their primary responsibility to teach entry-level skills to their students, preparing them for jobs in the news industry. The apprenticeship model common in an earlier period was imported into the academy. On the other hand, some faculty felt it was their responsibility to teach their students material that ranged beyond the requisite skill set and explore wider issues associated with communication in general. The former approach to journalism education was often espoused by ex-practitioners who had made their way into the academy, and newspaper editors. The latter was proposed by Ph.D.-holding academics, many, though not all, of whom had some experience in journalism, as well as academic administrators interested in increasing the research productivity of their faculties. The split in approach was captured in a 1967 article called “Green Eyeshades vs. Chi-Squares,” which appeared in *The Quill*, the magazine of the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ). In it, the author Jake Highton argued that editors believed that journalism students should receive a practical education focused on the skills needed to practice journalism while the administrators of journalism programs in colleges and universities were more interested in students learning more theoretical courses and integrating journalism with “communication education.” During the 1980s and into the 1990s, the battle lines seemed to be drawn between a more holistic journalism education and an industry-oriented sequence approach.

This split in journalism education, however, side-stepped an important question—what should people entering the field of journalism know about the practice of journalism itself. Regardless of whether people learned entry-level professional skills in a university program or through on-the-job training, was there anything about journalism itself beyond the skill set, such as its history, development, social role, and its practitioners that people entering the field, and the public at large, should know?

Perhaps through the 1980s, that question was irrelevant. In 1970, 77 percent of the adult Americans read weekday newspapers and even in 1985, that number still stood at 64.2 percent. Watching evening news broadcasts, both network and local, were nightly habits for tens of millions of people. In 1980, the network news programs regularly reached more than 36 million households. Reading newspapers and watching broadcast news were routine activities for most people, enabling them to form their sense of the news media and what is news through their own experience with their favorite newspaper or television news broadcast.

That situation has changed dramatically. By 1995, only 23 percent of people under the age of 30 reported that they read newspapers on a regular basis. Viewership of broadcast news was also dropping precipitously. Many students interested in studying journalism and entering the field simply are not that familiar with the current news media. They cannot form their opinions about what news should be and how the news media should operate through their own personal experience because this is insufficient to do so.

A similar process has occurred in the workplace as well: in the past many newspapers, as established institutions, had developed their own local cultures. New employees could learn about the traditions of the *Atlanta Constitution*, perhaps, or the *Chicago Tribune*. They could learn about the founders, the great editors and reporters, and the important stories the newspapers or the news broadcasts broke and covered. In short, news reporters could absorb the culture of journalism through their experience in the workplace.

Even if at some point in the past aspiring journalists and the public at large could understand journalism as an area of practice, an institution, and a social force through their own personal experiences, largely this is no longer the case. The consolidation of newspapers into a few great chains has hurt newspapers' local identification and culture. Senior editorial staff, who could be expected to be the bearers of a newspaper's culture, are transferred from property to property through the chain as they ascend the corporate ranks. The downsizing of newspaper staffs has hit hardest at senior journalists with the most experience in their organizations, who are also the bearers of the organizational history. While young reporters can still theoretically learn how to "do" journalism on the job, there is little chance to learn or think about journalism in any systematic way.

At least two other factors have raised the question—what should the public and aspiring journalists know about journalism? Since the Republican convention that nominated Senator Barry Goldwater for the presidency of the United States at the Cow Palace in San Francisco in 1964, where the attendees erupted in wild applause when President Eisenhower warned delegates not to be divided by those outside "our family," that is "sensation seeking columnists and commentators," conservative politicians have railed against the "liberal" media. From Spiro Agnew's attacks on "nattering nabobs of negativity," a phrase coined by William Safire, a speech writer for President Richard Nixon and then a *New York Times* columnist, through the radio commentator Rush Limbaugh, conservatives have assailed the operation of the mainstream media as biased and misleading. For their part, though perhaps the recipient of less popular attention, liberals and those farther to the left have published a steady attack on mainstream journalism as being biased in the other direction and basically serving as lapdogs to people in power.

The result is that members of the public often have very cynical views of the press, seeing it as biased and more interested in "selling newspapers" than truly reporting the news. In fact, in a 2010 Gallup poll, only 25 percent of the public had confidence in newspapers and even fewer, 22 percent, had confidence in television news. In short, the public knows little about the operation of the news media and journalism itself and what it knows, it doesn't like. These attitudes shape the environment from which students enter the field of journalism and to which they will return after they complete their education, should they ultimately choose journalism as a profession.

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The cold hard truth, however, is that many journalism students ultimately will not work in journalism, either in print, broadcast or online, in the short or long run. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, that bills itself as the leading source of information about the employment of college graduates, in the spring of 2009, only 24 percent of college graduates looking for jobs in journalism actually received offers, making it the toughest field in which to get a job. With the relatively low pay for many entry level positions, the vicious downsizing of newspaper and broadcast operations, and the uncertainty of Web-based news operations coupled with rising enrolments in journalism programs, the math itself indicates that many students who major in journalism will look for and find jobs elsewhere when they graduate.

Given this reality, the study of journalism in the academy can no longer be conceptualized solely as training for jobs in the media. Instead, journalism must be seen as an academic discipline that stands on its own merits as a rewarding area for students to invest a significant period of time during their undergraduate and even graduate educations in the same way that history or English are seen as worthy academic disciplines regardless of the professional paths those who study those fields might ultimately travel. The study of journalism has to be seen as a worthwhile endeavor in and of itself, as an interesting way to engage and better understand the world in general, in the same way that other liberal arts and social science disciplines allow students to engage and understand the world.

That said, academic disciplines, almost by definition, have boundaries. While those boundaries may be porous at the edges, in virtually all disciplines there is a core of knowledge that everybody said to be educated or knowledgeable in that field holds in common. It is a familiarity of this shared core of knowledge that in some ways defines who is a member of that learned community, or at least who can claim to be educated in the field.

For the past perhaps 50 years, the shared core of knowledge has been the skill set—how to write in an objective fashion; how to make sure stories are credible; how to develop a straightforward unadorned writing style; how to produce good work on a tight deadline. Moreover, the thought was that students should be taught to address significant issues—this despite the rise of celebrity journalism, the proliferation of sports journalism, the lack of attention to the arts and so on. A focus on the skill set may have sufficed when journalism education was seen primarily as a training ground for entry into the profession, but most academic disciplines have a core of knowledge that ranges beyond an acquisition of specific skills. Academic disciplines are defined by what students of that discipline should know and what students of that discipline should have read.

So beyond the skill set, what should journalism students and perhaps the public at large know about journalism to be considered educated in the field? As reflected in the selections in this reader, students of journalism should be knowledgeable in five areas—the development of journalism, the practice of journalism, lasting works produced by journalists, notable practitioners in the field, a critical analysis of journalism and the social impact of journalism.

Each area is significant in its own right and taken as a whole, can result in a well-informed multifaceted understanding of journalism. For example, it is important for

students of journalism to understand that the development of the field has always been shaped by shifting economic, political, social and cultural changes in play in the country at large. While the emergence of the Internet as a platform for mass communication is leading to radical changes, those changes are no more severe in many ways than those sparked by the growth of democratic capitalism in the 1830s or the introduction of the telegraph in the 1840s. Journalism's developmental arc has always been conditioned by a wide range of significant factors. The key is identifying and recognizing which of those factors are having a critical impact and how to cope with them.

While the development of journalism has been shaped by social forces, on a daily basis news is reported and written by people. To understand journalism, it is important to understand how journalists go about their work. Those work routines shape the news product created and presented to the public every day. The organization of work plays a significant role in the output of journalism.

The output of journalism, of course, is the production of "texts"—news reports, magazine articles, television broadcasts, books and now blogs and Web sites. A familiarity with the journalism texts that have made a difference is critical to an understanding of journalism itself. In fact, many people in the field feel that the best way to teach people to be great journalists is to have them read great journalism. Others feel that the best way to teach people the history of journalism is to have them read or watch the primary texts produced by journalists—the newspaper and magazine articles and news broadcasts themselves.

Interestingly, it is often easy to identify reporting that made a difference: reporting on the Civil War; 100 years later the civil rights movement; the exposure of Boss Tweed and corruption in New York in the late 1860s and early 1870s; then the exposure of corruption in the Watergate scandal in the 1970s that led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon; reporting on the lead up to the Spanish American war in 1898; then on the war in Viet Nam in the 1960s and the 1970s, the impact of reporting is often cumulative. No single article stands out. For example, the investigative reporter Seymour Hersh's report that Lt. William Calley was under investigation for deliberately killing 109 unarmed civilians at My Lai in Viet Nam in 1968 had huge repercussions as it basically raised the possibility that U.S. soldiers were guilty of war crimes. The story itself, however, took the form of a straight, almost routine dispatch.

As a result, most lasting journalism is frequently found in books, but it is here that the lines between journalism and other disciplines begin to blur. In journalism, many of the exemplary books use techniques often associated with literature. While perhaps not representative of the routine output of journalism, these books generally are examples of the best of journalism, meticulously researched, well-written works that have had a major impact. The line between literature and literary journalism is fuzzy indeed, as well it should be. From the beginning of modern journalism in the 1800s until very recently, journalism was often seen as the first rung of literature.

It is virtually self evident that texts are primarily created by individuals, with the assistance of a support team. As in most fields, certain individuals have come to be seen as role models in the field for the work that they have done. The presence of role models is particularly important in professional fields: they help new entrants understand what is considered good work and what is valued. In journalism, the lives of the luminaries sometimes become the point of entry for understanding changes in the field

or the significance of reporting on specific topics. This is only to be expected. While the development of journalism has been shaped in large part by broader social forces, journalism itself consists predominantly of stories about people. Any knowledge of journalism is surely incomplete without knowing about Edward R. Murrow, for example. Whilst the exploits of Robert Woodward and Carl Bernstein drew many people to journalism as a career in the 1970s, now many incoming journalism students can barely name a single prominent journalist, currently working or from the past.

The stakes involved in truly understanding journalism, its practitioners, its output, and its institutions may be higher than they may be for other academic disciplines. Journalism is one of the few professional fields that benefit from constitutional protection: at the heart of the First Amendment is the need to safeguard the right to a robust debate that is essential to democracy. In fact, journalism plays a vital role in establishing and maintaining a democratic and free society. Providing citizens the information they need to be self governing is journalism's paramount goal. Educated students of journalism must understand the relationship of journalism to society.

Since journalism is so critical to democratic life, students must be familiar with the broad criticisms of journalism as well. While ill-informed and slanted criticism has soured many on journalism in general, an astute critique of press performance is most necessary. Students should be equipped to assess the work of the contemporary news media and also be familiar with the assessments that have been made in the past.

If the areas outlined above can serve to broadly define the contours of the academic discipline of journalism, the question "what should students of journalism know in order to claim to be educated about the field?" still remains unanswered. Many other academic disciplines have what could be called core readings or a canon. Students of English, for example, are expected to read some of the plays of William Shakespeare and some of the works of Mark Twain, preferably *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. If they don't, those students cannot be said to be well educated in English. In the same way, most sociology students must read works by Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx. Once again, those thinkers are central to that field.

Building a canon, however, is a tricky business involving issues of power. A great deal of what was called the "culture wars" in the 1980s revolved around what was to be included on the booklist for introductory and advanced English courses. More conservative academics wanted to reserve the canon for works that have been defined as the "best" of their time periods, works that often were the books of dead white men. More liberal academics argued that the definition of "best" did not reflect quality but the power structure in the academic world at the time. They fought to have the canon enlarged to include other, hitherto excluded voices—particularly those of women, people of color and people from non-Western societies. Conservatives argued that the liberals were "diluting" the quality of the canon. Liberals argued that they were widening the scope of the field.

Acknowledging the risks involved, to identify a core literature for journalism, a survey was conducted in the spring of 2009 soliciting respondents to identify books that they felt were essential for all journalism students to have read. Sent to journalism academics and graduate students, 382 people responded. *All the President's Men*, by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, *Public Opinion* by Walter Lippmann and *Discovering the News* by Michael Schudson topped the list. The selections in this

volume were drawn from that survey and supplemented by additional choices designed to broaden the book's scope on every dimension including gender, race and nationality.

The books from which the excerpts in this reader were taken do not represent a consensus on a canon. The survey on which they are largely based is not representative; there was no consensus in the survey, as the top voted work received fewer than half the votes; and the leading books on the list do not seem to have the same cultural weight that Shakespeare and Twain have. On the other hand, Shakespeare and Twain probably did not have the same cultural weight when they were still alive as they do today. The problem with developing a canon may be that journalism as an academic discipline is still quite new, perhaps too new. Or, as some of the survey respondents argued, there is no need to develop a canon at all since canons are generally just exercises in authority and control.

Be that as it may, it seems very clear that there is a pressing need to develop a common pool of knowledge among students of journalism, knowledge that goes well beyond teaching the traditional skills and even the traditional values of journalism, values that increasingly seem to be honored more in their breach than in their implementation. With the revolution in the delivery of news, the very definition of who is a journalist has been called into question. Journalists can no longer be defined by the organizations for which they work, their work practices, or the way that they report the news. Instead, journalists must be defined by the lens through which they see the world and people who are educated in journalism will understand what that lens is.

The author Benedict Anderson argued that people imagine themselves to be members of a specific community and their imaginations are shaped by the texts they produce and the texts to which they attend. The selections in this volume identify the texts that should be held in common by the community of those educated about journalism. The works represented in the volume may not be comprehensive, completely inclusive or completely uncontroversial. But readers of these selections and the books from which they are drawn will have a deep understanding of journalism along many of its dimensions. This common ground created by sharing these texts is essential to establishing who a journalist should be and what a journalist should do now and in the future, giving people who do not enter the field professionally a deep and appropriate understanding of journalism as a field of human activity, an education critical to the functioning of democracy itself.

SECTION I

The Development of Journalism