

Principles of American Journalism

An Introduction

Stephanie Craft and Charles N. Davis

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Principles of American Journalism

In a rapidly changing media landscape, what becomes of journalism? Designed to engage, inspire and challenge students while laying out the fundamental principles of the craft, *Principles of American Journalism* introduces students to the core values of journalism and its singularly important role in a democracy. From the First Amendment to Facebook, Stephanie Craft and Charles N. Davis provide a comprehensive exploration of the guiding principles of journalism—the ethical and legal foundations of the profession, its historical and modern precepts, the economic landscape, the relationships among journalism and other social institutions, and the key issues and challenges that contemporary journalists face. Case studies, discussion questions and field exercises help students to think critically about journalism's function in society, creating mindful practitioners of journalism and more informed media consumers.

With its bottom line under assault, its values being challenged from without and from within and its future anything but certain, it has never been more important to think about what's unique about journalism. This text is ideal for use in introductory Principles of Journalism courses, and the companion website provides a full complement of student and instructor resources to enhance the learning experience and connect to the latest news issues and events.

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*Dedicated to
Principles of American Journalism students past, present and future.*

Preface

This book results from the process of co-teaching the Principles of American Journalism course at the Missouri School of Journalism—the task we were hired for and the course that continues to challenge us and change our thinking on so many issues, day after day.

In our daily conversations as we took turns teaching the course, we concluded that the many fine “Introduction to Mass Media” texts on the market did not meet the needs of a course designed to introduce students not to the entire world of mass communication, but to the central role that journalism plays within that broader world. What if we created a text that not only introduced students to journalism as a practice, but also highlighted its values and the many forces promoting and hindering journalism’s ability to act in accordance with them? What if, in other words, we could teach students why journalism matters?

We, like so many others, were deeply influenced by *The Elements of Journalism*, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel’s elegant testament to what makes journalism unique and important. It fundamentally changed the way we thought about teaching the course, and underscored the importance of a course that focuses singularly on the news media.

Of course, much has changed and continues to change since we began teaching the course and since Kovach and Rosenstiel published *The Elements*, changes that are reflected in this book’s contents. We believe that much of what Kovach and Rosenstiel set forth stands the test of time—indeed, the ferocity and pace of change make taking a clear stance about journalism’s values all the more important. We hope this book does credit to Kovach and Rosenstiel’s work and pursues, even if it never quite reaches, the goal of making the case for journalism’s essential role. In the end, we do feel we have a text that matches the goals of the course.

Chapters 1 and 2 trace journalism's role in democracy and ways of defining journalism that have implications for what we expect journalism to do. Chapter 3 takes a look at the changing tides of journalism, making the argument that while tools change, the principles underlying journalism don't (or at least shouldn't). Chapters 4 and 5 attempt to make sense of the economic context for journalism and the ever-present tension between profit and public service that has new urgency with the collapse of traditional revenue models. Chapters 6 and 7 address the ethical and legal underpinnings of journalism practice as well as offering practical information to help students understand what they *can* do and whether they *ought* to do it. Finally, Chapter 8 concludes the book with a spirited discussion of independence, the element of journalism that is central to journalism's ability to fulfill its democratic function.

Acknowledgments

A book is a collective effort reflecting the labors of many people. We'd be remiss if we failed to recognize the many fine colleagues, former students and friends who have added their expertise to the book through the many sidebar features you'll read. They add a depth and breadth to the text, as well as a fresh new voice.

We also would like to thank the thousands of students who have marched in and out of *Principles of American Journalism* over the past 13 years. To say that we could not do it without you all is trite, maybe, yet so true. Your feedback, your questions in class, your responses to the discussions we've had are all reflected in this book.

And this book also reflects one of the greatest joys of teaching *Principles of American Journalism* at Missouri: the many wonderful graduate students who have worked with us through the years. Many appear in these pages as contributors to the sidebars, but many, many others played a role in this book through discussions, comments and occasional cajoling. We thank you all.

We'd also be remiss if we didn't thank the faculty and staff of the University of Missouri School of Journalism, who prove daily that the "Missouri Method" continues to be the finest way to train young journalists ever devised.

And finally, our families and friends and colleagues, who have made countless adjustments to their own lives so we could get this book written. As for the Davis side of the writing partnership: thanks to my dear wife Julie, and my kids, Charlie and Mamie Davis—your father does nothing without you in mind. Bernie and Art Craft—the very definition of "supportive"—have their daughter's deepest gratitude.

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The Mirror, the Watchdog and the Marketplace

Navigating the rush-hour traffic on his way to work in January 2009, Sri Lankan newspaper editor Lasantha Wickramatunga was gunned down by two assassins on motorcycles.

He knew it was coming.

For years his newspaper, *The Sunday Leader*, had exposed government corruption and questioned its conduct of the war against the separatist Tamil Tigers—reporting that had already subjected Wickramatunga and his family to beatings and no-holds-barred intimidation. Just days before his murder, he received a message scrawled in red ink on a page of his newspaper: “If you write you will be killed.”

So why did he do it? Why did he keep writing in the face of such threats? In an editorial he wrote anticipating his assassination and published three days after his death, Wickramatunga offers a compelling answer, describing how he saw his role as a journalist and the role of a free press in society:

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- ▼ Develop an understanding of the essential role journalism plays in democracy.
- ▼ Explore the specific functions the press performs to fulfill democratic needs.
- ▼ Consider the factors that influence whether and how well journalism can perform those functions.

The free media serve as a mirror in which the public can see itself sans mascara and styling gel. From us you learn the state of your nation, and especially its management by the people you elected to give your children a better future. Sometimes the image you see in that mirror is not a pleasant one. But while you may grumble in the privacy of your armchair, the journalists who hold the mirror up to you do so publicly and at great risk to themselves. That is our calling, and we do not shirk it . . . We have espoused unpopular causes, stood up for those too feeble to stand up for themselves, locked horns with the high and mighty so swollen with power that they have forgotten their roots, exposed corruption and the waste of your hard-earned tax rupees, and made sure that whatever the propaganda of the day, you were allowed to hear a contrary view.

(Wickramatunga, 2009)

That Wickramatunga would put himself in harm's way—and ultimately pay with his life—for the “calling” of journalism demonstrates a singular kind of courage. But the very idea that simply doing journalism put him at risk might be a little difficult to understand from the vantage point of the United States, where journalists can generally report on and even criticize the actions of government without fear of violence. That freedom is easy for us to take for granted, but was grimly elusive for Wickramatunga. In that final editorial, he offered this blunt prediction: “When finally I am killed, it will be the government that kills me.”

What can we, separated by thousands of miles and great historical and cultural differences, learn about American journalism from the assassination of an editor in Sri Lanka? A lot. In fact, if you substitute “pounds” for “rupees” in the quotation above, you could easily believe you were reading something penned by a patriot during the American Revolution. (OK, so you'd have to substitute “powdered wigs” or something for “styling gel” too. But you get the idea.) Why do these ideas sound so familiar to us? Because they echo a widely shared understanding of what democracy requires of journalism, and of the kind of freedom necessary for journalism to do what democracy requires.

► THE HISTORICAL BACKDROP

In the United States, that widely shared understanding has its roots in American colonial experience and the subsequent revolution, particularly in

the background and mindsets of the group of men who would become the framers of the U.S. Constitution. The colonists' reasons for revolt largely centered on what was considered to be the tyranny—economic and political—of their British rulers. An ocean away from the Crown, the colonies wanted to shake off the inequity of taxation without representation and the indignity of being forced, after a long period in which the government practiced a hands-off policy toward them and they began to develop a distinct, “American” identity, to resubmit to British authority. (We are skipping over a ton of really interesting history here in the name of brevity. Promise us you’ll read up on press history on your own.) But once they managed to successfully break free, they would still need to come up with a system of government to manage their affairs. What would it look like? Something completely different.

In addition to their personal experiences as colonists, the framers of the U.S. Constitution also were steeped in Enlightenment philosophy, particularly that of John Locke, which emphasized the power and authority of individual reason over other—arbitrary—sources of authority, such as the state. In very oversimplified terms, this emphasis assumes that individuals are free to exercise reason and that reason is the source of truth. Perhaps you can begin to see where all this is heading: A basic idea that people, exercising reason, are best equipped to govern themselves, to make sense of the competing “truths” in the marketplace of ideas, and the related conclusion

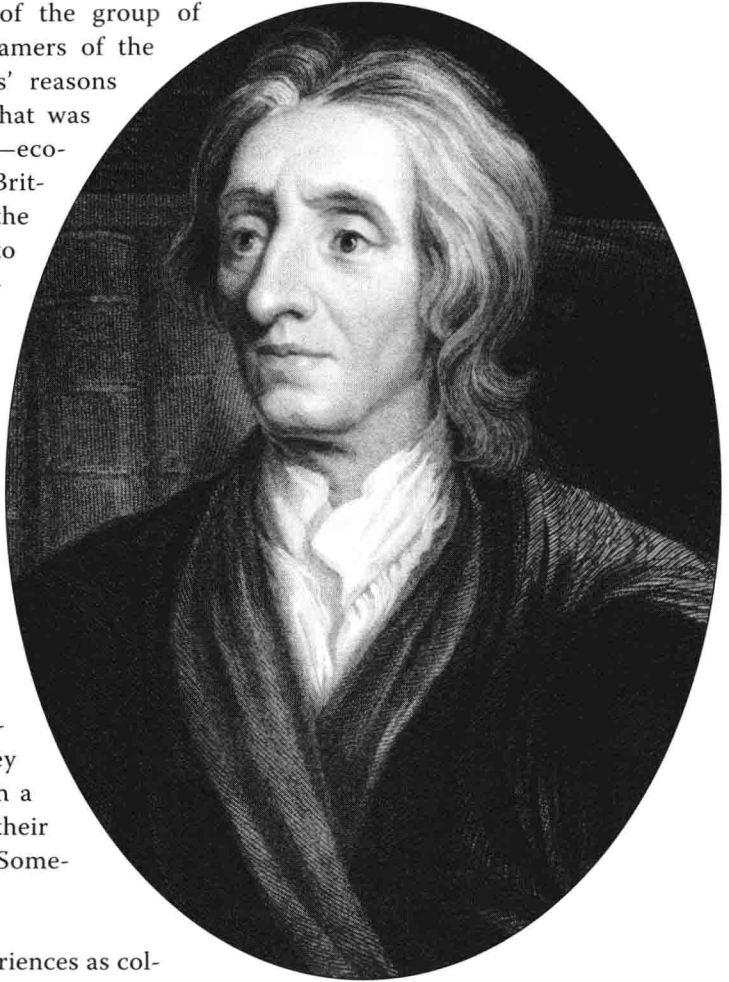


FIGURE 1.1 English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) was a key Enlightenment figure whose ideas were very influential on the founding fathers of the United States.

*Georgios Kollidas/
Shutterstock*

► **DEMOCRACY:**

A system of government in which the people govern themselves. Typically characterized by free elections in which every adult can participate, freedom of expression, and an independent judiciary, this kind of self-governance stands in contrast to monarchies, dictatorships, theocracies and other forms in which an unelected person or small group of people hold power.

that government power must be harnessed in the service of the people, not the other way around.

So, how might a free press assist in that self-governance? By acting as a check on government power and by creating a space in which claims about truth could be debated. This notion of the press contradicts a tenet of English common law during colonial times that sounds, well, tyrannical. It's called "seditious libel." A libel is a statement that harms someone's reputation. The "seditious" part refers to a libel about government authority. In England, this was a crime punishable by life imprisonment.

It gets better. (Or worse.)

"The greater the truth, the greater the libel." This feature of the law essentially said that the truth of whatever libelous thing you dared to say against the government didn't matter. In fact, the more true the criticism, the bigger trouble you would be in for voicing it. Imagine what a law like that can do to the marketplace of ideas. Shut it down altogether, that's what.

When the framers turned their attention to drafting the founding documents of the United States, they saw vestiges of English law such as seditious libel to be contrary to what their experiment in democratic government would require. Not only did it violate Enlightenment notions of reason, but it also ran contrary to more practical concerns about how to check tyranny and discuss and debate public affairs. (Seditious libel, sadly, crops up again and again in American history, typically during times of war. You can take some comfort in the fact that it has been repeatedly beaten back.)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

American democracy today differs in many ways from the structure laid out by the founders. For example, virtually all citizens—not just rich, white, landowners—now have the right to vote. Further, those running for office appeal directly to the general public, rather than to an elite group of electors. In this new environment, is the role of journalism more or less important than it was more than two centuries ago?

Among those founding documents is the Bill of Rights, drafted by James Madison, which declares freedom of speech and of the press to be basic rights. (You'll learn much more about the First Amendment in Chapter 7.) The need—or lack of need—for a document to enumerate such basic rights was the topic of much debate. In fact, some colonists didn't want to ratify the U.S. Constitution without such a

list. Nevertheless, if a list were to be drawn up, certainly freedom of expression would have to be on it. As Madison (1822) later wrote, “A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both.”

In his overview of the twists and turns the discussion about the Bill of Rights took, scholar Rodney Smolla (1992) gives us a sense of the magnitude of the framers’ accomplishments:

America had, for the first time in world history, put the people before the state. . . . In the Declaration of Independence and the grandiloquent opening of the Preamble to the Constitution, in which “We the People” asserted their ultimate authority, America reversed the flow of power.
(p. 39)

► WHAT DEMOCRACY NEEDS FROM JOURNALISM

Now that we’ve got some background into why a free press is so intertwined with democracy, we will delve more deeply into just what, specifically, the press can or ought to do to support democratic governance. Interesting that the thinking of 18th Century American revolutionaries is echoed in the thinking of a 21st Century Sri Lankan newspaper editor, isn’t it?

Notice the three metaphors for the role of the press Wickramatunga’s editorial contains: First, the mirror, where society can see itself, warts and all. Second, the watchdog that is supposed to start barking when those in power become corrupt, forget their roots and waste the people’s hard-earned money. Third, the marketplace of ideas, the space where even unpopular causes and contrary views can get a hearing. These metaphors for the press come up again and again, so it’s worth spending time here to examine them in some depth.

First, let’s compare those metaphors with how scholars talk about what democracy needs from the press. Five commonly discussed needs are: information dissemination, accountability, representation, deliberation and conflict resolution. **Information dissemination** is probably the easiest one to understand: Democracy requires some method for distributing all the information people need to make decisions and govern themselves. That means the press has to make decisions about what we need to know to do our jobs as citizens in a democracy, decisions that require exercising editorial judgment. Not



FIGURE 1.2 Sri Lankan media rights activists shout slogans and hold up posters bearing the picture of the disfigured face of journalist Keith Noyhar in Colombo on May 23, 2008. Noyhar, a deputy editor and defense analyst with the English-language weekly *The Nation*, was abducted outside his house on the night of May 22 by a group of unknown persons. He was badly beaten up and dropped off outside his residence. Media rights groups say the attack was motivated by Noyhar's criticism of the government's war efforts against the Tamil Tigers.

Lakruwan Wanniarachchi/AFP/Getty Images

all information is necessary for democracy to function, but without access to the essential information about governance, we can't begin to make decisions in a complex global marketplace of ideas. **Accountability** refers to democracy's need for some way to hold those in power responsible for their actions—actions that can affect all members of society. The value of accountability is as a corrective influence on government, which on its own is loathe to revisit mistakes and concede error. **Representation** means that in a democratic system, all people, not just those with the most education, money or influence, are visible to others and have the chance to be heard. The news media have a responsibility to ensure that those without an army of spokespeople still have a voice, that they can counter the voices of institutional power that might otherwise crowd them out of the marketplace of ideas. **Deliberation and conflict resolution** address democracy's need for a forum in which the interests of the public can be aired and debated and conclusions can be reached. The press exists, at least in part, so that a diversity of ideas find their way to the public conversation about the best course of action on the issues of the day.