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1 From 'Trade' to 'Profession'

Andrew Keen, author of *The Cult of the Amateur* (2007), argues that media messages produced and distributed for free by non-professionals undermine the authority and purpose of traditional outlets such as newspapers, magazines, broadcasting, music and films. Against this confused backdrop, it is understandably hard for anyone thinking of a media career to know what lies ahead. But what is evident is that the industry and society are keenly debating what the attributes of 'professionalism' are and trying to draw clear boundaries as well as to cultivate strong leaders.

The term 'professional' has become synonymous with journalists who are paid for their services. The word is often used to distinguish between journalists who are employed by a media organization as opposed to independent bloggers and citizen journalists who might loosely be termed the 'Fifth Estate'. Reporters, feature writers and editors are proud to declare themselves to be part of a profession. As the boundaries of professional identity and trade allegiance are being fiercely defended against the rapid rise of the Fifth Estate at the start of the new millennium, there is even more introspection as to how journalism would define and protect its occupational status. But what does journalism as a profession constitute? And can it neatly be defined thus?

The journey towards the professionalization of journalism began in earnest in the nineteenth century; yet, debate still rages more than 100 years later over its occupational status. Some maintain that it is a trade with its roots in the local community, delivering a service or commodity to its clientele. Others increasingly view journalism as possessing a higher moral imperative of public interest divorced from its commercial aim, as evidenced by its associated codes of practice. In this way, it has much in common with established professions such as law or medicine. Key signs of this include the emergence of a professional journalistic ideology (such as attention to objectivity), the growth of professional institutions and graduate-level qualifications. It has also been noted that journalistic professional values are becoming increasingly universal as

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the media become more global and corporatized; how journalists view ethics, standards and priorities are fairly universal despite some cultural and historical nuances (Weaver, 2005).

There have been several ‘professional moments’ during journalism’s development. By examining how professionalism has been manifested over time, we can see that journalism is actually a very dynamic occupation that adapts according to its context. The picture that emerges is that journalism’s adoption of professional mores is only partial and is indeed superficial, aimed primarily at sustaining the profit-motive. Perhaps a new set of values is needed to take its place and restore public faith.

Journalism as a trade or craft

The BBC political editor Andrew Marr described journalism as ‘my trade’ in his 2004 brief history of the Press, *My Trade*. It is easy to see how journalists might identify with trades- and craftspeople. A tradesperson is a skilled manual worker whose status, economically and socially, is considered somewhere between a labourer and a professional. Examples of tradespeople might be welders or electricians. The practitioners possess a high degree of both practical and theoretical knowledge of their trade. Traditionally, a tradesperson needs to be permanently involved in the exchange of goods or services to make ends meet. It is certainly an area we will examine much more closely in the context of the media. It is interesting to consider how much the profit-motive in commercial media production impacts on the determination of journalism in particular as a trade or profession. This question will be examined in more detail later in this chapter.

A craft lies somewhere between an *art* (which relies on talent) and a *science* (which relies on knowledge). The English word *craft* is roughly equivalent to the ancient Greek term *techne*, meaning skill or art. It tends to be most often associated with the decorative arts such as pottery, tapestry or certain types of woodwork. Typically, a trades- or crafts-person would serve an apprenticeship, learning on the job under the close tutelage of a senior practitioner. Once qualified, they would search for a place to set up their own business and make their own living.

This corresponds with journalism; newspapers especially were once locally owned and recruited staff from their catchment areas based on their expert local knowledge and contacts. Editorial staff would start their careers as ‘copy boys’ and, less frequently, girls, running errands for the editor as they gradually learnt how to report and write. Only

after several years' experience would a reporter have the opportunity to train in editorial production and become a sub-editor.

This step-by-step approach to mastery of a skill, which involves obtaining a certain amount of training through observation and experience, still survives in some countries. However, crafts even more than trades have undergone deep structural changes since the Industrial Revolution during which time the mass production of goods limited crafts to areas of life that industry could not satisfy, either due to its modes of functioning or because mass-produced goods would not meet the preferences of potential buyers. The fact that so many journalists are keen, especially at the current time of digital mediation, to identify with the model of trades- or craftspeople is a reaction to the increasing mechanization and mass production of journalism, in which the editorial staff are cogs in a very big wheel. Journalists may be very keen to protect the perceived 'artisan' expert status of their field. A trades- or craftspeople also suggests that an individual's working varies closely with their clientele, rather than in the distanced manner an industry might suggest. It also connotes an element of individual artistry and autonomy rather than an individual beholden to set processes and practices.

But there are some limits to classifying journalism as a trade or craft. It could be reasonably argued that journalism requires more than being part of a news production line if it is to move forward. Journalists are certainly required to gather and re-present information but, like doctors who possess accumulated knowledge and experience, they use their seasoned judgement to make editorial decisions. Technological changes have removed some of journalism's trade and craft elements such as being physically out and about in a community. It still takes craft to write the story but the art of finding the story is diminishing with research suggesting that 90 per cent of stories are generated by press releases (Lewis et al., 2008). But the media industry has the same economic structures and developments as any other commodity-based sector. It is a labour product with its end result the commodity of news, which is then marketed, sold and consumed.

Defining professions

The term 'profession' has many meanings and is used in a variety of contexts. *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* (1997, p. 572) states:

The occupation which one professes to be skilled in and to follow.
A vocation which a professed knowledge of some department of

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learning or science is used in its application to the affairs of others or in an art upon it. Applied Spec. to the three learned professions of divinity, law and medicine, also to the military professions.

(OED, Vol. XII)

The three 'learned' professions of divinity, law and medicine are specifically mentioned. Therefore, a fundamental question would be: why were these occupations singled out and labelled professions? This is an important issue because defining professions by reference to the traits of these three old occupations helps draw a boundary around the concept and, consequently, excludes other practices that do not display these characteristics.¹

Journalism presents a challenge to formal notions of professions such as medicine or law due to its diverse and undefined nature. Jeremy Tunstall has described journalism as vague and hard to define as opposed to law and medicine that are more sharply bordered or neatly defined. He described the term 'journalism' as a 'label which people engaged in a very diverse range of activities apply to themselves' (Tunstall, 1973, p. 98). Writing 40 years ago, Tunstall could not envision journalism gaining the professional status of, say, law or medicine. This suggests that the 'professional' status of journalism might have been applied as a defence mechanism or a means to convey the image of respectability rather than as an accurate representation of the diversity of its practices. Characterizing the professions has also long posed a challenge to social scientists. None of the founding fathers of sociology – Marx, Weber and Durkheim – paid much attention to the status of professions in their respective theories of the divisions in society (Tumber and Prentoulis in de Burgh, 2005, p. 58).

The twentieth century was defined by economic growth and increased social mobility as the United Kingdom moved towards a post-industrial society (Bell, 1973). Bell argued that the older industrial manual occupations would give way to a post-industrial, knowledge-based society, where technical and professional white-collar workers would form the major productive base. Recent sociological studies appear to support Bell's claim and demonstrate sustained growth in the importance of the 'professional classes'. For example, Heath and Payne (2000) completed a study of social mobility, which built on the methodologies employed by sociologists in earlier seminal works, such as Goldthorpe (1980).

There are two typical scholarly approaches to professionalism that can help us to understand media professionalism. One approach is to

examine how certain occupations accumulate professional traits that distinguish them from non-professional roles. Another approach takes a more socio-historical route to chart how the development of professions is related to broader contextual changes over time. Both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses when applied to journalism.

Studying the traits associated with professionalism was particularly popular among sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s. Millerson (1964) summarized the characteristics of a profession:

Knowledge monopoly: no-one outside the profession has the knowledge and ability to do the work of the profession;

Exclusivity: a clear division of labour, and the power to exclude outsiders (e.g., by enforcing some kind of legitimisation);

Professional bodies: strong professional organisations with ethical rules and standards and internal systems dealing with those breaking the ethical rules of the profession;

Education and training: strong professional education and research. A long academic education is associated with a profession;

Codes: an ideology that advocates greater commitment to doing good work than to economic gain and to quality rather than the economic efficiency of work.

(Cited in Nygren, 2011, p. 208)

A limitation of this approach when applied to journalism is that ideal traits can change over time and are dependent on dynamic contexts. This has been particularly evident in the move to graduate intake rather than school leavers in the past 30 years. A further issue is that fixed-trait models suggest an industry-led approach. They do not account for the actions taken by occupational groups in the media to ensure they are *seen* as professional and thus elevate their own status. This suggests a departure from traits towards a power-based model. To constitute a profession, members of an occupation have to be able to control their own work and to have autonomy in their everyday practice. Sociologists suggest a number of means by which professionals can exercise this control (Selander, 1989; Friedson, 2001).

Reflecting on the work of Millerson (1964), Johnson (1972) states that the dynamic process of professionalization as a concept can be seen as a 'straight jacket imposing a view of occupational development which is uniform between cultures and uni-linear in character' (Johnson, 1972,

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p. 37). Johnson then proceeds to develop a definition firmly viewed from his own critical perspective: ‘Professionalism becomes redefined as a peculiar type of occupational control rather than an expression of the inherent nature of particular occupations. A profession is not, then, an occupation, but a means of controlling an occupation’ (1972, p. 45). He also goes on to redefine professionalization as an historical process rather than a process that particular occupations undertake because of their ‘essential’ qualities.

Johnson’s is typical of what is now termed the ‘power approach’ to the professions. He recognized the explanatory weaknesses of the trait approach. I therefore wish to explore these traits but I will do so in context, looking at their evolution over time.

The knowledge monopoly

This characteristic believes that professional journalists acquire certain skills and knowledge that distinguish them from non-professionals. The legendary *Guardian* investigative journalist David Leigh is among many when he cites the power to report objectively as evidence for the enduring need for trained, skilled reporters:

We’re not talking ‘unmediated media’ here. We’re talking about corrupted media. And the online world, with its don’t-pay, something-for-nothing mentality, is very vulnerable to lies and propaganda.

(Leigh, 2007)

Journalists on both sides of the Atlantic insist that objectivity gives them professional status, especially when they feel threatened by others practising journalism. Objectivity is a slippery term, encompassing certain established codes such as non-partisanship, balance and detachment as opposed to bias. It emerged as a driving principle in the early part of the last century. There is, of course, much debate within media studies and branches of philosophy as to whether objectivity is humanly possible (McNair, 2005; Gaukroger, 2012). But within the industry, the term is generally understood to denote the need for editorial staff to keep their own views out of their reporting and offer a multiply sourced, balanced picture. Those who ardently defend the industry’s professional boundaries assert that balance requires seasoned skill and judgement which only those who have been trained, tutored or at least thoroughly immersed in newsroom traditions can muster. However, these claims often rely on a concept of objectivity that is now over a century old.

Objectivity did not just suddenly emerge as a journalistic mantra. Its arrival coincided with the drive by proprietors to be seen as upholding professional high standards of practice to quell concerns about muckraking, chequebook journalism and sensationalism. In the late eighteenth century, the emerging economics of mass production and distribution in the United Kingdom and United States offered media owners both the beginnings of the profit incentive dominant today and the possibility of breaking free of political control and asserting their independence. Until this time, most newspapers had been politically partisan, dependent to varying extents on party patronage. Massive new presses could print thousands of copies of a newspaper every hour to feed increased circulation, and the ability to illustrate newspapers strengthened their appeal. The growing public demand for a steady stream of news forced proprietors to develop the first 'professional' newsrooms.

In journalism, it was specifically the notion of objectivity that helped to differentiate the practice as professional as it allowed editors to distance themselves from patronage and party politics. American authors in particular have identified objectivity as a key element of the professional self-perception of journalists (see Schudson, 1978 and 2001; Reese, 1990; Ognianova and Endersby, 1996; Mindich, 1998). The end of restrictive taxation in 1855 was a significant moment in promoting neutrality and impartiality as the basis of news provision. While editors did not rule out favouring one political party over another, that decision would be made by the papers themselves rather than forced by economic considerations (Chalaby, 1998, pp. 130–3).

Objectivity, or the desire for it, coupled with the idea that journalists were in pursuit of the 'truth' also influenced the routinization of news production (Tuchman, 1972). The processes and practices of journalism focused on presenting a complete picture, with all the facts, in order to achieve objectivity. American sociologist Gaye Tuchman has described the news-making process as a series of 'strategic rituals' aimed at achieving objectivity:

They [editors] assume that, if every reporter gathers and structures 'facts' in a detached, unbiased, impersonal manner, deadlines will be met and libel suits avoided.

(1972, p. 664)

But one of the problems with establishing journalism as a profession is that the concept of objectivity may be illusory, subject to institutional and sociocultural mores over time. Take, for example, the selection of

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sources. In journalism, it is often felt that by representing two sides of a debate, objectivity is achieved. But are there only ever two sides to a story? Some stories may involve many viewpoints and not constitute a clear-cut binary. Second, the availability of sources must adhere to newsroom routines – those who are available and articulate at deadline time will be the ones used.

Therefore, while it might certainly be seen that objectivity distinguishes the media professional, paid journalists have no more monopoly on that concept than any other citizen, especially given the economic prerogative of the organizations many work within. It is an oft-cited adage that a reporter is only as good as their next story or their sources. While journalists may enjoy the credibility and status that being a paid professional brings, they have no more ownership of that knowledge than that which being part of an organization or a well-known brand brings.

Exclusivity

The second trait of a profession is that its borders are well defined, with a clear demarcation between professional and non-professional practitioners. Journalism is keen to establish boundaries between ‘professional’ journalism and that practised by unpaid citizens such as bloggers. The industry and its practitioners at times fiercely defend the exclusivity of their occupational ideology. Durkheim (1957) viewed professions as moral communities whose shared commitment to, and ritual reaffirmations of, sets of shared norms served to define, promote and police group membership. To its members, journalism constitutes an occupation of particular public significance, reliant upon independent autonomy, requiring specific skills, knowledge, training, production techniques and specific ethical commitments.

Journalism has, in fact, only been a paid occupation for a relatively short time in its long history. When the first printing presses were set up by William Caxton in the late fifteenth century, a key moment in the development of mass media, the writers made little income because copyright lay with the publishers. Instead, authors and journalists relied on patronage for earnings rather than making a living in their own right. Though the status of authors was incrementally improved over time by acts of parliament which established property rights for authors, few journalists could make even a basic living from the activity. Their work was regarded as akin to novelists and political theorists, subject to the whims of partisan publishers rather than a means to a regular income. Even great literary figures, such as Charles Dickens, undertook

their significant and respected journalism beside their creative and more profitable endeavours.

History shows how fundamental changes to the commercial base of journalism impact on the occupational status of its practitioners. The nineteenth century saw dramatic developments in journalism, which had far-reaching effects as resonant as any of the recent changes wrought by the Internet. Major advances in printing and in paper-making technology led to rapid growth in the newspaper industry and the emergence of the penny press, mass-circulation newspapers that an ordinary member of the public could afford to buy. Until this time, newspapers were funded by yearly subscription, paid in full and in advance – something only the wealthy élite could afford. However, increasing industrialization created new audiences that warranted adding the term 'mass' to media. Modernity drew people from the country into employment in cities. Thanks to these dramatic political and demographic shifts, and rising literacy levels, newspaper owners found a new market for their products, offering the public an ever-present supply of cheap and interesting reading matter, sold on street corners by newspaper boys.

Despite the growing interest in international affairs, newspapers were still regional and local until the mid-nineteenth century, largely due to the logistics of production and distribution. Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, launched in 1841, changed this. The appeal of his title beyond New York was secured by his illustrious staff (which for a short time included the revolutionary socialist thinker Karl Marx) and his campaigning liberalism, which heralded the identification of the journalist as a crusader. Under Greeley's leadership, the *Tribune*, circulated by rail and steamboat lines, became the first newspaper to unite the country in the mission to abolish slavery. Later, during the American Civil War, Greeley transported thousands of copies of the *Tribune* to other cities. And in 1886, the *Tribune* took a further technological leap by becoming the first newspaper to adopt Ottmar Mergenthaler's linotype machine, rapidly increasing the speed and accuracy with which type could be set. The Linotype machine allowed printers to set a line of type at once, using the machine's 90-character keyboard. Because the one-character-at-a-time Gutenberg process was so slow, for more than 400 years after the press's invention, most newspapers consisted of eight pages or fewer. With the advent of the Linotype, that quickly changed. As editors overcame logistical problems, they became keen to expand their news coverage and required skilled practitioners.

The invention of the telegraph (by Samuel Morse in 1837) boosted the speed and reliability of reporting by enabling the swift transfer of

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information from one source to another, even from one country to another. A new type of news provider emerged to supply the demand for coverage of international affairs. Major news agencies, known commonly as 'wire' services, originated in France in 1835 with the founding of Agence Havas, which later became Agence France Presse (AFP). Its founder, Charles-Louis Havas, is described on AFP's website as 'the father of global journalism'. In 1848, six large New York papers set up a co-operative, or pool system, to provide stakeholders with coverage of events in Europe, rather than each newspaper suffering the expense of placing dedicated staff overseas. This arrangement was later formalized into the Associated Press, which received the first-ever transmission of European news through the transatlantic cable. Information that had previously taken ten days to be transported by ship between America and Europe could now be transferred in a few minutes.

As technology transformed the speed of newspaper production and lowered its costs, it served to professionalize and formalize the nature of journalism. Because telegraphs often broke down, sometimes a reporter was cut off before they had finished sending their story. To alleviate the problems caused by this, reporters developed the 'inverted pyramid' form, which involved stating the most pertinent facts at the beginning of the transmission. Thus, the most significant part of the story would probably reach the newspaper and if the latter part failed to get through, it would not ruin the story. Telegraph and cable transmission also required much tighter, more concise sentences and paragraphs, in contrast to the more literary style of earlier newspapers. Journalists had to recount their story in as few words as possible, to pack in the maximum facts. This approach persists in news reporting today, not only in newspapers but also in broadcast and online journalism. The reporter gets straight to the crux of the story, spelt out in the first short, attention-grabbing, concise paragraph. Although journalism is a form of storytelling and can employ similar dramatic devices, journalists must not wait to deliver a *dénouement*: the reader has to be told the essential facts at the outset.

It was as a result of mass mediation, and the need to deliver news quickly and in a uniform format, that clear job demarcations developed. But in the digital age, the situation has changed once more, presenting journalists with some challenges to protecting and distinguishing their role. Editors now look for candidates who are adept at multi-tasking, capable of presenting stories in different formats. It would appear that the more skills you have the more you are viewed as a true professional. It is not that those skills are in any way monopolized by journalists; they

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