

News and Democratic Society: Past, Present, and Future¹

Michael Schudson

Democracy and journalism are not the same thing. Most of the key philosophical works that lay out a case for democracy or a theory of democracy make no reference to journalism. This is not, of course, surprising—there was no journalism in ancient Greece. Even when the thinkers around the American and French Revolutions were making their arguments for republican government in pamphlets and in the pages of weekly newspapers, the press played little role in their calculations.

Later, and with growing assurance through the years, journalists themselves have insisted that their work is essential to the public good. Their self-promotion, along with what came to be the self-evident importance of freedom of expression in any society claiming to be a liberal democracy, made the importance of journalism to democracy seem obvious. One prominent American scholar of journalism, James Carey, concluded that journalism and democracy are one and the same, that “journalism as a practice is unthinkable except in the context of democracy; in fact, journalism is usefully understood as another name for democracy.”²

This takes the plea for journalism’s democratic virtue a step too far. That journalism is crucial to modern democracy seems clear; that it is not by any means sufficient

¹ This essay is forthcoming in Michael Schudson, *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008). An earlier version of this essay is forthcoming in the journal *Cuadernos de Comunicacion*, published by the Catholic University in Santiago, Chile.

² James W. Carey, “Afterword: The Culture in Question,” *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, ed. Eve Stryker Munson and Catherine A. Warren (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 332.

Michael Schudson is a professor in the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University and in the Department of Communication at the University of California, San Diego. His books include *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (1978); *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (1985); *The Power of News* (1995); *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (1998); and *The Sociology of News* (2003).

for democracy seems equally clear. That journalism does not by itself produce or provide democracy seems likewise apparent. Carey offers a normative, one could even say, romantic notion of journalism, defined as a pursuit so intrinsically democratic at heart that it does not exist if democracy does not exist. Reality is more complicated and less happy. If we accept common understandings of journalism as the practice of periodically producing and publicly disseminating information and commentary about contemporary affairs of general public interest and importance, then journalism existed in Chile in the 1980s when democracy did not, it existed in Franco's Spain without democracy, and it exists in China today, sometimes even daring to criticize the government—but without bringing China appreciably closer to democratic political institutions. Journalism exists and has long existed outside democracy.

Democracy does not necessarily produce journalism, nor does journalism necessarily produce democracy. British journalism arose in a monarchy. American journalism, a journalism of colonial territories under a monarchical, colonial power, preceded American democracy. Where there *is* democracy, however, or where there are forces prepared to bring it about, journalism can provide a number of different services to help establish or sustain representative government. The relative importance of these different services changes over time and varies across democracies. With the digital age upon us, and changes taking place in journalism everywhere, the democratic functions that journalism serves, or the ways it serves them, will change again.

But what are these functions? There is little clarity about this despite all the talk of journalism's great gifts to democratic society. Taking inventory of what journalism offers to democracy or what, in different times and places, it has provided, is a task long overdue. I see six primary functions news has served or can serve in a democracy—and a seventh, generally ignored, that news could and should serve. The six functions journalism has frequently assumed in democratic societies, in different combinations and with different emphases, are:

1. *Information*: the news media can provide fair and full information so citizens can make sound political choices.
2. *Investigation*: the news media can investigate concentrated sources of power, particularly governmental power.
3. *Analysis*: the news media can provide coherent frameworks of interpretation to help citizens comprehend a complex world.
4. *Social Empathy*: journalism can tell people about others in their society and their world so that they can come to appreciate the viewpoints and lives of other people, especially those less advantaged than themselves.
5. *Public Forum*: journalism can provide a forum for dialogue among citizens and serve as a common carrier of the perspectives of varied groups in society.

Democracy does not necessarily produce journalism, nor does journalism necessarily produce democracy.

6. *Mobilization*: the news media can serve as an advocate for particular political programs and perspectives and mobilize people to act in support of these programs.

These different functions are sometimes at cross purposes. In particular, the mobilization or advocacy function may undermine the reliability of the informational and investigative functions. Different news organizations may emphasize one function more than another. A single news organ, particularly a newspaper, may serve democracy in all these ways at once.

1. *Informing the Public*

This seems the most obvious and most boring claim for the role of journalism in a democracy. Here journalism's function is educational, informing the public—the ultimate democratic authority—of what its political representatives are doing, what dangers and opportunities for society loom on the horizon, and what fellow citizens are up to, for better and for worse. The educational function of journalism puts the public in the front seat and enables the citizenry to participate in self-government.

Much of the power of the media comes from the simple fact that news tells us things we would not otherwise know. Obvious as this may be, it has not always been taken for granted. Democracy probably has done more to make information a part of journalism than journalism has done to make information a part of democracy. In the eighteenth century, even representative legislatures and assemblies operated largely in secret from the people who elected them. Reporters in the middle of the eighteenth century in Britain might talk to Members of Parliament as they left the House of Commons, but they could not themselves observe the MP's debate. In Samuel Johnson's parliamentary reporting, for instance, most of the speakers sounded in style very much the same and discoursed at length on Johnson's own favorite topics. In a word, he invented—he had no other choice—the news.³ The United States Senate met entirely in secret for its first few years, as did the U.S. Constitutional Convention before it. Freedom of the press at that time meant—and this was not a small thing—freedom for a writer to speak his opinion as he wished, even in criticism of the government. But it did not mean a freedom to report. It did not guarantee access to government offices or government officials. As late as 1842, John Quincy Adams, former President, wrote in his diary with disgust that President Tyler's sons “divulged all his cabinet secrets to...hired reporters for Bennett's *Herald* newspaper in New York.”⁴

The educational function of journalism puts the public in the front seat and enables the citizenry to participate in self-government.

³ Robert DeMaria, Jr., *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) 51–6.

⁴ Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic, 1978) 24.

The need for the adjective “hired” to modify “reporters” suggests how novel and disreputable the occupation of reporting was at that time.

Journalism can perform its institutional role as a watchdog even if nobody in the provinces is following the news.

Even several generations later, when reporting had become established, some of the tools of the journalistic trade were resisted. The most notable of these was interviewing, a practice that became widely accepted in the United States by the 1880s, but that was judged unseemly in much of Europe until after World War I. A French observer in the 1880s criticized “the spirit of inquiry and espionage” of the American reporters.

He attacked “the mania for interviewing” and predicted that the British, much more sensible than the Americans or the French, would never accept it.⁵ A more admiring Danish journalist at the same time noted of the American press:

The reporter and the interview are the focus of these papers...this is ideal journalism. These papers are produced by journalists, not aesthetes and politicians, and they are written for the lower class to help them, inform them and fight corruption for them.⁶

This overestimates the power and purpose of the interview; the interview became, after all, a tool of politicians and celebrities—and journalists—for self-advancement, more than a point of entry into political life for the masses. Still, interviewing, like reporting in general, seemed a practice fit for a democratic society. The informational function of journalism is consonant with democratic social and cultural style. American journalists of the late nineteenth century were simply more brash and more raw in their manners than Europeans. They were not part of a literary circle. They presented themselves as men of the street and men of the city, not as men of the salon or the elite.

2. Investigation

In the second function of journalism in a democracy, the governors on stage and not the governed in the auditorium are the focus, and journalism is a watchdog on them. News becomes a theater in which conflicts inside government are played out on a public stage—regardless of whether the public audience is large or small. Journalism can perform its institutional role as a watchdog even if nobody in the provinces is following the news. All that matters is that people in government believe they are following the news. What is necessary to inspire this belief is simply that an inner circle of attentive citizens is watchful. This is sufficient to produce in the leaders a fear of public embar-

⁵ Paschal Grousset (published under the pseudonym, Philippe Daryl), *Public Life in England* (London: George Routledge, 1884) 39.

⁶ Henrik Cavling, as cited in Marion Marzolf, “American ‘New Journalism’ Takes Root in Europe at End of 19th Century,” *Journalism Quarterly* 61 (1984): 531. For more on the history of the news interview, see Michael Schudson, *The Power of News* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 72–93.

rassment or a fear of public discrediting, public controversy, legal prosecution, or losing an election. The job of the media, in this respect, is to make powerful people tremble.

Clearly, there are two different versions of this dynamic. One emphasizes that news inspires fear of publicity among powerful leaders, and the other focuses on how news inspires thinking, reflection, debate, and engagement among highly attentive elites. In the latter sense, this may be the democratic function that most nearly approaches the Habermasian ideal of a “public sphere.” Victor Navasky, long-time publisher of the liberal weekly, the *Nation*, notes that Frank Walsh, a U.S. Senator in the 1920s, wrote articles about the railroads for the Hearst newspaper chain, reaching some ten million people—but the articles evoked no public response. Walsh published the same material in the *Nation*, circulation 27,000, and reported: “The day *The Nation* went on the Washington newsstands my telephone started ringing. I heard from editors, broadcasters and Congressmen.” Navasky concludes: “Beyond the quality of the readership is the intensity with which these publications are read.” How many readers may not matter as much as which readers they are and, as Navasky suggests, how intensely and instrumentally they read.⁷

The watchdog function of the press has a negative orientation; it is designed to foil tyranny rather than to forward new movement or new policy, and it prevents bad things from happening rather than advancing the cause of the good. In this view, nothing about journalism matters more than its obligation to hold government officials to the legal and moral standards of public service. Public officials should try to do what they say they will try to do. They should refrain from using their office for private gain. They should live up to their oaths of office. They should make good on their campaign promises. And if democracy is to work, the public should be well informed of just what these people do while in office and how well they live up to their legal obligations, campaign promises, and public avowals. The media, therefore, should investigate.

Investigating to keep government officials honest is not inconsistent with informing to keep the general public knowledgeable, but it is not the same thing. The ideal of objectivity or fairness seems to presume that the world is relatively simple and relatively open and displays itself to the journalist whose job it is to describe that visible world without fear or favor. The ideal of protecting democracy through investigation is different. It assumes that the world is relatively complex and relatively veiled, and that some of the information that is most important to citizens is embedded in opaque structures and systems and may in fact be deliberately hidden from view. The world is not an open book. It is a text of many texts, written for many purposes, and some of the texts are intentionally written over other texts to obscure them. Journalists therefore have an obligation to affirmatively seek the text behind the text, the story behind the story. Journalists should be judged not only by fairness in reporting but by energy in detection. In this model of journalism, the world is not so much a complicated place that needs fair-minded description and analysis but a misleading and deceptive wall of

⁷ Victor S. Navasky, *A Matter of Opinion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005) 336.

pretense that must be breached by a professional truth-teller. If the virtue of the informative journalist is judgment, the virtue of the investigative journalist is suspicion.

Suspicion would seem an easy virtue to cultivate. It is not. If it had been left to the top reporters at the *Washington Post* to pursue the Watergate story, it would have been dropped. The star reporters all believed that Richard Nixon was too smart to get caught up in dirty tricks and burglaries and thefts. And all of them were wrong. It is not so easy to maintain one's suspicion. It is also not easy to turn suspicion on one's friends. The 2006 Pulitzer Prize for national reporting went to the *San Diego Union Tribune*, among the more conservative newspapers in the country, a paper that routinely endorsed Republican Randy "Duke" Cunningham for re-election. But it was this newspaper that followed up Cunningham's suspicious sale of his home to a defense contractor who then mysteriously sold it for a \$700,000 loss. Why? The reporters wanted to know. What they discovered was the worst bribery scandal in the history of the United States Congress; Mr. Cunningham is now serving an eight-year term in prison, and the ardently conservative *Union Tribune* is overjoyed with its success in sending a conservative ally to prison.

3. Analysis

Analysis may be an effort to explain a complicated scene in a comprehensible narrative. Today we sometimes call that "explanatory journalism," and explanatory journalism has its own Pulitzer Prize category. The virtue required for analytic journalism is intelligence and a kind of pedagogical wisdom, linking the capacity to understand

a complex situation with a knack for transmitting that understanding to a broad public. It might try to illustrate a complicated social phenomenon through the life of a single individual. A lead story in the *New York Times* on March 26, 2007, came from Conrad, Montana and described Mary Rose Derks, an 81-year-old widow with a long-term-care health insurance policy that denied her coverage, despite her dementia. Not until the sixth paragraph does it become clear that the story is not about Mary Derks but about the scandalous long-term-care insurance industry. And what did

the *New York Times* contribute to this? Quite a lot. The *Times* reviewed 400 cases of elderly policyholders who are "confronting unnecessary delays and overwhelming bureaucracies."⁸ Analysis, like investigation, requires something that providing information does not require so fully: money. It takes a great deal of time and effort to do analysis of this sort.

Analysis, like investigation, requires something that providing information does not require so fully: money. It takes a great deal of time and effort to do analysis of this sort.

⁸ Charles DuHigg, "Aged, Frail and Denied Care by Their Insurers," *The New York Times* (26 March 2007).

Consider one *New York Times* report on the consequences of the “surge” in U.S. troops for security in Baghdad in 2007. Two days before General David Petraeus testified before the U.S. Congress about the surge, the *Times* published a detailed report on what effect the surge had had, or failed to have, in three demographically disparate neighborhoods of Baghdad. Two reporters spent over half of their working days on this story for two months, and they were backed up with the efforts of twenty-nine other reporters, photographers, editors, and others. Their editor spent two weeks of her time working on the story. This is not to mention that maintaining a bureau in Iraq costs the *Times* \$3 million annually.⁹ Few news organizations are willing to invest so heavily in reporting so ambitious. The investment required for investigation and analysis is worthy of our consideration because, as newspapers find themselves competing with the free media available on the internet, and competing not very successfully, the primary engines of public investigation and analysis are increasingly at risk. Online journalism, particularly online journalism that is not sponsored by major print and television media, has so far shown little capacity for, or interest in, making the kind of large investments in investigation and analysis that make conventional media, especially newspapers, invaluable for democracy.

Explanatory journalism articulates a silence, or foregrounds what was background, making it thereby available for conversation and collective notice.

Who is addressed in explanatory journalism? Both the attentive public and a potential attentive public. What may not be obvious is how valuable this journalism is to the attentive public, those who are already well informed. An individual well informed about foreign policy may nonetheless be naive about domestic policy; someone familiar with problems in social service delivery for children may know little or nothing about social services for the elderly. Explanatory journalism articulates a silence, or foregrounds what was background, making it thereby available for conversation and collective notice.

4. *Social Empathy*

What I am calling social empathy has little place in the familiar rhetoric about journalism. It deserves more attention. My own thinking about this goes back to a conference I attended in 1980 where Roger Wilkins, then an editor at the *Washington Star*, told a story about sitting down at a lunch counter next to an elderly black woman in Washington, DC, and striking up a conversation with her. I do not remember the story precisely, but it was something like this: Wilkins, himself African-American, asked the woman which candidate she favored in the upcoming presidential election. “President

⁹ Mike Hoyt, “Editorial: Iraq and the Cost of Coverage: Serious Stories, Serious Money,” *Columbia Journalism Review* 46.4 (November/December 2007): 4.

Carter, he's a good man. I don't know about this Ronald Reagan." So, are you going to vote? "Oh, no, I don't vote." Why is that? "Too busy and too tired, it's too much trouble."

Why did Wilkins bring that story to this conference of academics and journalists discussing the role of the press in democracy? Because, he said, he did not think journalism could do anything to change the views or actions of the woman at the lunch counter. But he did think journalism could tell her story. Journalism could inform those of us who do vote, and those of us who have the power to make decisions and the leverage to turn society in one direction or another, about that woman and others like her so that we could see her and understand her with compassion.

I think journalism does more of this and does it better than it ever has. Coverage of Hurricane Katrina was rich, passionate, and compassionate in many news outlets. With the *New York Times*, it was also persistent. The *Times* assigned a "Katrina editor" and followed up the disaster with story after story, nearly every week, for the next year, with continuing coverage long after that, following the story not only in New Orleans

and along the Gulf Coast, but also in Houston and Atlanta and other communities where hurricane victims relocated. Human interest stories have been a part of journalism for a long time, but they are used more and more instrumentally these days, to draw readers or viewers into a larger tale, one that tells us not just about an interesting or unusual individual but shows us how that person's experience links up

The better news organizations of our day make a great effort to demonstrate the link between private troubles and public issues.

with larger issues. The sociologist C. Wright Mills defined what he called "the sociological imagination" as the leap of mind that shows the connection between a person's "private troubles" and the "public issues" that gave rise to them.¹⁰ The journalistic imagination is similar. The better news organizations of our day make a great effort to demonstrate the link between private troubles and public issues.

Social empathy is a surprisingly recent development in journalism. In the United States, exposés of "how the other half lives" go back at least to the work of Jacob Riis (who gave us the phrase) and Nellie Bly in the late nineteenth century. Their work drew attention to categories of people (the poor or the insane), while today's journalistic empathy goes out not just to large, publicly relevant, demographically or bureaucratically defined groups, but to individuals and groups and grouplets, slivers of groups who may have no public face or public identity. At some point in the 1970s or a bit later, "the personal is political" became one of journalism's most familiar clichés. Personal trouble as entrée to a public issue seemed almost inescapable by the 1980s. The idea of using human interest to open up larger public issues would seem to be as old as the hills, but in the American media, at least, it is not. The idea of presenting the general significance of a particular public issue by introducing an individual case, a person

¹⁰ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

whose troubles are in fact related to or an instance of a public problem, is recent. Even in the 1970s, many arenas of life that give rise to empathy stories were judged by conventional journalists to be undignified, not the serious stuff of politics and business but “SMERSH” topics—“science, medicine, education, religion and all that shit.”¹¹

The practice of linking individual vignettes to large public policy issues became a matter of public controversy in the early Reagan years. In 1982, CBS presented a Bill Moyers-narrated documentary that tried to examine the impact of Reagan’s budget reductions on the lives of everyday citizens. The program focused on four individuals adversely affected by Reagan’s cuts in government spending. David Gergen, then Reagan’s communications director, attacked the documentary for blaming poverty on the president.

But the president, himself widely noted for using (fabricated) anecdotes to make a point, was already exercised about this kind of journalism-by-anecdote. He said, “You can’t turn on the evening news without seeing that they’re going to interview someone else who has lost his job. Is it news that some fellow out in South Succotash someplace has just been laid off and that he should be interviewed nationwide?”¹²

Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder tested the so-called “vividness hypothesis” in the laboratory. This hypothesis is simply that the more vivid, dramatic, or emotionally compelling is the text or image people are exposed to, the more it will influence them, affecting their opinions or enduring longer in their memories. But, surprisingly, Iyengar and Kinder found that “news stories that direct viewers’ attention to the flesh and blood victims of national problems prove no more persuasive than news stories that cover national problems impersonally—indeed, they tend to be less persuasive.”¹³

Iyengar and Kinder find their results mysterious. They speculate. Perhaps viewers blame the victims and see them as causes of their own misfortune. Perhaps viewers get so caught up in the melodrama of the specific instance that they fail to make the sociological leap that, for more sophisticated viewers, is so obviously what the journalists are up to. Or perhaps the journalist’s implicit or explicit subordinate thesis—these people are just like you or, more spiritually, there but for the grace of God are you—is something viewers simply do not accept: I am not black. I am not old. My family has not abandoned me. I have never relied on government assistance. I do not live in New Jersey. So what you are showing me does not translate into my own everyday life.¹⁴

Social empathy stories, then, do not always prompt the imaginative leap in readers and viewers that journalists intend. Still, the development of this sort of journalism seems to be one of the great achievements of the leading contemporary press and one that is linked closely to democratic values. It expresses the virtues of curiosity and empathy in the journalist, and it encourages empathy and understanding in the audi-

¹¹ Katharine Graham, *Personal History* (New York: Knopf, 1997) 411.

¹² Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News that Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 34.

¹³ Iyengar and Kinder 42.

¹⁴ Iyengar and Kinder 34–46.

ence. Joseph Raz, a political philosopher, writes that it is important in a democracy, and particularly a pluralistic democratic society, for the media to portray and thereby legitimate various styles of life in society, giving them “the stamp of public acceptability.”¹⁵ Learning about our neighbors through the mass media, both news and entertainment, Raz suggests, serves a vital democratic function. Reporters who do this work surely recognize that they are serving democracy, but journalists as well as media critics who urge news to serve democracy better rarely call attention to this sort of journalism, which is often not at all directly political. This makes Raz’s brief but elegant remarks all the more noteworthy.

True, covering medicine and education and religion leads also to covering diet, restaurants, cars, celebrities, and so on and can be a distraction from public life rather than an expansion of the range of it, but all of these topics are potential entrances into public life.¹⁶

5. *Public Forum*

From the early days of journalism to the present, newspapers have made space for letters to the editor. In the U.S. for close to forty years, leading newspapers also have provided an “op-ed” page—so named because it is the page opposite the editorial page—in which staff writers, syndicated columnists, and guest columnists, experts as well as ordinary citizens, provide a variety of views on current issues. More U.S. newspapers feel a responsibility to provide a range of views in their pages because few major cities have more than one daily newspaper these days.

Television provides scarcely any help in extending the public forum function of news. Television news still tends to convey a naive impression that there is only one way to see the world—Walter Cronkite used to close his CBS News broadcasts, “And that’s the way it is.” There is more room than there used to be for a degree of spontaneity and subjectivity in the live reports from journalists in the field. If one looks more broadly at cable television, various opinion shows have advanced this public forum function of journalism. Opinion, perspective, passion, and anger, even if it is often more theatrical than sincere, have enlivened the television screen. The most popular and pervasive of the voices, however, are clearly from the political right.

The public forum function of journalism has cracked wide open with the creation of the world wide web; the internet opens up this journalistic function in the most wide-ranging and profound way. Its virtue is not individual but social: the virtue of interaction, of conversation, of an easy and agreeable democratic sociability.

¹⁵ Joseph Raz, *Ethics in the Public Domain: Essays in the Morality of Law and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) 140.

¹⁶ There is a very instructive study by a physician, Barron Lerner, on media presentations of famous people with serious illnesses—a good example of how the public’s frequently disparaged fascination with celebrities becomes an avenue to useful public education. See Barron H. Lerner, *When Illness Goes Public: Celebrity Patients and How We Look at Medicine* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

6. Mobilization

Historically, no form of journalism has been more important than partisan journalism. Even in U.S. journalism, widely recognized for its powerful commitment to notions of non-partisanship and objectivity, party-based journalism dominated the past. Partisan journalism seeks to rally only those who share the journalist's political or ideological position. This was the dominant concept of journalism in the U.S. throughout the nineteenth century.

Why was the partisan press so pervasive? Not because the press failed in an effort to be fair and objective; the nineteenth-century press never tried to be fair or balanced. Newspapers were subsidized by political parties directly and indirectly. The publishers, editors, and reporters understood their job to be political cheerleading and mobilizing, not political reporting. As one historian puts it, nineteenth-century newspapers were much more interested to reach citizens' feet than to reach their minds, eager to get them into the streets marching, parading, and going to vote rather than to persuade them by argument or facts or reasoning to share an opinion, let alone to think for themselves.¹⁷ Top editors looked forward to political appointments if their party won the White House. Abraham Lincoln appointed newspaper editors as ambassadors or consuls in Switzerland, Holland, Russia, London, Paris, Elsinore, Vienna, Bremen, the Vatican, Zurich, Turin, Venice, Hong Kong, and Ecuador; he also appointed editors who had supported his campaign to run the post office or the custom house in New Haven, Albany, Harrisburg, Chicago, Cleveland, St. Louis, and elsewhere.¹⁸

Was there information in nineteenth-century newspapers? Yes, there was, but it was doggedly partisan. The press did not at that time endorse either of the first two democratic functions of journalism I have discussed in a way familiar to Americans today. The intent of the newspapers was not to create an informed citizen but a party-loyal citizen; the intent was not to reveal government scandal but to reveal government scandal if and only if the opposition party was in control of the government.

There is much to be said for this model of journalism as partisan cheerleader, journalism as propaganda, journalism as exhortation and incitement to participate. If different partisan viewpoints are well represented among institutions of journalism, then a journalist-as-advocate model may serve the public interest very well. Partisan journalism enlists the heart as well as the mind of the audience. It gives readers and viewers not only information but a cause. In contrast, the objective, information-providing,

The intent of the newspapers was not to create an informed citizen but a party-loyal citizen; the intent was not to reveal government scandal but to reveal government scandal if and only if the opposition party was in control of the government.

¹⁷ David Ryfe, "News, Culture and Public Life: A Study of 19th-Century American Journalism," *Journalism Studies* 7.1 (2006): 60–77.

¹⁸ Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: Free, 1998) 121n2.

and non-partisan investigative functions of today's leading news organizations may have de-mobilizing effects. They provide people with information, but they do not advise people what to do with it. If anything, they seem to imply that nothing can be done, that politicians are only interested in their own political careers. The undertone of cynicism in news reports may be a factor in encouraging an undertone of cynicism in the general public.¹⁹

If the partisan press was so pervasive in nineteenth-century United States, where did the modern American idea of news as a professional, balanced resource for an informed citizenry come from? This is a long story.²⁰ But, in short, it begins with reformers at the end of the nineteenth century who attacked party politics. These reformers sought to make elections "educational." They sponsored civil service reform rather than filling government jobs with loyal party workers. In a variety of ways, they tried to insulate the independent, rational citizen from the distorting enthusiasms of the party. In the 1880s, political campaigns began to shift from parades to pamphlets, and so put a premium on literacy. Newspapers broke free. The attractions of the marketplace captured more and more newspapers—a danger, to be sure, but a danger that freed the press from subservience to the parties. In the 1890s, the Australian ballot swept the

nation, and so, for the first time in American history, literacy was required to cast a ballot. The novelty of the Australian ballot was that the state took responsibility for printing ballots that listed the candidates from all parties that qualified for the election. This meant that voters received their ballots from state election officials at the polling place, not from party workers en route to the polling place; it meant that the voter had to make a choice of candidates by marking the ballot; and it normally meant that provision was made for the voter to mark the ballot in secret. With this innovation, voting changed from a social and public duty to a private right,

from a social obligation to a party, enforceable by social pressure, to a civic obligation or abstract loyalty, enforceable only by private conscience. In the early 1900s, non-partisan municipal elections, presidential primaries, and the initiative and referendum imposed more challenging cognitive tasks on prospective voters than ever before. These changes enshrined "the informed citizenry" in the U.S. political imagination.²¹

Between 1880 and 1910, the most basic understandings of American politics were challenged. Reformers invented the language by which Americans still judge our politics—a language that stresses being informed, while it dismisses or demeans parties and

If the partisan press was so pervasive in nineteenth-century United States, where did the modern American idea of news as a professional, balanced resource for an informed citizenry come from?

¹⁹ See Michael Schudson, "The Concept of Politics in Contemporary U.S. Journalism," *Political Communication* 24.2 (2007): 131–42.

²⁰ Telling that long story is the aim of Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News*, told again more briefly and with more theoretical self-consciousness in Michael Schudson, "The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism," *Journalism* 2.2 (2001): 149–70.

²¹ Schudson, *The Good Citizen*, 144–87.

partisanship. To put this more pointedly, the political party, the single most important agency ever invented for mass political participation, is the institution that current civics talk and education regularly abhor and that is rendered almost invisible in the way we conduct the actual act of voting. Insofar as the way we *do* vote is a set of enduring instructions to us about the way we *should* vote and the way we should think about voting, the civic lesson of election day, as the U.S. has organized it for the past century, recommends contempt for parties and partisanship.

Almost all nineteenth-century electoral rhetoric was not about informed choice but about loyalty and fraternity. All U.S. electoral rhetoric in the twentieth century and since insists that people make their choices among candidates, parties, and issues. Independent, reasoned choice is the ideal. Non-partisan groups get out the vote. Non-partisan groups try to elevate the state of politics by analyzing the issues. In California, the state provides every registered voter an extensive printed information guide, routinely over one hundred pages of dense print. (The voter information guide was a development of the same reform period, 1910s–20s.) In Oregon in 2004, the voter information guide was so long it had to be printed in two volumes.

This does not mean people are in fact well informed. But it does mean that the collective ritual of getting the news in the press and obtaining information from other sources over the past century has been very different from the century before.

Conclusion

There is—at least, there should be—a seventh function for the news media in a democracy, although I did not see this until reading a thoughtful essay by Kent Asp, “Fairness, Informativeness and Scrutiny: The Role of News Media in Democracy,” a set of reflections based on studies of the Swedish media. Although there is much in this essay that I found instructive, I found myself in sharp disagreement when I came to Asp’s most general formulation of the function of news in a democracy: “in a democracy media should work for the realization of the will of the people by facilitating the free exchange of ideas.”²² Instantly I wanted to add, at the least, “within a system of free and fair elections and with protection of civil liberties and human rights.” I wanted, in other words, a role for journalism that was democratic but not populist, that regarded and respected constitutionalism and the strong role in representative democracies for the protection of minority rights. I wanted not just democracy but liberal democracy. “Realizing the will of the people” does not provide the best government, even assuming one had some reliable means (which we do not) of determining what that will is. No means that I can imagine for ascertaining and then realizing the people’s will can provide as fair and just a system as a mixed mode of government with constitutional protections in place. Even this messy arrangement I am advocating can and does mis-

²² Kent Asp, “Fairness, Informativeness and Scrutiny: The Role of News Media in Democracy,” *Nordicom Review*, Jubilee Issue (2007): 32.

fire. No system is immune to damage from deceit or avarice or even so moderate a sin as chumminess.

But what role does journalism have in advancing a liberal democracy rather than a majoritarian democracy as such? I do not know that anyone has articulated a broad normative function for journalism in these terms, and it may be that the task of living up to the first six functions of news in a democracy is more than enough without journalists dedicating themselves to teaching political philosophy and encouraging a fuller, richer vision of liberal democracy than one normally hears articulated in public life when politicians dedicate themselves to pandering to populist sentiments. Still, to the extent that journalists or scholars who study journalism articulate democratic virtues while omitting discussion of liberal and constitutional virtues, journalism's role in democracy is left unmoored.

I do not suggest that journalists become evangelists for a more sophisticated understanding of representative democracy—except, perhaps, on the editorial page. What I propose is that greater sophistication about representative democracy should lead journalists to cover more carefully some institutions and relationships that news takes for granted or ignores. In the United States, the past forty years have seen significant growth in institutions of government transparency—open records laws at state and local levels, for instance, and the Freedom of Information Act nationally. There has also been growth in a variety of systems of accountability in government and in politics from the Federal Elections Commission that requires candidates for national office to disclose the amount and source of campaign contributions; the Government Accountability Office that takes responsibility for the fiscal accountability of federal agencies; and the inspectors general assigned to many federal agencies and responsible for reporting to the President and the Congress on investigations of the propriety and lawfulness of a wide variety of agency actions. The inspector general of the F.B.I., for instance, produced a very critical report of his agency's failures in tracking the men who, on September 11, 2001, committed the bloody acts of terrorism in New York and Washington.

All of these government officials help provide a set of informational checks and balances within the government; none of them are widely known to the general public or, so far as I can judge, even to a well-educated and attentive public, on the whole. And yet the ways in which democratic government is held accountable operate not only through “vertical accountability”—a direct accounting to the public through elections—but also through “horizontal accountability” in which one branch of government holds another branch accountable. These are not just details. They are the ways in which democracy works—or fails to work. Voter turnout is a matter of great interest to U.S. journalists and a matter of great concern to all who worry over the health of U.S. democracy, but the vigor of horizontal accountability should be of interest once one recognizes that liberal democracy is not plebiscitarian democracy but representative democracy with a large executive branch that the press by itself is in no position to monitor closely.

Where will journalism be in ten or twenty or fifty years? No one knows. We do know that it will be more online than it is today. It will be more online next week! I think we can be confident that some varieties of television news will continue and radio news will continue. There are more concerns about newspapers, it is fair to say,

but at this point there is no online news gathering organization of any scope and substance that is not part of a print-based (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or other) or television-based (CNN, BBC, or other) media organization. There are all sorts of bloggers, all sorts of aggregators, all sorts of opinion columnists whose presence exists only online, and many of them are making impressive contributions to public discourse and to several of the democratic functions discussed in this essay. But none of them has invested in news gathering the way that hundreds of newspaper publishers have done. The efforts of these newspapers cannot be dispensed with, even though the economic model that sustains them has to be redesigned.

With the arrival of the web and the growth of the blogosphere, the public forum and mobilizing functions of journalism have grown relative to the informing, investigative, and social empathy functions. The web also helps create an incipient new function of journalism for democracy, one in which the divide between the journalist and the audience for journalism disappears. Some people talk about this as “citizen journalism.” It has always existed to a degree. Every time a citizen calls up a news organization and says, “I have a hot tip for you,” this is a form of citizen journalism. Every letter to the editor is a form of citizen journalism. But now citizens can simply go online and publish the tip or the letter on their own.²³ There is a new self-organizing journalism, then, already making waves, already enacting something new and exciting.

We should...recognize that the unruliness of a decentralized and multi-voiced informational system may be among democracy's greatest assets.

I am neither alarmist nor utopian as I survey the present sea-change in the mass media. We are not about to see the end of journalism, but newspapers are in for a very rough ride and some of them, even some very distinguished ones, will not survive. The informative, investigative, and social empathy functions that journalism has sometimes offered democracy may get redistributed across different journalistic and non-journalistic organizations. They may not be as centrally concentrated in newspapers and television networks as they once were. In the long run, this is not something to fear. It is something to work with. We should be open to its possibilities and recognize that the unruliness of a decentralized and multi-voiced informational system may be among democracy's greatest assets.

Journalism tomorrow cannot produce democracy where democracy does not exist, but it can do more to help democracies along if it recognizes the multiple services it affords democracy, encourages the virtues that endow those services, and clarifies for journalists and the public the many gifts news offers to humane self-government.

²³ See Jan Schaffer, *Citizen Media: Fad or the Future of News?* (College Park: J-Lab, 2007). This report is available online at <www.kcnn.org/research/citizen_media_report>.