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Normative expectations: Employing ‘communities of practice’ models for assessing journalism’s normative claims

Abstract

Journalism’s relationship with the public has historically rested on an assumption of its Fourth Estate roles and as fulfilling democratic imperatives. The normative dimensions of these ideals have also long been ‘taken as given’ in journalism studies, serving as a starting point for discussions of journalism’s public service, interest, and role. As contradictions to these normative ideals expose flaws in such assumptions, a reassessment of this normative basis for journalism is needed. This paper looks to challenge normative legacies of journalism’s societal role. Drawing on uses and gratification theoretical frameworks and engaging with communities of practice, it explores how communities understand journalism from both top-down (journalism) and bottom-up (citizen) perspectives. This research considers citizen expectations of journalism and journalists and evaluates perceptions of journalistic values from the ground up. By employing a community facilitation model, it offers an opportunity for participants from across the community to reassess their own conceptions of the role of journalism. This establishes a better basis to approach to the journalism-public relationship that does not advantage historic, normative, or traditional legacies.

KEYWORDS: *Communities of practice; Fourth Estate; normativity; uses & gratification; co-production*

Introduction

The notion of the Fourth Estate has long been identified as journalism's *raison d'être* to safeguard democratic accountability and ensure the public has knowledge of what is being done on their behalf. This has been the essential moral basis for journalism's function in democratic societies since the mid-nineteenth century (Hampton 2004). The normative ideal of journalism acting as the Fourth Estate is one that rests upon shared journalistic claims about journalism's obligation to represent the interests of the democratic community (Hanitzsch and Mellado, 2011; Hanitzsch 2011). Journalism's relationship with the public has historically rested on an assumption about *its* moral commitment to fulfilling *its* self-declared democratic obligations. This paper looks to stimulate new understandings of journalism's normative rationale by examining journalism from the perspective of those on whose behalf journalism purports to serve. We draw out arguments from a grassroots level on journalism for a more ground-up assessment of journalism. We use community groups and community news products as a locus of inquiry to understand what is expected of news media at community, local, regional, and national and international levels. This paper looks to advance research orientated towards 'ground-up' normative criteria from those who consume journalism, around whom journalism's normative claims are framed. The key interventions this paper seeks to make are therefore two-fold: firstly to challenge the normative basis of journalism as it has been understood by both journalist practitioners as well as critics of journalism; and secondly, to lay the foundations for re-evaluating normative criteria for journalism.

Theoretical Context

Amongst the many roles that journalism purports to perform, the Fourth Estate is probably the most frequently cited, and for journalists describing what they do the democratic watchdog component is by far the most prominent (Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011; Hanitzsch 2011). Conversely, particularly within media and journalism studies, such an idealised conception of journalism has long been criticised. The notion that journalism actually nourishes democratic life is one that many have long had difficulty with (Keane 1991; Lichtenberg 1983) as these critics have argued that journalism's economic imperative tends to undermine its long established democratic imperative. Yet it is important to note that those who criticise journalism's selective democratic credentials tend to do so from the same cherished and idealised notions of the Fourth Estate as held by those they criticize (Lau 2004, Tuchman 1978). Critics rightly argue that journalism is not engaged with its public, it does not represent its public, and it caters to market requirements and demands (Petley 2012). An idealised version of journalism's societal role is presented and journalism is assessed on the same normative criteria it purports to meet, and more often than not, journalism cannot live up to these expectations (Muhlmann 2010). Rather than assuming the public requires journalism to fulfil certain functions and therefore projecting onto the public an idealised and largely unquestioned set of normative claims, we suggest that it is the public themselves who might be better placed to formulate normative criteria to which journalism might aspire to achieve. In making this claim we draw upon two related theoretical perspectives to locate a framework from which such a normative framework might emerge.

In the first instance, this is based on the idea that knowledge and practice can produce an understanding that is of most benefit to those involved in the process of its production. We argue that rather than journalism insisting on, via the weight of shaky historical foundations and self-proclaimed virtue (Hampton 2010), a deeply flawed conception of journalism's main function, it is the public itself and the

communities that they inhabit that should prescribe the moral basis upon which journalism might function. This draws on Lave and Wenger's notion of situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991; Lave and Chaiklin 1993), which argues learning and knowledge production occur via communities of participation, or communities of practice. This provides a useful model to analyse community conceptions of journalism's normative claims as it is the community itself that is the site of knowledge production. This idea of communities of practice explicitly relates to our commitment to develop a method through which a more grounded set of normative criteria for journalism might be developed. In this regard we are drawing from a participatory research paradigm that is situated within those communities that have an interest in the outcomes of the research. For this we have also drawn on ideas from community-based participatory research "based on a commitment to sharing power and resources and working towards beneficial outcomes for all participants, especially communities" (Banks and Manners 2011, 6). To evaluate these questions we establish a standpoint from uses and gratification theory to understand how journalism is approached as a service (of use) to a public, as well as how members of that public judge that performance (is there a match between use and gratification?). We argue, in line with Katz et al (1974), that the role of the user should be assessed to consider the relationship between news media and audience, particularly as media selection (use) can be a goal-oriented process (towards gratification). Similarly, we approach news media as a set of options that people can turn to for various gratifications and with various motives (Papacharissi 2008). As such their assessment of journalistic media may be based on considerations other than idealised roles.

In exploring these normative dimensions, aspects typically considered under use/gratification preferences (such as those underlining habitual consumption of a specific media or media type) cannot be considered 'best' or presumed media need at any one time, and should therefore not be privileged. Westlund and Ghersetti (2014) argue this point in a study of media use in Sweden during times of crisis, and we look to extend that argument here to explore whether similar dynamics exist at civic and community levels. This gratification-centric approach shifts away from valuing news media as inherently ideal 'gratifiers', and instead considers when members of the public and community might be disinterested as well – when they see media as not useful – thereby allowing dissatisfaction to be evaluated, either as a deterrent for media use or as a feature of the media system that is noted, and endured.

The prevailing view of media 'as gratifying' public use (and demand) and fulfilling the ideals of the Fourth Estate rests on the idea that there is 'a public', and that the media notion of this public is relatively stable, at least with regard to their needs and the demand for media content of a certain type (McQuail 2008, 410). This feeds back into the idealised notion of the Fourth Estate in a traditional communicative cycle (Hall 1993), where journalists perceive their role as knowing what a public 'needs' for its participation in society and delivering what it determines as necessary. These assumptions are problematic when not paired with an inquiry into the motives of members of any public and community as they identify within use-and-gratification binaries. Employing a uses and gratifications framework, allows us to take stock, first, of people's perceived needs as individuals as well as community members, and, second, how *they* perceive media as gratifying these needs, while, third, asking how, whether, and when they perceive motivation to communicate held by journalistic media (Rubin 2002). This paper offers an initial exploration of both

how members of a community perceive their own motives and how they feel they are perceived and documents the first phase of an on-going study into these dimensions.

Uses and gratification frameworks have been applied extensively in research focusing on contemporary media usage (Chen 2011, Westlund and Ghersetti 2015), we adapt this approach to expand, without prejudice, our analytical framework for community members' media usage allowing the choice not to gratify certain media needs, even if they are viewed as important, and seek to approach the variety of media that members of communities can choose from to meet their needs. While traditionally the Fourth Estate treats information delivery as paramount, the use of news media for enjoyment must also be weighed (Bartsch and Viehoff 2010). Our approach to communities and hyperlocal outlets does not assess hyperlocal media as objects of inquiry, better addressed in the work of Forde (2011), Hess (2013), Paulussen and D'heer (2013), and Westlund and Ghersetti (2014). Rather it allows us to identify community activists engaged with a range of media, including hyperlocal media, in order to evaluate the ways *they* might engage with concepts such as the Fourth Estate or locate gaps between idealised and experienced dimensions of journalism. This has been the focus of a number of initiatives in the United States (Haeg and Hardman 2015), and within the academy has been explored as an area of opportunity for journalistic practice to serve communities (Hess and Waller 2014).

Process

In developing our research it was first necessary to identify a small number of community based groups and organisations that have an indirect interest in journalism's role and function. As the first phase of a multi-stage study, the preliminary findings here will be used to scope subsequent stages of research, while also using the views and activities of participants to shape subsequent aspects of the research. Two organisations in Sheffield were identified: Sheffield for Democracy, a group of non-partisan political activists who campaign for greater democratic accountability and better access to power for all citizens; and the Nether Edge Neighbourhood Group (NENG) who are active in the Nether Edge suburb of Sheffield. NENG campaigns to improve the environment for those living and working in the area and organises local events and activities for residents. NENG also publishes a monthly newsletter for local residents called *Edge*, and a co-produced edition of this publication is incorporated into Phase II of this research. Both of these are grass-roots organisations that share a commitment to specific yet different community values and goals. Sheffield has several printed hyperlocal news media, including *Edge* and publications like *the Burngreave Messenger*. These two community papers serve disparate socio-economic and geographic areas of Sheffield, and also present areas of study that avoid the pitfall Hess (2013) identifies, as the media produced for these communities is overwhelmingly read within the geographical boundaries of the communities of Burngreave and Nether Edge.

Following initial discussions with both groups, we invited members of the groups to participate in the study. We first distributed a questionnaire on individual uses of news and information via the groups' e-mail distribution lists (Denscombe 2014) to gain some baseline information about individuals' news consumption, the frequency and type of news they consume, the platforms they utilise as well as the importance they place on local and national news. The questionnaires included closed and open responses, with the opportunity to add comments about news and journalism. Questionnaires have also been adopted in other media research projects which have sought to examine uses and gratification theory (Shin 2011; Kim et al 2015). For our purposes, the questionnaires served as the only 'steer' for participants

in both the discussion (Research Intervention 1) and workshop (Research Intervention 2), as key to our research was seeing how people within communities spoke about news and journalism outside of academic-led discussions. We were careful not to foreground the normative aspect of our work, to avoid priming discussions around those elements. Rather we stated that our understanding of their uses of journalism will enable us to gain a ‘users’ perspective’ on journalism which might feed into how journalism is thought about in future. Phase I of our study is divided between a community facilitation (focus group) and a collaborative workshop. As will be discussed below, this has allowed us to tease out the expectations and perceptions of community members about the news media around them. Across the two research events in this first phase of study we had six active participants. Each of our active participants completed a 44-question questionnaire. A further 12 respondents answered open-ended questions distributed via email. Five respondents provided additional information via telephone or personal correspondence. For the exploratory nature of our study, this data informed discussions of media use (eg. the relevance of local news) and identified unanticipated trends (eg. the role of interpersonal news). While small, this has allowed us to begin to revisit our own biases as an exploratory study, and has helped develop the second stages of research with a wider range of participants, including journalism educators and practitioners.

Initial Findings

From this first phase of research, our findings already point to some interesting preliminary results and provide a useful corrective to the expectations of the authors for considering the way we position normativity within journalism studies. As will be shown in this section, findings are being utilised to scope a broader study, and therefore should be approached as exploratory. Our data revealed the following key considerations:

- Participants have a somewhat blasé view of journalism’s societal role and performance of any such role.
- There was a strong view of news and journalism as a form of entertainment – including the ‘jousting’ of contrarian views, the practice of relaxing with a newspaper, and reading gossip or celebrity news – on level with its informative dimensions.
- The commercial imperative of journalism (that newspapers need to sell and broadcast needs to be watched) was seen as an explanatory basis for why news content is positioned in the way it is.
- All of our research participants emphasised the importance of non-mediated news shared interpersonally, and valued it highly, often over mediated content (even when that content might be personally relevant). The pub conversation, information shared by someone trusted, and the role of news from ‘friends and family’ in particular were mentioned.
- Online media play a role for participants in their news habits, but were not considered stand-ins to fill gaps in local coverage. None of our research participants saw online media as avenues for more local coverage or higher quality.
- While participants would welcome better, higher quality coverage, there is little expectation for this (there was also little appetite for investing, personally, in news seen as lesser quality) and little expectation for a different ‘idealised’ journalism.

In general there was agreement among participants that local news receives inadequate coverage for them to stay informed of goings on in Sheffield, with some agreement that this meant there is a dearth of information relevant to their day-to-day lives (this was bemoaned as unfortunate, and a real gap in informing ‘the public’). However, contrary to our expectations, participants were not cynical or negative about this, mostly expressing resignation. Participants mentioned the lack of quality local news and community coverage in general, noting that the ‘precarious’ nature of news media business models meant much of the content was more sensational: “they’re produced in the same way as the popular national press – *the Suns*, *the Mirrors*, *the Mail* – and it just doesn’t interest me” said one participant in the focus group, adding “for that reason I miss a lot of local news which is a shame.”

We probed aspects of this resignation in the second of our research activities, a workshop-oriented event that allowed participants to consider why they read, navigated to, or otherwise selected news content in real time using think aloud protocols (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2014). None of our participants opted to evaluate the local papers (which were available), nor did any consider their online web portals or other local platforms. When asked why participants opted for non-local news, we found that there was a general perception (expressed explicitly by two participants) that journalism at the local level was low quality, focused only on sensational content, and lacked journalists capable of producing strong content of interest to local audiences: “the quality of that sort of person would’ve moved on to a national newspaper by now [...] there’s probably a reason these people are at the local news.” While this view was not universally held, it was reflected more broadly in the way that, across our study and despite being active in local affairs and community groups and producing hyperlocal content, none of our participants cited the local news media as relevant to their day-to-day participation in society.

Local news was also not a part of their news habits – typical remarks from participants noted the only time either of the two local Sheffield papers would be read were if they were a) lying around somewhere, b) if someone stumbled across one, or c) if they were free. “I certainly don’t read the local paper, but I am involved in a local neighbourhood group, that’s really so parochial it’s to be within a mile and a half of my front door sort of thing, very, very local,” said one participant. For this group, relevant news was likely to come from the people in that group getting agitated over an issue or involved in various activities, and then sharing information and news in a flurry of emails. There was also recognition that geography was not a sufficient condition to be interested in local news (as opposed to hyperlocal). One participant who grew up in Liverpool said they felt more in tune with the local news in the *Liverpool Echo* than *the Sheffield Star*, despite living in Sheffield for more than 30 years, and this emotional connection played a role in how they sought out their news media.

Reflecting on the linkage between news in terms of quality and coverage, (local, regional, and beyond), any performance of idealised roles was not a paramount consideration – “you don’t think [about categories like local or national], or whether this is important or not important. You just watch it,” said one participant. Another saw the value in the delivery of facts, but saw a lot of news as “a mixture of things to fill the time”. For our considerations, evaluating the expectations of a Fourth Estate, these sorts of responses – resignation and lowered normative expectations – came as a surprise considering our selection processes targeted active members of local communities. While, broadly speaking, publications like *Edge* and Sheffield community papers such as the *Burngreave Messenger* were identified as ‘more relevant’ (in part because the people who produced them were known, and shared a

commitment to their communities), participants stopped short of seeing these on par with the idealised normative dimensions of journalism, and were not seen as filling a local news void. Participants from the Nether Edge neighbourhood pointed out that the volunteers for *Edge* often debated whether they should even endeavour to take on a more traditional journalistic approach, also debating the role of campaigning or 'hard news' coverage in their publication. This offers an indication of expectations and perceptions of journalistic role performance.

What people expect from their journalism and what they miss or bemoan in journalism are two different things. During the second research intervention, participants were asked to design their 'ideal journalism'. It was telling, said one participant, that their own 'ideal' was not that different from the traditional news options they are familiar with, describing an ideal newspaper that "would make me aware first thing of what have happened overnight, indicate what might interest me in the day ahead and prepare me for it, and stimulate and entertain me." In their ideal journalism constructions, our participants noted that they would welcome a more tailored, local, journalism that reflected the varied neighbourhoods of Sheffield, but recognised this would result in a trade off where "serendipity" and the chance of coming across news outside their personalised content would likely diminish, another pointing out that idealised journalism neglected the want for entertaining items like celebrity gossip they would still want "snuck in". There was a persistent view that even when given the scope to describe a 'utopian' approach to news and journalism, the entertainment function was something participants wanted to remain, running alongside information: "where you're reading for enjoyment, you're enjoying disagreeing with [columnist] or enjoying agreeing with [them]. [...] News merges into entertainment."

Conclusion

This research prefaces its approach on an abandonment of authority over determining the 'ideal' normative dimensions of journalism. Not intended as a petulant rebuke of theoretical work or past inquiries (including our own, cf. Eldridge 2013, 2014; Steel 2012, 2013) that have also assumed 'as given' the normative dimensions of the Fourth Estate, we look to instead draw attention to the locus of these normative foundations and the traditional biases of either idealised self-perceptions or traditional perspectives in propagating its merits. In this, we are exploring journalism that finds itself in a state of flux (Conboy and Eldridge 2015), by asking whether the centre-point we evaluate journalism against is broadly recognised. In revisiting journalism's normative dimensions, we argue there is a need to assess the presence of gaps between the idealised and the expected. In particular, in trying to understand whether the absence of certain local coverage is identified as problematic or rather as a feature of the current media reality, we find both community/hyperlocal groups and their media provide useful prisms for exploration. In doing so we step away from a traditional focus of journalism studies which locates the Fourth Estate in national or international political journalism where these roles are structurally embedded. Therefore, we use the hyperlocal focus as a prism through which we can understand the perceptions and expectations of news media from the ground up. At this stage we are not focusing acutely on hyperlocal or community media as products, though in the next stage of this research co-production of a community newspaper is at the centre of research activity.

Extending beyond local or hyperlocal newspapers, it was surprising that news that was shared in person played a far greater role than our scoping of literature and previous work would have suggested. For our participants the pub conversation and the neighbourly chat are considered highly important news avenues – not just for

their local/hyperlocal community news, but also for connecting the concerns of communities to the larger issues of the day. Interpersonal news was trusted to a greater degree, even used to validate (or challenge) mediated news, and was considered more likely to be factual and held stronger connections to the broader society, including key information sources for news on civic matters or council activities. Less useful was the sort of interpersonal news that parroted what had been printed in newspapers, when people are “being bad proxies for their respective newspapers”. Where news online, on television, and in print was seen as ‘entertainment’ and as a product that needed selling, interpersonal non-mediated news was consistently noted as trusted, relevant, and meaningful.

When it comes to journalism’s idealised role perceptions and the normative expectations of a Fourth Estate, there were not very high expectations of journalism to perform these roles at all. This is not to say our study groups were disenchanted with journalism’s performance or content per se, but rather that what they saw in their news content represented something else – something expected to be parochial at times, biased at others, sensational (when commercially viable), entertaining when possible, etc. For our research group, news serves a utilitarian role for connecting them to the world – “it makes me live less like a hermit” – but participants did not describe their expectations of journalism in terms of ideology, idealised roles, or expectations of performing as a Fourth Estate. Other responses noted the utilitarian service of journalism for staying informed about events in places one might travel to – “a need to know what’s going on in order to arrange your life” – of maintaining an “on-going narrative” about the wider world, of myth-busting, or as sating a human interest for information (these comments were made with reference to the crisis, celebrity news, and weather). In this regard, this initial study offers new threads of consideration for understanding and theorising journalism’s normative claims. Our findings suggest, and further study will explore, that the normative ideals expressed by both journalism practitioners and their critics do not resonate with those members of the communities who they purportedly serve.

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