

JOURNALISM AND SOCIETY DENIS McQUAIL



JOURNALISM & AND SOCIETY

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Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Professor of Sociology of Communication, University of Milan, Italy

‘This book deals with the eternal question of how journalism is linked to society. Its nine chapters cover all pertinent aspects of journalism, including its freedom and responsibility, as well as issues such as the power of the press and the future of the press as an institution in the age of internet. All this is done with an analytical insight of the encyclopedic authority behind *Mass Communication Theory*. Also, pedagogically it is an exemplary textbook with each chapter including boxes to summarize the points, a conclusion to wind up, and selected further readings to support homework. I cannot think of a better staple food for students of journalism at all levels.’

Kaarle Nordenstreng, Professor Emeritus of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Tampere, Finland

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SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Editor: Mila Steele
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Proofreader: Jill Birch
Marketing manager: Michael Ainsley
Cover design: Jennifer Crisp
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY



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First published 2013

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2012948129

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4462-6679-3

ISBN 978-1-4462-6680-9 (pbk)

To the memory of Hans Kleinsteuber, 1943–2012, a good friend
and colleague and a free and generous spirit.

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Preface

This book is intended as an introduction to the social theory of journalism. It covers a wide range of issues, but with a particular focus on the expectations of society from journalism and, in turn the latter's own perception of its public roles and responsibilities. It also examines the factors in society that have shaped journalism, both enabling and limiting it in its aims and scope and also in its effects. This overall perspective is one that attaches a high value to the contribution of journalism to society, especially by way of an attachment to truth, justice and freedom. The benefits are not guaranteed and not always delivered. However, the potential outweighs the failings that are often entailed in an institution that is not primarily altruistic and has to earn its own way in the world. It may even be the case that we cannot have the benefits of journalism without the offence and criticism it often provokes and the harm it can cause. The larger, normative, purpose of the book is to lend support to the efforts of journalism to perform its essential public roles, by way of voluntary accountability and protection from damaging market and political pressures.

The book had its origin in a small-scale project to write a short primer on contemporary social theory of journalism for use by students at the University of Yekaterinburg, as proposed by Dmitri Strovsky. Unfortunately, the project could not be completed as planned, but I am grateful for the stimulus to begin on this path, and later also to Takesato Watanabe, of Doshisha University, for further encouragement in the project. For the rest, I have too many debts to acknowledge individually, although, I owe much to colleagues and friends associated with the study of normative media theory over a number of years, including Jay Blumler, Jan van Cuilenburg and others at the University of Amsterdam, not forgetting the 'soul brothers' (Cliff Christians, Kaarle Nordenstreng, Bob White and Ted Glasser). My own interest in journalism, especially newspapers, began in a childhood fascination with news at a time of world-shaking events (the 1940s). But it was later given professional shape by my experience as a research adviser to the UK Royal Commission on the Press, 1974–7, with particular reference to news content and standards (thanks, Paul). This interest remained with me but my attention gradually shifted to normative issues and to the potential for implementation in policy. While my personal experience of journalism is quite limited, I have tried to take a

broad view, without being able to claim any universality. But journalism today has many shared features of practice and theory across different countries and cultures and there is an increasing amount of comparative research to draw upon. There is at least a basis for reaching a number of generalisations on the matters dealt with here. In the time since the ambition of the book was enlarged beyond its first purpose, I have received much support in the rewriting from Sage and, in particular, from Mila Steele.

The whole structure and practice of professional journalism has come under great strain as a result of changing technology and market conditions. Change is also bringing new opportunities for more democratic public communication, along with less creative destruction. After reviewing the issues and evidence for the present purpose and from the perspective of society, I am still much inclined to stress the continuing relevance of the professional values and roles that have evolved and the enduring need on the part of society to support these, if need be, by way of structural provision.

Denis McQuail, Eastleigh, Hampshire

What is Journalism? How is it Linked to Society? 1

Introduction

This is a book of theory, specifically theory of the relation between journalism and society. It is written primarily from the perspective of society (rather than journalism), although it draws on the views of journalists as well as on research findings about journalism. The main focus is on the claims of society and the goals, rights, duties and responsibilities of journalists. Although the treatment is mainly explanatory and analytic, the outcome lends support to the case for an independent, professional and effective institution of a free press. This should be regarded as an indispensable element in a just and open society and beyond in the world. It is also unlikely that it can be achieved without some positive support from society, as well as from the press itself.

The term journalism is defined below but needs clarification in relation to other similar terms. Sometimes reference is made to 'the media' or 'mass media', or possibly 'news media', thus to the entire 'media system' or a large sector of it. The word 'press' is also encountered as an alternative (also explained below) that usually serves as a more abstract and formal description of much the same set of activities. Additionally, 'journalism' is often used as if synonymous with 'news' or even with the 'newspaper'. The relation between the various terms can be explained approximately as follows, since it is more than just a matter of words.

The widest frame of reference is that of 'mass media', both as an industry and a new social institution in its own right. Within this frame we can speak of the 'press' which occupies its own institutional terrain and acts to represent and stand for the interests of news media and, albeit informally

and incompletely, to regulate some aspects of the work of journalists. Note that the 'press' concept is not limited to print media, as the word might suggest. Journalism is the core activity that the press stands for. It is also the word most commonly used to describe the occupation. Finally, we can mention the 'news' – the main product of journalism that is sometimes used interchangeably with other terms. The 'newspaper' enters the picture because most employed professional journalists probably still work for newspapers and the newspaper model of the news genre has largely been carried over to other media. However, other types of print media, especially magazines, have historically been important vehicles for information, opinion and comment about society. There is thus no consistency in usage, but this book will try and keep to a formulation in which 'journalism' is always the primary referent, but with an understanding that it is not coterminous with 'news' and not just a genre of the 'newspaper'.

Origins of journalism

In everyday terms, journalism refers to the activities and outcomes of those professionally engaged in collecting, analysing and publishing 'news'. In turn, news can be defined as factual accounts and explanations of current or recent events of wider relevance to a given public, usually characterised by their geographical location (city, region, nation, etc.). It is important not to reverse this connection and identify journalism only in terms of 'news' since there is a strong case for including other kinds of 'account' of social reality within the scope of journalism. Of course each of the main terms used in this definition needs further explanation, but this will suffice for the moment.

Journalism in this sense is strongly associated with the invention of printing and with the particular printed form of the newspaper, which first made its appearance in the early seventeenth century. Its emergence is clearly related to what has come to be called a 'modern' society and with the development of towns and international commerce as well as political changes. Compared to earlier forms, such societies were more free and individualistic, more secular and dedicated to material progress based on commerce and the application of science and technology. They have a looser social organization, with a high degree of division of labour but with interdependence of their elements. The fore-runners of print journalism are diverse and include: written accounts of events (sometimes distant in time), chronicles of dynastic, ecclesiastical or national developments, log-books and records, letters and journals kept by travellers, diplomatic despatches and presumably reports of spies and agents.

The prototype of the newspaper was the printed or handwritten newsletter that reported significant events and circumstances of relevance for trade, commerce and politics. These letters circulated along the postal and trade routes of Europe in the first instance and then more globally. They could be read aloud and handed on or copied, and were often intended for wider public diffusion. The contents of private letters, public announcements and also word of mouth reports were compiled into summary miscellanies, printed and sold as both entertainment and useful information.

Journalism in these forms existed well before there were professional journalists or editors, since news would usually be collected by printer-publishers from a variety of sources.

Although the original forms of journalism were disparate, it quite soon acquired certain distinguishing features, on the basis of common practices and public expectations that have persisted. The main characteristics of journalism as it gradually emerged in the form of the newspaper are summarised in Box 1.1.

Box 1.1 Defining features of early journalism

- Having reference to, or relevance for, recent or current events
- Factual, informative in form
- Public and open in terms of content and audience
- Independent of official authority
- Regular appearance in print
- Secular and miscellaneous in subject matter (not political or religious in purpose)
- Content selected mainly on grounds of potential interest to reader.

Once invented, journalism was found to be: indispensable for commerce; appealing to readers; and the basis of a profitable small business for printers. It also drew the attention of authorities governing cities, regions or nations. For them it could be seen as useful both as a means of control and influence and as a potential source of intelligence. State and city authorities in Europe sometimes published their own official newspapers or gazettes with a somewhat different purpose than

commercial ventures, but with some overlap in content. Journalism was also liable to supervision or censorship as a potential cause of dissent or unrest, with much variation from one jurisdiction to another. Later, regular print publications (whether in newspaper or magazine form) came to be an important vehicle for movements towards political reform or revolution, national independence or freedom for religious minorities. Civic virtues and regional identities sometimes also gained journalistic support. The 'normative' dimension of journalism was well established before the commercial newspaper became dominant in the 'mass media age'.

In Europe and North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, journalism increasingly became a vehicle for the propaganda of established authorities and interests, and also a key instrument in the activities of opposing factions in political and religious struggles, reform movements and challenges to authority. As its role expanded, especially in relation to politics, it began to acquire an institutional character and formed the basis for what came to be known as 'The Press' in the nineteenth century (see below). Largely because of this development, the Press as an institution, with journalism as its core activity, has acquired a close association with aspirations for freedom and democracy. This strengthened the claim of journalism to have its own freedom.

As this brief history shows, journalism originated in the 'West' and became established as a genre and institution of society before newspapers really existed in Asia and the rest of the world. For this reason, at least, it is justifiable to define it largely in terms of a western 'dominant model', or at least as a very influential prototype. This has even been characterised more narrowly as an 'Anglo-American invention' (Chalaby, 1996). Nevertheless, the present and future of journalism need to take account of a much changed world in which journalism is a global phenomenon with a range of different forms and cultures, depending on the national society in which it is practised and the chosen medium. The different circumstances of its environment often strongly affect many of the theoretical issues about journalism discussed in this book.

Even so, we can still claim that our initial definition is still, generally, valid for most of the world's journalism and the key issues are still much the same in a more global environment, especially when they relate to freedom of reporting, standards of quality, the goals of journalism, the ties to society, the nature of the profession, and the challenges presented by changing media systems and changing worlds.

The journalism–society link: levels of analysis and theoretical perspectives

Although the practice of journalism, viewed from within, does not require any theoretical justification or explanation, some form of theory inevitably develops out of the wider interaction of journalists and their social environment, especially as journalism becomes more complex and more significant in its potential consequences. Theory may not be needed by journalists themselves to guide their day-to-day activities but it is essential for certain other purposes. It plays a part in explaining, or in justifying, the actions of journalists when these become controversial, and in processes of accountability involving the law or professional self-regulation. In particular, the claim to journalistic freedom as a fundamental principle cannot be sustained without theoretical justification as well as pragmatic arguments.

Following this line of thought, for purposes of theory, we can distinguish between three levels of attention to the practise of journalism: the levels being those of: the society; the news organization; and the individual journalist. The key issues facing journalism, beyond the practice of the task itself, are those of freedom, obligation to others, and accountability for meeting any obligations that are acknowledged. Each of these is experienced differently in the three main contexts looked at, with different expectations, rules for conduct and potential for negotiation, resistance or enforcement.

At the level of the society, journalism becomes enmeshed in all large public events, by way of contacts with social, cultural and political elites and drawn by the interests of its own audiences. At this level, ideas about the rights and obligations of journalism tend to circulate in the form of pressures and demands from society and proposals and counter-proposals concerning accountability and control. At the heart of the matter is the assumption that journalism plays an important, possibly essential, part in the collective life of a community or nation. In consequence, the press itself has to be governed, organized and conducted according to the same fundamental principles that are supposed to govern the rest of society. In a democracy this refers to freedom of speech, equality of all citizens and the rule of law.

Journalism in some form is a necessary condition for each of these principles, since it is a primary medium of public expression and it provides all citizens equally with the same information and advice for forming opinions and making choices. Under modern conditions of large-scale society, there can be no real public space for debate without journalism

and no opportunity for the many to participate in relevant society-wide processes of self-government. Publicity is also essential to a fair and efficient judicial system. The press institution provides the primary means of self-regulation of journalism and also a limited guarantee of some measure of responsibility and of accountability to society as a whole.

Box 1.2 The level of society: some reasons why journalism raises theoretical issues

- Journalism is involved in all major public events
- Prominent actors in society use journalism for their own ends
- Principal values of society transfer to journalism and are, in turn, supported
- Journalism provides the basis for society-wide public debate and participation
- The justice system depends on publicity from media
- Journalism exerts pressure for accountability and society exerts pressure in kind in return.

At the *level of the news organisation* (e.g. newspaper or media firm), patterns of systematic reporting and publishing that characterise the output of journalists are related to larger structures of the market and of the social system. Theory to account for the structure and behaviour of news media usually requires reference to political and economic circumstances, to public policies and forms of governance (especially as embodied in regulations and law and also to the working of the market, especially the media market itself). The main relevant factors are summarised in Box 1.3.

Box 1.3 Factors affecting the conduct and performance of journalism at the level of the news organization

- The legal and regulatory system in place
- The structure of ownership and control (public versus private; degree of ownership monopoly; foreign ownership, etc.)

- The links between media and politics (parties, politicians, movements, ideas)
- Market forces, practices and pressures
- The general influence of organisational requirements and work routines on reporting, processing and distribution of news.

It is evident that the relation between news and society is mediated according to some or all of the factors mentioned in Box 1.3.

At the *individual level*, the journalist is a person dealing directly with other individuals, especially those who are considered as sources or as objects of reporting. More distantly, and notionally, the journalist has some form of relation with audience members. Real audiences aside, it has been shown that journalists, faced with a large, disparate and anonymous audience are inclined to construct a preferred view of the kind of person they are addressing. The various relationships involved are often in some degree reciprocal, so theory is concerned not only with what the journalist thinks of others, but also what others think of journalists.

The central aspect of these relationships concerns the potential obligations (professional or personal) that the journalist might be aware of. Conventions and customs of the profession play a large part in turning theory into practice. Furthermore, journalists are attached to the wider society by obligations and constraints that are sometimes personally experienced as citizens, but also often embedded in a web of informal rules of the workplace and the role, giving rise to expectations about conduct.

A significant factor for individual journalists may be the conception he or she has formed of the main purposes and rationale of the role of journalist, insofar as this is not fully determined by the organisation and work specification. Role conceptions relate to the degree and kind of social engagement that is called for or allowed. The extent to which a person aspires to professional status is also relevant here. Theory has tended to focus most on the perception of these roles on the part of journalists. How do they see their primary task and what do they regard as criteria of good journalism in light of this? The definition and perception of roles has direct implications for other key issues, including the degree of freedom they might claim in their work and relations with potential sources of news, especially those in positions of authority or influence.

There are also ethical norms and other standards that guide journalists in their relationships with other individuals. Central tenets relate to: respect for the privacy and dignity of subjects; an awareness of the consequences of publicity; and honesty in the collection of information

and dealing with sources. These and other such matters are familiar to journalists. Observance may be governed by the policy of the news organization or by adherence to professional codes, but may sometimes be left to individual choice or governed by informal pressure and the demands and routines of everyday activity.

Box 1.4 The perspective of the individual journalist as an influence on conduct and performance

- Relationship to the audience, real or imagined (close or distant, favourable or hostile, etc.)
- Personal conception of the role
- Adherence to professional norms and codes
- Personal background, values and opinions
- Experience of in-work training and socialisation.

Although most questions of journalism theory relevant to the wider society can be dealt with by reference to one or other of these three levels and corresponding perspectives, there is an additional perspective to take into account – that of the reader or audience. Media use as a field of human behaviour has been extensively studied and ‘the news’ has often figured centrally in audience inquiries. Most relevant to this book, apart from the details of actual attention to, interpretation of, and ‘learning’ from news, are questions about motives for news attention.

Inquiries have revealed a wide range of motivations and satisfactions sought or obtained, with many variations, but frequent elements in public perceptions of news go beyond the more obvious purposes of keeping up with issues of the day and being informed of events. These additional purposes include: gaining a sense of security from the continuous flow of information; acquiring status through knowledge; having the means of social interaction with others; the entertainment and ‘human interest’ value of much content; and the sense of acquiring from regular news bulletins a framework for a daily routine or a ritual to follow.

Much actual use of news by large sections of the audience is thus not guided by motives related to essential informational needs of the person or the society. This fact co-exists with a widespread perception of news as generally a serious business. This ambiguous underlying reality of much

news ‘consumption’ does help to make sense of audience choices and attitudes and also of the strategies of news providers to leaven ‘hard’ with ‘soft’ news. The much criticised news phenomenon of ‘infotainment’ may fail to meet high standards of information quality and is related to ‘commercialisation’, but it is not simply imposed from above on an unsuspecting and vulnerable public.

In general the findings of news audience research reflect and confirm more abstract theories about the social functions of news and journalism. They are also a reminder that ‘news’ is not only defined and characterised by its originators and that its significance and effects go beyond the informative aspect and are not very predictable. More to the point of the present book, a few key issues about journalism are highlighted from this point of view. These include the variable extent and basis of public trust in the suppliers of news (sources, media and journalists); and the variable degree of support from the audience for ‘higher’ journalistic purpose as opposed to forms of news that are sometimes regarded as trivial or even harmful. The larger question raised here concerns the extent to which journalism is constrained to reflect the reality of the culture of its society and the limits to influence this entails. The counter-currents to what is conventionally regarded as ‘quality’ journalism are strong.

Box 1.5 Audience perspectives on the news

- News is selectively and often casually attended to
- The perceived uses and satisfactions of news are very diverse
- The contents and consumption of news are seen as entertaining and diverting
- Social and cultural variations strongly influence attention and perception
- Trust and perceived credibility are very variable
- Audience beliefs about the rights and duties of journalists often deviate from established norms.

The main concerns of social theory of journalism

Journalism can be examined according to different types of theory (social, economic, literary, political, etc.) but the category of ‘social theory’ is most directly relevant to the public role of journalism and principles of the kind just introduced. Social theory is a mixture of *description* and *normative*

prescription. As description, we are essentially treating journalism as conforming to a certain 'ideal type' of purpose and practice, but with differences according to time and place. Such an ideal form or model can be compared to the reality in a given national case and used as a tool of analysis and interpretation. The normative element refers to ideas about the ideal purposes of journalism and potential obligations to the wider society. It deals with the relative value of different goals and how these can or should be achieved, bearing in mind that in modern societies the 'press' is largely run as a business enterprise, not as a social service or for idealistic (or ideological) purposes.

Our aim is not to propose rules to be followed but to identify the guiding principles of journalism that are most widely recognised both internally and from the outside. The 'theory' we are seeking to describe either in empirical or prescriptive aspects, or both, is not fixed or universally valid, but open to alternative interpretations and formulations. Nevertheless, some coherence and consistency can be expected between societies that subscribe to the same values of civic and human rights and forms of political decision-making. The value of theory should lie in its potential to explain and assess the reality of journalistic work. It is an essential aid to criticism and self-awareness as well as to attempts at reform. The status accorded to journalism in the wider society depends on the values it subscribes to and how well it lives up to them. Efforts at improvement depend on there being a viable and respected body of social theory for diagnosis and prescription.

The main concerns of social theory of journalism are given in Box 1.6.

Box 1.6 Social theory of journalism: main concerns

- The nature of the 'needs of society' that are met by journalism
- The issue of whether or not journalism, despite its claims to freedom, has some obligations to society that it cannot ignore
- The nature and strength of any such obligations
- The means available to society to activate obligations or hold media to account for them
- The norms and standards that should apply to the practise of journalism, as it affects society
- Issues of control and accountability especially as they relate to freedom of expression and publication.

Diversity and diversification of journalism

Journalism itself is a social and cultural phenomenon linked to many other conditions and ultimately escaping clear and unambiguous definition. Nevertheless, we can identify some of its various manifestations and look at the pathways by which these have emerged. As noted earlier, journalism is only one of many different genres of writing with a bearing on the contemporary reality of society that were stimulated by the invention of printing and publishing.

An important strand of much early print publication was the wider concept of personal *authorship* that had been stimulated by the discovery of printing. For some versions of journalism, this has given it an expectation of originality, personal vision and intrinsic authority. The journalist as author should have the same rights of freedom of expression and of conscience as any other author. However, the mundane task of news collection and dissemination is not easy to reconcile with this principle. There are practical limits to the exercise of personal freedom, imagination and expression. Journalists are typically employed by organisations engaged in selling and distributing the products of their work. They are inevitably constrained by these circumstances.

The version of the occupation or role of journalist that has come to predominate, as distinct from the simple activity of printing and publishing bare accounts of actual events, reflects the tension between the many demands and expectations affecting journalistic work. The individual journalist of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe or North America could sometimes lay claim to being an author or at least a writer, and not just a conduit from sources of information to typesetters. But the claim was not made by all or even many journalists and the public reputation and image of the profession was not usually very flattering. An inherent uncertainty about the status of the journalistic role remains with us.

Nevertheless, the literary and scientific dimension of authorship coupled with an involvement in the struggles for religious and political freedom did modify and extend the original idea of journalism as a neutral carrier of information about current events. One result can be seen in the emergence of different varieties or types of journalism, especially forms that involve the expression of strong opinions, the adoption of an adversary position, or the emergence of a 'watchdog' role. Contemporary journalism is characterised by a number of essentially different genres, carrying different expectations for the audience and society and often following their own distinctive ground rules.

This diversification is not simply a case of subject matter (for instance, the opinion-forming press or the press of sport, politics, business, art and

culture or celebrity gossip). More important are distinctions according to place (local, regional, national), social class and education (quality versus tabloid journalism) or audience taste/interest and style of writing (sensational or restrained, literary and philosophical, etc.). Not least important was the fundamental difference between a profit-oriented newspaper press and one with ideal, political or ideological objectives.

In more recent times, differences according to medium (and technology) have added another significant dimension of variation. The print-based model of journalism has proved a powerful survivor and in many respects still remains more influential than audio-visual media (for instance, in setting the news agenda for the latter and in its closeness to power). In many countries, the newspaper never attained mass circulation and, where it did, it has been in decline. Even so, the communicative power of the word seems to exceed that of visual reporting because of its lack of ambiguity and with the advantage of permanence. However, film and television documentary have unique possibilities for impact and the primacy of words may be slowly giving way to the capacity of online media to combine all forms and genres, with immense practical advances in processing and distribution.

Box 1.7 Dimensions of variation in journalism

- Authorship versus employment
- Profession versus trade or craft
- Local versus national and cosmopolitan
- Profit versus non-profit
- General versus specialist
- Adversarial and active versus supportive or neutral
- Print versus other media
- Informative versus entertaining purpose.

The variations described are easily recognisable, and we can also discern a general tension between a view of the press as an institution primarily concerned with serving the public interest and one that is a branch of commerce or even of the entertainment industry. Whatever side one takes on the issues raised here, we are still dealing with much the same idea of

what is basically expected of the press – namely the regular provision of relevant and reliable information about current issues and events. To that extent a large part of what the press ought to be doing is a matter of agreement and much the same body of social theory concerning the role of journalism can be applied.

However, there are large areas remaining for potential dispute, especially where it concerns not just the provision of information, but matters of interpretation, opinion and value judgments. These can strongly influence the selection of topics and events for journalistic attention as well as the manner in which stories are told. Sooner or later we come up against the view that a completely objective and factual journalism is not attainable. Theory can help to resolve this paradoxical feature of the work of journalism, by offering a more complex version of what can be achieved and an understanding of the limitations.

Journalism and changing technology: implications for society

Ever since the mechanisation of printing and the industrialisation of newspaper production, journalism has been changing in response to technological change. The early manual press supplied a limited class of readers, mainly in towns. Late nineteenth century developments led towards a ‘mass market’ audience, with journalism for all social classes. The new readers were thought to be less interested in politics and more interested in sport, gossip, human interest, crime and useful information for daily life. Broadcasting by radio and, later, television was slow to adopt a news and information function, but by the latter half of the last century television news had come to reach whole populations and was widely claimed by most to be their ‘main source’ of news. Accessibility, popularity of the medium and perceived reliability all played a part in achieving this position. The key consequence for society was that a majority was quickly and equally informed about the same events, in much the same version. This was interpreted as a basis for social cohesion and solidarity. It also encouraged governmental and other social actors to influence and control the medium, in ways that were not available for controlling the printed press. The dominant position of television news weakened as a result of increased competition from cable, satellite and other new channels, aided by deregulation and privatisation of media systems.

However, it was the rise of the internet in the late twentieth century that has most troubled the settled relations of journalism and society since