

Putting Journalistic Ideals Back in the Service of Practice

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When journalism comes to mind, the tendency is to think West, to think settled democracies, autonomous institutions, reasoned deliberation, transparent decision-making and a unified and stable public.

But what has been happening with Al Jazeera and Qatar shows yet again that existing models for thinking about the news fall way short. They don't account for the many ways journalism takes shape around the world. They don't recognize the discrete challenges journalists face all the time and how they must improvise to offset them. They avoid the fact that journalism exists as an integral part of a larger institutional culture, where its deep ties with politics, economics, the law, education, security, religion and the military are profoundly intertwined with how the news works. They neglect to consider how journalism is dismissed, even despised by much of the world's population. Instead, thinking about journalism—in the academy, among the public, across much of the political world—is an exercise built on unrealistic and abstract conditions, usually connected with stable democracies and the autonomous, reasoned and transparent activity we associate with them. The news, thought to have the most value when seen as enhancing democracy, thus seems to operate in a vacuum from anything that complicates ideals about its existence.

This is paradoxical, because the failure to think with more nuance about journalism – about how it unfolds in practice from the bottom up rather than top down, how it works all the time in the face of *large* challenges not only small, how it is often more biased, conflicted and unevenly related to different types of governance than assumed, how it necessarily depends on a slew of external factors beyond its control and how it violates our ideals because they may themselves be unrealistic—coincides with one of the worst periods for journalism in contemporary memory.

Just this year — now a bit over its half way mark—between 34 and 38 journalists died on the job, depending on how one counts and who is doing the counting. That is to say nothing of the 55 other journalists who remain missing, the 259 journalists already in jail when the year began or the countless incidents of journalists being harassed online. Violence against journalists is on the rise, with body slamming in the US providing odd detail to a statistic that has always been complicated to navigate. We know that

journalism is at greater risk today in settled democracies than it's ever been before. And if the freelancers and news startups that may not be reflected here are factored in, the magnitude deepens.

And yet, at the same time as journalists are being regularly killed, assaulted, imprisoned, detained, investigated and surveilled and news outlets are being shuttered, censored, fined and targeted, discussions of the news continue to orient to an idealistic if unattainable version of journalism, laying claim to a purist aspiration of what journalism should be. That journalism is less morally ambiguous and corrupt and more stable, autonomous, transparent, unidimensional, socially useful and aligned with a particular idea of democracy, reason and civic deliberation than it ever could be on the ground.

Al Jazeera and Qatar sit at the heart of what is all too common in discussions of journalism, where an entrenched paradox sets abstract ideals and concrete practices at odds with each other. When Al Jazeera was launched two decades ago, it embodied those high ideals. Its platform aimed to provide reliable information across the Arab world, and it strove—not always perfectly—to offer a different kind of journalistic presence for and about the region. As Al Jazeera itself recently recounted, the network was first (in 1996) to orient to free-flowing information in a landscape of state-run and censored journalism, first (in 2006) to provide a global non-Western English-language news organization, first (across the 2000s) to give ongoing attention to concerns in the Global South that had been long eclipsed by existing news media, and among the first (in 2011) to broadcast ongoing coverage of protests across the Arab world. Al Jazeera emblemized, as Daoud Kuttub wrote last month in the *Washington Post*, “a breath of fresh air in a region that only understood news as the product of governments rather than the public’s right to know.” Al Jazeera’s prerogative to exist arose from a roll-out of idealized expectations associated with journalistic freedom and the unfettered flow of information.

To be sure, no news outlet is perfect, and Al Jazeera is no exception. The last few years reveal a dip in its credibility and tilts to its balance for overarching coverage of the Muslim Brotherhood. Both Al Jazeera America and Al Jazeera Mubasher closed down. Criticism of the government in Qatar is pretty much nonexistent. As countries in the region called for its overall shutdown in late June, Al Jazeera responded by echoing the expectations that had greeted its birth, where like other journalistic platforms threatened by political intimidation, it repaired to pristine ideals of what journalism should be. And it said:

We demand that journalists be able to do their jobs free from intimidation and threat. We demand diversity of thought and opinion (to) be cherished, not feared.

We demand the public have access to unbiased information.

Though the demand to shutter Al Jazeera is presumably being rolled back, it's worth noting how remarkably silent has been the overall response to its plea. Where were the great calls for unfettered information flow, the pundits rallying around journalism in the eye of political intimidation and the usually articulate media watch groups? There has been some response---the International Federation of Journalists is in Doha now, while the Committee to Protect Journalists called on Saudi officials to reverse the order and the Brussels-based Alliance for Freedom and Dignity is investigating it as a human rights violation of the principle of non-interference. Perhaps *The Independent* said it best, when it likened the attempt to the EU telling Teresa May to close the BBC and noted flatly that if Qatar complied with its neighbors' demands, it would "cease to exist as a nation state."

But by and large, journalism watchdogs have been silent because the ideals attached to the news don't easily service a wide range of grounded political circumstances. The West's tepid response -- specifically the US and UK calling for the parties to resolve the dispute internally -- muted journalism's necessary role in circulating information, even if and when its relay gets muddled. If there were ever a time to realign the abstract ideals proclaiming journalism's value with its less than perfect ground conditions, that time is now.

For Al Jazeera's shuttering highlights what those of us who care about journalism's future wrongly expect ideals to do, how we can't see the practices on the ground because we are so swayed by abstract notions of how journalism should work. Were we to admit that journalism exists in both democracies and authoritarian regimes and everything in between---transitional states with high degrees of self censorship and irresolution, odd mixes of colonialism and post colonialism, soft authoritarianism with little hope of becoming a civil society, pan regionalism, states that support information suppression, terror and the persecution of journalists---there might have been more visible protests. "The best way to respond to content that is unfavorable," continued

Kuttab, “is to produce countering content, not to punish the media or the country that is supporting it.”

It is important to remember that Al Jazeera is not the only news outlet facing threats to its existence. Political intimidation exists in a wide range of forms across the global environment, and they are increasing in number and intensity. News websites are being repeatedly blocked, predictably many of them by the same states that called for Al Jazeera’s shutdown.

Those of us concerned about journalism have a moment of opportunity. We can continue to support unrealistic journalistic standards, avoiding the fact that they often get repealed, violated or forgotten when the going gets tough. Or, we can recognize that ideals need to get dirty from time to time so as to work out the problems that should be driving ideals. If existing models for thinking about journalism aren’t relevant now – at a time in which a nation’s main media outlet has been outlawed by its neighbors – then when will they be?

Journalism’s demonization will only stop if and when we call it by name, and we need initiatives to make that happen. Right now, under my direction, the Annenberg School for Communication and the University of Pennsylvania are setting up a new Center for Media at Risk, due to open this coming academic year. The Center will provide a hub to help monitor and sustain a free and critical global media environment, by creating a register of the mechanisms of political intimidation that undermine the news, documentary and entertainment in multiple locations around the globe. With even supposedly stable democratic governments putting the media increasingly at risk and impeding the free flow of information, there is a terrific need to tackle head-on the array of practices now used to intimidate journalists and all media practitioners. What does media at risk mean today? And what does its opposite—media freedom—look like in practice? How free can media practitioners be, and how do we agree on risk and recognize it in a fundamentally variable global environment? The Center for Media at Risk will advocate and facilitate ongoing discussions about political intimidation between academics and all kinds of media practitioners in multiple locations worldwide, with a particular focus on the harnessing of media practitioners in circumstances of creeping authoritarianism and their response.

Recognizing that ideals aren't much help if they don't respond in an ongoing fashion to practice, the Center will provide a global platform for identifying and tracking the various forms that media intimidation takes worldwide.

The Center is only one initiative at a point in time that needs many more. In that light, I conclude with three suggestions.

- 1) Definition. We need to be clearer about the relationship between journalistic ideals and practices, about when and under which conditions ideals service our understanding of journalistic practice, and when they do not. By keeping practice at the center of our discussions, with all its strengths and weaknesses—rather than ideals about what journalism should be—we can address the shared and different forms it takes across locations without demonizing journalism. This offers the chance of more reliably forecasting when journalism will be put at risk.
- 2) Dialogue. We need to practice outreach, to stop talking only to people like ourselves and address those on the other side of the table. Using cross-platform forums—symposia, chat-rooms, listservs, workshops, immersion colloquia—to share what we know about the news with each other in an ongoing and evolving fashion provides a better opportunity to recognize the risks to journalism at their onset. Sharing what we know could create initiatives across journalists and journalism scholars in different regions, videographers from the Gulf States and the United States, freelance and veteran journalists in Africa and Europe. Awareness of the increasingly difficult and evolving conditions under which the news operates will increase only if we talk more and more often to each other.
- 3) Direction. We need to be proactive—not reactive—in identifying the complexities through which journalism works, even and perhaps mostly when they contradict journalistic ideals. Too much today happens under the rug, and the discrete forms associated with authoritarianism creep unknowingly into the news because not enough people pay attention when it begins. A proactive investment in the news can foster deeper understanding—occupational, professional, managerial, academic and public—of the patterns of media intimidation and information suppression that are unfolding worldwide, and what journalism can do in response.

Engaging in definition and dialogue and embracing direction is our way forward. We need to make our ideals work for journalism again, not the other way around.

Short Biography

Barbie Zelizer is the Raymond Williams Professor of Communication and Director of the Annenberg Scholars Program in Culture and Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, USA. A former journalist, Zelizer is an expert on journalism, culture, memory and images in times of crisis. Author of fourteen books—including the award-winning *About To Die: How News Images Move the Public* (Oxford, 2010) and *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago, 1998)—and over 100 articles and essays, she has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, Freedom Forum Center, Harvard University, Fulbright Senior Scholars, Stanford University's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. Zelizer is also a media critic, whose work has appeared in *The Nation*, PBS News Hour, *Liberation*, CNN, *Huffington Post*, *Newsday* and other media organs. Coeditor of *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, she is a recent President of the International Communication Association. Her most recent book *What Journalism Could Be* was published by Polity in late 2016. In 2017-2018, she will unroll and direct the Center for Media at Risk at the Annenberg School for Communication, to track the free flow of information in circumstances of creeping authoritarianism.