



## WHAT IS JOURNALISM?

*A report of the Ethics Advisory Committee of The Canadian Association of Journalists*

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*This report is a response to questions considered by the committee surrounding the increasingly elusive definition of journalism and the distinct role, if any, of journalists.*

### **Why ask the question?**

It used to be that everyone knew, or thought they knew, what journalism was and who journalists were. Those were the days when journalists served as the gatekeepers to public information—an idea that now seems archaic (Bardoel, 1996).

Many would say that the very act of seeking a definition for journalism or, more especially, a definition for “who is a journalist,” is an elitist and ethically unacceptable act. (Rosen, 2011) Isn’t any citizen, in principle, a journalist when seeking to gather and disseminate information? But the idea of defining journalism has assumed some currency in recent years because of a variety of practical concerns. A reasonable test for identifying journalism would help determine who deserves a seat in the Parliamentary Gallery (Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery, 2012) or admission to a closed-doors hearing in court (Lacey, 2011). Police in some jurisdictions, faced by the question of how to assign media passes, have opened the definition of journalism way-wide; in others, they’ve thrown in the towel and stopped issuing press passes altogether (Chan, 2009).

For those who support a shield law –the legislated privilege of protection for confidential sources’ identities – the question of “who’s a journalist?” is tough to avoid. Drafts of a proposed U.S. federal shield law have successively revised definitions of who is a journalist (Society of Professional Journalists, 2009), while judges ruling under states’ existing shield laws have been known to deny bloggers’ eligibility for protection of confidential sources (Ingram, 2011).

Our committee has spent several years addressing ethical issues faced by “journalists” regarding their social-media and political entanglements, their transparency and corrections policies, protection of sources, coverage of hostage-takings, and a broad swath of ethical principles and guidelines. The question, “But what is journalism?” has sometimes hung in the air during our discussions, but it seemed too abstract to warrant

attention until, in 2011, the Payette report's proposal for a professional status for journalists in Quebec (Alzner, 2011) forced us to have a discussion about it. A year later, the specifics of the Quebec proposal seem to be dying a largely unmourned death, but some scandal-enmeshed British journalists have rallied to calls for a system of certifying journalists and regulating their conduct. (O'Carroll, 2012). In addition, the Supreme Court of Canada's decision to create a public-interest responsible communication libel defence (Grant v. Torstar, 2010), rather than a "responsible journalism" defence as in Britain, made it clear that there is a legal vacuum surrounding the definition of journalism.

What, we asked ourselves, might be the ethical consequences of defining journalism? On the other hand, what was the meaning of *declining* to do so? In the end, we were persuaded that it was ethically unacceptable for us to continue to discuss the ethics of journalism while shrinking from a definition of journalism itself.

### Existing paradigms

We are not the first to seek a working definition of journalism, and we will not be the last. Well-known proposals include that of Adam (1993), who defined journalism as a form of expression used to report and comment in the public media on events and ideas, a product of individual journalists and the culture in which they work, always marked by five "**principles of design**":

- news or news judgment;
- reporting or evidentiary method;
- linguistic technique ("plain style");
- narrative technique; and
- method of interpretation or meaning.

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) set out nine somewhat definitive "**elements of journalism**" touching on a duty to citizens, independence and other tenets of what was once known as "civic journalism," as well as a now-famous axiom that "the essence of journalism is a **discipline of verification**." (See also Getler, et. al., 2001.) More recently, Deuze (2005) proposed that working journalists share a common "occupational ideology" whose essential elements — "a collection of values, strategies and formal codes characterizing professional journalism and shared most widely by its members"—can be recognized worldwide. This ideology can be described, according to Deuze, under the headings of "five ideal-typical **traits or values**." These are:

- public service;
- objectivity;
- autonomy;
- immediacy; and
- ethics.

Rather than defining journalism itself, Shapiro (2010) set out to create a framework for identifying "good journalism" within five "faculties" (**discovery, examination, interpretation, style and presentation**). (See also Kunelius, 2006.) For each of these faculties, Shapiro listed specific "evaluative topics" plus a potential "standard of quality." Quality journalism, he suggested, is:

- independent,

- accurate,
- open to appraisal,
- edited, and
- uncensored.

### **Our proposal**

Our panel was impressed by the previous efforts to define our craft, but found the various available definitions either excessively technical or laden with ethical evaluation which would restrict the community of journalistic forms. We wondered whether it might be possible to address the question from a more practical point of view - to come up with a set of criteria that are easy to read and simple to apply. To this end, we asked ourselves the question: "What is NOT journalism?" Discussing what might distinguish journalism from various other types of work (e.g. activism, social science, memoir, and aggregation), we came up with the suggestion that journalism and journalists might be distinguished from other types of activity and actors under three headings: a disinterested **purpose**, the act of **creation**, and a particular set of **methods**.

It is arguably correct that most journalists ascribe to a largely common set of values, and that various guidelines and codes seek to express and define that ethical heritage. Our proposal declines to do that. Instead, we argue that journalists, and hence journalism, can be recognized and distinguished, *not by what they believe or think, but by their actions*. These specifically journalistic types of action may be recognized as follows.

**1) Purpose:** *An act of journalism sets out to combine evidence-based research and verification with the creative act of storytelling. Its central purpose is to inform communities about topics or issues that they value.*

Journalists draw their own conclusions about the necessity and direction of a story - and of the underlying veracity of facts. Such conclusions are drawn in a disinterested way - that is, **independently of consideration of the effect, for good or ill**, of the coverage provided. The economic or other benefits to companies, organizations or movements do not drive journalists' choices. Due to this definitive idea of disinterest, the journalist neither receives nor anticipates a direct benefit, financial or otherwise, from coverage. Any connection or association the journalist, her editor or employer, has with individuals or groups who might benefit from publication of the information is made clear to audiences (although disclosure by itself does not remedy a conflict of interest or, therefore, turn an act of propaganda into an act of journalism). Journalists' careers, and those of their managers and employers do, at times, benefit *indirectly* from their coverage choices, but potential benefits, be they direct or indirect, play no role in editorial choices.

**2) Creation:** *All journalistic work -- whether words, photography or graphics -- contains an element of original production.*

Journalism often involves a shared perspective of a team of people whose knowledge and creativity contribute to the final production. Journalism is fact-based; history often shapes the context of a story. In addition, the creative element is bounded by time. A breaking news story may be a single line which, while brief, still involves the skill of

news judgment in selecting pertinent facts. Subsequent stories are the result of more in-depth reporting dealing with the investigation of facts and the further organizing of information to give a deeper context to storytelling.

**3) Methods:** *Journalistic work provides clear evidence of a self-conscious discipline calculated to provide an accurate and fair description of facts, opinion and debate at play within a situation.*

This notion is not the same idea as “balance” (since a lopsided debate should necessarily be portrayed as lopsided), or as the more complex notion of “objectivity” (see Ward 2010; Schudson, 2001; White, 2010; Brisbane, 2010; Brisbane, 2011). Specifically, the journalist's craft includes certain recognizable approaches, such as some combination, but not necessarily all, of the following:

- A commitment to researching and verifying information before publication.
- A consistent practice of providing rebuttal opportunity for those being criticized, and of presenting alternate perspectives, interpretations and analyses.
- The use of plain language, and story-telling techniques, as a means to attract a broad rather than an expert audience (Adam, 1993).
- An honest representation of intent to sources.
- A practice of conveying the source of facts.
- A practice of correcting errors.
- Publication.

## Conclusion

Non-journalists will fulfill some of these functional criteria, some of the time. The work of those who do not see themselves as journalists may well be consistent with some of these descriptors. Examples may include some historians, some ethnographers, and independent commentators of various kinds. Works that come close to meeting the criteria could include a book review, a carefully crafted and considered letter to the editor, or a thorough, thoughtful comment on a piece of news by someone without any interest in the matter beyond intellectual.

But we propose that for most purposes, the above three criteria create a three-way definitional "veto". That is, all three criteria must be met in order for an act to qualify as journalism. Failure to pass any one of these tests means that the act in question is not journalism, and only journalists will meet -- or, at least, attempt to meet -- all these criteria consistently, fully and deliberately.

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