

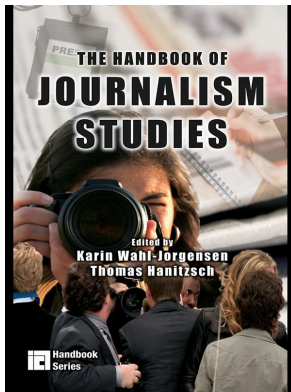
This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

On: 04 Jun 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

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## **The Handbook of Journalism Studies**

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### **Objectivity, Professionalism, and Truth Seeking in Journalism**

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203877685.ch7>

Michael Schudson, Chris Anderson

**Published online on: 28 Nov 2008**

**How to cite :-** Michael Schudson, Chris Anderson. 28 Nov 2008, *Objectivity, Professionalism, and Truth Seeking in Journalism from: The Handbook of Journalism Studies* Routledge

Accessed on: 04 Jun 2023

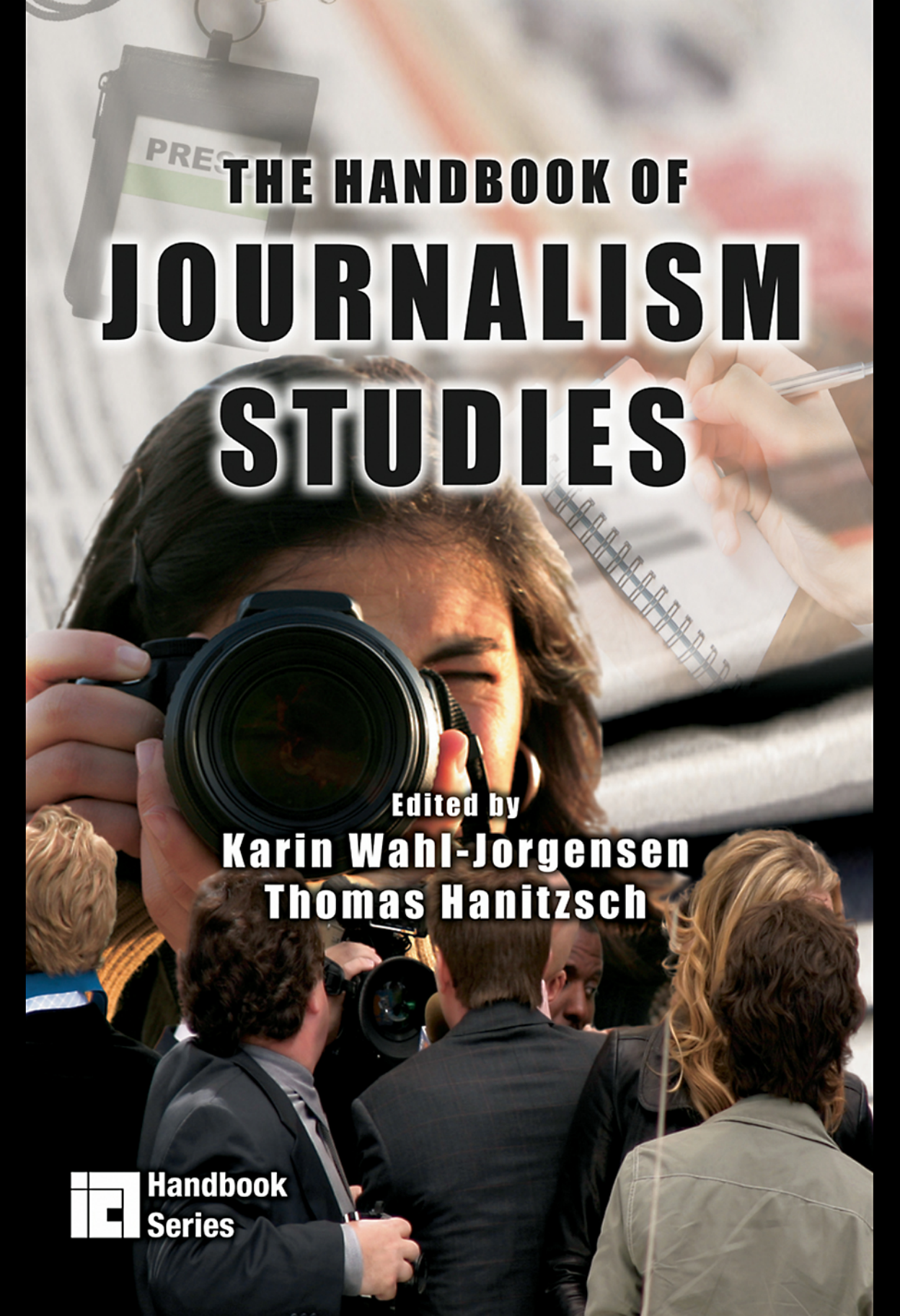
<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203877685.ch7>

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**THE HANDBOOK OF  
JOURNALISM  
STUDIES**

Edited by  
**Karin Wahl-Jorgensen  
Thomas Hanitzsch**

 **Handbook  
Series**

First published 2009  
by Routledge  
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Simultaneously published in the UK  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2008.

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*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

The handbook of journalism studies / [edited] by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch.

p. cm. — (ICA handbook series)

Includes index.

1. Journalism. I. Wahl-Jorgensen, Karin. II. Hanitzsch, Thomas, 1969-

PN4724.H36 2008

070.4—dc22

2008024854

ISBN 0-203-87768-3 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10 HB: 0-8058-6342-7

ISBN10 PB: 0-8058-6343-5

ISBN10 EB: 1-4106-1806-4

ISBN13 HB: 978-0-8058-6342-0

ISBN13 PB: 978-0-8058-6343-7

ISBN13 EB: 978-1-4106-1806-1

# 7

## Objectivity, Professionalism, and Truth Seeking in Journalism

Michael Schudson and Chris Anderson

The field of journalism studies and the subfield of sociology that examines professionalization and professional systems—the sociology of the professions—have coexisted in a state of mutual indifference for decades. Few of the classic professional studies in the sociology of professions hazard even a guess as to journalism’s professional status, preferring for the most part to focus on the traditional professions of medicine and law (see, for example, Bledstein, 1976; Dingwall & Lewis, 1983; Freidson, 1970; Haskell, 1984); most studies of journalistic professionalism, on the other hand, forego engagement with the bulk of the sociological literature on professional occupations and systems. (For a rare exception, see Tumber & Prentoulis, 2005.) At a time when many of the most important scholarly questions about journalism revolve around issues of the occupation’s power, authority, and professional status, there is much to be gained, it would seem, from revisiting questions of journalism and professionalization from an explicitly sociological angle—articulating a deeper understanding of journalism’s troubled professional project, the relationship between the objectivity norm and that project, and the manner in which journalists attempt to forge a journalistic jurisdiction out of the link between their everyday work and their heavily qualified claim to possess a form of professionalized knowledge.

To draw these journalistic and sociological perspectives on professionalization into dialog, we begin this chapter with an overview of Weberian studies of the professions, carried out in the late 1970s and 1980s, including a discussion of Abbott’s (1988) influential analysis of “professional jurisdiction.” We then examine the two major strands of scholarship that have emerged within the field of journalism studies. The first strand, emerging from journalism itself (for example, Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2007), tends not to worry about whether journalism produces authoritative knowledge or possesses professional traits; for researchers in this line of work, the importance of journalism is self-evident and not dependent on its status in a hierarchy of occupations. The emphasis in this line of work is to measure the degree to which journalism has achieved professional status, often through occupational or educational surveys. A second strand of work comes from the sociology of news organizations (Fishman, 1980; Gans, 2004; Schudson, 1978; Tuchman, 1978) and media studies (Zelizer, 1992) and focuses on the character of journalistic knowledge or claims to knowledge and thus on the standing of journalism’s “cultural authority” in Paul Starr’s (1984) terms. While the first strand suffers from its (probably unconscious) adoption of the “trait perspective” on the professions, the second strand



confuses journalistic objectivity with journalistic professionalism per se. As Hallin and Mancini's (2004) recent work demonstrates, objectivity is not the definitive professional norm in many non-American media systems where professionalism, nonetheless, exists.

In our conclusion, we advance the argument that a productive mode of analysis of journalistic objectivity, professionalism, and truth seeking would continue to build on the best work of the two strands noted above while adopting a modified version of Abbott's (1988) framework. For Abbott, the study of the professions begins with the study of professional work, and "the central phenomenon of professional life is thus the link between a profession and its work" that Abbott calls "jurisdiction." Jurisdiction refers to the day-to-day manner in which a profession both concretizes and displays its base of "abstract knowledge" or, in the peculiar case of journalism, knowledge real and expert but by no means abstract. We seek to integrate Abbott's analysis with the two streams of research mentioned above, apply it to current controversies surrounding journalistic professionalism, and outline an agenda for future research.

### FROM OCCUPATIONAL TRAITS TO OCCUPATIONAL STRUGGLE

The most productive era within the subfield of sociology dedicated to professionalization research begins with the widespread abandonment of the "trait approach" of occupational analysis, an approach that dominated the field for decades and whose more extreme normative tendencies defined a profession as a model of occupational autonomy and self-regulation worthy of imitation (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1993; Tawney, 1920). Key to the trait approach was an attempt to isolate certain professional characteristics and then to determine the degree to which various occupational categories fulfilled them. No single overview stands out as authoritative, but lists generally include the following features: work based on scientific or systematic knowledge, formal education, self-governing associations, codes of ethics, a relationship of trust between professional and client (as opposed to a strictly market-based relationship), licensing or other barriers to entry to the field, and widely recognized social status or social esteem. In the 1960s and 1970s, taking their cue from Everett C. Hughes and inspired by Max Weber's work on status and authority, sociologists abandoned the trait approach, passing "from the false question 'Is this occupation a profession' to the more fundamental one 'What are the circumstances in which people in an occupation attempt to turn it into a profession and themselves into professional people'" (Hughes, 1963, p. 655). In the forty years since Hughes' challenge, the study of the profession as an idealized structural-functionalist category has been replaced in much of sociology by the more Weberian study of professionalization and the "professional project."

One of the first explicitly Weberian professionalization theorists, Magali Sarfatti Larson argues in her analysis of the "professional project" that "ideal typical constructions do not tell us what a profession is, only what it pretends to be." We should ask instead, she argued, "what professions actually do in everyday life to negotiate or maintain their special position." (1977, p. xii). In MacDonald's (1995, p. 7) formulation, the word "'profession' is a lay or folk term, and [...] assessing whether an occupation is or is not a profession, is a semi-profession, or is more or less professional than other occupations is what the 'folk' do. It is not the task of sociology to do it for them scientifically." As Freidson (1983, p. 27), finally, summarizes the point:

If "profession" may be defined as a folk concept then the research strategy appropriate to it is phenomenological in character. One does not attempt to determine what a profession is in an absolute sense so much as to how people in society determine who is professional and who is not, how they "make" or accomplish professions by their activities.

Initially advanced by Sarfatti Larson (1977), the theory of the professional project has remained at the center of much of the most important work in the sociology of the professions for the past several decades. The concept represents a fusion of Freidson's early, groundbreaking work on the medical field with Weber's classic analysis of the attempts of occupational groups to link economic class and social status. For Sarfatti Larson, professions are neither naturally existing occupational categories nor the bearers of socially functional "traits"; rather, they are collective social actors who "attempt to translate one order of scarce resources—special knowledge and skills—into another—social and economic rewards." This effort is what Sarfatti Larson calls "the professional project" and which she describes as a collective intention with coherence and consistence even though the "goals and strategies pursued by a given group are not entirely clear or deliberate for all the members" (p. xiii).

Framed in this manner, certain aspects of the professional project assumed key roles in the Weberian analysis of professional struggle that prevailed in the late 1970s. These aspects included: a profession's attempt to create organizational monopoly on a socially useful body of abstract knowledge; the need for a market in which to transact the exchange of the technical utilization of that knowledge; the relationship between a profession's monopolization of knowledge and its members' social status; the mutual interdependency of the profession's drive for social mobility and market control; attempts to convert economic power to social status (and vice versa); the ultimate dependence of this knowledge monopoly on the sanction of the state; and, finally, the need for a profession to "produce its producers" via schooling, credentialism, codes of ethics, etc. (Collins, 1979). Indeed, much sociological writing about professions was related to and inspired by sociological studies of education and higher education as a system for the orderly reproduction of a class system and the legitimation of class inequality. Neo-Marxist studies emphasized the place of education not in training individuals to acquire technical knowledge or skills fit for the modern economy but to acquire cultural capital to justify their high standing in the social order (Bourdieu, 1984; Collins, 1979; Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, 1979; Karabel & Halsey, 1977). Early criticism of the ideal of objectivity in US journalism drew on this work or shared in the same intellectual mood skeptical of the authority of professions and inclined to see claims to neutrality, detachment, or dispassion as a veil for power. (Debates over objectivity in US journalism arising in the Vietnam war years are summarized in Schudson, 1978; a spirited defense of objectivity as a journalistic ideal is Lichtenberg, 1989.)

From this disciplinary reorientation, it follows that any investigation into issues of professionalism, objectivity, and truth seeking in journalism specifically should move from the question of whether journalism is or is not a profession to the more interesting analysis of the circumstances in which journalists attempt to turn themselves into professional people. Rather than outlining the traits that best characterize professionals, and then assessing the degree to which journalists attain them, we can analyze the social process through which journalists struggle to claim professional status. This research agenda places the study of journalism within the sociological study of the professions, and can cast new light on many of the classic institutional histories of journalism, including those that ignore or discount a sociological lens.

## PROFESSIONAL RESEARCH AND JOURNALISM

How has this disciplinary transition from "traits" to "struggle" played out within the field of journalism studies? It would be an exaggeration to say that developments in sociology proper have had no effect on studies of journalistic professionalism. Arguably, however, the relationship has been indirect. Much of this can perhaps be attributed to the general decoupling, over the past two

and a half decades, of sociology and media research tout court; on the side of journalism studies, as Zelizer (2004, p. 80) notes, “despite the auspicious beginnings of sociological inquiry into journalism, much contemporary work on journalism no longer comes from sociology per se.” Or as Klinenberg (2005, p. 28) argues from the perspective of a sociologist:

A paradox of contemporary sociology is that the discipline has largely abandoned the empirical study of journalistic organizations and news institutions at the moment when the media has gained visibility in political, economic, and cultural spheres, [and] when other academic fields have embraced the study of media and society.

The paradox is at least partially explained by the migration of sociologists to the burgeoning communications and media departments. Sociologists including Rodney Benson, Todd Gitlin, Michael Schudson, and Silvio Waisbord have primary or exclusive appointments in communication rather than sociology departments. The work of these scholars has found an audience in communication and media studies more than in sociology. Some sociologists, to be sure—the work of Steven Clayman and his colleagues stands out—still speak primarily to an audience inside sociology, even if it is in the subfield of sociolinguistics and conversational analysis.

In the absence of work that explicitly links the sociology of the professions to journalism, two strands of analysis have emerged within journalism studies. The first, encompassing what might be termed institutional research, usually seeks quantitative data on journalists’ employment, education levels, adherence to ethical codes, etc. Such research has most often been initiated by the news industry itself, or by academics with close ties to professional journalism. In the United States, the Annual Survey of Journalism and Mass Communication Graduates has provided regularly updated statistics on the employment prospects of recent journalism school graduates. In other countries, as well as in the United States, additional surveys and employment analyses have been conducted to “measure” the degree to which professionalization has occurred within journalism, at least along the axis of higher education credentialing. The data presents something of a mixed picture. In the United States, for the twenty years from 1982 to 2002, the number of journalism and mass communication bachelor’s-degree graduates who went into degree-related jobs declined from one-half to one-quarter (Weaver et al., 2007, p. 37). At the same time American newspaper editors mouth verbal support to the importance of a journalism or communications degree, even though a substantial minority (32 percent) from the 1995 survey contends that the degree of an entry-level hire is irrelevant. While the value of a “journalism degree” may be open to question, the importance of higher education is not; over 90 percent of journalists hold a degree (Weaver et al., 2007, p. 37). The situation is similar in other countries with established media systems: a greater hiring emphasis is placed on higher education in general than on the possession of specific “communication” degrees.

For journalism, it is tempting to turn to talk of a “quasi,” “pseudo,” or “failed” profession and to echo Weaver and Wilhoit’s (1986, p. 145) contention that journalism “is *of* a profession but not *in* one.” Indeed, many of the investigations of journalistic professionalism have halted at this point. Basic institutional research echoes (probably unconsciously) the older body of “trait theory” and stops the investigation before it truly begins. This first strand of journalism studies, in short, largely avoids the deeper questions surrounding journalism’s unsettled occupational status. Rather than placing journalism somewhere on the professional spectrum between plumbers and neurosurgeons, it would be far more productive to inquire why and how the occupations of reporting and news editing achieved the professional status they did and how journalism may be attempting (or not, as the case may be) to raise that status. This removes us by one step from the rather arid analysis of employment data and forces us to consider the history, theory, and practice

of journalism. Such questions have been dealt with most explicitly by authors working within the second strand of journalism studies, a strand that we might label cultural histories of professional objectivity.

### CULTURAL THEORIES OF PROFESSIONALISM AND OBJECTIVITY

Schudson (1978, p. 151), in *Discovering the News*, identifies Walter Lippmann as “the most wise and forceful spokesman for the ideal of objectivity.” Journalists, according to Lippmann, should “develop a sense of evidence and forthrightly acknowledge the limits of available information; ... dissect slogans and abstractions, and refuse to withhold the news or put moral uplift or any cause ahead of veracity.” In short, Lippmann urged reporters to fuse their professionalism with claims to objectivity. The link between professionalism, objectivity, and truth seeking would come to be accepted, not only by journalists themselves in the form of an occupational ideology but by media researchers and journalism scholars as a related series of problems susceptible to historical and sociological investigation. Understanding the emergence of objectivity would, in short, provide the key to understanding the emergence of professionalism.

Kaplan (2002) has provided one of the most recent overviews of the social histories of the American press. Following and expanding on his lead, we can speak here of at least five orientations to this history. *First*, progressive historiography, which closely tracked the development of journalism’s own occupational ideology, has depicted journalism as moving inevitably toward social differentiation, occupational autonomy, and professional freedom. By this account, objectivity serves as a normative endpoint, one enabled by modernization and the growing social differentiation among politics, business, and journalism; it is seen not as a tool, or a claim, but as a goal, a “best practice” made possible by historical progress. A *second*, related understanding of the relationship between objectivity and professionalism, though one not discussed by Kaplan, is the “technological” explanation for the emergence of objective journalism. This explanation, which most recent historical scholarship dismisses (though one can see glimpses of its return, in an inverted form, in some of the more utopian writings on the Internet), sees objectivity as a literary form fostered by technological developments.

A *third* strand of scholarship points to economic developments that fuel commercialism (and by implication, a misleading, ideological claim to impartiality called “objectivity”). Kaplan singles out Baldasty’s *The Commercialization of News in the 19th Century* as an especially forceful, carefully documented, and ultimately wrongheaded argument about the relationship between commercialism and professionalization. “In Baldasty’s theory, news content and indeed ‘journalistic visions’ followed from the [capitalistic] funding mechanism” (Kaplan 2002, p. 8) and produced a journalism that saw the public as consumers rather than citizens.

A *fourth* strand of research on the rise of journalistic objectivity in the United States begins with Schudson’s *Discovering the News* (1978), which, along with his later work (2001), moved away from seeing the emergence of objectivity as an “inevitable outcome” of wide-scale social processes and changes—whether social, economic or technological—and linked the emergence of journalistic professionalism to questions of group cohesion, professional power, social conflict, and the cultural resonance of claims to occupational authority. Schudson’s original move in *Discovering the News* was to seek the origins of professional objectivity in the nexus of developments that built a “democratic market society” rather than in technological developments or in a “natural” evolutionary progress. Schudson distinguishes journalistic beliefs of the 1890s—naïve empiricism, or a faith in “the facts”—from the more modern, early 20th century view of objectivity, which takes norms of objective reporting to be a set of defensive strategies rooted in



the “disappointment of the modern gaze”—the understanding that true objectivity is impossible. Many authors—primarily historians of journalism—have followed Schudson in discussing the emergence of a professional class of reporters in the context of the development of professional objectivity (most notably Banning, 1999; Dicken-Garcia, 1989; Summers, 1994; Tucher, 2004). For these authors, and many others, objectivity continues to be the *sine qua non* of journalistic professionalization: explain the reasons behind the emergence of objectivity as an occupational practice, fix a date at which it first emerged, and you have gone a long way towards uncovering the “secret” of professional journalism.

Recent scholarship, however, calls into question the strong linkage this work implies between objectivity and professionalism. At the very least, objectivity cannot be seen as the *only* occupational norm to both emerge from and buttress the professional project, and in some cases, it may not even be the *most important* norm. Chalaby (1998) has called journalism as a “fact-based discursive practice” rather than a literary, philosophical, or political commentary on current affairs, an “Anglo-American invention.” Ramaprasad’s extensive surveys of non-Western journalism do not even include adherence to “objectivity” as a major characteristic of newswork in Egypt (Ramaprasad & Hamdy, 2006), Tanzania (Ramaprasad, 2001), or Nepal (Ramaprasad & Kelly, 2003), and the new notion of “contextual objectivity” has emerged to explain the editorial policies of non-Western cable news channels like al-Jazeera (Berenger, 2005). Donsbach and Patterson (2004) have argued that a commitment to objectivity still distinguishes American from European newsrooms. Their extensive survey of German, Italian, Swedish, British, and American journalists, both print and broadcast, finds that US journalists almost uniformly report that their political views have no relationship to the views of their employers. Italian and German journalists at national newspapers say that their political views are close to their papers’ editorial position. Schudson also now argues that the journalism he took to be “modern” is more appropriately judged “American,” and some of its distinctive features have more to do with American cultural presuppositions than a universal modernism. This is notably the case with the American invention of interviewing as a standard journalistic tool, one judged by many European observers at the time (the late 19th century) as a particularly rude and presumptuous way of doing business (Schudson, 1995, 2005).

It is Hallin and Mancini, however, who make the strongest case for severing the link between objectivity and professional standing in the world of journalism. For them, professionalism is defined less in terms of educational barriers to entry, a lack of state regulation, or the ideal of “objectivity”; rather, it is viewed primarily in terms of “greater control over [one’s] own work process” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 34), the presence of distinct professional norms (p. 35), and a public service orientation (p. 36). Different media systems vary in their levels of professionalization; the Mediterranean model of journalism maintains a fairly weak level of professionalization; the North Atlantic model (America and Britain) and North/Central European model (Germany, Scandinavia) are both highly professionalized. However, being a “professional” in the democratic corporatist countries does not necessarily mean being committed to objectivity or being free from political party ties. Rather, journalists in democratic corporatist states (generally speaking, northern European countries) judge journalistic autonomy to be compatible with active and intentional intervention in the political world. In these terms, journalists in Germany are as “professional” as those in the United States. The social bases of their professionalism, however, and the specific content of their values are different.

In a later argument that amounts to an elaboration and generalization of his thesis in *Discovering the News*, Schudson (2001) has contended that the “objectivity norm” in American journalism ultimately provides some sort of benefit to the group that articulates it, either by stimulating social cohesion (in a Durkheimian sense) or social control (in a Weberian one).

Ethics and norms exist for ritualistic reasons, helping to provide internal solidarity and cohesion to a particular group; they also can also represent a way of defining a group in relation to other groups. Weberian explanations for the emergence of occupational norms, on the other hand, imply that they provide a measure of hierarchical control over social groups. The needs of superiors (editors) to control their subordinates (reporters) within large organizations mandates the adoption of a kind of “overt ethical reinforcement” that helps steer individuals in a rational, predictable manner.

Schudson’s essay focuses on the social functions of the objectivity norm in American journalism, but it acknowledges that “a variety of moral norms could achieve the ends of providing public support and insulation from criticism” (p. 165). Journalists in Germany or China might work with norms other than objectivity, Schudson notes, and indeed they do. If, as Hallin and Mancini argue, professionalism implies the existence of an occupational autonomy undergirded by distinct professional norms, professional journalism might have different bases cross-culturally, historically, and even in the future. The end of objectivity, even if it arrives, may not signal the end of professional journalism.

Kaplan (2002), *fifth* and finally, argues for the contingency of the development of objectivity as the American professional norm and for seeing it as a product of the distinctive shape of the US “public sphere.” Previous theories of the rise of objectivity in American journalism are insufficient, Kaplan argues, because they ignore the role played by political contention in American history. These theories often assume, incorrectly, that a social consensus around notions of political liberalism and economic capitalism has been the driving force in press history. Kaplan’s own empirical contribution is to show for Detroit newspapers (1880–1910) that Progressive Era politics, including the weakening of the authority of political parties through primary elections and other reforms, and the specific political consequences of the election of 1896, helped propel among publishers, editors, and reporters a vision of “public service” via impartial and independent reporting.

We have seen, in these various cultural histories of journalistic objectivity in the United States, a productive focus on the manner in which journalists “turn themselves into a profession and themselves into professional people” (Hughes 1963, p. 655). Informed by comparative studies of journalism, the best of these studies recognize that a variety of professional norms might provide public support and critical insulation for professional projects in journalism in other countries, while the most recent historical surveys have usefully re-interrogated the relationship between professional norms, journalistic style, and the authority conferred by the public sphere. Scholars of journalistic professionalism are at least indirectly rediscovering a key insight articulated by Hughes and advanced initially by the Weberian professionalization theorists—that journalism’s authority, status, occupational norms, and claims to expertise can be analyzed as facets of a professional project, of an inter- and intra-group struggle.

A large question remains: what exactly is the nature of this struggle? What, exactly, is the object over which this struggle is waged? And further: what are the dynamics of conflict and cooperation through which this struggle unfolds? In sketching out the answers to these questions we argue, first, that professional expertise (or rather, an odd form of specifically journalistic expertise) and the linking of this expertise to work serves as a lever by which occupational jurisdictions are created and seized by contending occupational groups. Second, we contend that the dynamics of this struggle are marked out by an odd fusion of overlapping networks and sharply defined boundary lines, and that a primary tactic in the struggle to define “who is a journalist” is to simultaneously sharpen and blur the lines between professional “insiders” and paraprofessional “outsiders.”

## JURISDICTION, NETWORKS, EXPERTISE, AND AUTHORITY

Following the lead of the professionalization theorists, then, over what social markers would we expect to see occupations struggle as they advance their “professional project”? For Sarfatti Larson, groups seeking professional status must organize themselves to attain market power—they must fight to first constitute and then control the market for their services. They must, as marketers of human services, “produce their producers” through training and education; they must attain state sanction for their occupational monopoly; they must ratify this monopoly through “the license, the qualifying examination, the diploma” (1977, p. 15).

Sociologist Andrew Abbott’s (1988) work in *The System of the Professions* shares much with Sarfatti Larson’s, but is a substantial refinement. In addition to criticizing Larson for her overemphasis on economic power as the ultimate basis of journalistic authority (rather than seeing professional power as emerging from mixture of economic control, political power, social status, and cultural authority), Abbott’s most important advance over the 1970s’ work is to argue that study of the professions must begin with a focus on professional *work* rather than the *occupational group* and the structural markers of professionalism as a distinct object of analysis. The key aspect of professional struggle, argues Abbott, is the struggle over jurisdiction, or the struggle over the link between knowledge and work. Abbott views the professional field as a terrain of competition, though in this instance as a competition over jurisdiction rather than the structural emblems of professionalism. As it claims jurisdiction, a profession asks society to recognize its cognitive structure (and thus the authority conferred by that recognition) through exclusive rights. “Jurisdiction has not only a culture, but also a social structure,” Abbott argues (p. 59), a structure emerging out of this societal recognition. Doctors and lawyers, for instance, not only claim jurisdiction over specific areas of work but gain enforceable legal and political rights through state intervention. Even journalists, who lack many of the structural advantages granted to other professional groups, have achieved some level of juridical recognition via shield laws, for example, and privileged access to political leaders.

For Abbott, establishing professional jurisdiction requires more than simply labor; instead, the jurisdictional process refers to the day-to-day manner in which a profession both concretizes and displays its base of “abstract knowledge.” According to Abbott, what differentiates professional knowledge from mere occupational knowledge in general is “a knowledge system governed by abstractions, a knowledge system that can redefine its problems and tasks, defend them from interlopers, and seize new problems” (p. 93). At the same time, this knowledge must be displayed via work. Or as Fournier (1999, p. 74) describes the link between knowledge and work in Abbott’s theoretical scheme:

Abbott uses [the] notion of cultural work to refer to the strategies that the professions deploy to manipulate their systems of [abstract] knowledge in such a way that they can appropriate various problems falling under their jurisdiction [...] Abbott’s suggestion that professions engage in cultural *work* to establish their exclusive claim of competence over a particular “chunk of the world” emphasizes the active work that professionals have to put in to maintain the boundaries defining their jurisdiction.

By shifting his focus from “the structure(s) of professionalization” to an analysis of jurisdictional disputes concerning the relationship between abstract knowledge and work, Abbott allows us to expand our discussion of knowledge-based occupations outside the “traditional” professions, and also helps us to conceive of a new way in which occupational groups struggle over social and cultural status.

Conveniently for us, Abbott devotes substantial space to a discussion of journalists. In Abbott's account, journalism, at least in the United States, has claimed jurisdiction over the collection and distribution of qualitative, current information about general events. Journalism in general, and US journalism in particular, also displays an internal differentiation in which journalists who cover politics or other topics that bear on political democracy have the highest professional standing and an especially marked cultural authority. This close link to democratic politics gives journalism its closest relationship to recognition by the state, but a paradoxical recognition in that the First Amendment prohibits state regulation rather than requiring it (as in the case of state-regulated licensing of lawyers and doctors and a number of other professional occupations). US journalism's claim to objectivity—i.e., the particular method by which this information is collected, processed, and presented—gives it its unique jurisdictional focus by claiming to possess a certain form of expertise or intellectual discipline. Establishing jurisdiction over the ability to objectively parse reality is a claim to a special kind of authority.

In sum, journalistic objectivity operates as *both* an occupational norm and as object of struggle within the larger struggle over professional jurisdiction. "Expert" professionals—in this case, journalists—seek, via occupational struggle, to monopolize a form of journalistic expertise, which itself is discursively constructed out of various journalistic practices and narratives, including the claim to professional objectivity.

And yet, this very notion of journalistic expertise makes journalism an unusually fascinating case within the sociological analysis of the professions. The very notion of journalistic expertise is doubly problematic. Professions, argues Abbott, are "somewhat exclusive groups of individuals applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases" (Abbott, 1988, p. 8). Yet most segments of the journalism profession are not exclusive (and with the arrival of on-line journalism becoming progressively less so); nor is journalistic knowledge abstract. Journalism seems to simultaneously make a grandiose knowledge claim (that it possesses the ability to isolate, transmit, and interpret the most publicly relevant aspects of social reality) and an incredibly modest one (that really, most journalists are not experts at all but are simply question-asking generalists). Abbott's framework, with its focus on knowledge and jurisdiction, helps us see immediately what makes journalism a sociologically anomalous profession.

If professional struggles are, in part, struggles over a definition of and jurisdiction over particular forms of expertise, what, exactly, is the nature of this struggle? Several answers common to both the sociological and journalism studies literature suggest themselves, each of which place an emphasis on the drawing of boundary lines and the creation of insiders and outsiders. In an important 1983 essay, Thomas Gieryn (1983) advanced the concept of "boundary work," the process by which divisions between fields of knowledge are delimited, attacked and reinforced. Specifically addressing the separation of religion from science in 19th century England, Gieryn argued that the emerging distinctions between "science" and "non-science" were partially constructed, and stemmed from the self-interested rhetorical maneuvers of scientists. In effect, the very act of answering the question "what is science" helped to shape the modern notions of science, defining it by both what it was and what it was not. For Gieryn, the struggle over the definition of scientist was a rhetorical struggle over boundaries.

A decade later, Zelizer (1992) echoed Gieryn's notion of boundary-work in her discussion of journalism. Specifically rejecting the paradigm of professionalization, Zelizer instead identifies journalists as an "interpretive community" whose authority stems from discursive sources operating both inside and outside the professional sphere. In her case study of media coverage of the John F. Kennedy assassination, Zelizer details how one emerging group, TV journalists, imposed themselves on the profession via both their coverage of Kennedy's murder and, just as

importantly, the stories they later told one another about the killing. Zelizer argues that journalists use narrative to strengthen their position as an “authoritative interpretive community,” using narrative to both consolidate their “truth-telling” position *vis-à-vis* other interpretive groups and to maintain internal group coherence (p. 197). As Zelizer emphasizes, the process of journalistic legitimization is primarily a rhetorical one, carried out through strategies such as synecdoche, omission, and personalization:

The ability of journalists to establish themselves as authoritative spokespersons for the assassination story was predicated on their use of narrative in deliberate and strategic ways. Journalists’ claims to legitimacy were no less rhetorically based than their narrative reconstructions of the activities behind the news [...] *While all professional groups are constituted by formalized bodies of knowledge, much of journalists’ interpretive authority lies not in what they know, but in how they represent their knowledge.* (p. 34, original emphasis)

The claim that journalistic professionalism is established as much by the *representation* of knowledge as by the actual *possession* of knowledge would not, in and of itself, be a controversial theoretical claim; indeed, arguments about the constructed nature of professional expertise predate the post-structuralist critique and can be found in sociological scholarship as far back as Elliot Freidson. What is important and original is the emphasis on the rhetorical dimension of constituting the cultural authority of journalists. Where Zelizer’s *Covering the Body* falls short is in its almost exclusive focus on the rhetorical dimension. Eyal’s (2005, p. 16) recent critique of Gieryn is applicable to Zelizer as well:

The first, and obvious [problem with Gieryn’s notion of boundary work], is the fact that boundary work is limited to rhetoric. The social mechanisms that limit the number of authoritative speakers, that assign their statements with differential values, that close off certain topics and devices from non-expert inspection, that characterize something as “calculable” or “not calculable,” etc., these mechanisms are far more robust than mere rhetoric. Rhetoric alone would never have been able to produce the relational reality of science or the economy, or politics, etc.

It is possible that journalists define themselves rhetorically more than do other professions—their rhetoric is not only about their work, it *is* their work. And where doctors and lawyers have, with government assistance, considerable control over the gates of entry to their fields, and hence have market power, journalists have no such autonomy in their work. They are almost always hired hands, not independent operators.

Struggle over the journalistic jurisdiction, then, includes, but cannot be limited to, “rhetorical” conflict. Once again, this key line from Abbott: “Jurisdiction has not only a culture, but also a social structure” (Abbott, 1988, p. 59). Zelizer’s conception of journalistic authority, almost entirely cultural, is important but incomplete. How else might the struggle over journalistic expertise be framed, in a way that more productively incorporates the profession’s social structure, as well as the “external” structures that impact upon the profession itself?

One possibility, gaining a following in recent years, would be to rethink journalism as a journalistic “field” in the terms of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu envisions modern society as highly differentiated, composed of different spheres or “fields,” each relatively autonomous and operating to some degree by a logic of its own. These fields include domains of art, politics, academia, and, most importantly for our purposes, journalism. Among communications scholars, Rodney Benson and Eric Neveu (2005) have led the way in applying Bourdieu’s field concepts to journalism studies. In the same volume, Klinenberg has spoken of alternative youth media



attempts to “channel into the journalistic field,” and a few other researchers (Atton, 2002; Benson, 2003; Couldry & Curran, 2003) have used field concepts to explore the relationship between professional and non-professional media systems.

Nevertheless, as Chris Atton (2002) notes, it is difficult to fit alternative media into Bourdieu’s conceptual frame since, almost by definition, they claim journalistic status by challenging mainstream journalism’s norms and practices. The field concept may theorize well about highly structured and fairly unchanging social-cultural constellations (fields) but is less supple at explaining the spaces between fields, the competition between fields, and the edges of fields. When Bourdieu himself wrote about journalism as a field, he expressed alarm that it might subordinate itself to the political or economic fields. But full autonomy from these other fields is scarcely conceivable and perhaps not even desirable (Schudson, 2006); the political and the economic are incorporated inside journalism. If this were not so, the inclination of journalists to solipsism rather than to engagement with a large democratic public might prove irresistible. The concept of “field” does not seem to offer leverage for analyzing fringes, spaces, or competition.

Consider the difficulty in conceptualizing blogging in relation to journalism. Boundary lines between “insider and outsider,” “professional and non-professional,” “journalist and blogger” are blurred today and growing ever more fuzzy. Instead of a sharply defined boundary line we might better imagine a thick, poorly defined “border zone” made up of proliferating hybrids, shifting social and occupational roles, and networks of expertise (Eyal, 2005). Bloggers, once interlopers whose claim to journalistic jurisdiction mainstream journalist rejected, now receive press credentials. Longtime *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter Dan Rubin goes from being a journalist to full-time (paid) blogger to journalist again. Vast numbers of amateurs with camera phones are spread across the world, far outnumbering professional news photographers, and so have access to many events of the moment the professionals do not—a subway commuter, for instance, provided key photos of the 2005 London subway bombings that news organizations around the world printed.

The boundary-maintaining problem this creates for journalism is apparent when an organization like World Press Photo, an international organization of professional photojournalists based in the Netherlands, selected its best photos of the year in 2005—choosing to eliminate from competition the photos at Abu Ghraib or in the wake of the tsunami because, even though they appeared in mainstream news publications, they were produced by amateurs (Livingstone, 2007). In an era of cell phone, camera phone, and blog, jurisdictional questions will be legion. Meanwhile, other developments in portable and efficient information transmission alter the character of how journalistic claims to authority are articulated. In television, the growing use of live “two way” interactions between a studio-based news presenter and a field-based reporter lend a growing air of informality to on-air discourse, a style that affords the reporters in the field leeway to distance themselves from a commitment to the factuality of their pronouncements, as Montgomery observes. Montgomery (2006), in a study of the BBC, sees an increase in reporters’ use of terms like “probably” and “perhaps,” “certainly” and “actually,” and “I think” or “my instinct is,” introducing a personal rather than institutional voice into the discourse of news. In a sense, this style of work maintains journalistic authority by removing it from its pedestal.

This does not deny that social actors still find a *rhetorical* value in fixing their own borders. Journalists, bloggers, citizen journalists, activist reporters all find it useful to define themselves and others as insider or outsider, as part of “our” or “the other” group. This is where the Bourdieuan notion of the field is valuable, perhaps not as a description of actually existing social reality, but at least as a term that points to the cultural construction of boundaries to which conventional journalists and their various competitors are emotionally invested. With the categories flexible and challenged, the rhetoric defining insider and outsider in flux, the deployment of the rhetoric is both strategic and essential to the identity of the various social actors involved.

## CONCLUSION

We have argued, building on earlier work (Schudson, 2001), that objectivity acts as both a solidarity enhancing and distinction-creating norm and as a group claim to possess a unique kind of professional knowledge, articulated via work (Abbott, 1988). This knowledge claim, in the case of journalism, is an odd one: unlike most scientific or legal claims to possess the occupational ability to discern the “objective truth” about reality, journalists do not argue that they possess esoteric or uniquely complex expertise. Rather, journalism makes a claim that has been simultaneously grandiose (jurisdiction over the collection and distribution of information about current events of general interest and importance) and modest (in the US case, gathering information less on the basis of expertise than of attitude, a capacity to and willingness to subordinate the views of the journalist to the voices of their sources).

The question of the manner by which objectivity (or other journalistic norms and knowledge claims) function within a larger occupational, political, and economic social structure is more complicated and difficult to discern. On the one hand, professional claims obviously serve to draw boundary lines between those on the “inside” and “outside” of the profession. On the other hand, several decades of science studies have warned us to be wary of assuming that the *rhetorical* claims made about boundaries, claims often put forth by occupational groups themselves mirror the actual reality by which professional power, knowledge, and authority operate. In short, claims to knowledge and professional power are often contradictory and incoherent.

We have not tried to formulate any grand theoretical statement regarding the operation of professional power, authority, and expertise. For now, the following simple propositions are worth keeping in mind: any empirical investigation into the status of journalism should be sensitive to the importance of journalistic expertise (in the form of objectivity claims and in other forms) along with the contradictory nature of that claim; simultaneously, any analysis of journalism should keep in mind the complex and, once again, contradictory nature of claims to be “inside” and “outside” an occupational system of power.

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