

What Can Journalists Actually Do for American Democracy?

Herbert J. Gans

However cynical American journalists may sometimes be, they are dedicated to strengthening the country's democracy. But they do not always think as clearly as they could about how to do it. Although other professions can be accused of the same failing, part of the journalists' fault can be found in the shortcomings of what might be called the journalistic theory of democracy.

The Journalistic Theory of Democracy

The theory remains unwritten, but since it seems to have widespread acceptance in the profession, it can be teased out from the spoken and written comments of journalists. Stated most simply, the theory has three parts: (1) The journalist's democratic role is to inform citizens; (2) the more informed these citizens are, the more likely they are to participate politically; and (3) the more they participate, the more democratic the country is apt to be.

By "democracy," journalists presumably mean America's representative form of democracy, but the theory assigns citizens, once informed, a more central part than most thinkers about democracy do. James McCartney, a retired Knight Ridder columnist, goes so far as to claim that "the Constitution of the United States created a governmental process reliant on an informed citizenry"—although the Constitution did little more than spell out that citizens (white male citizens originally) could vote. *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne, writing about journalism's "primary purpose," sees it as "helping . . . citizens make informed decisions and encouraging a wide-ranging democratic debate." However, the theory never spells out how the debate takes place or how it affects either government or politics.

By emphasizing the informed citizen, the theory assigns journalists a central role in maximizing democracy, yet it asks nothing of journalists other than what they already do to get their paychecks. Since the theory does not prescribe how citizens are to be informed or even what kinds of news they need to be offered, journalists can continue to do what they do now, supplying whatever news they consider to be newsworthy. When journalists do their regular job, the theory assumes, citizens will be informed or will inform themselves.

The consequences laid out in the remaining two parts of the theory are not up to the journalists, however, since the theory implies that they will occur automatically. Once citizens have been informed, they will debate and vote, and the country will become democratic.

The Theory's Shortcomings

Unfortunately, the theory has a number of shortcomings. The first part simply states what journalists should do—to inform citizens—but it does not ask journalists to produce informed citizens. The question of whether supplying the news informs citizens sufficiently to perform their democratic responsibilities is still being debated. A number of studies report what people, including news audiences, *know* about American government and politics, but the more relevant question, whether that knowledge makes them able—or willing—to participate, needs further study.

The second part of the theory is inaccurate. Although most audience studies indicate that better-informed people are more active politically, the cause is not their being informed, but their high level of education and socioeconomic class, which in turn cause their being more informed. Nonetheless, uninformed citizens often become politically active, at least temporarily, when they are angry enough. Lack of information is not, nor has it ever been, an obstacle to participation. And if angry people, informed or uninformed, want to believe something badly enough, they do not allow either the facts or the journalists bearing them to get in the way of what they do as a result. For example, taxpayers' anger at the poor produced a number of false beliefs about their behavior that helped end the federal welfare program.

The third part of the theory is even more questionable, for citizen activity per se does not produce democracy. The history of America's rural and urban political machines and of the congressional seniority system, to mention just two examples, suggests that if and when powerful individuals and interest groups control the strategic levers of politics and government, citizen activity alone will not necessarily reduce their power.

This is even more the case if citizens limit their participation to the debates that are so important in the journalistic theory of democracy. Aside from the already noted fact that no visible citizen debates ever take place, the theory implies that these debates, and the formal and informal discussions among citizens that surely do take place, can somehow overcome differences of interests and values; resolve other differences produced by class, religion, race, and other dividing lines in America; and result in the compromises necessary to democracy. Partly as a result, journalists are sometimes blind to the difficulty that many Americans have in compromising and to their choosing instead to nurture grievances and blame those differing with them for whatever is wrong, including the news media.

Nevertheless, the underlying shortcoming of the theory is its implication that democracy is the outcome of the information journalists supply to citizens. This proposition assumes that information is power, which sometimes encourages journalists to claim to be able to "empower" their readers, viewers, and lis-

teners. In reality, however, the reverse is true: Power is needed to obtain access to the right information. People in high places can identify the information that is relevant to participating in governmental decision making, the sources from which it can be obtained, and how those sources can be accessed. Conversely, ordinary people, and news buffs especially, may wind up with a bad case of information overload without ever learning what they need to know to get close to the circles where power and politically relevant information are passed out.

The Theory—and Journalistic Practice

The question of whether and to what extent journalists consciously apply the journalistic theory in their everyday practice requires a study of newsroom decision making, which I have not done. Still, there are certain parallels between theory and practice that suggest that the theory may in fact influence what journalists do and do not do in covering the news.

For example, the journalistic theory of democracy virtually shuns the notion of power, since its conception of participation is limited to debate and voting. This shows up in journalistic practice. Although journalists do report the exercise of power by the White House and a few other national politicians, political news coverage is dominated by presidential and other election campaigns and, to a lesser degree, congressional debates and voting.

However, journalistic theory has nothing to say about how informed citizens can affect government policy between elections. Journalists do report a limited number of major legislative, budget, and policy disputes and decisions that they consider newsworthy, but these disputes and decisions often take place at governmental levels that are more or less insulated from citizen participation. In any case, normal news coverage has as little relevance to democracy between elections as does the journalistic theory; it is only sufficient to enable the news audience to “keep up with the news” until the next election.

The shortage of between-election news does not prevent interested citizens from participating, however—as letter writers, members of citizen lobbies, funders of pressure groups, and even as Marchers on Washington. But the news is rarely detailed enough to supply them the information they need to participate. Consequently, citizen lobbies and other participatory groups in which citizens can take an active role all develop newsletters and other supplementary news media, including telephone chains, e-mail, and Web pages, to supply their members with the detailed and often time-bound news they need to participate, whether it is information for writing their representatives or news about the Washington demonstration in which they will march.

Moreover, the journalistic theory helps to create a misleading depiction of democracy. The theory implies that once citizens are sufficiently informed, American democracy will operate on the basis of majority rule and the one-citi-

zen-one-vote principle. The political news that journalists report constantly says otherwise. For example, journalists have long written about the political influence of economically powerful organizations and their dollars. Although well-funded candidates usually beat poorly funded ones and corporate and other lobbyists constantly buy “access” to politicians at all levels of government, journalistic theory nevertheless continues to assume that democracy can be preserved as long as journalists do their best to keep citizens informed.

Indeed, the theory discourages journalists from reporting—or even asking themselves—what needs to be done to preserve democracy. At present, much of the news journalists actually report is about powerful officials making decisions and engaging in partisan squabbling. This could easily give citizens the impression that politicians are not very interested in their problems and that there is little reason to become informed.

Conversely, journalists rarely report instances of active citizen participation, except perhaps when the activity involves protest or demonstration. Then, however, stories deal more with whether the participation was accompanied by violence or how it might affect some politician’s future electoral chances than with whether it achieved the citizens’ stated aims. Current conceptions of objectivity prevent journalists from supplying news audiences with information about how they can participate in political meetings and demonstrations.

The theory’s shortcomings also hurt journalists directly. Its superficiality helps to trivialize journalistic self-criticism and self-examination. Strengthening American democracy cannot be achieved by reducing the number of journalist-celebrities and overpaid journalist-lecturers or by increasing the length of politician sound bites on television news. Nor can it be achieved if citizens pay more attention to the news, especially foreign news, as if their news consumption could alter what is happening in countries like Bosnia or Congo.

In addition, the theory blinds journalists to the forces and institutions that limit democracy. The ability of multinational corporations to ignore national boundaries and the power of large organizations to persuade elected officials to meet behind closed doors to rewrite regulations in their favor are a bigger threat to democracy than the amount of “infotainment” in the news.

A Better Theory of Democracy?

In effect, journalists need a better theory of democracy, one that reflects the government and political system that they actually cover every day. That theory should correct the current inaccuracies about the informed citizenry, but it must also say something about how and why citizens participate (or do not) and what news they need to participate—that is, what makes for an informed and participating citizen.

Such a theory also needs at least two other sets of propositions. One set should help journalists understand the political and especially the nonpolitical

institutions that help democracy and most often endanger it. The other set should spell out journalists' roles in democracy and the limits to what journalists can do.

What Else Can Journalists Do?

Above all, however, a better theory ought to provide journalists with guidance for better practice: for what else they can do to strengthen democracy. This is a task for journalists, but I can make a handful of illustrative suggestions.

User-Friendly News for Potential Participants Journalists need to find ways of reporting how citizens participate on issues; in what groups; how and why they succeed and fail; and to the extent that objectivity permits, how they can participate more easily and more often. Above all, news coverage of an issue must include what potential participants, citizens not now involved, need to know about the issues and the politics in which they are embedded. Features and analytic stories should also report on participation *sui generis*, informing news audiences on how and why citizens participate and how and why they do not. At election times, such stories should explore a now poorly covered topic: the nonvoter. Reporting who did not vote and why will complement the picture of people's feelings about government and politics obtained from voters and the polls.

More News on Policies Journalists spend so much energy on politics, especially the "horse-race" elements of electoral politics, that they do not devote enough attention to what interests their audiences the most, the governmental policies and other actions that actually affect their everyday lives. Who benefits from and pays for new tax proposals and environmental reforms is often well reported, but that coverage should be extended to include the benefits and costs of less dramatic new policies and the implementation of older ones. Then citizens might have more to participate about.

Deeper Coverage of Politics Partly because of their preoccupation with politics, journalists do not report enough the activities of the lobbies and other organizations that seek to influence government or those that "mark up" legislation or shape it in other, frequently not very visible, ways. Currently, who pays for election campaigns is big news, but the kinds of access to government officials and the drafting of government policies that this money provides, if any, is too rarely traced.

Even more important, journalists need to expand their narrow focus beyond government and politics and report how the larger society and the economy affect these subjects—and democracy. For example, journalists must learn to cover the citizen's and the worker's end of the economy as comprehensively as they now cover the investor's and the banker's. The Dow Jones Industrials or the monthly unemployment rate are insufficient to keep

track of that multifaceted and multilayered set of regional, national, and multinational institutions too often described falsely as *the* economy. Instead, journalists must keep track of the actual economies in which their audiences work and live.

In addition, journalists need to pay more attention to the ways in which people's political behavior and attitudes are almost always influenced by what else is bothering them. The current distrust of government, the decrease in voting, and even the hostility toward illegal immigrants and the poor can be traced in part to the continuing job and economic insecurity and income inequality that many citizens feel. Nonetheless, politics also includes the religious and cultural battles in an America that has become so diverse that there may no longer be a single American Dream.

More Fundamental Changes

These suggestions, and others like them, imply more fundamental changes in journalism and especially in the division of labor among news media. The daily event-centered reportage that confronts the news audience with a continually repeated potpourri of unrelated stories should be reduced and replaced by more topic-centered features, especially in the news media that can accommodate longer stories. Audiences do not need or want daily updates of who did what to whom in Congress, but they might pay more intense attention to thoughtful periodic summaries of what Congress is or is not doing for them and for the country as a whole, particularly about the problems that worry them.

Topic-centered coverage calls for more active reporting and less reactive and passive dependence on what is offered by the White House or the other major sources of national political news. It also requires more *analytic* stories. If journalists really want to encourage citizen participation, citizens must know more about how and why the events and trends that most affect them are taking place. Analytic stories can help people understand which institutions and individuals are especially responsible and can enable them to take the appropriate political actions. At present, the analytic vacuum in daily and weekly news is too often filled only with book-writing journalists such as E.J. Dionne or William Greider, but most of the news audience never sees their books.

Needless to say, topic-centered features and analytic stories require that reporters have more time for reporting and analysis. In some cases, new beats may be needed, as well as additional training for reporters, editors, and producers to cover those beats and to write about them in audience-friendly ways. All of this equals more costly news coverage, which may be economically feasible only for national media that can recoup some of their costs through syndication, at least as long as corporate news firms expect to make as much profit as entertainment enterprises.

Improving the journalistic role in strengthening democracy will not be cheap or easy. However, the global and domestic complexities that America will likely face in the twenty-first century will, in any case, require the modernization of twentieth-century journalism.

Biographical Note

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