Professionalism without professions? Journalism and the Paradox of 'Professionalisation'

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Abstract

This paper considers the incommensurable nature of contemporary debates regarding journalism and professionalism, with some arguing journalism should be recognised as a profession, others suggesting journalistic professionalism is in decline, and still others claiming that a process of 'professionalisation' is increasingly evident. Through an engagement with sociological perspectives on professionalism, it suggests that the reason for such disparities is that these debates rest upon different definitions of what professionalism refers to. Drawing on work that has approached professionalism as a 'polyvalent discourse' that is increasingly being deployed as a disciplinary mechanism, it is argued that the apparent paradox of a simultaneous decline and reinvigoration of professionalism can be understood as an effect of the contradictions inherent to recent trends within the field.

Key words

Professionalism; Professionalisation; Media; Journalism; History; Discourse

Introduction

While questions of 'professionalism' have long been central to debates around journalism, both within and outside the academy, such debates may initially appear rather bewildering. Not only is there widespread disagreement about any solution to 'the problem' of journalistic professionalism: the field of debate itself appears to rest on a number of contradictory problems, embodying different assumptions, that present incommensurable starting points for research. For example, though it is now two decades since a classic study of news professionalism declared that the question of whether journalism qualifies as a profession is unimportant (Soloski 1997), debates about whether journalism 'counts' as a profession or should 'professionalise' have not abated (Hartley 2007, Green & Sykes 2004). Others, meanwhile, have argued that professionalism in journalism has been in a process of seemingly irrevocable decline and sought to explain why this is so, or that there is a need for journalism to re-embrace the values that have historically defined its public role (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2001; Schulz 1998). Meanwhile, still others suggest that, regardless, what we are currently witnessing is an irrevocable trend toward 'professionalisation' in journalism that is likely to have long-term impacts upon the identities and forms of practice of future generations of practitioners (Aldridge and Evetts 2003).

Rather than attempt to resolve such debates, this paper revisits the concept of professionalism itself, in order to develop an understanding of why this field of debate appears so contradictory. By engaging with sociological approaches to professionalism and a field of studies that have applied these to journalism, it suggests a significant reason for this is that such studies often rest on very different understandings of what 'professionalism' is. By adopting elements of both 'critical' and 'discursive' approaches to professionalism, it concurs that the important question is not whether journalism 'counts' as a profession, but the extent to which various parties pursue 'professionalising' strategies, and the particular sorts of

definitions of professionalism that are assumed, articulated and pursued within these. Such an approach, it is argued, enables a perspective that is both sensitive to the existence of contradictory trends within journalism, and regards such contradiction as theoretically (if not politically) unproblematic. This enables us to accept the argument that a certain tradition of professionalism can, along a range of measures, be seen to be in a process of long-term decline. However, it is suggested that what is occurring is not best understood as a simple decline, but the partial displacement of one arguably dominant tradition of professionalism by another. At the same time, this older tradition of professionalism can also be seen to maintain a certain persistence, and may also be in the process of being reinvigorated in several respects. What is most significant, however, is not the contradictory decline, persistence and re-invigoration of journalistic professionalism, but the reasons why, and the processes through which, such contradictory trends are occurring.

Professionalism and Journalism

> We trust our health to the physician; our fortune and sometimes our life and reputation to the lawyer and attorney. Such confidence could not safely be reposed in people of a very mean or low condition. Their reward must be such, therefore, as may give them that rank in society which so important a trust requires. The long time and great expense which must be laid out in their education, when combined with this circumstance, necessarily enhance still further the price of their labour. (quoted in McDonald 1995: ix)

The above quotation, drawn from Adam Smith's *Inquiry in the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, combines several key elements that are typically associated with professions: a recognised position of trust and public responsibility; occupations that tend to both be associated (naturally in Smith's view) with people of higher class status, and that tend to further enhance that status and attract high earnings; and forms of work that necessitate

extensive and expensive forms of education as a prerequisite to practice. Here, too, Smith refers to the traditionally pre-eminent examples of 'true' professions: law and medicine. It is usually by reference to such exemplars that aspects of professionalism are enumerated, as qualities that serve to 'define' a profession and distinguish it from a mere occupation. As well as those mentioned above, professional attributes also typically include necessarily high capacities of independent technical and ethical judgement, the existence of barriers to entry that mandate particular qualifications and training as a prerequisite to legitimate practice, and a commitment to a set of normative standards of practice that is broadly shared by their professional peers. Furthermore, because they normally involve high levels of specialised technical knowledge, this has informed a rationale that professions should be *self-regulating*, through the establishment and maintenance of effective professional associations. As a representative body, such professional associations serve simultaneously as licensing bodies, as guardians of codes of practice that professionals are duty bound to observe, and as quasi-judicial bodies that have the power to exclude those who have breached the established norms of their particular community of practice.

This view of professionalism as marked by specific professional attributes has been historically associated with particular theoretical perspectives on it. The work of Durkheim (1957) in particular, viewed professions as moral communities whose shared commitment to, and ritual reaffirmations of, sets of shared norms provided a basis upon which conditions of group membership are collectively defined, celebrated and policed, has been strongly influential. So, too, has the later systems theory of Talcott Parsons (1951), which assigned the professions a leading role in the functional reproduction of social integration, as the professional is involved in a pursuit of individual interest that is tempered by an observance of normative standards necessary for their integration within their own occupational community, which are promoted through appropriate forms of training. Such functionalist

perspectives have informed arguments, from a wide array of theoretical and political standpoints, that have sought to argue that journalism either is a profession or that it should adopt the structures of one (Green & Sykes 2004; Henningham 1995). Journalism, it is posited, clearly constitutes an occupation of particular public significance, whose importance is generally recognised, whose successful performance depends upon maintaining an independent autonomy, and which necessarily involves particular skills, knowledge, training, production techniques and specific ethical commitments. Others, by contrast, argue that journalism is not best understood as a profession, or is at best a semi- or quasi-profession (Hartley 2007, Dunn 2004, Tunstall 1996). Journalism, it is argued, lacks a unified body of theoretical knowledge and consistent basis of training. While, in some contexts, accreditation schemes exist and organizations may prefer applicants who have undertaken such courses, these do not constitute prerequisites for practice, and employers can ignore the question of whether applicants have such qualifications at will. Journalists also lack an effective basis of independence from employers, have historically lacked effective sanctions for breaches of ethical codes, and are not generally granted the legal privileges (such as the right to uphold client confidentiality) afforded to other professions. The question of whether journalism represents a recognised position of 'public trust' is also questionable, as journalists are not always held in high public esteem. Indeed, as one critic recently commented in reference to survey data, 'public faith in journalism has never been strong, with the average journalist placed somewhere between second hand car dealers and estate agents in the league table of trust' (Barnett 2008).

However, although the question of whether journalism 'counts' as a profession has been important to the extent it has provided a basis upon which particular rights and privileges have been claimed, recognised and refused, critical perspectives on professionalism have long disputed approaches that simply regard it as an objective and definitive set of

qualities that qualify or disqualify occupations as 'professions' (Johnson 1972, Hughes 1963). Instead, neo-Weberian perspectives on professionalism emphasise its significance as both a claim that is connected to struggles for class status and power, and a non-bureaucratic mode of social control. Such deployment of professionalism was historicized in the work of Larson (1977), who placed particular emphasis on the use of professionalism as a means to claim a monopoly over the delivery of particular services through a process of 'market closure'. The rise of professionalism, she argued, can thus be seen to have coincided with, and contributed to, the rise of monopoly capitalism, as it was instrumentally deployed as a grounds for narrowing the field of competition. As monopoly capitalism facilitated the rise of large organizations, moreover, 'professionalism' came to be understood as an alternative basis for securing workplace control, particularly through the use of professional training and the establishment of professional schools. These facilitated an effective socialisation to, and reproduction of, a particular culture of service delivery, and a means of standardisation that could be achieved without recourse to mechanisms of managerial direction and monitoring. While professionalism can, from this perspective, be seen to largely serve the interests of employers, it also represents a means by which professionals themselves can pursue their own interests. While employees within large organizations could not determine their own conditions of employment, professionalism nevertheless provides a ground upon which such workers could lay claim to a particular class status, articulate demands that they be afforded the respect and renumeration from their employers their status demanded, and even lay claim to a degree of independent influence over their own working conditions. At the same time, such claims to an independent and principled professionalism also delivers additional advantages to employers, who can displace the cost of investing in workplace training onto professionals themselves, exploit the professional commitment to the delivery of a vital public service by increasing workplace demands without delivering pay increases or overtime, and

deploy the claim that they offer a product or service delivered by independent professionals to enhance its market value.

To reiterate, what marks this critical perspective on professionalism as distinct from positivist and functionalist approaches is that it rejects the assumption that professions exist as given, definable entities. Rather, professionalism is understood as invoking the mobilisation of a particular basis of identity that has both material underpinnings and definite consequences, yet which also constitutes a grounds of social struggle. This perspective sheds valuable critical light on various aspects of journalism. For example, Marjoribanks (2000) has shown how journalists self-identification as respectable 'white collar' workers, a professional identity defined by contrast to 'blue collar' print workers, was crucial to the relative lack of opposition to workplace transformations that led to both large-scale redundancies and the effective de-unionisation of newspaper production environments. Others have recently emphasised both historical and recent attempts of employers to exercise influence over professional education in order to promote instrumentalist training agendas and to de-emphasise, or altogether remove, critical aspects within journalism courses (Reese 1999, Reese and Cohen 2000). Soloski's study of news professionalism also explicitly draws on this critical perspective to identify journalistic objectivity as an effective 'trans-organisational control mechanism' (1997: 143) that works in tandem with the editorial system as a mechanism for ensuring that journalists operate in a disciplined and relatively standardised fashion. As journalism's 'most important professional norm', objectivity displaces journalists' responsibility for what they report onto procedures of gathering 'facts' and presenting 'fair and balanced' reports, leads them to develop collective assumptions about what is socially 'normal', and supports a routine reliance on centres of political and institutional power as these are drawn upon to support the 'authoritative' credentials of the professional journalist. Similarly, Michael Schudson has developed an historical analysis of

objectivity that incorporates both a Durkheimian perspective on its adoption as an occupational norm, and a Weberian perspective on its instrumental use by employers as a mechanism to exercise control over employees, both of which are implicated in the gradual 'professionalisation of American journalism' (2001: 149).

A related perspective on journalism's historical 'professionalisation' in the US informs Daniel Hallin's (2000) claim that professionalism now appears to be in decline. Hallin quotes the 1947 Hutchins Commission of Freedom of the Press call for the press to 'look on itself as performing a public service of a professional kind' (2000: 219), and suggests that rather than a watershed, this was consistent with a trend toward an ethos of 'public service' and 'social responsibility' across various sectors:

> The professionalisation of journalism was part of a general trend, beginning in the Progressive Era, away from Partisan politics as a basis for public life, and towards conceptions of administrative rationality and neutral expertise. The journalist was supposed to serve the public as a whole, and not particular interests, whether the partisan causes journalists had championed in the nineteenth century, or the narrow commercial interests of advertisers and owners. (Hallin 2000: 220)

With hindsight, Hallin argues, this period of 'professionalisation' may be seen as a brief period of 'high modernism' that, though perhaps not entirely displaced, today merely maintains a residual influence over the field of journalism. This decline of professionalism, he suggests, has occurred as a result of a combination of transformations within media industries and broader processes of political and cultural change that have each served to undermine the structural conditions upon which it rested. In the case of the former, an intensified competition, the relaxation of broadcast regulation, and a blurring of formal lines of separation between business and editorial roles within media organisations are cited as key influences that have coincided with, and contributed to, the merging of news and

entertainment. Here, Hallin also cites the effect of identity politics and its progressive critique of claims to speak from either an 'objective' or consensual position, alongside the emergence of widespread distrust in centres of political authority. While largely pessimistic about the trends he describes, Hallin is careful to avoid an uncritical nostalgia, and explicitly points toward the many inequities and shortcomings of this 'high modern' tradition.

Is it justified, however, to regard such trends as a decline of professionalism itself? To answer this, we must return to the question of what 'professionalism' is. If professionalism is not a fixed set of attributes but a basis of social identity that forms a site of social struggle, then claims that an historical 'professionalisation' of journalism occurred appear well-founded. However, it follows from this approach that what 'professionalisation' represents is *not* the establishment of a 'profession' with definitive qualities, but rather the mobilisation of both particular claims regarding the professional status of journalism itself (or, at least, some areas of it) and the deployment of particular techniques to promote 'professionalism'. The question of whether professionalism in journalism is in decline, in this sense, cannot be equated to the question of whether a previously accepted definition of professionalism is no longer widely held. Rather, we must ask whether, today, there are fewer agents who seek to mobilise discourses of professionalism, and fewer mechanisms through which forms of professional identity are promoted?

'Professionalisation' and the redefinition of professional identities

It is this perspective on professionalism as a 'polyvalent discourse', mobilised by various parties in the pursuit of different ends, that informs the analysis of 'professionalisation' developed by Aldridge and Evetts (2003; see also Fournier 1999). Notably, their analysis considers how aspects of the discourse of professionalism have been both adopted and resisted by UK journalists. On one hand, the importance of 'being professional', by adhering

to particular professional norms and ethical values and maintaining a 'disinterested' status above factional interests, has been central to the journalistic value system. On the other, journalists were generally unsupportive of moves toward 'market closure' through the establishment of statutory mechanisms of compulsory registration in consultation with employers. Indeed, rather than support a 'professional body', journalists overwhelmingly preferred to be represented a trade union (the National Union of Journalists) which sought to campaign for the rights and conditions of journalists against employers:

> For nearly a century, therefore, the main collective voice of journalists has been that of a 'wages movement'…which has accepted the self-definition of journalism as a highly skilled craft best prepared for through apprenticeship (Aldridge and Evetts 2003: 550)

It is notable that Hallin also acknowledges a tendency among some US journalists to regard their occupation as a craft rather than profession, and that some have even argued in court that they are not 'professionals' but ordinary workers who should be eligible for overtime payments (2000: 220). This is not to undermine the point that, in both contexts, journalism did 'professionalise' in numerous respects over the course of the twentieth century. Rather, it is simply to note that such 'professionalisation' is part of a more complex history in which the concept was resisted at the same time as it was embraced, and sometimes by the very same individuals.

Aldridge and Evetts also point to a number of trends that appear, on the surface, rather disjunct to those discussed by Hallin. For example, they cite survey data that indicates the majority of journalists increasingly regard themselves as professionals, and believe this status should be recognised by others. They also note that, although degrees in journalism itself may not be the only pathway into the field, careers within the field are now almost exclusively graduate entry. This trend, they suggest, is not only attributable to employer preferences, but to the class composition of aspirant professionals, as careers in journalism

have become increasingly targeted by the children of middle class parents. This shift in the class identity of journalism as an occupation is, however, merely half of the story. The other significant aspect of trend towards 'professionalisation' derives from the fact that 'employers, managers and supervisors are mobilising the discourse of professionalism *unilaterally* and instrumentally' (Aldridge and Evetts 2003: 556). At first sight, it may appear there is nothing inherently novel about this. After all, as noted above, it has long been acknowledged that one aspect of professionalism is that it operates as an efficient mechanism of social control that operates in tandem, as well as tension, with the bureaucratic control mechanisms operative within newsrooms (Soloski 1997, Schlesinger 1987, Tuchman 1978). Today, however, professionalism is being both re-emphasised and redefined as a consequence of two developments. Firstly, consequent to both the shift in demographics and the increasing adoption of a 'professional' (middle) class identity, the relationship between employers and employees has increasingly lost its framing as a class conflict (albeit this has not been historically strong in the case of journalism). Secondly, where critical analyses previously viewed employers' acceptance of and (relative) respect for traditional professional identities as a functional, if often uneasy, compromise between different interests, the deliberate, strategic targeting and transformation of processes of professional formation and reflection mark a significant departure.

Several trends in journalism appear significant in this regard. Perhaps the one that has attracted most controversy have been concerted attempts to exert influence over university courses in journalism, to promote the adoption of what have been seen as narrowly vocational curricula that place a strong onus on 'skills training' at the expense of a depth and breadth of knowledge and capacities of research and critical reflection (Nolan 2008; de Burgh 2003; Reese and Cohen 2000, Reese 1999). Aldridge and Evetts suggest the increased use of professionalism has also been deployed as a means to persuade, or coerce, journalists into

accepting an intensification of work demands, particularly through the incorporation of new technologies in news production, as adaptation to change is positioned as a professional imperative. Other developments also appear significant. While there has been a long-term decline in journalism cadetships (Alysen 2005), in recent years a growing number of organisations have invested in positions focusing on accountability, mostly notably through the appointment of 'standards managers' and 'news ombudsmen' (van Dalen and Deuze 2006). Significantly, many of these positions have public or quasi-public dimensions, such that news ombudsmen have in many cases become incorporated within institutional complaints-handling processes and, in the case of some newspapers, writing columns engaging with public criticisms of news performance. While there are clearly both public relations and accountability dimensions to such roles, few studies to date have rarely considered their significance as disciplinary mechanisms that engage journalists in continual processes of professional self-reflection.

Conclusion

This paper has emphasised how different debates surrounding professionalism in journalism are frequently incommensurable because they assume different definitions of the concept. Following a history of critical sociological work on professionalism, it reiterates the inadequacy, and frequent elitism, embodied in approaches that simply equates 'professionalism' with 'professions' that are assumed to have a fixed set of attributes. While, critical analyses of how journalism has historically 'professionalised', in this respect, constitute a significant advance on sterile debates about whether or not journalism 'counts' as a profession, this paper has suggested that, if professionalism is approached as a discourse rather than a fixed set of values or attributes, claims that journalistic professionalism are simply 'in decline' appear somewhat questionable. While it may well be true that a particular tradition of journalistic professionalism has been displaced to a considerable extent, it does

not follow that the concept of professionalism itself is in decline. On the contrary, it appears in several respects to be an increasingly central dimension of journalists' own self-identity, at the same time as others – most notably employers – seek to both shape and direct such identities in the pursuit of various ends. From this perspective, trends toward an apparent decline in professionalism and simultaneous trends toward the professionalisation of journalism may not be as contradictory as they initially appear. This is not to suggest that older traditions of occupational identity and discourses of professionalism have ceased to exert any influence. Rather, it is to propose that the nature of emergent professionalisms, and the degree to which journalists continue to exercise a degree of control over the shaping of their own autonomy, constitute issues that merit further investigation.

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