

REVIEWS

The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered: Democratic Culture, Professional Codes, Digital Future, edited by **Jeffrey C. Alexander**, **Elizabeth Butler Breese**, and **María Luengo**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 298 pp. \$34.99 paper. ISBN: 9781107448513.

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This timely book on the crisis of journalism continues Jeffrey Alexander's longstanding campaign to place culture at the center of sociological analysis, banishing in the process "reductive" approaches that highlight social and material factors. The claims of Alexander and his co-editors Elizabeth Butler Breese and María Luengo in *The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered: Democratic Culture, Professional Codes, Digital Future* are two-fold: first, to show how cultural conceptions interacted with economic and technological changes to create the sense of crisis, and second, to argue that these same cultural conceptions ensure that journalism, in whatever future form it takes, will adequately meet its democratic responsibilities. This first claim is convincingly made; the second is intriguing, but dubious. In addition to the introduction (by Alexander) and conclusion (by Breese and Luengo), the book contains chapters by Breese, Luengo, and more than a dozen other scholars who engage with Alexander's ideas but do not necessarily adopt his cultural "strong program" *tout court*.

According to Alexander, discourses of morality exist as a structuring force in society relatively autonomous of self-interested institutions. The cultural terms of debate we use to articulate and defend our interests arise from these discourses—"the dark matter of the social universe, invisible but exercising extraordinary power" (pp. 22–23). In the realm of democratic politics and the civil sphere, of which journalism is a part, actors vie to label themselves on the side of the

sacred civil (e.g., rational, truthful, inclusive) and their opponents on the side of the profane anti-civil (irrational, deceitful, exclusive). As Stephen Ostertag shows in his chapter, moral reasoning creates the motivations that guide all types of individual and collective action.

Using this lens, we can see that it was the early utopian cultural coding of the Internet as a space of freedom (and free content), rather than any inherent properties of the new medium, that prevented news organizations from adequately monetizing their online operations. Similarly, objective changes (such as declining revenues or staff cuts), no matter how dramatic, do not constitute a crisis except in relation to culturally mediated expectations, as Luengo demonstrates in her chapter focused on post-Katrina New Orleans. In this case study, the widespread belief that the city's main newspaper, the *Times-Picayune*, had served the community well in the aftermath of the hurricane allowed the newspaper to merge its own identity with the civil side of the cultural binary. Journalists and broader publics were thus highly motivated to oppose management-led changes to the *Times-Picayune*, such as the switch to three-days-a-week print publication and greater reliance on the website, because they expected quality to come from a certain set of traditional practices and found it difficult to imagine otherwise. Likewise, in a well-constructed chapter on regional online news startups, David Ryfe reveals how the startup founders were forced to adopt traditional journalistic values in part because of the cultural expectations of local advertisers, information sources, and audiences.

In her chapter, Breese shows how U.S. professional journalists have consistently reacted to any change—whether technological or the passing of the torch from one television anchor to another—as negative. This resistance to change reflects a degree of historical amnesia, but it also serves a pro-civil purpose (and here we begin to enter the terrain of intriguing but dubious). According

to Breese, constructing a situation as a crisis provides an opportunity for professional journalists to reassert their basic principles and thus to ensure that these principles continue to be applied (whether in classic or new forms).

Clearly, this is an original use of normative theory for research on journalism. Instead of holding up ideals as a yardstick to evaluate journalistic performance, as in Habermasian public sphere approaches, here normative theory (in the form of professional standards) has causal force. But the causality is slippery: journalists' ethical model is portrayed at work when it stops change, but also when it allows change, with little specification of how and why it might vary by type, force, and outcome. Breese again: "Instead of being replaced by polluting symbolic codes, objectivity and its related ideals are reconstituted in every era. Objective, serious, professional news will not pass away, as discourses of crisis claim, but what constitutes these signifiers is continually renarrated and renegotiated" (p. 40). This claim implies that the "civil repair" process of recalibrating cultural signifiers and signifieds will just naturally achieve the appropriate democratic equilibrium. But will it?

For their part, Alexander and his co-editors consistently side with the market winners and choose to be optimistic about what lies ahead. In language that reads at times like a corporate press release, Alexander extols the many virtues of the new commercial digital order. He argues that Facebook and Google have been "compelled to directly or indirectly support journalistic modes of news gathering" (p. 17) in order to maintain their pipeline of content. Yet few knowledgeable observers would agree that these Internet companies have done anywhere near enough to help the legacy news organizations whose content they amply profit from.

Fortunately, many of the authors in this volume are less credulous. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen usefully distinguishes between crises of economics, professionalism, and confidence and shows how media policies and market structures help account for differences in the types and degree of crisis experienced across a range of western democracies. C. W. Anderson calls attention to the ways in

which metrics-driven awareness of a fragmented audience is complicating traditional journalistic aspirations to serve the unitary public (and thus to achieve the solidaristic purposes of the civil sphere). In her detailed ethnographic portraits of several online newsrooms, Nikki Usher documents an increasing obsession with breaking news and lowest common denominator clickbait at the expense of investigative and in-depth reporting. Daniel Kreiss, in his call for replacing the dominant "informational" model of journalism with the ideal of "civic skepticism," argues that the latter provides a better standard to measure the civic effects of online news monetization. To be sure, it's not all bleak: in a balanced account, Michael Schudson provides some well-supported "grounds for hope."

Matt Carlson brings power and interests back into the equation and highlights the crucial role of "normative reassurance" played by prestigious newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the late *Times* media columnist David Carr. Carlson insists that this kind of "metajournalistic discourse" is crucial "in shaping journalism as a cultural practice central to a civil society" in part because journalists lack "the ability to prevent economic and technological change affecting their work" (p. 150). This passage, insightful for the situation in the United States, also suggests a blind spot in Alexander-influenced cultural analysis. One wonders: Why, exactly, do journalists lack this ability?

And what happens when journalists do not lack this ability? Chapters on Scandinavia (by Håkon Larsen and by Kari Steen-Johnsen, Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk, and Bernard Enjolras) and on German versus U.S. regional political reporting (by Matthias Revers) provide answers to these questions. They identify the factors that make the "dark matter" of western European journalistic culture stronger than it is in the United States, thus protecting journalists' autonomy through, among other things, well-funded public broadcasting governed by "arms-length" regulations to protect its political independence, press subsidies, lesser dependence on advertising, and tough government negotiations with Internet monopolists (with

this latter serving as the actual goad for Google to begin opening its purses to legacy news outlets). These policies and practices—culture instantiated in institutions and reinforced with material as well as symbolic resources—do not prevent changes, but they help ensure a more even playing field for journalists to engage with market actors in shaping the future of journalism.

This relegation of policy discussions to the “European” chapters is an unfortunate division of labor and does not necessarily inhere in Alexander’s generalized conception of the civil sphere, whose autonomy he concedes is “fortified by law” (2006:151). Likewise, the book would be more compelling if it heeded better Alexander’s previous pledge (2011) to join cultural pragmatics to the analysis of “social power.” Granted, cultural analysis contributes a fresh perspective to the sociology of media. But why insist that everything else lies on the profane side of the cultural binary? Paying attention to market, class, political, and technological power as well is expansionist, not reductionist. Or, to put it in journalistic terms, it’s simply telling the whole story.

References

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Who Owns the Dead? The Science and Politics of Death at Ground Zero, by **Jay D. Aronson**. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. 318 pp. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780674971493.

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Who owns the dead? Or, to be more precise, who owns the right to control how we deal with the remains of the dead? In most cases the legal and moral answer is clear: the relatives of the deceased. But in acts of mass violence the politics of death become fraught with the competing interests of numerous

stakeholders, and the remains of victims come to represent something far beyond the individuals or their grieving families. In the case of September 11th, the dead at the World Trade Center (WTC) symbolized an entire nation perceived as under attack. This made it difficult to answer the question of who had the right to decide the fate of thousands of unidentified and unclaimed remains extracted from the site.

In the kind of painstaking detail with which historians excel, Jay Aronson’s *Who Owns the Dead? The Science and Politics of Death at Ground Zero* charts how various stakeholders struggled for control of the remains as well as the expensive parcel of city land containing them. This struggle carried into an emotional debate about memorialization, which took more than a decade and nearly \$1 billion to transform the site into the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum. This memorial stands out from other cases because the victims’ remains symbolized an attack later used to justify military action.

Further complicating this process was the development of new technologies that made large-scale DNA identification more viable. More than \$80 million has been spent on attempts to identify and return to families “every human body part recovered from the site” (p. 2). Families of 1,113 victims are still waiting. For them, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) has committed to continue identification efforts *in perpetuity*. This means the memorial represents “the physical embodiment of the technological dream that unidentified remains may one day be made personal again” (p. 255). I suspect we are just beginning to see the scope of this “dream,” one that feels like more of a nightmare after reading the anguishing perspectives of 9/11 families.

The book draws on a mix of primary and secondary sources exhaustively documented in the endnotes. Chapter One, “A Tuesday Morning in September,” is a heart-wrenching account of the WTC attack, yet quite possibly the most objective one I have read. Aronson manages to take the reader inside the panic of Lower Manhattan that frightful day without sensationalism. I highly recommend the chapter to any instructor teaching on the