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978-1-107-08525-1 - The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered: Democratic Culture, Professional Codes, Digital Future

Edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Elizabeth Butler Breese and María Luengo

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered

This collection of original essays brings a dramatically different perspective to bear on the contemporary “crisis of journalism.” Rather than seeing technological and economic change as the primary causes of current anxieties, *The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered* draws attention to the role played by the cultural commitments of journalism itself. Linking these professional ethics to the democratic aspirations of the broader societies in which journalists ply their craft, it examines how the new technologies are being shaped to sustain value commitments rather than undermining them. Recent technological change and the economic upheaval it has produced are coded by social meanings. It is this cultural framework that actually transforms these “objective” changes into a crisis. The book argues that cultural codes not only trigger sharp anxiety about technological and economic changes, but provide pathways to control them, so that the democratic practices of independent journalism can be sustained in new forms.

JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER is a leading social theorist who helped create the contemporary field of cultural sociology. He has written and edited dozens of books, among them *The Meanings of Social Life*, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, *Performance and Power*, *The Civil Sphere*, *The Dark Side of Modernity*, and *Obama Power* (with Bernadette Jaworsky). His books and articles have won various national and international awards.

ELIZABETH BUTLER BREESE is a sociologist who works with high-growth technology and education companies. She has published media, public sphere, and celebrity research in several sociology and communications journals and has been called on to comment on social media trends in *The New York Times*, *Wired*, and *AdAge*. She is currently Marketing Director at Panorama Education.

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Frontmatter

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# The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered

*Democratic Culture, Professional Codes,  
Digital Future*

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One Liberty Plaza, New York, NY 10006 USA

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107448513](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107448513)

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First published 2016

Printed in The United States of America

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Alexander, Jeffrey C., 1947– editor. | Breese, Elizabeth Butler, editor.

| Luengo, María, editor.

Title: The crisis of journalism reconsidered : democratic culture, professional codes, digital future / edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Elizabeth Butler Breese, María Luengo.

Description: New York : Cambridge University Press, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015043635 | ISBN 9781107085251 (Hardback) | ISBN 9781107448513 (Paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Journalistic ethics. | Journalism—History—21st century. | BISAC: SOCIAL SCIENCE / Sociology / General.

Classification: LCC PN4756 .C85 2016 | DDC 174/.907—dc23 LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015043635>

ISBN 978-1-107-08525-1 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-44851-3 Paperback

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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*To David Carr (1956–2015), a fierce critic of the press, and its  
fiercest defender*

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press  
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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>About the Contributors</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
Introduction: Journalism, democratic culture, and creative reconstruction <i>Jeffrey C. Alexander</i>	I
PART I: THE CRISIS NARRATIVE	
1 The perpetual crisis of journalism: Cable and digital revolutions <i>Elizabeth Butler Breese</i>	3 I
2 The crisis of public service broadcasting reconsidered: Commercialization and digitalization in Scandinavia <i>Håkon Larsen</i>	43
3 Beyond administrative journalism: Civic skepticism and the crisis in journalism <i>Daniel Kreiss</i>	59
4 The many crises of Western journalism: A comparative analysis of economic crises, professional crises, and crises of confidence <i>Rasmus Kleis Nielsen</i>	77
5 The crisis in news: Can you whistle a happy tune? <i>Michael Schudson</i>	98
PART II: FEARS OF DIGITAL NEWS MEDIA: THE SYMBOLIC STRUGGLE	
6 When codes collide: Journalists push back against digital desecration <i>María Luengo</i>	119
	vii

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-08525-1 - The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered: Democratic Culture, Professional Codes, Digital Future  
Edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Elizabeth Butler Breese and María Luengo  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

viii	Contents
7	Telling the crisis story of journalism: Narratives of normative reassurance in <i>Page One</i> <i>Matt Carlson</i> 135
8	Assembling publics, assembling routines, assembling values: Journalistic self-conception and the crisis in journalism <i>C.W. Anderson</i> 153
9	The constancy of immediacy: From printing press to digital age <i>Nikki Usher</i> 170
10	News on new platforms: Norwegian journalists face the digital age <i>Kari Steen-Johnsen, Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk, and Bernard Enjolras</i> 190
PART III: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM, CIVIL CODES, AND DIGITAL CULTURE	
11	Journalism in American regional online news systems <i>David Ryfe</i> 211
12	Digital media and the diversification of professionalism: A US–German comparison of journalism cultures <i>Matthias Revers</i> 228
13	Professional and citizen journalism: Tensions and complements <i>Peter Dahlgren</i> 247
14	Expressions of right and wrong: The emergence of a cultural structure of journalism <i>Stephen F. Ostertag</i> 264
	Conclusion: News innovations and enduring commitments <i>Elizabeth Butler Breese and María Luengo</i> 282
	<i>Index</i> 291



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-08525-1 - The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered: Democratic Culture, Professional Codes, Digital Future

Edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Elizabeth Butler Breese and María Luengo

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-08525-1 - The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered: Democratic Culture, Professional Codes, Digital Future

Edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Elizabeth Butler Breese and María Luengo

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

Contributors

of *Journalism, Sources, and Credibility: New Perspectives* (Routledge, 2011), and author of over two dozen journal articles and book chapters on how journalists and others construct journalism.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contributors*

xi

theory and journalism. Her work interprets developments at the nexus of social trends and movements, gender, migration, and journalistic culture and practice. Her research also adopts a cultural sociological approach in its examination of the media in the context of the civil sphere's independence from other, more materially dominant power spheres in society. She has published widely in the fields of journalism and media studies and co-authored *Periodismo social* (Social Journalism) with Juana Gallego (Síntesis 2014). Her research has appeared in *Journalism Studies*, *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, *Communication & Society*, and *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, among others.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

of presidential communication, political communication, and the history and sociology of news. His most recent book, *Can Journalism Survive?* (Polity Press, 2012), is an ethnographic investigation of American newspaper newsrooms and an exploration of the future of journalism. Currently, he is working on a book manuscript, *Journalism and the Public* (Polity, forthcoming), and a long-term project on the evolution of regional online news systems in the United States.

**Michael Schudson** taught sociology and communication at the University of Chicago, 1976–80 and the University of California, San Diego, 1980–2009. Since 2006, part-time, and 2009 full-time, he has been a Professor of Journalism at Columbia University. Schudson is the author of eight books and editor of three others on the history and sociology of the American news media, the history of U.S. citizenship and political participation, and related topics. He is the co-author, with Leonard Downie, Jr., of a report commissioned by the Columbia School of Journalism, *The Reconstruction of American Journalism* (2009).

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Preface

In recent decades, there has been an unfortunate split between core social sciences and media studies. While journalism has virtually disappeared from the agenda of academic sociology, a massive new discipline has emerged around mass communication, sporting its own journals, paradigms, global meetings, and graduate schools. Tens of thousands of teachers and students in this new global discipline certainly constitute a potentially huge audience for innovative contributions to the field. But an inward-looking quality to debates in “media studies” makes much of its scholarly activity orthogonal to social theorizing and empirical sociology in their contemporary forms. The challenge for contemporary sociology is to find a way of speaking to the crisis of contemporary journalism in a language that is relevant to the vast and still-expanding discipline of media studies.

*The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered* aims to accomplish this feat by speaking in two languages – the widely understood language of fundamental social theory/sociology, on the one hand, and the discourse of “disciplinary journalism,” on the other. The authors in this book are trained in sociology departments or in the handful of sociologically-oriented journalism schools, such as the Columbia School of Journalism, and most are housed in departments of journalism inside schools of media studies. Among such rare two-legged creatures, we have selected those most sophisticated in contemporary social theory and empirically based social science. Our volume’s master theme addresses a contemporary crisis to which every media student is attuned, but does so in a theoretical manner that bridges social science and media studies.

Among both the popular and academic media-studies books that address the current crisis in journalism, explanations have been one-sidedly focused on technology and economics – and, as a result, decidedly gloomy in their predictions: Meyer, *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age* (University of Missouri Press, 2009, 2nd edition); Jones, *Losing the*

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*News: The Future of the News that Feeds Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Mersey, *Can Journalism be Saved? Rediscovering America's Appetite for News* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010); and McChesney and Pickard, *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It* (New York: The New Press, 2011).

Recently, a small number of more carefully academic conducted studies have emerged, which speak more broadly, and occasionally more hopefully, to the continuing role of journalism in democracy: Levy and Nielsen, eds., *The Changing Business of Journalism and Its Implications for Democracy* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2010); Lloyd and Winter, eds., *Media, Politics and the Public* (Stockholm: Axel and Margaret Axson Johnson Foundation, 2012); Peters and Broesma, eds., *Rethinking Journalism: Trust and Participation in a Transfigured News Landscape* (Routledge 2012); and Franklin, ed., *The Future of Journalism: Developments and Debates* (London: Routledge, 2013).

Even these latter volumes, however, share many of the weaknesses of the first set. *The Future of Journalism*, which includes the best research works presented at previous conferences on the “Future of Journalism” – originally published as special issues of leading journals in the journalism studies field – rarely moves beyond techno-economic explanations of current problems. Most of its contributors are light years away from a cultural–sociological perspective, from an understanding of the “crisis in journalism” narrative as culturally constructed by long-standing, deeply-entrenched moral codes. Indeed, by looking only at distinctive national, political, and social contexts, the volume makes evident the shortcomings of such insistently noncultural frames. Its concentration on contextual variations seems responsive only to material factors, and the result is a decidedly determinist outlook. Our opposing form of argument, which places cultural commitments front and center, allows us to produce a more open-ended and also more hopeful argument. We suggest that the cultural codes driving new journalistic practices allow creative pathways to be discovered for sustaining journalistic commitments through digital technology and new organizational forms.

This volume's bridging qualities make it relevant, not only to journalism and media studies, but to key issues in contemporary sociology. In the last decade, sociology has produced only a handful of books devoted to journalism, and not a single volume among these concentrates squarely on the current digital crisis. If sociologists in sociology departments no longer specialize in journalism, however, they make frequent use of the products of journalism in their research and theorizing and are certainly avid consumers of journalism in their private lives. For all these reasons, *The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered* should generate wide interest inside the international sociology field.

The chapters in this book are original, researched and written for this thematic investigation. Each contributor is an academic specializing in journalistic practice;

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Edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Elizabeth Butler Breese and María Luengo

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xv

each has a track record of major journal publications; and most have published research monographs with leading university presses. The editors have engaged with each contributor, working to shape their proposals to hue as closely as possible to the volume's core themes. Alexander's introduction is a major theoretical statement that develops a new perspective on the current crisis of journalism. Breese and Luengo provide core chapters laying out the historical and comparative perspectives that anchor the volume. They also co-author a conclusion that synthesizes the individual contributions, demonstrating how the chapters illuminate central themes even as they expose nuanced but substantial diversity of findings and opinions about the sources of crisis and the pathways beyond it.

Two points need mentioning in concluding this preface. The first is that the distinctiveness of our volume does not derive from its sociological qualities per se but, rather, from its taking the cultural turn. It is not only crisis-books in media studies that are one-sidedly materialist, but most of the small number of recent works on media in sociology itself. Pierre Bourdieu's neo-Marxist approach to journalism, exemplified in his polemic *On Media* (1999), explains the practice of journalism as a struggle for domination inside and outside the journalism "field," determinedly reducing the independent power of cultural discourses and the link between professional journalism and political democracy. The smaller band of new journalism scholars in American sociology have tended to follow in Bourdieu's path, for example, Benson and Neveu, eds., *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field* (London: Polity 2005) and Eric Klinenberg, *Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America's Media* (New York: Metropolitan). A most significant exception is Jacobs and Townsley, *The Space of Opinion: Media Intellectuals and the Public Sphere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), whose cultural-sociological approach and democracy-related theorizing is limited only by its neglect of the news side of journalism.

In arguing that theory and research shift from technology to culture, *The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered* is bound to be controversial. For common sense and academic conventional wisdom, it seems blindingly obvious that the contemporary crisis of journalism is triggered by technology and powered by economics. Our position goes against this tide, but it does so by riding the rising wave of the cultural turn in the human sciences, the growing centrality of cultural sociology, and new theorizing about the civil sphere.

With these brief remarks, we submit this collective thinking about the democratic culture that sustains journalism, its professional codes, and its digital future for your consideration.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---



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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## Acknowledgments

In the summer of 2013, we invited leading communications and social science scholars to join us in a project to interrogate the crisis narrative in journalism. Thanks to their interest, diligence, and intellectual generosity with us and with each other, the contributors to this volume have become our colleagues.

In May of 2014 a two-day meeting, hosted and funded by the Social Trends Institute was held at the IESE Business School in Barcelona, which immensely strengthened our collaboration and this book. We especially thank Carlos Cavallé, Ana Marta González, and Tracey O'Donnell for joining us for engaging and challenging sessions, which made it possible for us to work out new understandings face-to-face.

We thank Springer and the editors of the *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* for giving us permission to reprint our three individual contributions.

– The Editors