

JOURNALISM AND JOURNALISTS AS A RESEARCH FIELD: A REIVEW OF LITERATURE

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Abstract

The profession of journalism along with its audiences also depends on its professionals (journalists) to continue its existence. Particularly, the strengths and weaknesses, qualities and characteristics of journalism of any country and culture have dependency on the conditions and status of news workers of that country and culture. This contribution proposes significance of studying journalists on whom the profession somehow depends. Moreover, it highlights how the studies of journalism, the profession called the first draft of history, have been getting the status of an international tradition and being accepted among scholars. To signify to journalism and journalists as a field of research a few number of journalism and journalistic studies, conducted in the various parts of world, have been enumerated. Further various opinions of some authors have been cited to sensitize that journalists, in addition to their professional role, are also members of some society like other common people. Hence, they have also some religion, culture and political ideology which make them prone to err and misconduct, therefore, not only the profession but also the professionals of journalism deserve to be studied to make them accountable.

Keywords: *Journalism; Journalism studies; Journalists; Journalistic studies*

Introduction

The sole purpose of this research was to put emphasis and justify in the favor of significance of studying journalism and journalists. Therefore to serve this purpose in the beginning some journalism and journalistic studies conducted in the world over have been enumerated. In addition to signify the importance of comparative

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studies in journalism the related literature have also been discussed.

Journalism and Journalistic Studies

Deuze calls to survey studies of journalism ‘an international tradition’ (Deuze, 2002: 1). Surveys about journalists were undertaken during the 20th century in Germany and the US. However, it was in the 1970s that such studies ‘became widely accepted among scholars internationally’ (Weischenberg & Scholl, 1998: 37) cited in (Deuze, 2002: 1). According to Deuze, some of the most significant of these studies of journalists were those conducted by Johnstone & fellows (1976) in the US; Kepplinger (1979) in Germany; and Tunstall (1970) in Great Britain. These focused on journalists’ personal characteristics such as their educational, ethnic, or religious background, the division of labour within news organisations, the way journalists perceived their role in society, and their perception of the threat posed by increased media concentration (ibid). Deuze further notes that the first national survey on journalists was undertaken in the US by Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman in 1971; it was then published in book form in 1976 (2002: 1).

Moreover, Johnstone et al., while justifying the significance and justification of their journalistic survey study, mentioned that sociological studies about the mass media commonly focussed on three main issues: the process by which the media transmit information to society, the impact of the diffusion of information on society, and the business of media—the media organisations themselves and their ‘functionaries as representatives of an occupational group.’(Johnstone, Slawski, & Bowman, 1976: 1). Therefore, the authors claim to have carried out the first systematic study of the social characteristics of journalists. Their study included television news reporters (on and off-camera), newspaper reporters and columnists, wire-service reporters, editorial writers, and reporters from local newspapers (ibid). Their study sought to

'present a representative overview of the nature of newsmen and newswork' in America (Johnstone, et al., 1976: ix) and examined the American journalist from every angle: his (or her) social origins, patterns of training and recruitment, career histories and job aspirations, division of labour within news-media, professional behaviour and values, working conditions, financial rewards, and sources of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction (ibid: 5). What was novel about this study, according to the authors, was that except for a few studies dealing with the 'characteristics of individual journalists' there were no previous studies of members of the profession as a whole (ibid: 2).

The other systematic study of American journalists was conducted by Weaver and Wilhoit (1986), and it examined the changing nature of the role of the journalist, the background and education of members of the profession, their attitudes, beliefs, and values; and the effects of new technology on journalists' work (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986: vi). Weaver and Wilhoit compared their findings with those of Johnstone et al., who were all sociologists (p. ibid). However, despite great similarity in the general pattern of both the above mentioned studies, there was one sharp contrast between their goals. As Johnstone et al. argued 'Our goal is sociological inquiry, not social criticism' (Johnstone, et al., 1976: vii); in contrast Weaver and Wilhoit maintained that though their goal was 'systematic inquiry', they did not claim to approach their study as disinterested academics; rather, they sought to find ways to make 'journalistic careers more fulfilling and rewarding' (1986: vi). Subsequently, Weaver and Wilhoit undertook two follow-up survey studies '*The American Journalist in the 1990s*' in 1992, and '*The American Journalist in the 21st century: U.S. news people at the dawn of a new millennium*' in 2002, both patterned on the 1971 study of Johnstone et al.; however the 2002 study included internet journalists and included more open-ended comments about why respondents chose journalism as a profession, their job satisfaction,

journalistic freedom, performance of news organisations (Weaver, et al., 2007: vii-viii).

Comparative Research in the Field of Journalism

Hanitzsch observes that similarities exist between the professional routines, editorial procedures, and socialization processes of news professionals in every country; at the same time the professional views and practices of journalists in different countries are influenced by the 'national media system' of which they are a part, which results in some differences (Hanitzsch, 2009: 413). Therefore, the attempt to explore such differences and similarities in journalistic culture has become an interesting sphere in the field of journalism studies, and researchers in this field follow a comparative perspective (ibid). Further regarding comparative research Hanitzsch notes (Kohn, 1989) that comparative studies have become necessary for developing the generalizability of theories and findings, and that they also test the interpretations of researchers against cross-cultural differences (Hanitzsch, 2009). Further, Hanitzsch (2009) adds that comparative research in the field of journalism is divisible into four main paradigms: (1) *The US and the rest*: This paradigm has been dominant in communication and media studies from the 1950s to the 1960s. Jack McLeod has been dubbed the founder of comparative journalism research; he constructed the scale to assess journalistic professionalism which is used in the US and Latin American. (2) *The North and the South*: This period was fundamentally formed by political processes that happened within UNESCO and the European Community. During the 1970s, the unbalanced communication flow between the industrialized North and developing South created a conflict 'on the need for a New World Information and Communication Order'. And that gave rise to a study of attitudes toward the media in 29 different nations which was then replicated in the 1990s on a sample of 38 countries, and the studies, to date, are integrated research ventures. (3) *The*

West and the West: This model had prevalence during the mid-1980s and late 1990s. It was pushed by European scholarship and also symbolised the launch of methodologically highly advanced comparative research. Journalists and newsrooms were studied in Germany and the UK by (Kocher, 1986) and (Esser 1998); histories of journalism in France, Great Britain and the US were compared by (Chalaby 1996). Online journalists in Germany and United States were compared by Quandt, Loffellholz, Weaver, Hanitzsch, & Altmeppen (1996). (4) *The West and the Global*: In this paradigm researchers want to assess the universal and the specific in journalistic cultures around the globe. One of the beginning studies within this paradigm was Golding and Elliott's (1979) analysis of broadcasting organisations in Sweden, Ireland, and Nigeria (Hanitzsch, 2009: 414-416).

Moreover, Hanitzsch has categorized comparative research conducted in the field of journalism into four main registers: Professionalism and Professionalization, News Decisions, Historical Studies, and Global Journalists (See Hanitzsch, 2009). According to Hanitzsch one of the key sources of journalism comparative research till now is *The Global Journalist*, a compilation by David Weaver (1986). The main argument behind this work is that in spite of social and cultural differences, there is some relationship between the background and ideas of journalists everywhere and what they report and how they report it (Hanitzsch, 2009: 419). The compilation included studies of 20,280 journalists in 21 countries, conducted from 1986 in Algeria to 1996 in Canada. Hanitzsch sees this study as still the most comprehensive compilation of results of studies of news people in the world and a key reference for comparative journalism researchers (Hanitzsch, 2009).

Methodology

The secondary data for this article was collected while setting a theoretical frame work of the PhD study of the author titled as "The

role and status of the journalists in Sindh province, Pakistan” conducted at University of Leicester, United Kingdom, from January 2008 to December 2011. Thus the related literature from various resources i.e. websites, and research articles were taken. In this way, in the search for referred literature, the key words *journalists*, *journalism studies*, and *journalism survey* were put in google scholar search engine. Additionally, the relevant research articles were collected and analyzed about the studies of journalists and journalism published in various journals and books.

Thematic Findings

The findings which have been sought by reviewing a related literature have been presented below thematically. In this way the findings section in the beginning discussing the purposes to conduct the journalistic studies. Later on it has been put that in the field of mass media research to what extent the space has been provided to studying and researching journalists. Whereas, in the final part of this section it has been justified that why there is need that journalists should be studied.

Purposes to Conduct Journalistic Studies

It is found that majorly journalistic studies focus on the sociological portraits of news professionals, and their attitudes and beliefs. Moreover, it should be noted that one of the fundamental purposes of conducting journalistic studies is to pay scholarly attention to the journalistic community of any particular area, state or country, and as it were, “put them under the microscope” as media researchers and scholars across the world also closely examine the professional journalists in their own countries. Added to this it also becomes possible by conducting journalistic studies that the world community of journalists also be able to observe and confirm what are the common issues and problems of journalists at international level, and their strengths and weaknesses across the globe. Such

studies may also stir up debate and discussion among journalism and media scholars and precipitate further and more in-depth studies of journalists in the various countries.

Moreover, journalistic studies are not conducted with the intention to praise or criticize the professional attitudes and beliefs of the journalists regarding their professional aptitude. Rather their collective socio-economic, educational and attitudinal profiles, responses and views about their profession are compared, with other such journalistic studies undertaken in various developing and developed countries, where ever appropriate and possible. And further it is also found that such studies are more commonly conducted by designing structured survey questionnaires. However conducting focus groups discussions may also be one of the possible ways to search and understand some relevant journalistic issues at a deeper level, (which maybe less possible to dig and answer through a quantitative method).

Space to Journalists in Media Research

The increasing globalization of mass media and the worldwide spread of the practices and ideologies of the western world, specifically the American communication industry, have been witnessed, in particular, during the last two decades (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990; Shah, 1999), cited in Mwesige (2004: 307). This all has become possible because 'technology has brought new channels of public communication'(Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997: 421), therefore, as a result 'We now live in a media-saturated environment' (Berger, 2007: 26). The development of the media as a global phenomenon is also observable if we consider the view that 'news and information about public affairs are more available now than ever before' (Simon & Merrill, 1997: 307). From such a level of saturation and the ever-increasing growth of the media, therefore, it is assumed that in today's world, 'mass media has been a main source of information for the majority of people, and it can also set an agenda on public

issues which the leaders and public deem as significant', (Mwesige, 2004: 70).

Mwesige further observes that globalization has brought much convergence in media systems worldwide and a 'lot has been written about the media content and audiences in the new global environment' (2004: 69-70). In the context of research on media it has been pointed out long ago that media studies during the past few decades have had more focus on message content i.e. characteristics of news, propaganda and popular culture. In addition the other areas where media research has been abundantly conducted are: how information diffuses, the impact of media on politics and the effects of television on children or uses and gratifications which audiences get from the media (Johnstone, et al., 1976: 1). However, in contrast 'very little has been done to compare the people who work in journalism in developing countries..... to their counterparts in developed countries', (Mwesige, 2004: 69-70). On the other side rather it has been stated that 'the impetus coming from new technologies pushes scholars (even) to reconsider the definitions of journalist' (Joseph, 2005: 86).

Why to Study Journalists?

Riddell (1997) puts journalists in three categories. First, academics, not university researchers or lecturers, but cultured, cultivated journalists with an interest in literature and foreign affairs, whose work is informing and reforming society. Second, technicians, those who are the specialists in finance, sport, racing, fashion, drama, architecture, music, markets, law medicine, gardening, photography, and motoring etc. Thirdly, popularists, those who have the gift of selection and understand what will interest the general public (1997: 112-113).

Various scholars and academics have commented on the importance of studying the working conditions and psychology of journalists.

Some have pinned high hopes on such journalistic studies, while others have cast a critical eye on them. As an example of the former, Stead says, in words which provide a basis for all studies of journalists, 'the future of journalism depends upon the journalists' (Stead, 1997: 50); and as Williams says, 'the guardianship of journalistic values rests primarily with the journalist' (Williams, 1997: 167). However, it also should not be ignored as Williams points out that 'a journalist has commitments to the commercial interests of those who employ him, (Williams, 1997: 186). Further Tomalin adds that 'journalists are always better at describing than doing, at telling others what is wrong than in practicing what we preach' (1997: 176). Riddell adds that newspapers live by selling news and views, therefore, journalism is a commercial business, and this fact colours the psyche of the journalist. Indeed, the attitude of the public to the press has entirely changed and journalists are not prepared to be treated as inferiors (Riddell, 1997: 110-111). Moreover, journalists are human and have their favourites, because, like other people journalists are sentimental about their own environment (Riddell, 1997: 111). Stead (1997) further shares his view that 'the ideal of the journalist should be to be universally accessible- to know everyone and to hear everything' (Stead, 1997: 52). According to Williams the influence of a newspaper on its readers derives not only from its expressed opinions but from its daily selection of news, the honesty of its reporting, the weight of its headlines, and the values it emphasizes in its features (1997: 168), so somehow journalist has opportunity in the process of selecting, reporting, writing, and editing news, or adding weight to news headlines, or emphasizing upon the features of news.

Moreover, Mwesige says that media can fulfil the 'noble role' of calling the state to accountability and being the watchdog of society if they (journalists) are credible and can provide reliable information about the state and its socio-political environment. However, if journalists do not develop the knowledge, skill and freedom

necessary to investigate all public matters, they (media) cannot rise to the challenges of democratic participation and sustainability. Therefore, it is necessary to have knowledge of the people who work in journalism particularly in such countries where the democratization process is weak (2004: 70). Mwesige continues that the role of journalism and the media cannot be adequately appreciated unless we have an understanding of the people who work in this significant institution which has been called the fourth estate (2004: 71). According to De Burgh journalists are also supposed to be 'the only guarantors of truth-telling and human rights' (De Burgh, 2003: 110). Therefore, 'we want our journalists to be thoroughly competent and responsible' (Raudsepp, 1989: 1). And it is also very relevant to put here that 'any effort to "make journalists" better, we believe, must begin with a commitment to prepare journalists to talk openly and eloquently about what they do and why they do it' (Glasser & Marken, 2005: 264-265) because 'editors and reporters are the ones who decide what is important for the world to know' (Willis, 2009: 13). It is also pointed out that while taking such decisions it is important for the world to know they (journalists) are 'both reflecting and affecting deep-rooted structures of feeling' (McNair, 1998: 7). Weaver also adds that the backgrounds and ideas of journalists have some relationship to what is reported (and how it is covered) in the various news media around the world, and that news coverage matters in terms of world public opinion and policies (1998: 456).

In this way the above discussion about the rapidly developing media, its role as watchdog of society, and the significance of studying journalists provides justification for studying and exploring further to the profession of journalism and journalists as a field of research. Still there may be many more other reasons for studying journalism and journalists. For instance, 'we should remember that journalists are not working in a vacuum' (Soffer, 2009: 488). Mistakes and misconduct committed by them are

reminders that journalists are social actors whose behaviour does not always conform to the professional codes (Dickinson, 2007: 2). Therefore, overall it becomes necessary to conduct scholarly research and make them accountable.

In addition, to know the views and perceptions of news workers about their profession and socio-economic status and conditions also becomes necessary, particularly because they are 'prominently involved in the formation of social consciousness in the name of public' (Adam, 2001: 316), and the news selection is dependent on their individual idiosyncrasies says White (1950) cited in Dickinson (2007: 5). Schudson also adds that 'leaders from various sectors of society who disagree on almost everything else agree that journalists are the most powerful, dangerous, and irresponsible group in the country' (2003: 16). Moreover, Machin & Niblock perceive that 'the role of the journalist is a seeker of truth, the eyes and ears of people' (2006: 4), however 'according to many studies the role of journalist as eyes and ears of the public is questionable' conclude (Machin & Niblock, 2006: 31).

Another reason for studying journalists may be that as commonly one of the purposes of journalistic studies is enumerated as to compare their findings with those of similar studies, because we can 'understand a given system by comparing it with others' (McLeod, Blumler, Berger, & Chaffee, 1987: 315). Therefore, Josephi (2005: 576) considers that these 'comparative studies, which have come a long way since first advocated by Blumler and Gurevitch (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1990, 1995; Esser, 2004), begin to have a deeper impact'. She (Josephi, 2005) adds that in journalism studies, no other book has been as influential as Siebert et al.'s (1956) *Four Theories of the Press*. However, the book has been incisively criticized by Nerone and others, pointing out that the *Four Theories* 'does not offer four theories: it offers one theory with four examples (Nerone, 1995: 18)'. Therefore, when, as Josephi (2005) points out, there are an insufficient number of theories, comparative studies are therefore

the only way to arrive at a new media and journalism theory as Hallin & Mancini (2004) suggest.

Finally, with regard to the importance of journalistic studies, Ramaprasad & Rahman state that the tradition of journalistic surveys around the world (Weaver, 1998) provides knowledge regarding international media and their practitioners. Such studies are, specifically, relevant in the current period of globalization, where media and messages flow across borders easily and continuously, and the effects on media policy and practice are also cross-national (2006: 148).

Conducting journalistic studies can also be justified in other ways. For instance, Mwesige says that 'national portraits of journalists are important because journalism is deemed to be a central influence on society' (Mwesige, 2004: 70). Therefore, there is need to conduct such comprehensive, systematic and scientific studies particularly in those areas, states and countries of the world where they have not yet been conducted, and as well in those countries where already journalistic survey studies have been conducted then they must be kept doing after a break of certain years, to have a fresh knowledge regarding journalists – their status, safety conditions, media role perceptions, professional attitudes, or other various profession related likes and dislikes. However, in those countries or areas of the world where journalistic studies would be conducted first time then they would establish baseline data regarding the journalists of those countries, hence upgrading the research profile of those countries at international level.

Conclusion

Survey studies of journalism have been establishing as an international tradition, and the trend to surveying journalists began in 20th century in Germany and US, which became accepted among scholars internationally. Thus some of the most important

journalistic studies were those conducted in US (1976), Germany (1979), and Great Britain (1970). Then one other systemic study about US journalists was conducted by Weaver & Wilhoit in 1986 and its two follow-up survey studies were undertaken in 1990s and in 2002. Further, similarities are found in the professional routines, editorial procedures, and socialization processes of journalists of various countries; on the other, professional views and practices of journalists in different countries are influenced by media systems of those countries, resulting in differences. Hence, exploring journalistic cultures has become fascinating sphere which caused to follow a comparative perspective as well to studying journalism and journalists at national and international level.

In this era of latest technology, media studies have more focused to the characteristics of news, propaganda, popular culture, information diffusion, impact of media on politics, TV effects, uses and gratifications and agenda-setting. However, comparatively very little has been done to compare the journalists, who due possessing different characteristics and skills have been categorized as academics, technicians, and popularists of their profession. Finally, journalists are justified to be studied because the future of journalism, it is said, depends upon them. Generally, they are also expected to make the state accountable, however, this is possible when they are credible and provide reliable information. Therefore, to assess or have knowledge about journalists through research studies, specifically of those countries where democratization process is still unstable, occurs important. Because, journalists are also human, have favorites, sentiments and most importantly they have commitment to the commercial interests of their employers, while they are being expected to play impartiality and neutrality in their profession.

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