

Purposes, Functions and Obligations of Journalism

Talk by Shafqat Munir

Purposes of Journalism

1. Informed Citizenry: The primary purpose of journalism is to ensure a well informed citizenry for our social and political structure. American Sociologist Herbert J. Gans in his book 'Democracy and the News' says journalism itself "can do little to reduce the political imbalance between citizens and the economic, political and other organizations." Journalism's theory of democracy still relies on a belief that an informed citizenry will be an engaged citizenry, that an engaged citizenry will be more participatory and more informed, and that the result will be a more democratic society.

The central purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with accurate and reliable information they need to function in a free society.

This encompasses myriad roles--helping define community, creating common language and common knowledge, identifying a community's goals, heroes and villains, and pushing people beyond complacency. This purpose also involves other requirements, such as being entertaining, serving as watchdog and offering voice to the voiceless.

2. Informed Media: Another purpose of journalism is to provide knowledge about **all aspect** of media. It **tells about** new developments in technology and hones writing skills that produce real publications (newspapers and television shows, radio programmes) for real audience.

3. Focus on writing/reading on people's issues: Journalism emphasizes on writing and reading literature **on people's issues**

4. Promotion of multiperspectival approach: Journalism promotes values and ideology of the profession with a purpose to project a multi-perspectival approach. Journalism informs citizens about the country's political diversity, the politically relevant activities and ideas of their fellow citizens, and what issues are concerning these citizens (which our elected representatives also need to know) then journalists need to be multiperspectival: to encompass all the important viewpoints from people with different values, interests, incomes. Multiperspectivism means reporting all ideas that could resolve issues and help problems, even if the ideas come from ideologically small groups.

5. Sociological context: Journalism need to be more sociological -- more about understanding and interpreting what underlies experience. But current journalism's attempts at explanation are rarely interpretive or analytical in these ways.

6. Online journalism: It is feisty and combative, but its style and round-the-clock news cycle raise questions about how cyber-journalism can offer reporting compatible with journalism's highest standards. Mainstream news organizations are struggling to apply old-fashioned news standards to the Web, but are discovering it is not easy to translate

the virtues of accuracy, balance, and clarity to a medium where the advantages of speed and timeliness prevail.

Web technology has strengthened the traditional watchdog functions of journalism by giving reporters efficient ways to probe more deeply for information. The capacity to search documents, compile background and historical context, and identify authoritative sources has expanded the reporter's toolbox. It also has introduced a fundamentally different culture built on interactivity, fewer rules, and fewer limits.

Functions of journalism:

Inform
Educate
Interpret
Mold opinion
Enable decision making
Agent of change
Entertain

What needs to be done while functioning/Writing:

Reader Interest
Accuracy
Objectivity
Credibility
Readability
Significance
Clarity
Personality

Functioning/writings cause the reader to:

Stop
Be interested
Think
Learn
Understand
Enjoy
Remember
Discuss
Change

Points to be noted:

Know your reader. Agenda must be only based on reader interest.

What makes you stop? The Headline.

Immersion, Structure, Tone, Voice/Opinion, Character/Personality, Balance

Be unafraid of outrageous statements, but back them up with facts.

A magazine is a group of people interested in and knowledgeable about a subject, talking to a larger group of interested people.

The best magazines in the world: readers feel that they are written for only one person — themselves.

Make the reader think.

Preferably use real examples.

Use timelines where applicable. Content should be designed for browsers rather than readers.

How to function/Write:

Think a lot for the lead.

Conclusion should be a tie-back, it should link back to the focus, giving a feeling of completion.

Stages: Information gathering, planning, writing, checking.

Objectives are determined by the limitations of space, the section/sub-section, and the reader profile. What is your objective?

Focus.

First thought on basic design elements.

Begin research. Discard research material when short of space.

Organise the text material and make a structure.

Identify the unusual, informative and entertaining in the text and put it into the appropriate form (boxes, main text, intro/close etc.

Finalise the elements.

Writing: Attribution (source, preferably creditable), identification, background.

Identification: elements, scenes, facts. Identify and bring out importance.

Background: a fact should be obvious to all, it should have meaning and importance for the generic reader.

Selecting and eliminating facts.

Obligations of Journalism

1. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth

Democracy depends on citizens having reliable, accurate facts put in a meaningful context. Journalism does not pursue truth in an absolute or philosophical sense, but it can-and must--pursue it in a practical sense. This "journalistic truth" is a process that begins with the professional discipline of assembling and verifying facts. Then journalists try to convey a fair and reliable account of their meaning, valid for now, subject to further investigation. Journalists should be as transparent as possible about sources and methods so audiences can make their own assessment of the information.

2. Its first loyalty is to citizens.

While news organizations answer to many constituencies, including advertisers and shareholders, the journalists in those organizations must maintain allegiance to citizens and the larger public interest above any other if they are to provide the news without fear or favor. This commitment to citizens first is the basis of a news organization's credibility, the implied covenant that tells the audience the coverage is not slanted for friends or advertisers. Commitment to citizens also means journalism should present a representative picture of all constituent groups in society.

3. Obligation of verification.

Journalists rely on a professional discipline for verifying information. When the concept of objectivity originally evolved, it did not imply that journalists are free of bias. It called, rather, for a consistent method of testing information--a transparent approach to

evidence--precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work. Journalism has developed various techniques for determining facts, for instance, it has done less to develop a system for testing the reliability of journalistic interpretation.

4. Independence and Neutrality

Independence is an underlying requirement of journalism, a cornerstone of its reliability. Independence of spirit and mind, rather than neutrality, is the principle journalists must keep in focus. While editorialists and commentators are not neutral, the source of their credibility is still their accuracy, intellectual fairness and ability to inform--not their devotion to a certain group or outcome. In our independence, however, we must avoid any tendency to stray into arrogance, elitism or isolation.

5. Independent monitor of power

Journalism has an unusual capacity to serve as watchdog over those whose power and position most affects citizens. Journalists have an obligation to protect this watchdog freedom by not demeaning it in frivolous use or exploiting it for commercial gain.

6. It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise

The news media are the common carriers of public discussion, and this responsibility forms a basis for our special privileges. It also should strive to fairly represent the varied viewpoints and interests in society, and to place them in context rather than highlight only the conflicting fringes of debate.