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In Defense of Democracy: The Case for Modern Advocacy Journalism

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## Introduction

The press has been and continues to be a part of every important historical and modern development: cultural, political, religious, technological and social (Altschull, 1995). For every laudable progression in American history, there were diligent journalists covering a myriad of injustices from widespread racism to the obscurity of the Watergate scandal. Journalists who transcend hard news reporting into the realm of advocacy journalism are celebrated, when successful.

In 2016, Rep. John Lewis addressed the attendees of the Pulitzer Centennial celebration about the heroics of journalists he witnessed during the Civil Rights era. He stressed that the opposition targeted journalists before civil rights advocates by physically assaulting them and destroying their equipment.

“If it hadn’t been for the media, for brave, courageous journalists, the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings,” said Lewis. “I think the journalists of the period did attempt to make it plain to help educate and make it clear to the average reader.”

Lewis recognized the vitality of advocacy journalism, and takes no issue in being generous with his credit (Mitchell, 2016). It is not difficult to garner public enthusiasm and support for contributors to advocacy journalism once the fruits of their labor are clearly recognized. Regardless of the overwhelming good engendered by advocacy journalism, critics who narrowly believe all news media should be a straight and unbiased catalog of events still remain.

Renowned journalism scholar and journalist Larry Atkins criticized advocacy journalism this way,

“Advocacy journalists do not set out to inform; they set out to advance an agenda, whether it be conservative or liberal. While FOX News and conservative talk radio show hosts like Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity are the worst offenders, liberal television hosts like Al Sharpton and Rachel Maddow also fall into this category. They are all giving their opinion and reporting news with a goal and a biased agenda” (2014).

While this is a fair assessment, I would hate to learn that Atkins’ above conceptualization of advocacy journalists is a consistent and widely accepted conceptualization. In this paper, I will critique this conceptualization and discuss how advocacy journalism is a vital defense for today’s democracy. A heuristical approach will examine facets of modern culture that must be considered, such as the growing diversity of journalistic voices and the stale argument of objective journalism. Along with that, traditional literature and ideas about the press will be revisited to bolster the idea that advocacy journalism is an essential part of a democracy.

### **The Impossibility of Objectivity**

When I was a child, my parents would show affinity for a journalist or news source because they gave “just the facts.” This led me, and I am sure many others, to believe objectivity is the “normal mode” for the press. This is incorrect, as objectivity became a professional norm in the 1920’s as an economic device (Pressman, 2018). Now, media scholars have determined that news consumers are becoming restless with objectivity because it is a self-defeating cycle and impossible to achieve (St. John & Johnson, 2012).

Janine Jackson, director of media watch group FAIR and host and producer of the radio show CounterSpin, argues that the most noble journalists were advocacy journalists and "...if taking a side against poverty or racism or climate change means breaking some rule of straight journalism, then it's the rules that ought to change" (2016). Her views align with Rory O'Connor's, co-founder of the media group GlobalVision. Jackson interviewed O'Connor on her radio show about an award called "The Danny" newly created by his educational foundation, the Global Center (the award bears the name of O'Connor's friend and co-founder of GlobalVision, Danny Schechter). The award is unique, as it extols "socially engaged journalism." Pulitzer Prize winner Jose Antonio Vargas was the first winner of The Danny, who was a reporter at the Washington Post. O'Connor describes him as "one of the leading advocates and activists in America when it comes to that very hot topic of immigration." However, Vargas is unique because he was, at the time, an undocumented immigrant. O'Connor calls him a "leader in the field" (2016).

Jackson and O'Connor reject the idea that objective journalism is the "right" journalism, and theoretical research from Shoemaker and Reese (1996) denotes no one, even a journalist, is exempt from bias. Jackson and O'Connor would argue that nothing progressive happens through the means of objective journalism. Even the United States was founded with the help of a revolutionary press because Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison understood that expression was central to democracy (Altschull, 1990).

The objectivity debate is anchored to the idea that objective journalism is a means to truth. Critics of objective journalism battle with the seemingly logical reasoning that if news is gathered unobjectively, then how is it justifiable (Berry, 2008)? It is justifiable because truth is complex and subjective, especially pertaining to social issues. I think of every religion and every

facet of every religion as an example. If one examined every belief with an objective mind only to draw a conclusion that one religion was the “right” religion, then that poor person would be subject to a life of criticism and aggressive persuasion from religious leaders. Humans derive truth from different sources, so one could argue it is counterproductive to establish a relationship with objectivity and truth.

Other anti-objectivity arguments say that objectivity is a barrier between journalists and a responsible and constructive societal role. Objectivity can sometimes be a list of “empty facts,” serving no use to society (Maras, 2013). A difference between a register of empty facts and advocacy journalism is fulfillment of a responsible and constructive role in public life. Vargas had a unique platform to be constructive, and remaining objective would deprive the country of his vital journalism on undocumented immigration, the AIDS epidemic in Washington D.C., and the impact Facebook and YouTube had on the 2008 presidential campaign. Now he acts as founder of Define American, it is described on his website as “a non-profit media and culture organization I founded that fights injustice and anti-immigrant hate through the power of storytelling.” Clearly, Vargas is not a subscriber of objectivity as a means to truth. However, I do believe there is a place for objectivity in journalism, but the concept should not be limiting.

### **News Reporting vs. Advocacy Journalism**

First, it is important to clear the air about the relationship between advocacy journalism and conventional news reporting. Advocacy journalism does not seek to replace news reporting but is simply an extension of it. Both seek to serve the public and its interest, but advocacy journalism is more assumptive and bolder than reporting a litany of events. A common criticism of advocacy journalism closely mirrors Atkins’ sentiment: advancing of an agenda or ideology

from a source, such as a journalist, so exposed to the public is unfair and sometimes manipulative.

Journalism Ethicist Bob Steele addresses valid concerns about advocacy journalism in “The Dangers of Activist-Driven Journalism” (2010). He argues that journalism derived from a source of activism contradicts ethical principles such as “competency, commitment and courage” and activist journalism erodes the power of independent thought that comes with “serious, substantive journalism.” Steele calls for intelligent, competent and brave journalists from all backgrounds to enhance the industry. This school of thought is bold, and it is also a vital recognition more need to have.

While Steele’s points are thorough and applicable, I believe he speaks in the incorrect context. There is a difference between advocacy *journalists* and advocacy *journalism*. Advocacy journalists fit the stereotypes of Atkins and Steele: journalists known for building their career from ideological activism for the sake of activism – the Sean Hannitys, Rush Limbaughs, Rachel Maddows and Cenk Uygurs of the media. These journalists often compromise accuracy and fairness for ratings and political elites’ approval. Advocacy journalism, however, is not bound to one person. Advocacy journalism is an aggregate of stories penned by diligent journalists who identify injustices and rely on journalistic frames and narratives guided by ethical values with an urgency to act.

Advocacy journalism should not supersede news reporting, which is essential to democracy in its own right. A television anchor should not feel pressured, for the sake of staying true to personal values, to pervade her reporting of a local drug bust with opinions on criminal justice reform. However, the conversation should not stop at simple reporting. Truth and facts are discovered by persistent discourse, which is where advocacy journalism finds its home.

### **Theoretical Analysis – Media Effects**

It is easy to say, “We need advocacy journalism because the world is so terrible!” without considering prior media effects research. Multiple communication studies have shown that the media influences public opinion and issue perception (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Shen & Edwards, 2005; Valentino et al., 2001; Shen, 2004; Zaller, 1992). Theories such as agenda setting allow for a closer analysis of the potential effects of modern advocacy journalism.

Researchers have long pondered how and why issues appear on the medias’ agenda. This process is known as the agenda setting theory, and the concept of issue salience is its foundation (Cohen, 1963; Scheufele, 2000). This theory suggests a perceptible correlation between medias’ emphasis on issues and how news consumers determine which issues are important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). These findings have substantial implications on advocacy journalism.

#### *Issue Selection*

First, let us ask how journalists should choose what issues to extend beyond conventional news reporting. Consider McCombs and Reynolds saying that the media sets the program of public discussion (2009). This gives a vast amount of power to those contributing to advocacy journalism, especially when it comes to the nuance of issues. In the same text, McCombs and Reynolds explain that issues fall on a spectrum between “obtrusive” and “unobtrusive.” Obtrusive issues are very easy to understand by the lay public, usually through personal experiences, and the media is not needed for information dissemination. For example, personal experience tells us about holiday spending patterns or rising gas prices. Other economic issues are not personable at all, and therefore require assistance to inform and help interpret: balancing the national budget, trade policies and deficits or the housing market. These are known as unobtrusive issues, and the assistance comes from the media (2009).

Sometimes, these issues intersect. For example, an injustice may have an impact on a marginalized group (making it an obtrusive issue to the marginalized) and be unbeknownst to the majority of the population (which would be an unobtrusive issue to them). Take the topic of voter suppression – labeled by the Brennan Center for Justice as the worst cases in the modern era, research finds that this issue is debilitating to racial minorities. In 2018 alone, roll purges erroneously invalidated 53,000 Georgia voter registrations and 50% of those registrations were black voters. In North Dakota, voter identification laws were reviewed after Heidi Heitkamp won her 2012 election with overwhelming support from Native Americans. A regulation that prevented using P.O. Box addresses to register to vote was enacted, thus disenfranchising Native Americans living on reservations (Lopez, 2018). This intersection creates an ideal environment for the most effective advocacy journalism because credibility is found here. Without sources to bolster arguments and narratives, advocacy journalism is nonsensical babble. A journalist writing about southern voter suppression as a form of racism peddles inaccuracy unless they find sources at the “obtrusive” end of the spectrum. Depending on life experiences, the journalist can sometimes serve as that source. Technology and social progression make that more common now than ever.

*Issue Orientation – The Public Needs Advocacy Journalism, Even if They Don’t Know It*

The “effects” part of “media effects research” occasionally examines the cognitive processes of the human brain and how it processes information. Without derailing too much, I will use the framing theory as a brief example. Framing is a way information is presented which influences how we think of the news (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). To help us process information, framing uses patterns of interpretation which helps us make sense of the world and makes the job of retention and recall easier (Entman, 1993; Shoemaker & Reese, 2006; Valentino et al., 2001).



Just as we need patterns of interpretation to help us make sense of information, we also need a sense of orientation when considering more complex issues (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009 cited Tolman, 1932 & 1948). Psychologist Edward Tolman suggested that we form maps in our mind that helps us navigate the world, and he called it the cognitive mapping theory. McCombs and Reynolds said, “The need for orientation concept suggests that there are individual differences in the need for orienting cues to an issue and in the need for background information on an issue” (p. 8, 2009). In order for an individual to need orientation, they must feel *uncertainty or relevancy* about an issue. Naturally, if issue relevance is low then the need for orientation is low. If uncertainty exists about a relevant issue, then the need for orientation is high.

I will continue with the example of voter suppression. Research of voting laws show two conclusions: (a) suppressive laws are often implemented to gain a partisan advantage and (b) Republicans champion those laws (Biggers & Hamner, 2017; Bentele & O’Brien, 2013; Hicks et al., 2015; Clark, 2018). Consider three scenarios:

Scenario	Issue Orientation
<p><b>Voter A</b> lives in a predominately white district in the Northeast United States that almost, always elects Republicans. He is registered Republican and has voted Republican his entire life. He heard talk of “voter suppression in Georgia” briefly on the news, but was unsure what it was.</p>	<p><b>Low Relevancy</b></p>
<p><b>Voter B</b> is a white, Republican voter who lives in the Southern United States. Her district is split between black and white voters, and it is often considered a swing district. While preparing to vote on election day, she arrived at her precinct and found a line wrapped around the building. She waited</p>	<p><b>High Uncertainty, Low Relevancy</b></p>

<p>for hours, and the polling place closed before she could vote. She was baffled. Later, she saw a tweet from a verified account that said voter suppression in her district is rampant, and if her precinct closes while she still in line, she still has the right to vote.</p>	
<p><b>Voter C</b> is an African-American principal at a high school in the Southern United States and a registered Democrat. More times than not, he does not vote. However, he decided to vote this year because his party’s candidate was running the first African-American female ever nominated. When he attempted to vote early, he was told his registration was no longer valid because it was purged from the rolls for being inactive for so long. He thought that was a fair point until he read an article in the paper reporting 50% of records purged were black voters’ and it is unconstitutional to consider someone’s registration as invalid because of inactivity.</p>	<p><b>High Relevancy, High Uncertainty</b></p>

Now let us consider the role advocacy journalism plays in each situation. Voter suppression is irrelevant to **Voter A**, and he would find no need for advocacy journalism. Since advocacy journalism about voter suppression targets Republican lawmakers, he might even become angry at the news outlet for disseminating “biased news.” Statistically, **Voter B’s** race and party affiliation would not subject her to oppressive voting laws. However, her geographical location does. In her scenario, the issue of voter suppression is very irrelevant, but she still did not get to vote. She did not second-guess it until she saw a verified account on Twitter tell her she should have voted. Advocacy journalism would have informed Voter B that long lines and short hours are unfair and telling those still waiting in line after the precinct closes is deceitful and suppressive. In the context of voter suppression, **Voter C** is the ideal source for advocacy

journalism. He needed to be informed, and he is different from Voter B because his situation is at the intersect of “obtrusive” and “unobtrusive” issues.

The need for orientation varies among news consumers but regardless of the level, advocacy journalism makes issue processing easier by choosing sources struggling with obtrusive issues and helping those needing orientation with unobtrusive issues. Issue obtrusiveness and the need for orientation on a relevancy and uncertainty scale could be also applicable to legislation, policy and ballot measures.

### **Function of the Press & Deliberative Democracy**

I may argue for a contemporary need for advocacy journalism, but a historical exploration of the function of the press gives valuable insight into effective journalism conduct, and why historical thought justifies modern advocacy journalism. First, let me lay the groundwork. There are multiple musings from the beginning of the press to present day that perpetually ponder what, exactly, is the function of the press? Siebert et al. published “Four Theories of the Press” in 1956, and it became seminal literature for that type of inquiry. Out of the four, this discussion aligns closely with the Social Responsibility Theory (SRT). The theory posits that the press’s main function is to “raise conflict to the plane of discussion” (Siebert et al., 1984, p. 7). Anything transcending a mundane register of events has some element of conflict, and advocacy journalism is an ideal device to facilitate sophisticated discussion.

Two fundamental thinkers are often associated with the SRT: John Milton and John Locke. While Milton’s line of thinking was somewhat utopian, John Locke was a hard-lining pragmatist. Each received their fair share of criticism, but combining select major themes from their work orchestrates a foundation on which modern advocacy journalism should operate.

Milton's self-righting theory says that if the "marketplace of ideas" is saturated with discourse, then truth will eventually emerge. While he was criticized for his romantic and unrealistic rhetoric, the basis of his thinking calls for enlightened discourse and advocacy journalism (Altschull, 1990; Merrill, 2000).

Milton articulated three kinds of liberty are required for happiness: religious, domestic and civil (Altschull, 1990). In this context, I think of times in United States history where stories about social justice "wins" always have an element of journalistic advocacy. Dudley Clendinen, an editor at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and national reporter was inducted into the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association for his journalism about AIDS awareness, literacy and the equality for members of the LGBTQ community (NLGJA.org, 2018). He used his sexuality and experiences to construct a more sophisticated public discourse, for his legacy was one of positive change (McFadden, 2012). This type of press is advocates for Milton's three liberties, and it improves the quality of life for everyone.

While less romantic, Locke's school of thought also valued experience of the populace. He is known for work on the social contract theory which, in short, the government needs the consent of the governed to serve its purpose. Locke believed there were no absolute answers to any question, and the human mind is a blank slate shaped by experiences (Altschull, 1990; Merrill, 2000). Experience is quite becoming of advocacy journalism, and experienced writers are excellent at detecting consent or dissent in a democratic population. On Oct. 5, 2017, New York Times journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey wrote a story that would uncover an entire culture of dissent among women. Their story, "Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades" launched the anti-sexual harassment movement, #MeToo. Their journalism encouraged women to share their experiences and sparked investigations into

other sexual harassment allegations directed toward powerful figures. Since 2017, Vox.com maintains a list of celebrities with allegations tied to them. So far, there are 263 names including actor Morgan Freeman, magician David Copperfield, Marvel Comics editor-in-chief Stan Lee and former U.S. Sen. Al Franken (North, 2019).

It is fascinating that the social justices of today were far from materializing when Milton and Locke made philosophical strides toward the function of the press. However, the foundation of their thinking remains a sound qualifier for practicing nuanced advocacy journalism in the pursuit of justice and an equally represented democracy.

“For the sake of democracy” bolsters our need for advocacy journalism, and the theory of deliberative democracy explains why. In a perfect world, deliberative democracy brings together citizens, representing a myriad of views and experiences, to discuss beneficial public policy (Bächtiger et al., 2018). The “Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy” defines deliberation as “mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values and interests regarding matters of common concern” (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2). Attach that to “democracy” and deliberative democracy is conceptualized as a democracy where deliberation is king. The dichotomy of obtrusive and unobtrusive issues dictates citizen deliberation can function without the press, but a democracy works only when its citizens are empowered to participate. This empowerment comes from a sense of equality, and the media facilitate channels of information to uncover and help eradicate inequality (Beauvais, 2018). Minority journalists could draw from their experiences to build a narrative that intersectionality happens when institutional structures contribute to the exclusion or vulnerably expose certain identities, which contributes to debilitating inequality (Crenshaw, 2016). Advocacy journalism works in democracy because, as championed by Milton, a marketplace of ideas exist that serves

no benefit if communication is simply a black-and-white account of events. The SRT argues that one of the press's many functions is to be a "watchdog" of democracy. Watchdogs are only effective if they act upon a threat, and advocacy journalism is exactly the same.

Even Alexis de Tocqueville was astounded by the power of the American press's relationship with its democracy. He noted that the mere saturation of periodicals gave different perspectives – on politics, morality and taste – and that diffused the power of any single opinion (King & Chapman, 2012). Although the press experiences economic hardship and news ownership is concentrated in a select few organizations (Molla & Kafka, 2019), the saturation of periodicals are replaced with voices of various genders, races and sexual orientations who have the talent and skill to be a voice of justice with their advocacy journalism.

### **Conclusion: A Diverse Democracy**

The premise of this analysis rests on (a) the growing diversity of the American population, (b) this is the first time in history where almost anyone, with any type of background, has access to the resources and the empowerment to tell their story, (c) the incredible benefit modern diversity has for our democracy and (d) one type of majority – white males – made and wrote our history and established our foundational thinking. As de Tocqueville wisely shared, "...majorities are quite as capable of tyranny and oppression of monarchs" (Altschull, 1990, p. 54). I do not suggest the ideas of conventional journalistic thought leaders such as Milton and Locke are oppressive to anyone not white and male. However, they were constructed in a time where the voice of one majority resonated and ruled.

To avoid inane rambling, advocacy journalists must be thoughtful and accurate. They must build well-constructed arguments with facts and experience while adhering to ethical

tenants. Advocacy journalism is most effective when experience supplements accuracy. For example, I view a journalist identifying as queer woman of color as a voice of authority on suppression of queer minorities. I also believe a woman would have more relevant insight on health resources, or the lack thereof, available to other women. This differs from advocacy journalism of the past because social progressivism and technological innovation provides a platform for those who did not have a voice.

Modern advocacy journalism breaks institutionalized and hegemonic forces. More journalism equals more voices, and more voices shed light on the dangers of intersectionality. Journalists are part of society and not mindless messengers. They experience social life just like normal people, and therefore always have an interpretation (Rachlin, 1988). These interpretations are invaluable. When the First Amendment was ratified in 1791, the basic freedom of expression only applied to white males (Altschull, 1995). Thankfully, our country progressed, and more people see the value in diversity. Instead of one facet of society trying to manipulate or interpret complex issues, there are now journalists who speak up to share their experiences and reality. Growing diversity means obtrusive and unobtrusive issues intersect more often – more voices and more experiences mean more people experience different things and writing about them gives the unaware public greater accessibility – especially through today’s multimedia capabilities such as documentaries, interactive news stories and live streams.

Advocacy journalism is a collection of experiences, observations and analyses that is built on a solid foundation of accuracy, facts and diligent journalism. It encourages public deliberation, wherein lies the power of democracy. So many modern social issues are on a progressive track toward change because brave journalists chased the story. Journalists who cover and investigate sexual harassment are contributing toward a culture where women feel safe

and there is a mutual level respect between bosses and employees. Voting rights journalists dig into suppressive laws and fight them by arming voters with information about their rights until everyone has equal voting access. Advocacy journalism enhances our democracy by shining light where it is dark, giving voices to the marginalized and checking the powerful.



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