The one thing journalism just might do for democracy: counterfactual idealism, liberal optimism, democratic realism

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss counterfactual idealism, liberal optimism, and democratic realism as different ways of thinking about journalism's role in democracy. On the basis of a democratic realist reading of Michael Schudson's essay on six or seven things journalism can do for democracy and emphasizing the importance of developing a normative approach (1) based on what actually-existing journalism could conceivably do for democracy, (2) that is rooted in something journalists actually want to do and (3) that identifies something that is distinct to journalism specifically, I identify one thing journalism just might do for democracy: provide people with relatively accurate, accessible, diverse, relevant, and timely independently produced information about public affairs. This is a more modest ambition than the ones many harbor on journalism's behalf—less, even, than what Schudson's liberal optimism asks for. This, I argue, is a strength of a democratic realist approach. We do not get more from journalism simply by wishing for more. A central part of any normative argument is not simply the articulation of a number of "oughts" in the face of an "is", but also a judgement about what is most important. For journalism's role in democracy, that is providing information.

Keywords

Democracy, deliberative democracy, public sphere, liberalism, democratic realism, journalism, news media, counterfactual idealism

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> "In her despair she had resorted to desperate measures. She had read philosophy in the original German, and the more she read, the more she was disheartened that so much culture should lead to nothing—nothing."
>
> Henry Adams (1880), *Democracy*

Introduction

Journalism studies is an ambitious field. It is ambitious in the best possible sense in that we try at the best of our ability to make sense of a complex, ever-changing, and self-reflexive object of analysis. But it is also ambitious in a slightly more problematic manner, in that we tend to have very high ambitions on other people's behalf, and tend to criticize people for not living up to these ambitions (our ambitions, not their ambitions).

These ambitions are often built around a conception of journalism's role in democracy. In practice, this means the democratic role of a few thousand over-worked and increasingly underpaid and inexperienced white collar professionals unevenly distributed across more and more complex, pluralistic, unequal, globalized and often deeply divided societies, working for sometimes existentially threatened media organizations, faced with well-organized and intransparent vested interests of a wide variety of sorts and catering to people who see themselves as citizens only occasionally and as one amongst many identities, and engage with news to widely varying degrees. Thinking about their role, it is clear that journalism studies as a field, like professional journalism itself, deals with necessarily normative phenomena (Blumler and Cushion 2014). Both we and the people we study have norms for journalism, ideas concerning not only what is, but also what ought to be. At least in Europe and North America, for many researchers and practitioners, the central normative anchoring point has been a notion of democracy (Carey 1989, Zelizer 2013). Outside of the "Western world", this is less clearly the case, but many academics, citizens, and journalists continue to see democracy as a central normative concern even in societies where the political elite may beg to differ (George 2013). As Amartya Sen (1999) has noted, one of the most important things that happened in the 20th century was that democracy came to be seen as a universal value.

The ambitions that journalism studies scholars have had on journalism's behalf are often implicit and have frequently been high. This article is about these normative democratic ambitions, about how they can be made explicit in different ways, and about how we might scale them in three ways:

1) How we might scale them so that they approximate something we can expect that actually-existing real-world journalism just *might do* for democracy.
2) How we might scale them so that these ambitions, without being collapsed into a self-legitimizing professional ideology or subservience to the dominant ideals of a given state or society, are rooted in something journalists actually *want to do*.

3) How we might scale them so that they identify something that is empirically and normatively *distinct to journalism* specifically.

My basic argument is simple: if democratic ambitions on journalism's behalf are to function as useful regulative ideals (and in turn thus provide a meaningful basis for judgements of where and when journalism as a profession falls short), these ideals have to be something journalists can realistically strive for, something that they can identify with, and something that is distinct to their profession. A structural critique of the institutions that sustain and constrain professional journalism can—should—deal with whether the profession operates in an enabling environment. A discussion of the profession, in contrast, concerns in part its relation with these institutions, but also, centrally, the purpose and performance of professional journalism itself. Here, normative critiques based on goals actually-existing journalism cannot realistically achieve, never aimed to achieve, and/or duplicate what many others are doing are less useful than discussions of where journalism might focus its finite and often very limited resources, when and where journalists manage to do things they actually strive to do on the basis of professional norms and values, and that no one else will do.

The one thing I argue journalism just might do for democracy is this: provide people with relatively accurate, accessible, diverse, relevant, and timely independently produced information about public affairs. I develop this democratic realist perspective on the basis of a discussion of the role of normative approaches in journalism studies—often in the form of abstract forms of counter-factual idealism—and an examination of the specific position developed by Michael Schudson, which I will call "liberal optimism". In the process, I will highlight the importance for those interested in engaging in a normative discussion of journalism of: (1) being explicit about their standards and what they are based on; (2) deciding between an approach based on ideal or nonideal theory; and (3) choosing between a broad or a focused assessment.

In what follows, I first discuss counter-factual idealism (broad, more abstract normative approaches based on various kinds of ideal theory), before turning to the liberal optimism of Michael Schudson (a broad assessment based on nonideal theory) and finally a democratic realist alternative (a focused assessment based on nonideal theory). Before beginning, however, let me note that, despite the centrality of the link between journalism and democracy to the self-perception of both the profession and journalism studies, most studies of journalism are empiricist, focused on what journalism is, how it works, and what that means, and limit judgement to brief normative assertions in the concluding section, or as a part of almost ritual invocations in the opening paragraphs before the research design and analysis is presented (Kreiss and Brennan 2015). This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is worth acknowledging this, and worth noting that my focus here is on those parts of the field that in various ways engage more explicitly with normative issues.

Counter-factual idealism and journalism studies

When scholars working on journalism do offer explicit normative assessments and sustained discussion of the different standards by which one might develop them, they primarily do so with reference to theoretical work coming out of philosophy, sociology, and political theory. Take just two prominent examples from relatively recent book-length studies: First, in *Media, Markets, and Democracy*, C. Edwin Baker (2002) offers "elitist democracy" (attributed to Joseph Schumpeter), "liberal pluralist democracy" (attributed to John Rawls), "republican democracy"

(attributed to John Dewey), and “complex democracy” (attributed to Jürgen Habermas). Second, in *Normative Theories of the Media*, Clifford G. Christians et al. (2009) outline four normative traditions: “corporatist” (associated with Plato), “libertarian” (associated with John Stuart Mill), “social responsibility” (associated with Robert Hutchins), and “citizen participation” (associated with James W. Carey). It is worth noting that of all the intellectual forefathers identified (and they are mostly men), only one, James W. Carey, can be seen as having played an active part of the field of journalism studies. None of them are journalists. Most of them are philosophers. This is indicative of how many normative discussions in journalism studies play out in external terminology rather than inside terms.

The underlying dynamic of many of these arguments is very similar to that which has characterized much contemporary work in the field of political theory. In sharp contrast to the “less is more” minimalism of democratic realism, the dominant approach here seems to be a “more-is-more” approach, a sort of normative bidding war where each new entrant to the discussion has offered at least one more thing journalism really ought to do for democracy and contrasted their “richer”, “thicker”, more “diverse”, or more “complex” models with that favorite straw man of liberal representative democracy (often short-handed as “elitist democracy”—though I have yet to see anyone self-identify as an elitist democrat). This way we have ended up with a proliferation of very detailed, multi-layered, complex theories of deliberative, participatory, and discursive theories of journalism and democracy (see e.g. Benson 2013, Ferree et al. 2002, Strömback 2005), each of which aims to go beyond the perceived limitations of liberal democracy and articulate more ambitious abstract positions, each of which heaps more and more normative expectations on both journalists and citizens.

The approach that seems most influential in journalism studies is the one Baker (2002) calls “complex democracy”, also known as “deliberative democracy” or “public sphere theory”, identified more than anything with the work of Jürgen Habermas. His work is complex and has evolved over a half-century, but the basic idea is that democracy requires a public sphere (Öffentlichkeit) where public opinions are formed on the basis of unrestricted communication (including mediated communication), dialogue based on reason-giving, mutual respect and civility, and free and equal access for all citizens, enabling consensus to be formed through the forceless force of the better argument, and where these freely and equally formed opinions in turn enables democratic control of political activities (see e.g. Habermas 1989). (The fact that neither Habermas nor anyone else have managed to produce much in terms of empirical support for the idea that something approximating this ideal of a public sphere has ever existed anywhere at any point in time has not diminished the enormous popularity of the term.)

The outcome is what we might think of as “counterfactual idealism”. This is a scholarly position that goes beyond the high ideals that some journalists sometimes articulate on their profession’s behalf. “Counterfactual” in that the focus is often on something journalism is not in fact doing but is thought to ought to be doing. “Idealism” in that the focus is generally on abstract ideals, not on social practices, and that the development of such ideals is assumed to have intrinsic intellectual value and perhaps real-world practical implications. It provides a nice set-up for empirical papers, as almost any conceivable finding can be cast as a democratic problem and thus of wider relevance on the model of: “X does not, in fact, approximate Habermas’ idealized theory of the public sphere” (fill in the X). In journalism studies, counterfactual idealism is mostly broadly articulated from the political left, but in philosophy and political theory more broadly, it is adopted on the right as well—whether in the form of Martin Heidegger’s pathetic sentimental longing for an imagined organic pre-modern “heimat” or

Robert Nozick's libertarian fantasies of an anarcho-capitalist society without a state. Heidegger and Nozick's intellectual positions obviously differ from Habermas', but they operate at comparable levels of abstraction.

The intellectual stance that is implicitly assumed is one that has been explicitly articulated by some political theorists, most notably John Rawls, namely that the development of detailed and complex ideal theory is a necessary precursor to the kind of nonideal theory that can guide action in the real world (Stemplowska and Swift 2012). For Rawls, ideal theory is theory that assumes (1) "strict compliance" with the principles (of justice, democracy, etc.) developed and (2) "favorable circumstances" such as limited structural inequality. Nonideal theory, in turn, deals with situations characterized by partial or noncompliance with the theoretical norms and by unfavorable circumstances. What is important here is that for Rawls and those who share his basic dispositions, ideal theory necessarily precedes nonideal theory, because it provides "the only basis for the systematic grasp of these more pressing problems" (Rawls 1999a, 8). Until an ideal theory is developed, nonideal theory "lacks an objective, an aim, by reference to which its queries can be answered" (1999b, 90). Ideal theory, in his words, must outline a sort of "utopia" (Rawls 1999b, 11–12)—that is the task for the normative theorist. It is left for others to deal with the nonideal and practical matters of progress towards it (perhaps accompanied by occasional admonishment and exhortations from the normative theorist). Rawls' particular version of ideal theory is broadly speaking what Baker (2002) calls "liberal pluralism", but the underlying approach has a familiar resemblance to that of other normative theorists with different ideal theories, including deliberative democrats like Jürgen Habermas. While in empirical political science, normative assertions based on implicit standards is certainly also common, in political theory and political philosophy, this stance is so prevalent (perhaps because it privileges the specific skills and contributions of professionalized theorists?) that some talk of the "hegemony" of ideal theory in political philosophy (Pateman and Mills 2007).

Liberal optimism as a nonideal normative theory

Michael Schudson's work on journalism and democracy represents an alternative to counterfactual idealism that present standards on the basis of various abstract theories as well as the normative assertions of much empiricist work. The evolving and imperfect connections between American journalism and American democracy has been a steady theme in his work for 40 years, from his 1976 doctoral dissertation on the "Origins of the Ideal of Objectivity in the Professions" to his most recent 2015 book, *The Rise of the Right to Know*, with landmark contributions in several books and articles involving both explicit normative standards and empirical normative assessments.

The position that underpins Schudson's normative evaluations I would describe as "liberal optimism". "Liberal" because of his explicit focus on the individual, his emphasis on the way the separation of powers and the rule of law critically shapes how democracy (and journalism) functions, his interest in formal and informal institutions, and his recognition of the centrality of elections in actually existing democracies. This represents a set of explicit normative standards that he and those sympathetic to his views might bring to bear to any normative assessment of any situation. "Optimist" because Schudson explicitly and repeatedly has argued that, contrary to what many academics, public intellectuals, and professional journalists seem to think, many aspects of both journalism and democracy in the United States have in fact improved over time. Throughout his work, he has been systematically skeptical of

those who bemoan lost golden ages. In *The Power of News* and *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press*, he takes on those who assert that American journalism is in decline, and argue it has actually become markedly better in many ways—more independent of both politicians and proprietors, more aggressively investigative, and more inclusive in terms of how it deals with issues like gender, race, and sexuality. In *The Good Citizen*, he offers a similarly optimistic interpretation of the historical evolution of forms and norms of citizenship in the United States, and in *The Rise of the Right to Know* of the formal and informal institutionalization of openness as part of a wider development towards what he calls a "monitory democracy".

Schudson's position as a liberal optimist is distinct in terms of its specific focus on journalism and its nuanced approach to it, even as it has affinities with what C. Edwin Baker calls liberal pluralism and with what Clifford G. Christians and his coauthors call a social responsibility view of journalism. (Schudson has clearly and explicitly distanced himself from alternative views, including James W. Carey with his emphasis on community and participation and from Jürgen Habermas with his emphasis on deliberation.) It is also distinct from most counterfactual idealist positions in its refusal to engage in ideal theorizing and its preference for drawing inspiration from concrete examples and analysis rather than abstract philosophical speculation. In this sense, the intellectual stance Schudson implicitly assumes is akin to the one explicitly articulated by Amartya Sen, who has directly challenged John Rawls' view that ideal theory is a necessary precursor to nonideal theory (Stemplowska and Swift 2012).

Sen (2006, 2009) argues that the pursuit of ideal theory is an unnecessary distraction and that what we need to assess something in normative terms is not an ideal of what things could be like in a counterfactual situation characterized by strict compliance and favorable conditions, but the ability to compare—in actually existing situations characterized by partial compliance and often unfavorable conditions—the relative justice, and injustice, of the options available. As Sen (2009, 102) puts it: "the possibility of having an identifiable perfect alternative does not indicate that it is necessary, or indeed useful, to refer to it in judging the relative merits of two other alternatives." From his point of view, the abstract ideal theories developed in splendid isolation from empirical work by philosophers like John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas (or Martin Heidegger and Robert Nozick) do nothing to guide action in or assessments of actual states of affairs. One theory might be more "complex" than another, more sophisticated in its engagement with a multitude of philosophical ideas, but this is no value in itself unless it connects with the situation on the ground. Similarly, in journalism studies, Schudson shows how nonideal theory, engagement with empirical research, and plain language can provide a basis for normative assessments.

What, then, might provide useful in judging the relative merits of various alternative actually existing or practically possible kinds of journalism? In his essay "Six or seven things journalism can do for democracy", Schudson (2008) provides a list of standards by one might assess the extent to which journalism serves democracy. The six are:

1) Inform the public of what political authorities, other powerful actors, as well as people at home and abroad, are up to;
2) Serve in an investigative or "watchdog" function;
3) Offer analysis;
4) Encourage social empathy;
5) Provide a public forum for debate;
6) Serve as an advocate for various policies and points of view.

The final "generally ignored" seventh is (7) arguing in favor of democracy, a task many journalists in non-democratic countries have taken on at great personal risk, and that some journalists also take on in established democracies when their form of government is under pressure. (I have been told that Nicholas Lemann, then Dean of the Columbia Journalism School, responded to the list by saying "and we do it quickly.")

The six or seven things is an example of Schudson offering an explicit approach to normative assessment and a nonideal theory based on liberal values. It provides explicit regulative ideals by which one can normatively assess actual states of affairs, without articulating an abstract ideal theory. Like many ideal theories, it provides a broad assessment across multiple dimensions each implicitly held to have intrinsic, irreducible, and equal importance. In his normative assessment, Schudson then arrives at his liberal optimism—his view that on most counts, American journalism has gotten better at most of these things over time. Whether it has enhanced civic and political participation or fostered rational-critical debate—things that fall beyond the standards he has outlined—or fulfilled any of the other possible objectives articulated by some ideal theorists, is not his primary concern.

Democratic realism in journalism studies

Schudson's liberal optimism thus stands out in journalism studies both in terms of offering explicit standards for normative assessments (in place of the normative assertions based on implicit standards found in some empirical work) and in terms of offering a nonideal theory of journalism and democracy based on liberal values articulated in plain English (instead of counterfactual ideal theory anchored in political philosophy). For those who prefer explicit standards and standards anchored in actually existing, historically specific situations rather than abstract scenarios defined by strict compliance and favorable circumstances, it provides a useful starting point for thinking about the role of journalism in democracy—and a starting point that overlaps at least in part with what many journalists want to do (George 2013, Hanitzsch et al. 2011) as well as with what many citizens expect of journalism (Coleman and Moss 2015, Costera Meijer 2010, Poindexter et al. 2006). But, especially in a situation of eroding institutional investment in and support for professional journalism, it may still be too ambitious and broad to help us identify the most important thing that journalism—and journalism specifically—just might do for democracy. Normatively, we might want many things from journalism, including several things that journalism can do for democracy. But given finite resources and the necessity of making choices, what is the most important thing? Addressing that question requires a more focused assessment. To develop one, I want to offer a democratic realist reading of Schudson's six or seven things and argue that the most unique and most important thing journalism can do for democracy is to strive to keep people informed in a relatively timely way.

Democratic realism is a tradition that has been broadly influential across journalism and the social sciences especially in the twentieth century. In the 1920s and 1930s, it was associated with journalists like Walter Lippmann and social scientists like Paul F. Lazarsfeld in the United States, and in Germany with figures like Max Weber (Bucy and D'Angelo 2004, Peters 1989). These different democratic realists fought their intellectual and political battles on multiple fronts—against what they saw as the misguided and potentially distracting or even counter-productive optimism of progressive reformers like John Dewey, the useless theoretical

speculation of absent-minded philosophers, as well as against anti-democratic sentiments on both the far left and the far right. A central concern has been an attempt to focus on what is seen as the essentials, the central components of real-world democracies that set them apart from other actually existing forms of government, how these essentials function, and what potential there is for improving them. It is a way of thinking about journalism and democracy that would suggest that even liberal optimists like Michael Schudson, whom many counter-factual idealists may consider at best modest in his aims for journalism, is in fact too ambitious.

Clearly, democratic realism is no more a single set of coherent ideas than deliberative democracy or radical democracy. Rather, it indicates a set of family resemblances in a tradition that when it comes to journalism goes back to Lippmann and Lazarsfeld and others before them. As with the counterfactual idealism of for example deliberative democrats, it is a tradition that Schudson has explicitly distanced himself from (1995), but one with which he shares an interest in actually existing democracy and actually existing journalism. The first term "democracy" signals their commitment to popular government, not as a "way of life", but actually existing forms of democracy built on liberal (constitutional protections of rights, the separation of powers, and some semblance of checks and balances) and representative (elections, parties, interest groups, and social movements) institutions that can protect individuals against domination and help make ambition counteract ambition. (These commitments may seem banal to some, but let us remember that liberal representative democracy is a set of genuinely radical and emancipatory ideas aspired to around the world, both in democratic and nondemocratic countries (Nielsen 2016).) The second term, which signals their differences from some others, is of course "realism", the insistence that those who wish to understand (and perhaps improve) democracy must attend to the real motivations and reasons of real people in real settings, and not deal in abstractions.

A central focus for many democratic realists has been on redeeming the role and value of institutions often at best ignored or at worst dismissed by philosophers, most notably political parties (Schnattschneider 1988, Rosenblum 2008). To this, one might add journalism, a profession that has in political practice, political science, and political theory often been the *deus ex machina* that was simply assumed to be able to somehow, on its own, ensure that citizens were relatively informed about public affairs. Critics may see such a focus on the modest democratic upsides of imperfect institutions like parties and journalism as being complacent about or even complicit with the status quo, but democratic realists like Bernard Williams (2005) would argue it is really about striking a balance between two things. First, what he calls the "critical theory principle", the notion that we cannot accept as legitimate a situation in which the involved parties' own acceptance of it is the outcome of the workings of the very power that calls for legitimation. Second, the principle of "realisability", the idea that our norms are or must be constrained by facts and circumstances, including existing institutions. This is a very different way of thinking about normative issues from that espoused by counterfactual idealists. As Williams put it, normative arguments must "have a grounding in realty" and "cannot be forced on to a recalcitrant world" (2005, 21-23). Three elements of Bernard William's philosophical work are useful to consider here (Williams 2005, see also Frazer 2010, whom I draw on in this section). First, his view that normative work must interrelate closely with empirical work in history and the social sciences. Second, his argument that reasons, properly speaking, must be reasons for and of the relevant actors. An external imperative, or a judgement by one actor or group about what another actor ought to do, should not be presented as a reason for the second actor unless they can identify with it on the basis of their own values. Third, his idea that

normative work needs to build on what he calls "thick concepts", concepts that are significant because they relate to actors' reasons for action in a way that thin concepts that are theoretically constructed (such as deliberation) are not.

To see what a democratic realist approach to journalism might look like, let me return to Michael Schudson's list of six or seven things it might do for democracy. I take it up because this list shows very clearly, I think, where the most distinct thing journalism can do for democracy lies, what its most unique and therefore perhaps most important role is: that of keeping people informed, in a relatively timely way. Think about it this way: in the case of every other function on the list, it is relatively easy to identify others who are equally or better positioned to play that role in most democracies.

2) Investigations? The judicial system and various official organizations and NGOs engaged in oversight.
3) Analysis? Universities, public intellectuals, think tanks.
4) Social empathy? Civic associations, community groups, rights-based activism.
5) Provide a forum for debate? Not only the town halls of old, but also digital media.
6) Advocate points of view? Social movements, interest groups, political parties. This applies to (7), arguing in favor of democracy, too.

Not so with number one (1), informing the public. It is harder to think of others providing people with relatively accurate, accessible, diverse, relevant, and timely information about public affairs. There is redundancy, even institutional redundancy—arguably a good thing—when it comes many of these roles, but not when it comes to news. And it is when journalism fails on this count—this count specifically—that journalism has most clearly failed democracy. We may hear much about the world outside personal experience from family, friends, and colleagues, and may pass by snippets of news on social networking sites and elsewhere, but much of this information originates with professional journalists and news organizations. Education, general interest reading, curiosity and interesting debate may be more important for whether we are informed citizens in a longer-term perspective, but in terms of knowing what is going on currently, right now, news occupies an absolutely central place. A focus on information, in turn, has at least two consequences. First, it displaces the question of the impact of the information that news provides (in terms of accountability, debate, empathy, participation, etc.) away from journalism alone and to its relation with other actors, including citizens, various political actors, and institutions like the judiciary. Second, it puts questions of the nature of this information, its diversity, and its reach and distribution across the whole public at the center of normative assessments of journalism.

And indeed, information has been central to the ways in which democratic realists have thought about the role of journalism in democracy. As Herbert J. Gans (2003, ix) has noted "the news alone cannot contribute as much to democracy as journalist would like […] their main power is to inform the citizenry." Journalism, for all its many and varied shortcomings, has provided the most important solution to what Walter Lippmann (1997, 202) called "the problem of how to make the invisible world visible to the citizens of a modern state", especially of doing so in a relatively timely fashion. To exercise our citizenship and take part in self-government, we need to be able to find out what is going on. Providing basic information about that is the single most important and distinct thing journalism can do for democracy on a day to day basis. Important, because we need it. Distinct, because no one else does it.

Conclusion

Providing people with relatively accurate, accessible, diverse, relevant, and timely independently produced information about public affairs may not seem like much to ask of journalism, even if it in practice hard to do, whether for US newsrooms reeling from cuts, Indian reporters faced with meddling proprietors, or Nicaraguan journalists dealing with an ever more repressive regime. It is certainly far less than what counterfactual idealists have often asked for—less, even, than what Michael Schudson' seemingly modest liberal optimism asks for. Information alone is not enough for democracy to function, but then democracy depends on many overlapping and redundant formal and informal institutions to function, and not on journalism alone. As Walter Lippmann (1997, 229) argued, even if news in its various imperfect ways illuminate the world beyond personal experience, we "cannot do the work of the world by this light alone." Such democratic realism might point a way forward for journalisms studies that would retain a normative dimension but bring the field closer to how democracy and its many underpinnings are discussed in for example political science and sociology, and in turn help us contribute to those disciplines by focusing attention on the normative issues and empirical questions that they have left large unaddressed.

Is information too little to ask for? The reader should make up her own mind. In this article, I have discussed various ways of thinking about the normative role of journalism, and in particular focused on approaches that are: (1) explicit about their standards, (2) make a choice between basing those standards on ideal or nonideal theory, and (3) opt for a broad or a focused approach to the issue. Various counterfactual idealists take very broad approaches and would ask for much more than information (rational-critical deliberation, for example), Schudson has broad hopes for six or seven things, democratic realists focus on one. I find the last approach appealing—not because the other things are not nice to have, but because they are things that democracy does not need from journalism specifically and because they are less important for the democratic role of journalism. Furthermore, if journalism strove as much for them as for providing information, they might make informing the public an even less realisable goal. After all, resources are finite, and trade-offs have to be made. We do not get more from journalism simply by wishing for more from journalism. And if we keep asking for more, it is not at all obvious why rational-critical deliberation or providing a forum for public debate is more important than, say, countering deep economic, political, and social inequalities. A central part of the any normative argument is not simply the articulation of a number of "oughts" in the face of an "is", but also a judgement about which of many different things we *might* want from a particular actor, institution, or process we actually want *the most*. (A structural critique, in turn, then asks what helps or hinders delivery.)

Seeing the provision of relatively accurate, accessible, relevant, and timely independently produced information about public affairs as the one thing journalism might just do for democracy has several advantages. First, it provides a normative horizon that is: (1) aligned with what journalism might conceivably do (realisable), (2) aligned with what journalists might conceivably want to do (based on reasons people hold, articulated in thick concepts that make sense for them), and (3) focused on something that no one but journalists routinely and regularly do. We might turn to other actors and institutions for many of the other things that Michael Schudson would like journalism to offer democracy. Not so for timely information. This provides the basis for critical discussion of actually existing journalism that cannot simply be dismissed by saying "well, we can't do that anyway", "well, we never said we'd do that

anyway", or "well, someone else will do that anyway"—the kinds of arguments journalists might well reach for if criticized for not enabling deliberative or participatory democracy. Providing information, however is what they say they will do (Josephi 2013). When they fail to do so they serve both their own professional aims and our democratic needs poorly.

The democratic realist argument is not that journalism has no role to play in terms of the other things discussed by liberal optimists like Schudson, or even in terms of the more expansive ambitions articulated by counterfactual idealists. The argument is simply that no one can do everything we might want them to do—but everyone just might do a few, important things. In this respect, journalism has—and ought to have—a primary relationship to the provision of news, information about public affairs, whereas it has a secondary or even tertiary relationship to many other normative aspirations. And at a point in time where the institutional underpinnings of journalism in much of the world are undergoing a gut-wrenching transformation in the face of powerful and often hostile political actors, eroding public interest and trust, technological change, and the rapid decline of many traditional sources of funding, it might make sense to focus on first principles, on the most important and distinct things journalism just might—often against the odds—do for democracy. In the democratic realist view outlined here, this one thing is to make relatively accurate, accessible, relevant, and timely independently produced information about public affairs available for people. Those who do not think this is a sufficiently ambitious goal should try working as a journalist.

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