The proliferation of news and information sources has motivated a need to identify those providing legitimate journalism. One temptation is to go the route of such fields as medicine and law, namely to formally professionalize. This gives a clear method for determining who is a member, with an array of associated responsibilities and rewards. We argue that making such a formal move in journalism is a mistake: Journalism does not meet the traditional criteria, and its core ethos is in conflict with the professional mindset.

We thus shift the focus from whether the person is journalist to whether the work satisfies the conditions that characterize legitimate journalism. In explaining those conditions we also look at mechanisms for enhancing the power of persons doing journalism, drawing upon lessons from the labor movement. We also consider a self-declaration model while urging increased literacy from all participants in the news gathering and consuming enterprise.

JOURNALISM IS NOT A PROFESSION

We say this despite the many journalists and scholars who regularly refer to it as such, not to mention that the moniker of the practice’s leading association in the United States—The Society

Correspondence should be sent to Wendy N. Wyatt, Associate Professor, Department of Communication and Journalism, University of St. Thomas, Mail 4372, 2115, Summit Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105. E-mail: wnyatt@stthomas.edu
of Professional Journalists (SPJ)—declares otherwise. Furthermore, it is the rare occupation anymore that does not call itself a profession; sex workers, athletes, and massage therapists all do. It appears the sole criterion to which such groups appeal is whether they are paid for the activity (no doubt a remnant from the old, largely Olympics-driven, distinction in competitive athletics). So if everyone is a professional, why not journalists?

Because, of course, calling oneself something does not make it true. Yes, the term is used widely and loosely, but its meaning is, at its core, normative and historical: To be a professional, even in a minimalist sense of the term, is to be so dedicated as to see such work as a calling. It is also to engage in work (a) that serves a vital individual or civic need, (b) that is primarily intellectual and thereby requires specialized training and skills, (c) that is at least mainly autonomous and self-regulating (usually with some form of licensure), and (d) that is committed to furtherance of basic ethical norms, particularly with respect to satisfaction of clients’ needs.¹

This formal “philosophical” approach to the definition of profession—wherein we analyze the concepts involved and their normative and semantic connections—differs from a “socio-logical one” in which one does an empirical investigation of those enterprises that self-identify as professions (Davis, 2010, p. 92). Our position is that “profession” is in fact a formal and inherently normative concept: Professionals are committed to the ethical foundations that allow for the satisfaction of vital social needs, managed through ethical, rather than instrumental, relationships. On the sociological approach, “professional” becomes essentially a marketing term, a way of trying to convince potential customers/clients that the services will be of high quality. On the formal approach, the commitment to the criteria (along with, in most cases, the associated internal and external oversight) produce a structural trust; that is, because being deemed a professional means one has by definition satisfied educational and ethical conditions, trust becomes the default, potentially lost, rather than needing to be earned (e.g., in the case of a car salesman).

We also take a normative as opposed to empirical approach to our characterization of “journalism.” That is, we argue what the craft should be, rather than provide an analysis of what is in fact practiced, though of course there is considerable overlap. Even within this normative characterization, we will argue, journalism meets some, but not enough, of the formal criteria for professional status. Further, and more importantly, the spirit of critical independence that is journalism’s core ethos is in direct opposition to the more rule-bound culture of professionalism.

To say one is not a professional is not to say that one cannot act professionally. Doing so, within whatever activity, is to strive to fulfill its highest standards. Per this meaning, one can act professionally, regardless of the labor, when one is highly competent to the task and engages it in an ethical manner. Here the labor of gathering and disseminating news surely fits: Some of it is clearly done well and ethically, that is, “professionally.” But just as clearly, some is done incompetently and wickedly. As we wrote this, Rupert Murdoch’s London-based tabloid News of the World had just been closed because some of its journalists hacked into, among other things, a murder victim’s cell phone, deleting messages, disrupting the investigation of her murder, and subsequently bribing law enforcement officials. The resulting uproar motivated a renewed reflection on similar tabloid activities in the United States, with at least one columnist arguing that such “news” organizations should not receive First Amendment protection (Shapiro, 2011, p. A-13).

The Murdoch fiasco is of course only a small part of the story: Information now comes from so many sources, in so many forms, and with such varying degree of credibility, that it

₁
has become increasingly difficult for citizens and advertisers to separate the wheat from the chaff, to be able to trust the information is accurate and meaningful.

The historical means for distinguishing real journalists from mere gossip mongers was in effect a form of branding: Does the person in question work for a recognized news outlet? This branding disappeared when the physical monopoly collapsed. Since such brands are being radically transformed by changing economic models and the exponential increase in “publishing” capabilities, there is an urgent need to identify news sources that are genuinely journalistic.

PROFESSIONS IN HISTORY

Such chaos is part of what motivated other occupations to formally professionalize, with medicine as the exemplar. In the early 1800s, a number of physicians pushed a scientific model of medicine, one distinguished from the theological and purely experiential approaches that had previously dominated. As their successes grew, these physicians argued that theirs was the only real medicine. In 1832 they founded the British Medical Association (BMA), using that association as the vehicle for determining the accreditation and licensing standards to which any legitimate physician had to adhere. From there it was a relatively easy pitch to convince Parliament to give them an economic monopoly: Only those deemed worthy by the BMA would be granted legal status to practice medicine. The American Medical Association (AMA) followed suit in 1847, using the BMA’s approach as its model. Both groups at least initially engaged in aggressive autonomous self-regulation, working hard to confirm that only competent and ethical persons could practice. They also worked equally hard, though, to make sure that their economic benefits were not disrupted, including such oversight as setting limits on how many persons could be admitted to medical schools, thereby controlling the eventual competition.

As the latter point reveals, the move to formally professionalize was obviously not done only for the benefit of patients. The monopoly gave the newly anointed medical doctors tremendous economic advantage, as well as greatly enhanced social status and power. Nor has medicine’s subsequent history been wholly virtuous; the array of abuses (from economic conflicts of interest to covering up colleagues’ incompetency) has contributed to medicine’s—to all formal professions’—significantly diminished social status in recent decades (Meyers, forthcoming).

Even with such problems, however, the established professions still warrant real trust. Clients have confidence in their engineer to know how to design bridges, their surgeon to be able to safely remove an inflamed appendix, their dentist to properly cap a broken tooth, or their philosophy professor to have an accurate understanding of Plato’s Republic. That confidence is generally warranted, given the respective professionals’ extensive training, skills, and commitment to client well-being. That each of these groups has (varying degrees of) a monopoly on their services, and that such monopolies have generated abuses, has been seen as a worthy trade-off for the social benefits.

THE PLACE OF JOURNALISM

Mainstream journalism got to that same monopolistic status, if only de facto and not de jure, without ever formally professionalizing. Whereas medicine (and the other formal professions)
held a *legal* monopoly, journalism’s was a monopoly in *practice*, rooted in economics and status. News organizations had a cornered market, given the tremendous costs associated with gathering and disseminating news, costs that became even more prohibitive with the leveraged mergers of the 1990s and 2000s. This economic monopoly, combined with the even older occupational exclusivity rooted in privileged access to information sources and to distribution channels, helped foment the *ideology* of journalistic professionalism. Journalism, in short, retained the exclusivity of a formal profession without the baggage: Prior to the Internet explosion, the easiest way to identify a journalist was to see if that person worked for a recognized news organization. Such exclusivity, along with the workplace designator, has been largely demolished, with more and more of the work traditionally regarded as journalism now being performed by people who are not doing it for a living.

The Internet (along with a dramatic downturn in advertising revenues and huge merger-related debts) wiped out that monopoly and attendant exclusivity, essentially democratizing information delivery. While there are undoubtedly positive results associated with such democratization, the downside has been—much as Plato predicted for pure democracy—disarray, with everyone from Rush Limbaugh to Julian Assange claiming status. In short, journalism is now at a place very similar to where medicine was in the 1800s: The pretenders are working alongside the experts, and the latter have no easy way to identify themselves as such and no way to insist the former abide by genuine standards.

Hence there is the strong temptation to formally professionalize: If you are not one of us, you are not a member of the club, and we get to decide who gets the card and for what. Despite the many problems attached to becoming “professionalized” (Wasserstrom, 1981), the overall balance has plainly been to the positive, at least for those professions, for example, law, medicine, engineering, and dentistry, where the “vital need” criterion is truly met and where prescribed standards can be defined, established, and satisfied.

### WHY JOURNALISM DOESN’T QUALIFY

Although we think journalism certainly meets a vital need, indeed one of society’s most vital, it does not satisfy the other essential conditions. In particular, it does not meet the specialized training and skills and the client well-being criteria. One need not even have a high school diploma to be a journalist, and the skills vary dramatically among the various media (compare, e.g., the talent needed to cover the Afghan insurgency versus that of a television newscaster). It is not even clear who the journalist’s client *is*, let alone whether that client’s well-being should be the journalist’s prime motivation. Furthermore, in the United States at least, there was never state licensure or authoritative discipline exercised by peers, nor was there a payment regime built around fees to clients.

Beyond that, the means to practice journalism were entirely in the control of employers. You did journalism if somebody hired you to do the work. If you were fired, you no longer did journalism. The notion of “an unemployed journalist” does not have the same definitional integrity as an unemployed lawyer, who is still licensed to practice. The *unemployed* journalist, without access to information sources or publication channels, was practically indistinguishable from a *former* journalist.
In short, normal profession criteria do not fit journalism, and even more importantly, journalism does not fit them. Its core ethos is as a critical, independent, fundamentally rebellious activity. Professionals, by definition, are rule-bound and tightly structured. They are society’s powerful elite that journalism is supposed to critique, not join. We are faced, as per above, with an imperative to distinguish real journalism—from whatever source—from the pretenders, but the traditional “professionalize” route will not work.

We, therefore, recommend four potential solutions, presenting them—especially the second and third—as challenges to existing norms, as starting points for further discussion, rather than as final answers. First, although it makes no sense to urge journalists to become professionals, it is imperative for journalists to act professionally, in the sense discussed above: They should acquire and practice the highest and best standards of the practice, and they should perform them in an ethical manner. Hence, instead of the Society of Professional Journalists, think Society for Professional Journalism.

Second, journalism can adopt a voluntary designation, either granted by an agency or self-declared, that identifies the individual as properly trained and committed. Here the analog is public relations with its “APR” designation, or the types of certification nonprofessional computing specialists can voluntarily acquire (see, e.g., “Oracle Certification” and “Red Hat Certified Engineer”).

Third, and potentially related, because of the range of economic troubles besetting journalism today, far too much power lies with owners and investors and not enough with working journalists. Because of this asymmetry, journalists need to find ways to guarantee high standards that are not controlled by their employing organizations. We suggest some collective strategies for acquiring and asserting more power to exercise control over good work modeled on the labor movement.

Fourth, we put some of the burden back on the consumer and citizen. That the line between news consumer and news producer is quickly fading makes it all the more urgent that the citizen-consumer-producer becomes more informed and more media-savvy. Just as the formal professions have had to effectively respond to the various democratization movements in their fields (e.g., online medical information, assessment programs for higher education, greater citizen oversight of legal malpractice panels), so also should an informed citizenry motivate better journalism.

PROFESSIONALISM, NOT PROFESSIONALS

The problem escalated when the physical monopoly collapsed. With the exuberant proliferation of the capacity to report and publish news—with tens of millions of ordinary people with greater communicative capability in their pockets than the mightiest news organizations on earth had a generation ago—the hold that journalists had on the production of news and topical commentary was broken.

Technological change had destroyed the two material foundations of journalistic privilege: preferential access to sources of publicly significant information and exclusive access to the means of distributing it. Now, people who want them can have both.

The democratization of information described above has so blurred the lines of who counts as a journalist that Jay Black (2010) has suggested we should change the question to what
counts as journalism. Using our earlier language, professionalism is more usefully applied to a practice than to its practitioners. On this model, journalism would be defined not by who does it but rather by what it is. And there, journalism is distinguished from other forms of topical discourse by a qualitative appraisal: Its substance must conform to certain evidentiary and expressive standards, and its conduct must accord with certain values (thus it still matters why someone does it and how). Both dimensions implicate normativity. Ethics is constitutive of journalism, but by the same token, what has become identified as journalism ethics is more like a self-affirming doctrine than a professional ethic.

Journalism ethics developed, to no small degree, as an ideology, reflective of contemporaneous struggles over industrial dominance and occupational privilege. With the economics and structure of the news business now in crisis, ethical doctrine is being renegotiated between a legacy industry and an emerging sector of online communicators who define themselves, in part, by their hostility to traditional standards.

The insurgent restatement of journalistic ethics is almost purely procedural, built around a radical demand for empowerment. The challenge is to marry this theology of enfranchisement to the substantive values that have been integral to traditional journalistic professionalism: public service, enlightenment, sensitivity to harms, independence, and social betterment.

If a professional model of journalism consisting of a cordoned-off group of workers, exclusively entitled and specifically qualified to perform specialized, socially beneficial labor, ever existed, it has certainly disappeared. If we fail to recognize and accommodate that collapse of exclusivity, any restatement of journalistic professionalism will grow increasingly irrelevant. Whatever meaning we could attach to the description of somebody as a journalist has undergone severe erosion at a time when work that looks very much like journalism is being performed by individuals who may very well wear a number of occupational hats. The relevant question is not: “Are you a journalist?” but rather “Is what you’re doing journalism?”

**WHAT IS JOURNALISM?**

Notions of acceptable journalism have had their own genealogies, and such topics as the history of the doctrine of objectivity and the uses of the language of ethics as a tool of industrial rivalry have been explored elsewhere (Ward, 2005; Schudson, 1978; Iggers, 1999). The overall point is that the ingredients of journalistic professionalism—and the ethical doctrine that is integral to it—have never been handed down on stone tablets but rather have been shaped by changes in marketplace demands, technological capabilities, models of craftsmanship, conceptions of public service, and industrial realities.

The current industrial reality is, on the one hand, a steady decline of the scale and scope of the advertising-dependent, legacy news business and, on the other, the dynamic ascendance of a thinly institutionalized corps of journalistic irregulars who rely on philanthropy, seed capital, cross-subsidy, or all three. There are enormous areas of interpenetration and co-dependency between these two sectors, but what is important for our purposes is the ethical alternative that the upstarts pose, which is a broad challenge to the traditional notion of professionalism in journalism.

The most powerful element of the emerging creed is its commitment to radically widening participation in information-gathering and standard-setting. It is a vision of a new journalism
that harnesses digital media to enable larger numbers of people to take part and be heard, creating wider opportunities for people to help guide the process of social awareness that is, at its broadest, what journalism is.

Compared with this credo, the traditional newsroom is stale and cloistered, and the standards that practitioners apply have no living connection to the society they claim to serve.

The emerging ethic is disturbingly hollow, however. It blows down the doors to the old club and invites anybody to join but does not suggest what the new club is and what it is supposed to do. It criticizes, powerfully, the exclusivity and arrogance of traditional, salaried newspeople. But is widening participation ethically sufficient? Is there a difference between “crowd-sourcing” and “mob-sourcing?”

This is not a trivial point. Legacy news organizations are eager—beyond eager, desperate—to develop formulas that will ensure broader public participation in identifying and creating news. They are increasingly willing to relax standards of veracity and streamline verification procedures so that news can be posted more quickly and the mobile public of news consumers kept stoked. They are distressingly willing to disseminate (and thereby legitimate) reporting that is conducted in ways they would never countenance from their own staffs (Wasserman, 2011). There is pressure to open up newsroom decision making to public scrutiny in the interest of accountability and transparency. The news organization that takes pains to monitor and respond to audience preference is not just acting in a more market-savvy way than the journalists who push ahead with coverage they persist in believing serves a public purpose, whatever the audience’s indifference; under this new doctrine, it is acting more ethically as well.

There is a danger in a reformulation of journalistic ethics that obligates the journalist to do little more than keep the customer engaged. At some point, the furies that this enfranchisement unleashes may overwhelm the formal, substantive, and ethical boundaries that have largely defined journalism.

Yet if we cannot define journalism as whatever it is that journalists do, how do we define the practice, let alone define its highest standards? Plainly, we are dealing with a kind of fact-based narrative and topical commentary about contemporary realities. That terrain, however, is pretty crowded, and it is plain that not all of what is there is journalism. For starters, journalism shares that field with propaganda, advertising, public relations, and other forms of paid advocacy, all of which traffic in fact-based accounts and topical commentary. Journalism is also different from such closely allied nonfiction forms as documentary film, which claims greater aesthetic license and routinely incorporates cinematic devices of questionable veracity such as reconstructions, a practice that is anathema to ethical journalists.

Here, then, is how we conceive of journalism. First, and of most importance, journalism proceeds from a particular mission. This can be stated in any of several ways, but the common denominator is a commitment to being a public practice: It may illuminate, it may provoke, it may console, but what is key is that journalism is a discourse that addresses people in their capacities as citizens, in the broadest sense. Journalism speaks to their civic interests and obligations—those they incur as members of society—and nurtures their social awareness.

This normative foundation is achieved through focus on the following elements:

- Subject matter (topical and publicly significant);
- Evidentiary adequacy (conformance to accepted procedures of empirical verification);
Narrative style (normally linear exposition);
Rhetorical constraints (an avoidance of polemics);
A degree of operational independence (resistance to financial pressures);
A conceptual modesty (avoidance of sweeping conclusions, particularly of a sociological sort); and
Standards of fairness in dealings with sources and in presenting fully the contours of controversies.

While additional elements could be added to the list, our contention is that to be considered a journalist—whether providing straight news, commentary, reviews, or features—one must satisfy all of these conditions. Since, however, we have rejected a formal licensure model, some identification mechanism is needed. As noted, we look to how other non-professional groups, particularly public relations, manage this.

THE “AJ” CREDENTIAL: VOLUNTARY JOURNALISM ACCREDITATION

Although some journalists may be hesitant to admit it, public relations is a first cousin to journalism. The codes of ethics for both occupations stress the importance of free expression; integrity and accountability; truth telling, accuracy, and honesty; fairness; and avoidance of conflicts of interest. Unlike journalism, however, public relations has developed a means of demonstrating and publicizing when its practitioners live up to the occupation’s expectations: the APR. This voluntary credential, which stands for “accredited in public relations,” began in 1964 and is now administered by the Universal Accreditation Board (UAB). The credential “signifies a high professional level of competence and validates a PR professional’s commitment to the field” (Florida Public Relations Association, 2010, ¶1). Those eligible for the APR include practitioners who work or teach in PR; they must also be members of one of the UAB’s participating organizations (e.g., the Public Relations Society of America). Practitioners who pursue the APR complete an application, participate in a readiness review panel, take an exam, and engage in continuing professional development. Typically about 70% of PR professionals who attempt the APR pass all of the requirements (Forde, 2011). Once receiving the APR, practitioners must maintain their membership in a participating organization to maintain their accreditation. According to the PRSA, the APR credential is “valuable to those practitioners who earn it; to the agencies, clients, and organizations they represent; and, perhaps most importantly, to the public relations profession itself” because it “demonstrates a commitment to professional excellence and ethical conduct” (Public Relations Society of America, 2009, ¶1, 2).

We propose an optional accreditation for journalism—an Accredited Journalist (AJ) credential—that models the APR and that provides the sort of “branding” once attached to the institutional authority of a place of employment. For this accreditation to work, however, it would need to meet several requirements. First, it should be developed and administered by an international group with representation from the full range of news outlets as well as from freelancers, bloggers, and others who do journalistic work outside of mainstream news organizations. The structure supporting the optional accreditation must be able to respond to
globalization and the call for a global journalism ethics. If work toward developing an optional accreditation begins in the United States, for example, those involved must not be parochial in their approach; they should look beyond their home country and even beyond the West to develop something that would be meaningful to global audiences.

Second, even though the credential is voluntary, it should have teeth. Without a comprehensive mechanism for enforcement, we could not be assured that journalists are living up to what the credential requires. What would this enforcement look like? At the minimum, there must be some method in place for taking away someone’s accreditation if it is shown that he or she failed to demonstrate the skills or values the credential represents. Getting this structure in place is an effort in and of itself. The structure should include regular “peer” review of an accredited person’s work as well as a mechanism for peers—as well as audiences—to express concerns about an accredited journalist’s work. Finally, the accreditation should be accompanied by a comprehensive public relations effort to educate citizens about what it means. Without a process that brings audiences into the loop, an important part of the credential’s purpose is lost.

The marketing value attached to this “brand” will be revealed if and only if it reflects genuine quality. Readers, viewers, and listeners will find it significant only if it identifies a better product. If it does, and assuming news consumers and citizens are able to identify higher quality work, their attention will follow as will, eventually, advertising dollars.

This recommendation is not without its problems. With regulation—even when that regulation is voluntarily submitted to—come concerns about power. The body responsible for administering the AJ credential would have a fair amount of it. The “teeth” that go along with the administering body give it the kind of power that makes journalists—and many citizens—nervous. Entrusting sanctioning powers to a select group is something that would have to be done with care and caution. In addition, out of a commitment to fairness, a process for allowing journalists who think they have been sanctioned unjustifiably would need to be established. This could be an appeals process similar to that used by other regulatory bodies such as Britain’s Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), which uses an independent reviewer in cases where a sanctioned advertiser believes there was a substantial flaw in either the ASA’s adjudication or the investigation process.

A final potential problem relates to funding. Developing, implementing, and operating an optional accreditation comes with costs, and these costs would likely have to be borne by participating journalists. PR professionals with the APR designation help support costs associated with their credential by paying annual membership dues to one or more of the professional associations that comprise the UAB. If membership lapses, a professional loses his or her APR designation. The UAB budget is supplemented by income from preparation courses and seminars. Would journalists commit to financing their own accrediting agency as their colleagues in public relations do? Perhaps, but the current economic outlook for journalism cannot be taken lightly. Many young journalists’ first concern is finding work that pays a living wage; committing to money for joining professional associations is far down on the list of priorities. The question becomes: If only well-paid journalists can fund and participate in the voluntary accreditation, has an elitist system been established and its original purpose defeated? What’s more, does a system funded and comprised of only those who can afford to opt in raise additional concerns about power? Does journalism—a practice charged with fostering democratic impulses—risk becoming anti-democratic itself?
If economics get in the way of instituting a full-fledged optional accreditation or if the credentialing system creates too many concerns about loss of independence, its philosophy could be adapted into another system, a kind of “light” version of the accreditation. While we favor the more rigorous AJ credential, we offer a second scenario, a self-declaration system, as an alternative. In this scenario, individuals opt into a system that communicates to audiences—most likely through a shorthand symbol such as a seal—what the professional commitments of the journalist or quasi-journalist are.

Patrick Thornton has proposed a version of this system on his blog *The Intersection*. The system is designed specifically for online use and would allow news organizations as well as individuals with websites and blogs to embed ethics seals into their digital content. Thornton (2008) proposed five seal categories: 1) sourcing, 2) objectivity/advocacy/opinion journalism or opinion, 3) linking, 4) copy editing/fact checking, and 5) conflicts of interest. The seals would be developed by the community and updated, as needed, by the community. Similarly, Cynthia King and Deni Elliott have proposed a voluntary disclosure system designed to apply to all forms of storytelling (2010, pp. 114–115). This system, which is modeled on the Creative Commons licenses for copyright restrictions, would borrow from existing ethical codes for journalism and commercial speech. Content creators would label their content with the appropriate symbol, which would indicate the standards that have been applied to that particular piece of work. Additionally, “The TAO of Journalism Pledge”—a project of the Washington News Council—invites “anyone practicing journalism in the broadest sense of the word” to take a pledge to be transparent, accountable and open. Those who take the pledge may then display the TAO seal on their work (taoofjournalism.org). The website for The TAO of Journalism Pledge includes a directory of individual journalists and media organizations that have taken the pledge.

Any one of these three visions could be adapted for journalistic work and for the multiple forums in which it appears. However, a self-declaration system should apply to the full range of news outlets and be shared by them all. Although news providers could adopt a system at the organizational level, it should be used by individuals and applied to individual news reports, analyses, and commentaries. After all, journalistic content is often consumed via outlets other than where it originated; if a seal, for example, resides with an organization rather than with an individual report, it may not transfer along with the report as it gets linked, tweeted, e-mailed, or otherwise passed along. In addition, although individual journalists could develop and apply their own ways of indicating professional excellence and ethical conduct, for the system to have meaning, readers, viewers, and listeners must be able to easily make sense of it. Thornton’s vision of the online ethics seals is that they would be open source, meaning anyone would be free to change the language of any seal as long as he or she open sources the new seal. It is our view, however, that a declaration system that differs for every journalist would be meaningless in any practical sense. Therefore, like the AJ, the self-declaration system would need to be developed by an eclectic, global group focused on creating something that could be used across news genres and platforms as well as across borders. Also like the AJ, the introduction of a self-declaration system would need to be accompanied by a comprehensive public relations effort to communicate to the public what the system means.

The self-declaration system does not need the kind of infrastructure required by the voluntary designation, so it would be easier to execute. Again, however, if the system is going to have
meaning, it needs some group to develop it, get it off the ground, and serve as a continuing resource for journalists (or quasi-journalists) who want to use it and for citizens who have questions, comments, or concerns. However, this group would not serve as an enforcement team. In fact, this system is not regulatory in nature (although The TAO of Journalism website does have a “sealbreakers” page for reporting violations). Rather, it is built on trust that those who choose to self-declare are doing so honestly and with integrity. This, of course, raises a concern: Would it be too easy to “cheat” the system? People tend to have an overinflated sense of their own ethical compasses, consistently believing themselves to be more ethical than they are (Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, 2011). Either out of ill-intention or simple ignorance, the self-declaration system could be used by people who aren’t truly living up to standards of good work in the ethical and technical senses.

Importantly, however, we do not intend for either version to be a form of “profession-lite.” Unlike with the formal professions, opting in is wholly voluntary, intended as a way to send a message to citizens and advertisers that the source is credible, that is, that she is doing good journalism, as we define it above. The alternative, of course, is simply to do good journalism, with a discerning audience following. But because we see so much garbage being passed off as journalism, the designation model provides a plausible guide to citizens and advertisers.

Another advantage of the designation approach—either our preferred accreditation system or its less rigorous self-declaration—is that it grants power and credibility to those who have opted in and likely carries with it subsequent economic benefit and increased status and authority. The return here is not just to individual journalists; the crisis of economics facing news organizations has threatened, even undercut, the “operational independence” we take to be an essential element of good journalism. The once sacred wall between editorial and business sides is full of holes, and it has become ever harder for even committed journalists and editors to challenge the moneyed interests that essentially fund, through advertising, the news. As layoffs continue to roll through the industry, only the truly courageous (or independently wealthy) journalist can afford to resist the financial encroachment. But journalists as a whole might very well be able to exert the discretion that has characterized the traditional professions. Let us thus turn to an analysis of how group organizing, using principles from the labor movement, can work to sustain core values.

**COLLECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR ASSERTING CONTROL OVER STANDARDS**

Historically, the independence and security afforded by their status has allowed professionals to define quality and to exercise their expert judgment without being (at least completely) overtaken by market forces and political pressure. Without power, practitioners have no say. Without say, practitioners cannot exercise the kind of discretion they need to fulfill the public purpose of their work, nor can they sustain the ethical motivations we expect them to have. Although journalists’ well-developed defenses against government interference have resulted in broad constitutional protections, their lack of professional power in the workplace has put them in the untenable position of being responsible for ethical standards they cannot guarantee, depending on the “business-related constraints imposed by those who pay them and distribute their work” (McManus, 1997, p. 8).
Acting as a group has the potential to shore up journalists’ power. Unfortunately, both professional ideology and professional ethics have focused on individual practitioners’ competence, autonomy, responsibilities, and trustworthiness. In journalism, if anything, this tendency is pronounced for a number of reasons, including a tradition of non-conformity and rebelliousness, an emphasis on negative rights, a competitive streak, and the pride of authorship. Empirical research consistently shows that American journalists situate their professional identity in individual attitudes and particular organizations, rather than in a common association such as the Society of Professional Journalists (Borden, 2009).

Nor have American journalists taken to organizing (Fedler, 2006), with less than 10% of print and broadcast journalists represented by a union. Like other aspiring professionals, many journalists think of union membership as a demotion that does not befit their status, and they view unions’ focus on compensation and working conditions as crassly materialistic and legalistic. Another obstacle is journalists’ hesitance to appear political, let alone engage in activism. Nevertheless, other knowledge workers (notably teachers) have had substantial success in pushing back against incursions on their autonomy through union representation. Unions have allowed teachers as a collective to consolidate power, not just for worker benefit but also to make sure standards are maintained (e.g., teachers may negotiate class size). As the labor movement has weakened, unionization has been less effective in achieving this goal. However, unions have taught us some important lessons that the working journalist, as a collective, may use to acquire power so as to wield standards against owners and advertisers. These include:

- **Cultivate collective consciousness.** The labor movement’s emphasis on group identity is quite different from the individualistic stance emphasized by professionalism generally and is a needed corrective if journalists are going to have an impact on corporate decisions and legal regulations that affect their ability to consistently practice good journalism. As long as journalists advocate solely for individual privileges, “their potential disloyalty can easily be managed” (Larson, 1977, p. 237).

- **Defend ethical commitments.** One of the most difficult ethical dilemmas journalists face are those that involve sticking up for ethics at the price of sticking out your neck. Not only do a number of unions require adherence to codes of ethics—adopted through democratic processes by members, rather than handed down by management—but they also are in a position to support members who have to go against management to adhere to their ethical commitments. The conscience clause of the United Kingdom’s National Union of Journalists is illustrative: “The NUJ believes a journalist has the right to refuse an assignment or be identified as the author of editorial that would break the letter or spirit of the code. The NUJ will fully support any journalist disciplined for asserting her/his right to act according to the code.” (“Code of Conduct,” 2007). True moral support consists of actions as well as words.

- **Stand in solidarity with others.** A core ideal of the labor movement is standing up for your fellow worker’s rights as if they were your own. Increasingly, unions have recognized that solidarity can be extended through alliances outside their immediate occupational specialties. For example, the Newspaper Guild has affiliated with engineers and technicians in the broader U.S. communication sector. In the United Kingdom and Ireland, the National Union of Journalists is affiliated with numerous organizations that
advocate for press freedom and workers’ rights, in addition to groups directly connected to the media. Journalists in the United States might consider collaborating with teachers and professors in the education sector, as fellow knowledge workers.

- **Look past your own back yard.** As noted earlier, a broad outlook is increasingly necessary to manage the challenges posed by media convergence and media globalization. Journalists can no longer focus just on what’s happening in their shop. The trends that threaten journalistic quality cross mediums and political borders. The labor movement has a transnational infrastructure in place through national and international trade organizations and their affiliates. This infrastructure provides a helpful model for journalistic activism in the 21st century.

- **Frame the fight.** Despite the stereotype, union activity extends beyond compensation; it also involves negotiating working conditions that ensure quality and opposing budget decisions that threaten it. For example, the Newspaper Guild campaigned in 2011 against deep cuts and demotions at *The New York Times*, and the National Union of Journalists launched a campaign to fight proposed government cuts to the renowned BBC World Service. A prerequisite for good journalism, of course, is freedom of expression—another cause taken up by journalists’ unions. Indeed, the labor movement is a broad social movement focused centrally on social justice. Labor activists and allies such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch argue that workers’ rights are civil rights (this was one of Martin Luther King’s major causes) and, more basically, human rights (as recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in international law). When journalists advocate for good journalism, it is important that they frame the fight in terms of such values, so the public can see the broader social implications of protecting the prerogatives of journalists on the job and may be more willing to join them in the common cause of good journalism.

As vital as all these solutions are, however, they will be for naught if news consumers and citizens could care less about whether they are being given real journalism, or whether as citizen journalists they are producing real journalism. Hence our last argument: a push for greater media literacy.

**CITIZENS AND MEDIA LITERACY**

This suggestion confronts the issue of journalistic quality from a different direction. Rather than focusing on journalists (or others who produce journalism), it aims at citizens. The option speaks to the concern that efforts to control journalism and bring it more in line with the traditional understanding of professionalism can seem impractical and ethically problematic. Rather than trying to rein in journalism, perhaps the best response is to help citizens learn to better negotiate the complex and often chaotic landscape of the news. This would be done through formal education in schools and universities as well as through outreach efforts by journalism associations, media scholars, and media activists. On its own, this option could mitigate many concerns that give rise to calls for increased professionalism without moving into the questionable realm of regulation. On the other hand, the option could be combined
with the designation system we discussed earlier—backed by an organized group empowered to defend it—for a two-pronged approach to journalistic excellence.

How does increased media literacy address the issue of professionalism in journalism? First, media literate citizens are sophisticated consumers of news. They understand that messages, including news stories, analyses, and commentary, are constructions which are the work of human beings. Media literate citizens take into consideration the people and organizations behind news messages. Media literate citizens recognize the difference between news and advocacy, while understanding that all media have embedded values and points of view. Media literate citizens pay attention not only to what appears in the news, but to what’s left out. Media literate citizens understand that different people make different meanings from the same news message. And media literate citizens know something about producing media, so they are not only able to better understand the messages they consume, they are able to adopt a professional stance, in the ethical sense, to create messages.11

In short, providing media literacy skills to citizens results in viewers, readers, and listeners who are more discerning. But media literate citizens are also more demanding. The push for journalism that is excellent in both the technical and ethical senses comes from audiences who have high standards and will simply tune out of journalism that doesn’t live up to their expectations. We recognize the widespread critiques of today’s journalism, and we think those critiques ought to be heeded. But one legitimate response is that we as citizens get the journalism we deserve. Journalism doesn’t meet our expectations because we don’t hold it up to what it promises. If media literacy skills can be fostered, we will likely begin demanding and deserving better, more professional journalism.

What’s more, we will begin producing better, more professional journalism. Media literacy education is something that teaches citizens to read and to write, to consume and to produce. In a media landscape that is being keenly affected by citizen media producers, education in media literacy becomes even more essential. We certainly need the kind of media literacy education described by Elizabeth Thoman: education that gives us the ability to choose and select, to challenge and question, to interpret and create personal meaning, and to control interpretations rather than letting them control us (1999). However, the media literacy education we envision also calls for training in news literacy through which citizens are introduced to the tradition, processes, and values of professional journalism and are then able to apply those to messages they produce.

RECAPTURING VALUES

A more fully democratic, participatory ethic alone will not preserve what is genuinely valuable about professional journalistic practice. Indeed, without a recommitment to substantive values of public service, a more porous media regime can degenerate into a market populism that fully enfranchises chiefly the loudest and the best-heeled, while ignoring the truly voiceless even more profoundly than at present. The traditional value placed on journalistic independence may, in fact, at times compel independence from one’s own, generally best-heeled, readers.

The challenge is to marry the current clamor for democratization to a restatement of the values that are worth carrying forward: a reverence for fact, a commitment to verification, a
belief in the worth of independent discourse, humility, trustworthiness, accountability, public service, and so forth.

In this context, journalistic professionalism confers an obligation to collaborate with the crowd, not to cave to it. Practicing journalism would mean applying superior information-gathering and presentational skills to the job of superintending a wider process of research and narrative-making in which large numbers of others may take part. Here, the importance of trust—a generalized reliance on the journalist’s good will—would emerge as a principal ethical fulcrum. Moreover, the professional’s role would be that of an ethical emissary, insisting on the importance of such traditional standards as fairness, independence, accuracy, and intelligent skepticism.

Professionalism, in sum, depends on harvesting those traditional values and applying them to a new, more richly participatory, style of journalistic inquiry and making it more widely available than ever through the fresh and compelling representational forms digital media have made available.

NOTES

1. These criteria largely build off Michael Bayles’s classic work (Bayles, 1981); some authors also want to include such considerations as asymmetrical power relations, technical language, and a code of ethics. See Meyers (forthcoming) for a fuller discussion.

2. Some preferential access to information remains as a cultural artifact, but with officials tweeting from cabinet meetings, even well-placed journalists are being routinely leapfrogged.

3. That employer dependence has led to chronic problems in the articulation of ethical standards: Employers have the power not just to fire, but essentially to expel practitioners from the profession. In the professions, such expulsion can occur only for reasons of competency or ethics. In journalism, garden variety insubordination, absenteeism—the range of offenses specified in any self-respecting employee manual—gets you not only sacked, but defrocked.

4. See, for example, Mark Glaser’s notion of “the people formerly known as the audience” (Glaser, 2011).

5. We cannot completely omit consideration of who is a journalist when defining journalism as such (rather than as a profession). Doing so would exclude the moral motivations that have traditionally marked the practice’s normative boundaries (Borden & Tew, 2007).

6. For a contrary view, see Singer (2010).

7. This is why an analyst who investigates publicly significant events or institutions for the benefit of private clients may use much the same techniques of inquiry and exposition as a journalist, but the work is not journalism.

8. See Singer’s argument for the self-correcting power of the network (Singer, 2010).

10. Indeed, unions have been known to defend individual members’ rights at the expense of larger moral concerns. However, the same can be said of licensed professions, corporations, and other collectives who pursue their claims as legal actors. When you are using legal categories and procedures, the arguments will tend (unfortunately) toward the legalistic. However, groups without legal standing have no power.

11. These are skills widely recognized by scholars as those that are developed through training in media literacy. For additional information on the concept of media literacy, see: Center for Media Literacy. (2003). Teacher’s/leader’s orientation guide. MediaLit kit: A framework for learning and teaching in a media age. Santa Monica, CA: Center for Media Literacy.

REFERENCES


