

# THE WHEN OF JOURNALISM

## Module 4



### WHY THIS TOPIC MATTERS

Awareness of the basics of journalism's history can help citizens have a more nuanced understanding of the forces that shape news today.

Because journalism is only as good as a society genuinely wants it to be, understanding current strengths and weaknesses of journalism allows news consumers to become part of an important dialogue.

In an age of abundant information, citizens should take a proactive approach to consuming news and information that is of high quality.

### A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The origins of news we receive on our phones can be traced back to [59 B.C.](#) That year, in early Rome, the earliest references are found to a journalistic product called the [Acta Diurna](#). The publication was distributed daily throughout the city. Most societies since that time had some form of journalism.

American journalism is older than the nation itself. Early versions of American newspapers arose in Boston at the end of the [17th century](#) and [beginning of the 18th century](#). Among his other roles, [Benjamin Franklin was an influential early American journalist](#) and publisher. [John Peter Zenger's](#) acquittal for libel in 1735, has been called "[the first important victory for freedom of the press in the English colonies of North America.](#)"

Sedition--words perceived to incite disloyalty to the government--has long been used as a tool by those in power to subdue their political rivals. Even after ratification of the First Amendment in 1791, Congress adopted the Sedition Act, which was [used by Federalists used against Republican editors](#). The First Amendment specifically protects freedom of the press, and yet, like other provisions of the Bill of Rights, that seemingly absolute protection ("Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press...") has always been subject to balancing against other societal interests, such as collective security, privacy, reputation, intellectual property and others.

The [19th century](#) era identified with the [Penny Press](#) brought journalism to the public on a mass scale. Subsequent innovations that facilitated gathering and distribution of news included the [telegraph](#), collective news-sharing organizations such as the [Associated Press](#) and establishment of once-local news

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF JOURNALISM

in the United States of America



## AMERICAN JOURNALISM

17th - 18th century

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## THE PENNY PRESS

1833

Founding of first Penny Press paper in New York, making newspapers cheap enough for the masses.

## PHOTOGRAPHY

1880s-1890s

Transformative introduction of photography to newspapers.



## THE RADIO ACT OF 1927

1927

Congress began regulating electronic broadcast which eventually led to the establishment of the

Federal Communications Commission and later regulation of television and other electronic or digital media.



## NEW YORK TIMES CO. V SULLIVAN

1964

One of the most significant press-freedom events of the latter half of the 20th century. The Supreme Court adopted an important precedent relating to the rights of journalists and others to analyze and critique the performance of public officials.



## • ACTA DIURNA

59 BC

The earliest references to journalistic publications begin in Rome with the Act Diurna.



## • THE FIRST AMENDMENT

1791

"Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press..."



## • THE SEDITION ACT

1798

Passed by Federalists and used against Republican editors.

## • INVENTION OF THE TELEGRAPH

1844

## • THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

1846

A collective news-sharing organization founded in New York.

## • MUCKRAKERS

1904-1912

A collection of investigative journalists called muckrakers provided important public service by discovering and bringing attention to societal ills and abuses in need of reform.



## • HUTCHINS COMMISSION

1947

Published a report about the social responsibilities of journalists.

## • KERNER COMMISSION

1968

Issued a report about violence related to race issues and made recommendations for news media and other societal improvements.

## • PENTAGON PAPERS

1971

## • WATERGATE

1972-1974

## • INTERNET AGE

21st Century

Information travels around the world in seconds and is made available to people in more countries than ever before.

Figure 4.1 Infographic

organizations that later became national in scope, such as the newspaper known today as [The New York Times](#). The 1880s saw the transformative introduction of [photographs](#) into newspapers. [A collection of investigative journalists called muckrakers](#) provided important public service by discovering and bringing attention to societal ills and abuses in need of reform.

In the early 20th century, technological advances and modern constitutional law interpretations shaped journalism in profound ways. Congress began regulating electronic broadcast media with the [Radio Act of 1927](#), which eventually led to establishment of the Federal Communications Commission and later regulation of television and other electronic or digital media. [The rise of dominant TV news networks](#) followed the government censorship and propaganda efforts that accompanied World War II. A task force known as the [Hutchins Commission published a report in 1947](#) about the social responsibilities of journalists. Another group, called the Kerner Commission, issued a [report in 1968](#) about violence related to race issues and made recommendations for news media and other societal improvements.

[New York Times Co. v. Sullivan](#) was one of the most significant press-freedom events of the latter half of the 20th century. The Supreme Court adopted an important precedent relating to the [rights of journalists and others to analyze and critique the performance of public officials](#). The case established the doctrine of “actual malice,” meaning that journalists and others would be protected under the First Amendment for false criticisms of public officials as long as the statements were made in good faith—without knowledge of falsity or reckless disregard for the truth. Journalism took center stage again in the 1970s with the [Pentagon Papers](#) and [Watergate](#) incidents. The modern Internet has impacted journalism in ways that will be discussed in a later module. explores just a few of the ways that ethical journalism serves society.

## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF NEWS VALUES AND CURRENT ISSUES

The development of an advertising-supported revenue model for American journalism impacted news content in profound ways. Journalists came to value objectivity, or at least editorial independence and skepticism. Journalism students today are taught that news is made up of events and issues that are novel, timely, relevant and impactful, as well as situations that involve conflict and human interest.

### Components of “Newsworthiness”

Proximity: Is the story relevant to the local reader?

Conflict: Is the issue developing?

Eminence and Prominence: Are noteworthy people involved?

Human interest: Even though it might not be an earth-shattering event, does it contain unique, interesting elements?

Figure 4.2 Components of “Newsworthiness”

Sociologist Herbert Gans spent four years with journalists at multiple news organizations before concluding that news content was largely shaped by journalists’ self-identity as Progressive Reformers. Modern American journalists view their role as “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable” or “providing a voice to the voiceless.” In essence, journalists have been focused mostly on pointing out societal problems in hopes that government and other power brokers will resolve those problems. Journalists, Gans wrote, reflected [middle-class American values](#) such as ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, moderatism and order.

However, changes in technology and other societal forces have forced journalism to re-examine its role in society. Scholars contend that over-wrought attempts at objectivity and skepticism are unnecessary or even detrimental to journalism [connecting with its community](#). Furthermore, the rise of disinformation society has allowed politicians and others to call into question the basic existence of neutral facts and journalism’s ability to identify such facts.

As a result of other forces, such as the severe decline in print advertising revenues and the bottom-line-driven consolidation of local news organizations by large corporate owners and hedge funds, journalism today faces several major challenges. All of this has made news literacy education, a subset of [media literacy](#), more important than ever. Meaningful journalism does exist but most people using social media won’t find it. Citizens should proactively seek and support,

including financially, good local, regional and national news organizations that are not simply contributing to the political echo chambers but that are still gathering and distributing fact-based news independently and in the public interest.

## CONCLUSION

Though smartphones and social media have put the power of publishing into the hands of the many, journalists are still tasked with important responsibilities and held to higher standards than the average person with a Twitter account. [Citizen journalism](#) has an important role to play. Still, most online content created by today's users of social media platforms should not be confused with news conveyed by independent and public-interested minded journalists. Journalism certainly has need of progress and improvement, but accomplishing that requires some level of nuanced understanding and support by citizens, news consumers and societal leaders.



**JOURNALISM  
RESEARCH AND  
INNOVATION  
PROJECT**