



THE WHY OF JOURNALISM

Module 5

WHY THIS TOPIC MATTERS

Understanding how journalism benefits society can motivate citizens to protect freedom of journalism on local, national, and international levels.

The watchdog role assigned to journalists can begin to explain reasons for the sometimes combative relationship between the media and government.

Journalism is a necessary part of a healthy democracy, which benefits from an actively expanding, diverse marketplace of ideas.

JOURNALISM BENEFITS SOCIETY

People may choose to participate in journalism for a variety of reasons, including entertainment, self-fulfillment, and expression. Yet most journalists ascribe to the same fundamental belief as stated by the [Society of Professional Journalists](#), that

“public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy ... journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough.”

Figure 6.1 Society of Professional Journalist

This altruistic view of the role of journalism in society is at the heart of the work journalists do. This module explores just a few of the ways that ethical journalism serves society.



Figure 6.2 Watchdog role of journalism

THE WATCHDOG ROLE

One of the most critical ways journalism benefits society is by checking government abuse of power. This practice has been given the term “watchdog role,” which refers to the essential duty of journalists to monitor the conduct of government officials. As an independent monitor of power, they are tasked with [“watching over the powerful few in society on behalf of the many to guard against tyranny.”](#)

Academics explain that the watchdog role of the press is founded on an understanding of the media as the [“fourth pillar’ of democracy within a system of checks and balances.”](#) It has also been called the [“invisible branch of government”](#) or more commonly, the fourth estate.

Fulfillment of the watchdog role is not without its challenges. Tight governmental control, as seen in [North Korea, Russia, and China,](#) restricts journalists’ ability to investigate and report on institutional corruption. Even in places where the media is generally regarded as free, like the United States, consolidation of media ownership and increasing market pressures are troubling obstacles. Most recently, [“vilification of critical reporting as ‘fake news’ by political leaders”](#) damages the public trust in journalism and makes it more difficult to identify fact based information.

FACILITATING DEMOCRACY

James Madison made the following [iconic statement](#) regarding the importance of an informed citizenry: “A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce

or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both,” wrote Madison. “And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.” Madison alludes to a vital role which journalists fulfill in their everyday work: Informing and educating society about relevant issues. Perhaps this is why one constitutional scholar [said](#), “Any living constitution, written or unwritten, breathes partly through journalism.”

For this very reason, a healthy news media has been called the life-blood of democracy. [Freedom House](#) claims that this is because “news provides, or should provide, the vital resources for processes of information gathering, deliberation and analysis that enables citizens to participate in political life and democracy to function better.” [Properly done, journalism can help consensus emerge, improve the knowledge and judgment of voters, and sharpen the performance of public officials and government as a whole.](#)

Not only must the media inform, but it must provide information from a variety of perspectives and sources. This ensures that citizens have access to all available facts and opinions so that they may be better prepared to make educated decisions as a member of society. Highlighting diverse opinions creates [“a culture of dissent that every healthy democracy must have...If one voice becomes too powerful, this process is placed in jeopardy and democracy is damaged.”](#)



Figure 6.3 Voice to the voiceless

Part of highlighting a variety of voices is fulfilling the journalistic responsibility to give a voice to the voiceless. A prominent point in the [Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics](#), giving a voice to the voiceless is usually not literal. Rather, it means sharing a story from or about minority groups that don’t have the power to “speak” in the public

domain. Most average citizens, especially those who are underprivileged, don't have indisposible access to a mass media platform like a TV news program or newspaper. In this sense, perhaps it is more accurate to say that journalists become [megaphones](#) for valuable stories to be told.

For example, a person experiencing homelessness might have an incredible story to tell that could inspire people to make important changes in their community. With their own limited resources, they will only be able to reach an audience as far as their voice can carry. However, if a journalist uses their resources to share the story of this person, their insights can reach a mass audience that could possibly include people who can instigate important change.



Figure 6.4 Marketplace of ideas

MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS

Serving as a megaphone for minority groups to be heard is essential to democracy and society in general because it contributes to the [marketplace of ideas](#). The marketplace of ideas “refers to the belief that the test of the truth or acceptance of ideas depends on their competition with one another and not on the opinion of a censor, whether one provided by the government or by some other authority.” More simply put, it is a metaphorical space that welcomes all ideas so that people can be best equipped to decide for themselves what is true.

As people contribute to the marketplace of ideas, they may be participating in the safety valve theory. This essentially deems free expression of controversial ideas through journalism as a way to let off steam, with the belief that it will deter people from turning to more violent means to draw attention to their causes. The [safety valve theory](#) represents the idea that [free speech](#)

[provides a balance between stability and change in a society.](#)

Scholar [Thomas Emerson](#) believed that “people who have had full freedom to state their position and to persuade others will be more willing to accept decisions that go against them. Without free expression, the real problems of society may remain hidden and fester. So by suppressing reform, censorship may transform problems into a revolution.” Journalism benefits society by providing a way for people to express their positions in a safe, productive manner.

CONCLUSION

Through the watchdog role, journalism checks government power by monitoring and reporting on political activities. It facilitates democracy by educating members of society and providing a platform for minority voices. Journalism also provides a productive way for opinionated people to contribute to the marketplace of ideas. It's no wonder it has been written that, [“Now more than ever, journalism benefits every member of society by the millions of words written every day.”](#)



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