

FEATURED ESSAY

Sociology and Journalism: A Comparative Analysis

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Sociological researchers and journalists both study society and write or film reports about their findings, but they are not particularly fond of each other. Many sociologists disparage and even dismiss the work of journalists and, equally important, of fellow sociologists they consider to be journalists.

Journalists are condemned mostly for dramatizing, oversimplifying, and sensationalizing their findings. They are also condemned for methodological shortcomings, such as using anecdotes and samples of one or two as evidence. In addition, sociologists criticize journalists for not understanding their work or oversimplifying their reports on it.

They also look down on journalists for being only descriptive, and fellow sociologists who are deemed to be too descriptive may therefore be dismissed as journalists. Eschewing disciplinary concepts can result in the same put-down, and so will repeated appearances in the news media.

As far as I know, no one has ever systematically studied sociology's opinions of and behavior toward journalism. Nor do we know how widespread these opinions and behaviors are. My hunch: they are practiced most widely among sociologists who consider themselves social *scientists* devoted to empirical research that contributes to theory-building and the literature. Even if their research is publicly funded, they report their work by adding to the sociological literature rather than by informing the general public, and they may be reluctant to talk to journalists.

Conversely, sociologists who see themselves as *social* scientists and seek mainly to understand American and other societies probably look more kindly on journalists. Public sociologists may admire them for their ability to reach the general public.

To be sure, sociologists are not alone in dismissing journalists, for they are treated similarly by the other social sciences. I still remember when the late John Kenneth Galbraith, arguably the most influential American economist of the last century, was called a journalist, and I can think of several contemporary economists who are probably being put down the same way.

Journalists are no more complimentary; they see sociologists as given to jargon and other forms of opaque writing. Instead of focusing on the important or interesting topics about which journalists report, sociologists produce too many boring writings on topics that journalists view as not newsworthy.

The critiques that the two disciplines level at each other reflect their different disciplinary norms, but also those of the very different institutions in which they are embedded. Still, some criticisms are justified, particularly those that impair the usefulness of the two disciplines for their audiences, others in the general public, and the country.

However, this essay is limited to a comparative analysis of journalism and sociology as two disciplines studying and reporting on the same society. It will argue that they do so for different purposes, that they report their findings to different audiences, and that they differ in many other ways. They are not even competing for scarce resources, power, or other institutional necessities or rewards. Consequently, they need not disparage each other.

The essay also suggests that the two disciplines are similar in a few ways and sometimes use each other for their work. As a result, both would gain from greater mutual understanding and a more cooperative relationship. The essay concludes with some suggestions for advancing both.

Because what follows is neither a review essay nor a research report, I will generalize more broadly than is customary. My generalizations about journalism apply mainly to reporters working for the daily legacy news media: print, radio, and television. (Too many of my observations probably come from media that cater to the college-educated audience, notably the *New York Times*.)

The sociological researchers I write about are academics who are primarily teachers, but at research universities that expect that they will do research and keep course loads low for that reason.

I thereby neglect the considerable variety in the kinds of journalism and journalists as well as of sociology and sociological researchers. A comprehensive comparative analysis of the two disciplines would need to be of book length.

Some Major Differences between Sociology and Journalism

Sociological researchers and journalists play different roles in the division of information-supplying labor, each with their own purposes and responsibilities.

Journalists report mainly to members of the general public and pay particular attention to the latest news about government and politics. They do so in part because their profession considers itself to be a bulwark for democracy, but they also seek to inform their audience of what government and politics do for and to the citizenry.

Sociological researchers work mostly for their disciplinary colleagues and students, monitoring the components of society that the social scientific division of labor delegates to sociology.

Perhaps the biggest difference: journalists must report daily, and now sometimes 24/7, on all events and actions they consider important. Sociologists can study anything past or present, choosing their research topics based on their personal research interests, the demands of their field, and what funders want studied or are willing to support.

Journalists like to emphasize the individuals at the center of the events and actions they cover. Most of their data comes from

interviews with named individuals, such as institutional leaders or the information-suppliers employed to speak for them and their institutions.

Sociologists focus instead on patterns and structures, such as processes, networks, and institutions. While journalists emphasize unique or distinctive events or acts, sociologists more often study recurring ones.

Moreover, journalists look especially for the deviant or unusual event, action, or personality. The plane that crashes is newsworthy, while the thousands that land safely are not. Sociologists study the unusual as well, but they report more often on what is considered typical, normal, and regular.

Journalists aim to expose villains and thereby serve a moral and even a penal function in society, while sociologists are more likely to study the structures and processes that cause behavior to be labelled as law-breaking. Insofar as they act as moral guardians, they are concerned with ending harmful or criminal behavior even while re-labeling victimless actions as acceptable behavior.

The research methods of the two disciplines, especially their data-gathering and analytic processes, differ too. Because journalists must report on the latest happenings and then disseminate their findings as quickly as possible, they have little time for data collection and analysis. Investigative reporting sometimes takes months, but it is therefore so expensive that only a few news media can afford to undertake it.

Since journalists serve lay audiences, most of their reports are brief, although weekly and monthly news media can practice so-called long-form journalism.

Sociological methods are frequently just the reverse. Sociologists generally get their data from and about populations, the roles they play, and the social positions they occupy. Researchers sometimes spend years collecting and analyzing their data; and because they serve mainly their colleagues, they can report it in great detail.

The two disciplines report their findings in different ways as well. Journalists have to produce news *stories* and aim to be story-tellers, leaving so-called “think pieces” mainly to columnists and commentators. Conversely, sociologists write their

findings up as research reports, with extensive descriptions of their methods. Their think-pieces are called theory.

The two disciplines also speak different languages. Journalists write plainly, concisely, and sometimes dramatically to attract and hold the attention of their audience. Sociological research reports employ technical language and aim to invent new concepts. Partly as a result, almost every sociological field develops a somewhat distinctive vocabulary.

Many of these and other variations between the two disciplines can be explained largely by the institutions in which their workers are employed. Most journalists work for profit-seeking firms that make their money by selling their product to subscribers and assembling audiences for advertisers.

In the process, they must compete with other firms selling similar products, and those who win in the competition grow and sometimes buy those who lose. Partly as a result, the so-called legacy news industry producing print and electronic journalism is increasingly controlled by an ever-smaller number of large firms. Some of these firms, especially in radio and television, obtain most of their income by supplying entertainment.

Although the digital news media have now intensified the competition, news-gathering is still very labor intensive and costly. Consequently, a handful of news websites may eventually become dominant as well. The social media firms such as Facebook that are now also supplying news are already huge, and Google is much larger than any of the corporations that own legacy news firms.

Sociologists conduct their studies in departments in which they are mainly teachers and in research institutes where they must often spend time writing grant proposals to fund their research. While both departments and institutes are nonprofit institutions, they depend on funders who expect symbolic rewards, whether they are grant givers, donors, or the tuition-paying students who attend their schools.

Competition between profit-seekers is always more intense than between nonprofits. Consequently, the legacy news media are currently experiencing economic decline brought on in part by shrinking audiences and by advertisers moving away from print and

even television news to online news websites and social media.

Sociology departments and research institutes must compete, too, sometimes with others in the same university; but overt competition is discouraged. The competition between universities is more intense because there are not enough students for all of them, but researchers do not have to face the same pervasive economic decline as journalists.

Differences in Audiences

Some of the difference between the two disciplines can be explained by the difference in the size and characteristics of their audience and by their relationship to it.

The circulation of the country's prime national dailies, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, is about two million. The three network television evening news programs are watched by more than 20 million viewers.

The circulation of sociology's two prime or "flagship" journals, the *ASR* and *AJS*, totals 11,000, and all of *ASA's* journals reach about 43,000 subscribers, although students and other readers who read these in libraries or on the web should be added to both numbers.

Journalists are also involved in more complex relationships with their audiences. They not only report to readers, viewers, and listeners but must also keep in mind that their work is seen by their sources, the people and organizations about which they report.

Then too, journalists must keep in mind the many different kinds of organizations, politicians, and media critics who constantly monitor them for perceived political and other biases. Politicians have long thought the news media ought to be their publicists, but Donald Trump attacks them for supplying "fake news" and calls them "the enemy of the people."

Sociologists rarely have to worry about their sources, most of whom never see their writings. While researchers are sometimes attacked for political and other ideological biases by the Right and the Left, the only critics that they must always keep in mind are their peers. For better or worse, sociologists are not publicly visible enough to be

sought out or regularly attacked by politicians, although at times of social change, the discipline sometimes becomes a convenient scapegoat.

Journalists' relationship with their readers, viewers, and listeners might be described as two-sided. On the one hand, their professional norms urge journalists to supply news that "the public needs to know." On the other hand, they must offer the public what it wants to know, which is reinforced by the need to maximize that audience for employers and advertisers.

The journalists' relationship is two-sided in another way. Those working for the popular news media assume that their audience consists of a small number of news buffs who may pay close and regular attention to the news and a much larger number who pay less, and less regular, attention. Its interest in the news is limited, another reason why most news stories are brief.

Also, journalists expect much of their audience to be fickle so that it must be wooed for almost every news item. This explains why the news is communicated as stories and, when possible, dramatic ones.

Because so much of the news is about atypical events and actions, journalistic generalizations about what is happening or trending can sometimes be overly dramatic and misleading. However, journalists rarely have time to think about all the possible effects of their work.

They do not have time to think about their audience, either; and when that audience is diverse and in the hundreds of thousands or more, there is no way they can do so. Instead, some of them keep relatives, neighbors, and other lay people in mind, and then mostly to remember what they know and understand about the world covered by journalists and how much they want to know.

Because journalists believe, without much evidence, that their audience will want only the latest news and that the journalists and firms with which they are competing believe so as well, journalists are under constant time pressure. Being first with a story and scooping other news media therefore earns both the news organization and the journalists involved recognition, prestige, and consideration for professional prizes.

Another source of pressure: making complex subjects clear to a lay audience, even as they must attract it. Consequently, they must simplify but should not oversimplify. Unable to tell their audience all they have found out, they also cannot add the qualifications that sociologists dare not omit.

The reporting task is further complicated for general reporters, who must quickly learn enough about the large variety of topics they have to cover in order to accurately report the latest news about them.

Beat reporters who concentrate on specific topics also need to learn fast, since their beats are much larger than the fields or subfields in which sociologists work. National political reporters must understand the entire political institution to which they are assigned, and the few social science reporters must understand all the social sciences.

Sociologists are freed of most of these complexities. Their audience is, comparatively speaking, homogeneous, and much of it is virtually captive.

Researchers must keep up with the literature in their field so that they can add to it, teachers must keep up so they can teach it, and students are assigned many required readings. Sociologists are thus almost guaranteed a regular and fairly attentive audience, which they neither need to court nor attract with attention-getting studies.

Moreover, that audience is not and cannot be very demanding of the journals they read—if only because they need to be published themselves. As a result, editors can choose among a humongous oversupply of authors—and many can turn down 80 to 90 percent of the papers they receive.

Further, editors and authors need not report what is new, either in the society they study or even within sociology. They can ignore events, actions, and even the latest social trends that are headline-making for journalists. One of the possible exceptions: the textbook business, where novelty is sometimes a competitive advantage.

Originality is highly valued, but because it is rare, authors can publish articles and books that only report something slightly different, or that replicate or question what has already been published. In fact, authors' substantive findings are frequently less important than

their methods, theories, and concepts—especially if they can come up with new ones.

Since occupational success is too often measured more by the amount of publishing than by the quality of the work, journal articles are of lengths inconceivable to journalists. Because most journals are quarterlies or bimonthlies, readers also have enough time to read them. Thus, authors need not worry that they will lose their audience.

Still, even scholars sometimes need or want the latest news about their disciplines. Consequently, academic organizations also publish disciplinary, departmental, and institutional newsletters.

Nonetheless, their stories are unlike those appearing in the news media. Given the academic conception of time, the latest news could have occurred months ago. Moreover, most of the stories tell about disciplinary or institutional accomplishments and announce likely future ones. Routine politics, power struggles, and the like are avoided. Indeed, “bad” news about the discipline is virtually never reported in these newsletters.

Last but not least, the two disciplines face different futures, and that of the news media is currently troubled. Although Trump’s intentional and unintentional news-making has increased the news audience, the long-term trend is an audience decline, especially in the legacy news media. That and the ongoing consumer shift from stores to online purchasing have also contributed to the decline in advertising income. The resulting economic problems have led to elimination of print editions and even the closing of some newspapers and magazines, as well as the elimination of jobs even in surviving ones.

In response, print media have begun to alter the basic news format, for example, supplementing print with videos and podcasts—and even sending out newsletters and emails to inform audiences of news about topics in which they have shown an interest. Almost all news media, both legacy and digital, have also been looking for ways of repackaging and putting together news stories for audiences with specific interests in order to hold them and attract new ones.

Sociology is in much better shape, and unlike journalists, sociologists do not have to worry about the future of the discipline.

To be sure, not all is well. Higher education is increasingly competitive and underfunded, and too many colleges have had to downsize or hire more adjuncts. Perhaps as a result, the ASA’s membership has not grown for a number of recent years.

Federal and some other funds for sociological research have been reduced as well, along with library budgets. The latter reduction cuts into the acquisition of sociological publications, but the content of sociological journals and monographs has changed little for many decades, and the number being published still seems to be rising.

Some Similarities and Convergences between the Disciplines

Although there are many differences between sociology and journalism, there are a few similarities. As already noted, both disciplines report mainly about American society. They communicate much of their findings in written texts and to audiences that want or need to keep up with environments beyond the primary groups, networks, and institutions they are in or in touch with regularly.

Both disciplines also apply some similar methods. As suggested earlier, they rely on interviews with the people they report on. Both resort to surveys, but journalists rely mainly on those done by pollsters.

Journalists, like sociologists, get some of their data backstage, the former through investigative reporting, the latter by fieldwork. Still, investigative reporters occasionally also resort to fieldwork and, like sociologists, frequently among marginalized populations.

Both also go backstage in order to find people who are behaving illegally or violating widely agreed on norms. However, journalists seek to expose them, and those who do so often win their discipline’s most prestigious prizes.

Sociologists are more interested in comparing backstage and frontstage behavior. If they find illegal or norm-violating behavior, they look for impersonal—for example, structural and cultural—patterns that cause or incentivize injurious behavior and may suggest social changes to eliminate it.

Journalists and sociologists both strive to be accurate, to avoid plagiarism and violations of agreed-upon research procedures.

These are cardinal offenses in both fields and may lead to the expulsion of violators.

The two disciplines also aim to be as objective as possible, to keep personal values and opinions out of their studies. While sociologists focus on empirical findings, journalists concentrate on reporting agreed-upon facts. In a time of “fake news,” they have stepped up fact-checking to keep out inaccurate ones, a version of which sociologists assign to peer reviewers.

In a practice criticized by media critics as false equivalence, journalists are trained to treat “both sides” of law-abiding institutions, covering events, actions, and their participants as similarly and neutrally as they can.

They stick to the facts and to neutrality in part because their audiences are politically and ideologically diverse and now increasingly polarized. Consequently, journalists, or their firms and advertisers, try to avoid antagonizing them.

Sociologists aim for a somewhat different conception of objectivity, in part because, normally, they do not have to keep their audiences in mind. They do not have to think about whether they could be antagonizing quantitative or qualitative sociologists or cultural or structural ones.

Instead, sociologists assume that their readers are prepared to be persuaded by empirically based findings and practice a virtually automatic equivalence.

Despite the relative scarcity of similarities between sociology and journalism, there are some instances of convergence between the two, suggesting a possibly greater similarity in the future.

Journalists are beginning to report on sociological and other social science research, especially when they write about topics also investigated by academic researchers.

In recent years, journalists, especially those news media catering to a college-educated audience, have become more analytic, offering causal and other explanations that sometimes resemble sociological ones. In addition, they have begun to include news and analyses based on large data sets as well as “big data,” with some journalism schools now offering training in data journalism.

Sociological convergence with journalism is also taking place, particularly in communicating sociological findings and perspectives

to the general public. The ASA has held news conferences for many years, and its journal *Contexts* was originally published to reach readers beyond sociology.

Another instance of convergence is sociology’s increased resort to narrative about individuals, especially in book-length ethnographic and other qualitative studies. Sociologists may be adding story-telling to their rhetorical repertoire, though not as pervasively as journalists.

Perhaps the most significant example of sociological convergence is public sociology, particularly the kind that communicates sociological ideas and findings to the general public.

Public sociology can include both publications created specifically for the general public as well as those that are intended to reach the disciplinary audience. Public sociology should, however, be distinguished from popularized sociology, which is usually written by journalists or free-lance writers.

If the uses that journalists make of sociologists, and vice versa, can be considered examples of convergence, then the social and intellectual distance between the two disciplines is narrower than their opinion of each other would suggest.

Although few news media establish sociological or social science beats, journalists regularly use sociologists to obtain information for their stories and also as quote-suppliers when they want to provide scholarly backup for their conclusions.

The reporting of sociological findings should increase as journalism becomes yet more analytic and as data journalism moves toward the mainstream of the discipline.

Sociologists use journalists in at least three ways. Many keep up with the journalistic coverage of their research topics. Actually, they could probably not do their research if they had not already obtained some basic information about these topics from news stories.

They also use the journalists’ reporting to help them decide what they should study. This can include elaborating on and explaining journalistic descriptions and conclusions, focusing on related topics journalists do not cover, and correcting or debunking what sociologists deem to be faulty or oversimplified reporting.

In addition, sociologists trying to reach the general public need journalists to get their ideas and findings to that public. To do so, they must first evoke enthusiasm about their research from journalists.

Further, sociologists use and need journalists to get themselves and their employers reported by the news media. Most universities appreciate and sometimes reward their academic employees for publicity that increases their institutional visibility. That appreciation increases if the universities are competing with other universities in attracting students and pleasing trustees, alumni, politicians, and others on whose funds they depend.

Many sociology departments and research institutes regularly report the work of their staff members to some news media. Every issue of ASA's *Footnotes* includes a list of members who have been "In the News."

For Mutual Understanding and Closer Ties

Both disciplines would benefit from greater mutual understanding and closer ties. These would not erase differences or create many new similarities, but they could lead to higher quality work in both.

How mutual understanding and closer ties can be achieved requires discussion in both disciplines, but I can imagine five ways that could be considered in such a discussion. Some of these ways are already being pursued in a few sociology departments and journalism schools.

First, the two disciplines should study each other's work. Sociological researchers and their audiences need to become familiar with the many different kinds of news media to understand how journalists decide what is newsworthy and why and how they do their legwork, deal with controversial issues, and manage serving diverse and lay audiences.

Their research should also include the news rooms and firms in which journalists work. Although a handful of journalism and communications professors and graduate students are now doing fieldwork in news rooms, sociologists need to do more as well.

Journalists charged with the day to day reporting that is their basic function may

not have much reason to study sociology and sociologists. However, those with social science and related beats should know more about the operations of sociology and the other social science disciplines as well as the academic or other institutions in which they are embedded.

They might also benefit from being more familiar with how sociologists gather and analyze data, how they theorize and why, and how they deal with detachment and objectivity. They should know more about the role paradigm changes, intellectual fashions, and the *Zeitgeist* play in academic research, even if they are unlikely to cover them.

Sociologists would benefit as well from journalistic studies of their discipline, if only because they so rarely study it and themselves. Studies showing how informed journalists see them might even lead to some innovative disciplinary soul-searching.

Both sociologists and journalists should study why they criticize and disparage each other. These findings could enable them to determine which criticisms of each other might be justified, which are groundless, and which have significant negative effects, including on the society beyond their disciplines. They might also look into the satisfactions and pains of disparaging each other, which might then help to reduce it.

Second, sociologists and journalists should occasionally study together. Sociology graduate students and interested undergraduate sociology majors might take courses in journalism schools, particularly on news judgment and reporting. Journalism students would benefit from substantive and some methodological courses in sociology. Seminars open to both journalism and sociology students would be especially desirable.

Internships in news organizations ought to be available for sociology students, as well as research assistantships for journalists on sociological research projects.

Third, the two disciplines could look at ways of helping each other. Sociologists should show journalists how to see patterns in the topics they cover and complement journalistic causal analyses with sociological ones. In addition, they could show journalists how to use some of sociology's methods, including sampling procedures that can

replace their over-reliance on anecdotes. Such sociological aid might be particularly helpful now that journalists more often complement description with explanation and interpretation.

Journalists can teach sociologists how to write in non-technical English and encourage them to do more research relating to current events and controversies. Sociologists, like other social scientists, might therefore be able to contribute more to an understanding of the country's current problems.

If necessary, they can show aspiring public sociologists what kinds of findings about what topics are likely to be newsworthy and how to present their work so that it attracts the attention of journalists and, through them, of the general public.

Fourth, the two disciplines should try to use each other. Some news media already hire sociologists as researchers and advisers, but they could do more, especially on reporting projects that require research better carried out by sociologists than by journalists.

Sociologists could use journalists more often as well. True, they sometimes invite journalists to participate in conferences, and ASA now presents an annual award to the journalists who have demonstrated "excellence in reporting on social issues." Still, sociologists could use news stories as research materials more often, particularly when journalists have covered sociologically relevant topics. The findings of investigative reporting could stimulate sociological studies of the same sites.

Fifth, the two disciplines ought to work together at times. Journalists might benefit from sociologists occasionally participating in their legwork, just as sociological research projects could use help from journalists who have reported on their research topics. Fieldworkers and investigative reporters could assist each other with their studies and undertake joint projects.

Obviously, this list is far too ambitious even as a long-range plan; but, like other plans, it can be whittled down to adapt to funding and other realities.

Moreover, right now its various elements have to be initiated by sociologists. As I pointed out earlier, journalism is currently experiencing an economic and occupational

crisis, and journalists must first assure their own survival.

Actually, media sociologists might even be able to help a little, by conducting or assisting with in-depth audience studies among former, prospective, and current audience members to find out what they need and want from the news and the ways in which it is presented. Perhaps such studies could help the legacy media compete with the digital and social media that are now reducing their audiences.

Also, sociologists need journalists more than journalists need sociologists, because the news media can provide the discipline with more visibility. Greater visibility might help sociology attract further students and research funds, as well as the public's cultural and political support when sociology is threatened.

One current threat that journalists should already be covering is political opposition to sociological research, especially from conservative Republicans. Some have pushed to eliminate federal funding for studies of social problems the existence of which they deny, or which conflict with their conservative ideology, such as those documenting racial, economic, and other inequalities.

Some conservative politicians would also like to discourage political sociologists and political scientists who want to go backstage, where they could report normative and other shortcuts by political organizations and the country's power-holders.

A closer working relationship with journalists might even help sociology draw even with the other social sciences that already study current events and other topics that journalists cover regularly, notably, economics, political science, and psychology. Journalists would benefit as well, since their coverage would be enhanced if they knew more about the work of economic and political sociologists.

If the country's current economic, political, and social problems—for example, those wrought by its many inequalities, globalization, and climate change—continue, the two disciplines may discover that mutual understanding and cooperative relationships might help them to better understand the society they both study.