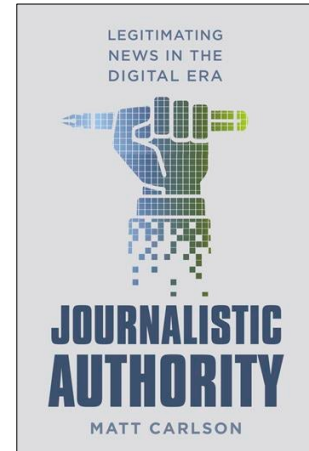


Matt Carlson, **Journalistic Authority: Legitimizing News in the Digital Era**, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017, 256 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

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Authority, legitimacy, credibility, and trust are significant points of entry for understanding the institutional status of journalism and the free press. While journalism has long struggled with public opinion, the crisis in authority specifically is arguably more prominent now than ever. This is due, in part, to ongoing change in technological, economic, and political structures, compounded by changes in the expected ways that journalists produce, and audiences consume media. As new technologies are introduced into the media environment, new forms of media are produced, new norms regarding who can create media emerge, and understandings of news as a professionally produced product evolve. The evolution of digital media and the various platforms within contribute to an overloaded environment of news stories claiming authority as explanations of the world. As such, audiences must confront—and often, question the authority of—this complex media environment every day.



Authority and how journalism derives and possesses it are the central questions of Matt Carlson's **Journalistic Authority: Legitimizing News in the Digital Era**. As Carlson argues, a focus on journalistic authority is crucial for understanding how we know what we know about the world. In order to meet the highly regarded expectations of journalism as an institutional driver of democracy, a watchdog, a diffuser of knowledge, or even an accounting of events, it must have authority. And so, Carlson seeks to find out whether journalists have authority, what kind it is, how it is changing, and what all of that means. These are, of course, questions and areas of concern pervasive throughout the news industry and among scholars and society at large, making Carlson's work essential reading for anyone interested in trying to make sense of a changing news landscape and an institution in crisis.

A key aspect of the book and Carlson's construct of journalistic authority is that it is not constant. He clarifies that the goal of his work is not to provide readers with a universal definition, but instead to offer an applicable analytical tool. Herein lies the crux of the book's utility, as for better or worse, journalism as an institution has always been open to contestation and change.

Carlson presents a "relational theory of journalistic authority" (p. 13) that can be used as a model for examining journalistic authority across varying contexts. Indeed, the journalistic authority explicated by Carlson is not simply an intrinsic characteristic of one person or organization, but the result of an "asymmetrical relationship" between authority and those who recognize it (p. 13). In other words, Carlson goes on to explain, while journalists have access, audiences depend on that access, thus enabling an asymmetrical relationship.

Importantly, Carlson's construct of authority is more than just audience perception—it is also predicated on changing professional boundaries, news forms, discourse, technology, and media criticism. Carlson begins his analysis with an interrogation of several "internal" components of journalism including a discussion on the boundaries of the profession of journalism, a history of news forms themselves, and an elucidation of how journalists discuss themselves as a mechanism for legitimacy. In doing so, he shows readers that professionalism is important for understanding journalistic authority, but there's more to its construction. The narratives that journalists tell themselves, as well as changes in the styles of news forms, and of course, the way these styles then impact the relationship between journalists and the audience are integral components to journalistic authority.

Carlson then provides a comprehensive overview of the wider, external context of journalistic authority relations by delving more deeply into the dynamics of the role of the audience and public opinion, sources, technology, and media critics. Each of these factors has a dedicated chapter that combines thorough concept explication with a peppering of real-life examples, adding a noted and appreciated real-world context to news about news. Regarding public opinion, for example, Carlson cites statistics from 2014 that already indicated a weak view of trust in journalism. Interestingly, he goes on to question these survey instruments, implying a necessary skepticism around the tools that measure such constructs.

The last component analyzed in Carlson's theory of journalistic authority is the relationship between journalism and critics. Carlson briefly alludes to the existence of "a suspicion so deep it forestalls collective attempts at skepticism to instead invite outright dismissal of contemporary news as legitimate" (p. 179); however, this chapter just scratches the surface of a topic overflowing with implications for assessing the current crisis of journalism and that of authority, in particular. In other words, what is the role and impact of attitudes and actions that are more than what's traditionally identified as "media criticism"? While this is not a question Carlson goes into with particular depth, he does go so far as to contend its inevitability. Toward the end of the book, however, Carlson brings up the question of what form journalistic authority should take and how we can help it get there. It is encouraging to already see a movement toward concrete takeaways for professional journalists, as the work lends itself well to future discussion on intervention strategies. This is an important point of entry for media professionals, and I look forward to reading what's to come.

Although the book was published in 2017, it's natural to read it now—well into the Trump presidency—and wonder if Carlson's conception of authority has changed since the time of writing. On the flipside, however, one of the main takeaways from this work is that, in many ways, the central argument would not change. Indeed, Carlson's novel and adaptable analytical model is one of the book's great strengths. He does an exceptional job of illustrating authority as a fluid process in continuous "repair, defense, and adaptation" of journalism. This, of course, serves to further contribute to the relevance and endurance of Carlson's theory even as the greater news environment continues to be in flux.