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Matthew Powers and Sandra Vera-Zambrano, **The Journalist's Predicament: Difficult Choices in a Declining Profession**, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2023, 320 pp., $35.00 (paperback), $140.00 (hardcover).

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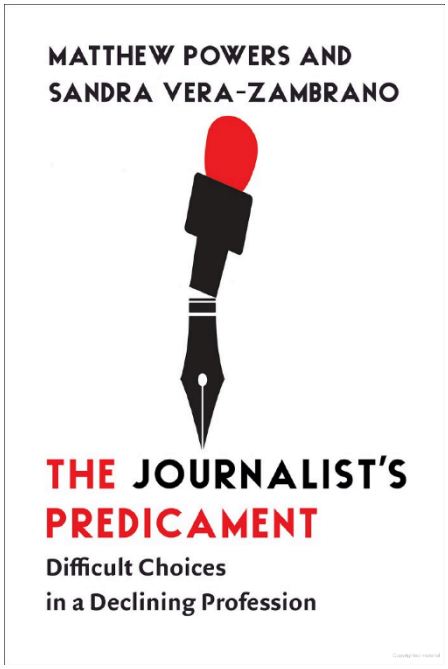

In ***The Journalist's Predicament: Difficult Choices in a Declining Profession***, Matthew Powers and Sandra Vera-Zambrano explore the twin questions, Why would anyone be a journalist? and Is journalism dying? against the backdrop of the contemporary "broad diminution in the material and symbolic rewards on offer" for journalists, brought about by "a heightened tension between the profession's distressed commercial underpinnings and its historically derived social functions" (p. 2). The emphasis on these often-asked questions, which the authors use as subtitles for the book's introduction and epilogue, is understandable in view of the seemingly intractable and irreversible decline of the profession in recent years, in both material (e.g., erosion of revenues, loss of jobs, reduction in journalists' pays and perks) and symbolic (i.e., dismantling of journalism's monopoly as the arbiter and intermediary of legitimate information, and erosion of public faith in and antagonism toward journalists) terms.

Ironically, however, such emphasis also bears the inherent risk of the book being deemed as merely recapitulating the known and the familiar. Its focus on French and American journalism (it draws on interviews with 30 journalists from Toulouse in southwestern France and 41 from Seattle in the northwestern United States for its empirical basis) only adds to this burden of familiarity, so to speak. Powers and Vera-Zambrano seem well aware of the risk and explain meticulously *why* and *how* their research, albeit an addition to the robust literature on journalism's decline as well as the long line of comparative studies of journalism in France and the U.S., does not "merely restate prior observations and recapitulate extant conclusions" (pp. 15–16). To this end, among others, they highlight the methodological choice of recruiting participants for the study from among journalists who work outside the media capitals of Paris and New York, which yield qualitative data that complicates the notion of national differences between French and American journalism.

What stands out about the study is that it develops a sociology, not of journalism but of journalists. As the authors put it, "the book complements a well-established sociology of journalism with a much more muted *sociology of the journalists* that give life to the profession" (p. 19). The starting point in this sociology of journalists, they explain, is the recognition that journalists are "social agents with dispositions, social backgrounds, and trajectories" (p. 20), which inform their decision to be/become

journalists and shape the meanings they ascribe to journalism. This recognition is key to discerning the correlations between the seemingly idiosyncratic choices that journalists make and the social stratification and attendant inequalities that they imply. Here, for example, Powers and Vera-Zambrano hint at the embeddedness of such a seemingly socially neutral notion as "quality journalism" in social hierarchy.

Central to their sociology of journalists is the concept of the journalist's predicament, which, in simple terms, refers to how journalists try to keep faith in journalism amid an increasing sway of its commercial needs over its social functions on the one hand and a widening gulf between expected and realized material and symbolic returns from the profession on the other. This entails a struggle, both emotional and intellectual, for a "personally acceptable balance" (p. 2) as journalists try to manage personal disappointments with the profession with different modes of adjustment that include but are not limited to "downgrading their sense of journalism as a vocation to that of a mere job" (p. 5) and even "redefin[ing] journalism's social functions to adapt them to the profession's current commercial needs" (p. 6).

Again, to Powers and Vera-Zambrano, a journalist's predicament and concomitant adjustments may seem personal, and deeply so, but are inexorably social. They argue that journalists' expectations of material and symbolic rewards from journalism and thus the disappointments and their consequent management generally correlate with their "social properties" such as family, education, gender, and race. These social properties are "embedded in hierarchies" arranged along quantitative and qualitative dimensions: "One can possess more educational experience (e.g., graduate education), as well as more prestigious education (e.g., degrees from elite universities)" (p. 13). Simply put, as the authors emphasize, social dispositions of the individual often shape their perception and, more importantly, determine their place in journalism or, said differently, the type of journalism that they will pursue—quality or popular, serious or sensational.

The journalist's predicament may have become increasingly irreconcilable in recent years but is by no means unprecedented. As Powers and Vera-Zambrano show in their analysis of journalism's history, its origin can be traced to that of modern journalism in France and the United States in the latter half of the 19th century. The introduction of a commercial business model of news in these two countries, and subsequently elsewhere in the world, led to a reconceptualization of journalism's function as not just social but commercial as well. These dual functions gave rise to a definitional struggle that endures to date. The conflict, as the authors point out, has never been about the centrality of fact to journalism both in its social and commercial functions but about "*which facts* and *which audiences* were [. . .] worth pursuing" (p. 30).

As their historical analysis shows, a small minority of journalists could then make a career in so-called quality or serious journalism, aligned with the profession's most valued social functions, and they generally belonged to particular social classes and possessed particular social dispositions. For most of the rest, it was the journalism that "their circumstances" allowed them to do and not necessarily the journalism that they believed in and had entered the profession for, in the first place. Their interviews with the journalists from Toulouse and Seattle confirm that the asymmetry persists to the present day. Apart from the fortunate few whose professional experiences align closely with the profession's prized ideals,

and thus live both for and off journalism, a huge majority of journalists have to settle for one or the other, that is, either making sacrifices and managing disappointments in the exceedingly faint hope for an opportunity to do real journalism or settling for a downsized definition of journalism as merely a job, and not a vocation, or adapting to a blend of journalism more responsive to the profession's commercial needs than to its social functions. There is, of course, the option of leaving journalism that some of the interviewees have gone for, out of either a sense of choice or a sense of necessity.

Yet, amid the pervasive doom and gloom, journalism's essential attractions (e.g., opportunities for self-expression and self-fulfillment) and inherent ideals (e.g., speaking the truth to power) have endured. Even the interviewees that had left the profession ascribed their departure to "a dissolution of the belief in one's relationship to journalism, and almost never in the ideal of journalism itself" (p. 168). For the other participants, the willingness to persevere through the predicament and its attendant adjustments underscores their belief in journalism's worthiness. The same belief seems to drive students, maybe not in numbers as before but still in their thousands, to enroll in journalism schools in the Western world and beyond, aspiring to become journalists. Journalism has thrived in its hay day and survives despite the present woes, economic and otherwise, because of this belief. However, as Powers and Vera-Zambrano warn toward the end of the book, sustained diminution of material and symbolic rewards, coupled with deteriorating work conditions, threaten to erode this belief, absent which "there would be no news of any sort" (p. 192) and, thus, no journalism as we know it.

In the end, then, *The Journalist's Predicament: Difficult Choices in a Declining Profession* does retell the story of journalism's decline as a profession and forebodes a grim future but with a difference. It foregrounds journalists and their predicament and view the choices they make to manage their disappointment with the profession as crystallization of "a very broad set of conditions—the moment in history in which one leaves, the nation-state in which one works, the social properties one brings to bear" (p. 185). This sociology of journalists, as the authors call it, allows for a rethink of certain normative concerns about journalism and redefinition of these concerns in particular, rather than universal, terms, as has been the case with mainstream journalism studies in the Anglophone world. The theoretical and methodological interventions that the study makes offer a different route for cross-national research on journalism, and especially journalists, to take.