

Why Journalism Still Matters: Interview with Professor Silvio Waisbord

Your new book (*An Introduction to Journalism: Thinking Globally* (Polity, 2025) makes the case for the continuing importance of journalism. At a moment defined by declining trust, platform dominance, and AI-generated content, what do you regard as the most serious challenges confronting journalism today — and why does it still matter?

Journalism confronts multiple challenges right now. One is primarily a problem of economic sustainability — the difficulty of finding a viable economic model in the digital economy. We know that funding for digital content is essentially monopolized by a few companies, and that makes it very difficult for journalism to sustain a viable funding model.

Related to that is the question of relevance, which I address in the last chapter of the book. Even journalism that can produce different kinds of news and has a more or less sustainable economic model still confronts the challenge of relevance — the risk that it simply does not matter to people. Increasingly, we see signs of journalism's diminished relevance. I would not be too dramatic and count it out; I think it still matters, for a number of reasons, and it is still relevant. But it is no longer the institution it was in the twentieth century.

That forces us, as researchers, to understand when and why journalism is still relevant, rather than making broad statements about whether journalism is or is not relevant. I don't think that is a very interesting way to frame the question. It is much more interesting to understand in what circumstances, for what publics, and for what reasons it matters what journalism covers — or fails to cover. There are no general answers to that question. What concerns me is that, for millions of people, journalism does not matter; it is not a relevant actor. It is not something they regularly check in order to understand what is going on in the world, to stay informed, or to stay entertained. Journalism has a hard time reaching publics that have effectively decided it is not relevant in their lives, with all kinds of consequences that we can discuss. So those are the two main challenges: the economic challenge and the challenge of social and political

relevance. Journalism has to find ways to remain relevant, and researchers have to understand why journalism matters.

You place economic sustainability at the center of the diagnosis. Why is the funding question so decisive — and is it indeed the most pressing of these challenges?

Advertisers have found many other platforms that are far more effective and more targeted for reaching consumers. And there is a limit to how much non-commercial funding — from the state or from philanthropy — can bankroll journalism, especially quality journalism.

At the global level, some news companies — the New York Times, the Guardian, the BBC — have a viable model and are likely to survive for the foreseeable future. But that funding model does not apply to most news organizations, because they have a very different scope and a very different readership. The situation at the global level is different from the national or the local level. News organizations need to figure out different models given the resources available to them, and given the overall collapse of the traditional funding model that existed for much of the twentieth century, whether public or private. There are probably more opportunities in wealthier countries, from either the private or the public sector, to fund different forms of journalism; in countries without significant resources, that is much more difficult.

When journalism is economically weaker, it is also easier to capture by private interests or by political and governmental interests. And when journalism is captured, it is more likely to be used as a megaphone or a propaganda tool than to be even a modestly autonomous or independent voice on the issues of the day.

How do you see artificial intelligence reshaping journalism — and should we be more concerned about its effect on how news is produced, or on how it is distributed and consumed?

There are different ways of looking at that question. One is the impact of AI on news production; the other is its impact on news distribution and news use. My main concern is news use. If people use generative AI to find out about the news, they are not likely to draw on a broad range of news sources. That is the fear many news organizations now have — the so-called zero-click phenomenon, in which people access news through a bot. They may not pay attention to the original source of the information, and they are less likely to click through to a journalistic organization's site. In some ways, this is part of journalism becoming even less visible in the eyes of audiences who use generative AI to find information every day.

There is a separate question about how AI affects news production — these are two parallel issues, and the challenges are different. But to emphasize the

point: AI primarily reinforces phenomena we have already seen — the concerns about news avoidance, about people not consuming news directly, about people getting news from non-journalistic sources. AI deepens the problems we have had for the last two decades.

Looking back across your career, which transformation in journalism or communication research has surprised you the most?

For me, it is the question of relevance — the fact that we are now questioning whether journalism matters at all. Consider this: a significant part of journalism research was built on the assumption that journalism matters. Research on framing, agenda setting, and gatekeeping — the premise was that journalism is important, and the question was to figure out how or why it is important, not whether it is relevant. In the twentieth century, the underlying premise was that journalism was unavoidable. Right now, we are, in some ways, no longer asking questions about framing or agenda setting; the question is whether it matters at all — how journalism covers, or fails to cover, a given story, and whether it gives voice to certain actors rather than others. If people ignore journalism, that research takes on a very different significance.

That is something I never thought would happen. I assumed that, for the rest of my life, journalism would be an important, relevant institution in public life, and that the question would always be the more nuanced one of how it matters. But now there are more apocalyptic voices saying that perhaps journalism does not matter, that it is not relevant. When I started doing research on journalism in the late 1980s, it never crossed anyone's mind that we would one day doubt whether journalism was relevant.

It may even amount to a paradigm shift. So much of journalism studies is anchored in the notion that journalism matters; if you take that away, you take away the relevance of the very questions that mattered precisely because we assumed it did — questions about objectivity in journalism, about advocacy, and so on. Right now, we are having a very different conversation.

If we can no longer take for granted that journalism matters, does that unsettle the conceptual and methodological foundations of the field? Are our established approaches still adequate to the questions we now face?

You cannot assume — that is exactly the point. I am skeptical of research on journalism or news that does not address the actual conditions of news use. You can run an experimental study on framing or agenda setting, but it is not clear that what holds in a controlled setting applies to the real world and to the way people actually encounter — or avoid — news. Once, we could assume that something like what happened in the experiment was probably happening in the real world too. Now, when we look at how people behave on their phones, it is very different

from a controlled experiment in which people are exposed to different frames and we measure, say, intermedia agenda setting.

So the challenge is to understand, under real-world conditions, how people engage with, disengage from, and avoid news. That is not only a methodological challenge; it is also a theoretical one. Increasingly, we need to bring it down to actual practice — both journalistic practice and the way audiences consume, fail to consume, or ignore news. That presents all kinds of challenges, because it is much more difficult to study.

I think we are at an impasse, trying to work out whether the methodologies we use are still the appropriate ones for the real-world challenges journalism faces. We can do content analysis — but if nobody is watching the news, what does that tell us?

We can still analyze media content, yet we often know very little about who produces or circulates it — especially online. What kind of research does this new environment demand?

What we need is more research that understands, for example, the lifespan of news stories — what happens, in the real world, to news stories on a given topic: how they are produced, how they circulate, how they are shared, commented on, and posted. That kind of more granular approach might give us a sense of how and when journalism is relevant — and when it is not. It forces us to address the more ontological challenges of what we do, because neither journalism nor news are static objects that you can simply manipulate and control. You can control them within a study, but that does not reflect what is happening in the real world.

Drawing on your experience leading the ICA, what are the principal challenges facing professional associations in communication and journalism today — and do you see meaningful differences between the younger and older generations of researchers?

With professional associations, the issue is partly this: what is methodologically possible may not be equally relevant in the real world of journalism. What we can do from a methodological perspective may ultimately not make a difference, because we are studying a phenomenon under our control, which is very different from the institution as it actually exists. But I remain convinced that professional associations need to nudge their members — researchers — to bridge, as much as possible, research and theoretical questions with actual practice. We cannot live in a world in which we care only about theory, or only about controlled situations, without understanding how quickly things are changing in the real world.

There are differences between the generations. Younger people are more likely to be digital natives in ways that my generation is not — even though

we continue to do research and remain embedded in the field. The question I keep asking is why our research is relevant: does it help us better understand what is happening in society, in the news industry, in journalistic practice? It is not just an intellectual pursuit, a passion for ideas; the question is whether it helps us understand the real world better. You can do very theoretical or abstract work, and that is fine, but it is not how I choose what to research. And associations need to push people to ask those questions, especially because much of what we do has direct implications for the actual practice of communication and journalism professionals. We are not divorced from practice. Other disciplines can perhaps afford purely theoretical work, because they lack such a strong connection to practice; we cannot, because we train the people who will become communication professionals and journalists. We need to work out whether the research we produce and the classes we teach help them better understand the environments they live in and the ones in which they are going to work.

The other task is bringing different perspectives together. Associations should be a meeting ground for people who would otherwise have no chance to talk to and learn from each other. We are not so different from most people — we live in our own bubbles of theory, methodology, epistemology, and topics. As much as associations support that specialized work, they also need to push us to step outside those bubbles: to listen to and meet researchers who take very different theoretical, methodological, and epistemological approaches. Associations are among the very few places that can actually do that, because we are usually very comfortable on our own islands of academic culture. I still value curiosity as a central intellectual disposition — the curiosity to ask about something we do not know much about, and to ask others: have you ever thought about this question, this topic? Professional associations, in different ways, need to provide spaces for that, for encountering new ideas on topics that are not immediately close to what we usually think about.

What positive vision would you offer for the future of media and communication research, and for its place in society?

For me, it is how dynamic everything is — that keeps me motivated. Things are changing so quickly that it affects our research, our teaching, our presentations. Everything we do sits at the intersection of technology, institutions, economics, and politics, and these four pillars are changing constantly. That constantly brings out new questions, and that is the positive side of it. It is a great time to be an intellectual and an academic and to think about these questions, because it is all work in progress. Everything we knew five, or even three, years ago is changing now. It keeps you on your feet; you cannot simply rely on old ideas. You are constantly challenged to rethink even your dearest assumptions.

That is very stimulating — sometimes too stimulating. As I said, I prize curiosity, and the question of whether there is something we are not thinking about is always interesting. To give an example: everything we knew about platforms over the last ten or fifteen years — their impact on news, on entertainment, on privacy, and on many other issues central to communication studies — we now have to rethink in light of generative AI, asking whether those conclusions still hold. That is exciting. It is a lot of work, but it is exciting.

And this has been the case almost from the beginning — even a century ago, in the 1920s, technology, economics, politics, and institutions were always changing. What has changed radically in the last two decades is the speed, and the simultaneous synergy of everything changing at once, around the world — not just within a single industry, from radio to television, or television to satellite. We are talking about major changes happening in a far more compressed period of time. It forces you to keep up with the reading and the research far more than before. I have to revise my lecture notes from last semester to see whether they still apply, because so much is changing. So you cannot run out of ideas: in our field, things are always coming at you, because you can always ask whether what you argued five or ten years ago still holds.

*Silvio Waisbord was interviewed in May 2026
by Bartłomiej Łódzki*

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Silvio Waisbord is a Professor at the School of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University. He is a past President of the International Communication Association (ICA). He is Editor of the *International Journal of Communication*. He is the author and editor of twenty books, as well as articles on journalism and politics, communication studies, media policy, and communication for social change. His most recent book is *Introduction to Journalism: Thinking Globally* (Polity). He served as Director of the School of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University (2020-2023). Also, he is the former Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Communication* and the *International Journal of Press/Politics*. Waisbord received a Licenciatura in Sociology from the Universidad de Buenos Aires and a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California, San Diego.