

Book Review: Understanding Journalism by Lynette Sheridan Burns

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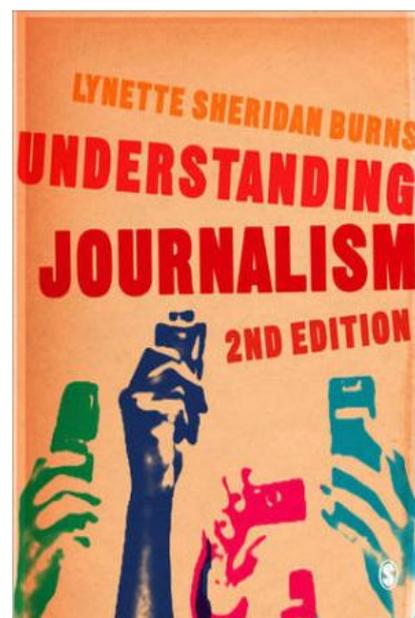
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Understanding Journalism sets out to examine the processes used by journalists to define, identify, evaluate and create journalism. What are the facts? Are there any questions that remain unanswered? Is there another angle to the story? What are my ethical concerns? These are the sort of thought-provoking inquiries that the author prompts us to critically reflect upon, writes **Ana Polo Alonso**. This is a highly interesting book that will be useful to journalism students.



Understanding Journalism. Second Edition. Lynette Sheridan Burns. SAGE. December 2012.

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It has become a ubiquitous, almost obsessive, cliché: that journalism is dying and that the Internet is to blame for its terminal state. Newspaper sales are constantly in decline, newsrooms are shrinking, and in just the United States there are below 40,000 full-time media professional employees; the lowest level since 1978. Blogs proliferate, readers flock to free content, almost everybody can now be called a journalist, and in general media seems in total disarray. Sounds familiar, right?

Well, it is not as dramatic as it seems, as [Lynette Sheridan Burns](#) posits in *Understanding Journalism*. It is true that “global communication is going through a transformation of a magnitude not seen since the Industrial Revolution ushered in the modern age” (p. 17), but, far from dying, journalism has “never been more important – as a means of guiding citizens through the clamor of communication to the information they need to know” (p.9). The question here concerns what we actually understand by journalism: is it the work of factual research and nuanced analysis that provides readers with a variety of perspectives so that they can make up their minds independently? Or it is just the result of a particular corporate model of running print newspapers that puts the interest of producers above those of readers?

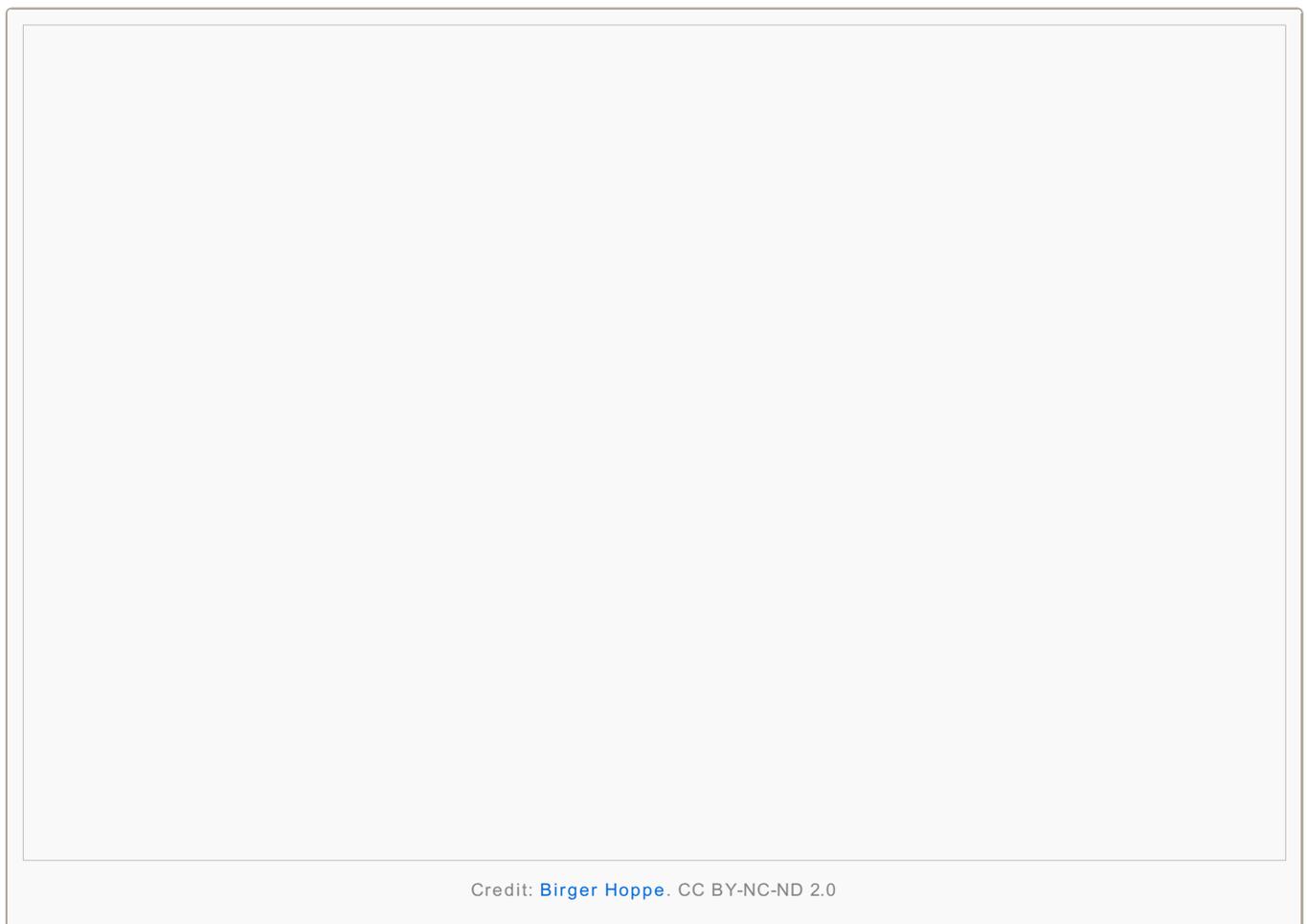
Sheridan Burns is adamant: “what distinguishes journalism from other media activities is the notion of service to the public interest. Journalists work to that end by truth telling, even when the truth is unpalatable and unwelcome” (p.32). True journalism belongs to the realm of transparency and accountability, and is a source of perpetual inquiry and shrewd reflection.

Reflection, *critical* reflection is the key concept for the author, for she defends that in a world overloaded with data, it is not acceptable to bluntly and aseptically reflect the facts. They must be contextualized, analyzed to detail, scrutinized, dissected and properly interpreted. In her view, a journalist must “interrogate the information provided rather than merely rewording it” (p.32).

Obviously, this idea is not new, and journalism based in critical reflection already has a long history. In 1840, for example, Henry Mayhew wrote *London Labour and the London Poor*, in which he accurately dissected the harsh conditions in which many Londoners were trapped. It is quite refreshing to remember, as Sheridan Burns does, that this is precisely this kind of intellectually stimulating, ethically-based, heavily-researched, well-crafted and compellingly-explained production what best describes what journalism truly is.

One of the main problems with journalism today, as Sheridan Burns posits, is that it has been trapped into a “market-driven” dynamic that has flustered the values it should stand for. Since the 1970s, media moguls have given priority to advertising above content, and propitiating news that offered readers what they (supposedly) wanted to read instead of what they had the right to know. As a result, the editing process began to vanish, official data was often reported without being checked, and the news was rife with cogent words, maximalist assumptions, and quick bursts of information, not always properly assembled, and more than often without being adequately contextualized.

Is



there still a public for this kind of insightful journalism? Or, in other words, are people willing to pay for it? Sheridan Burns doesn't posit this question, which for me is a great flaw. Yet, I think that the answer is affirmative. When in March of this year, Time published an insightful, extremely well researched 36-page, 25,000-word article titled “[Bitter Pill: Why Medical Bills Are Killing Us](#)” few could have foreseen that it would have such a huge effect on magazine sales. But it was a total success, and went on to become one of the best-selling issues in recent years. The renaissance of long-form journalism means that people are more than willing to access to (and to pay for) distinctive, well-crafted, sharp and penetrating pieces of journalism.

So, can this distinctive form of journalism be learned? Sheridan Burns argues that journalism is much more than a pure technical mastery, and devotes the second part of the book to detail a quite structured process that encompasses all phases of news-building, from the searching of news to its final publication. I must recognize here that I have always been quite skeptical about methods that aim to boil down complex processes into sound-bite-like rigid tenets that must be –no matter what—properly observed. Yet, I also recognize that I was pleasantly surprised at discovering that Sheridan Burns doesn't offer recommendations but instead poses questions that

prompt the journalist to better comprehend his or her work. What are the facts? Are there any questions that remain unanswered? Is there another angle to the story? What are my ethical concerns? Can I clearly and fully justify my thinking and my decision? These are the sort of thought-provoking inquiries that the author prompts us to reflect upon –to *critically* reflect upon.

Sheridan Burns concentrates on substance, but nonetheless she also considers that style is important. In fact, one of the most interesting contributions of this book –and often overlooked in other approaches – is the importance given to editing, or the “Butcher’s art”, as the author calls it. The author considers that “in today’s media environment, where there have never been so many competing voices, writers need more than ever to understand how to organize words and sentences to maximum effect” (p. 137). In this sense, “the editing process is used to correct over-writing, clumsy sentence construction and faulty grammar” (p. 118). She makes some suggestions (quite similar to those proposed in the much-vaunted Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*), in order to improve journalists’ style.

Summing up, this is a very interesting book that I am sure will be useful to journalism students and to all those people who, as Sheridan Burns, vindicate that journalism – critical journalism – plays a crucial role in society.

Ana Polo Alonso is a speechwriter and political adviser. She holds a BSc in Political Science from the Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona), and a MA in Public Administration from Pompeu Fabra-ESADE. She also studied Marketing and Branding at the New York University, Project Management at Stanford, and specialized in Digital Marketing at Instituto de la Empresa (IE) Business School. Ana served as Responsible for Communications at the Women’s World Forum, and has collaborated with International Organizations to develop advocacy strategies. She is currently finishing her first book, focused on the history of US Presidential campaigns. [Read more reviews by Ana.](#)