

Credentialing Issues

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Issues relating to news media credentialing manifest themselves in diverse ways across cultures with media access to news events routine in some societies and highly contested in others. Generally speaking, there are two types of credentials: those generated internally by journalists, their institutions, and their professional groups; and those issued by external authorities. The two can be interrelated in many countries as government and professional groups negotiate various standards and protocols for the facilitation of newsgathering.

An externally generated media credential is typically a document or statement from a public authority or private organization permitting a journalist to enter a space or engage in a specific activity without regard for the rules applicable to the public at large. Because such a credential depends on a distinction between journalists and non-journalists, institutional gatekeepers both public and private, as well as courts, have often looked to criteria such as the employer of the credential applicant, the ways in which coverage serves a public interest, and the medium in which an applicant publishes (Hermes, Wihbey, Junco, & Aricak, 2014). Such distinctions between journalists and non-journalists have become more difficult in an age of digital media innovation and new media forms, and scholars have continued to examine the ways in which journalists define themselves and society defines journalists in this context.

With regard to internally generated credentials, media employers and their employees, as well as freelancers, may also create and issue their own branded press card or press pass in order to make clear their employer affiliation, identity, and role in newsgathering situations. This issuing of credentials is sometimes done in coordination with professional affinity organizations or regional or national journalist unions, with substantial variation across countries. Professional association or trade union credentialing may be done on the basis of a journalist's background, education, income sources, or other criteria, such as claims to independence, depending on the country and professional organization. Governments sometimes accept the intermediary role of professional media associations in sanctioning and issuing credentials, giving power to such associations and unions to decide who can function as a journalist. Accordingly, credentials can also play a role in a journalist's opportunities for employment.

Because of agreements between media owners and journalist unions in France, for example, a press card obtained through a national credentialing commission has been necessary to secure long-term employment doing news work for a media business. French rules have been continually updated in recent decades to allow freelancers, broadcasters, and new media entrants to have a press card (McMane, 2012). These processes vary from country to country. In India, the Press Information Bureau issues

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press cards to unaffiliated or freelance journalists, provided that applicants meet certain criteria, while employees with news outlets may register through their organization. Different organizations in each Indian state also issue their own press cards and sports authorities may have their own credentialing processes there.

Governments and private institutions may also issue their own credentials in order to confer special status and permissions to a journalist covering specific planned events such as protests, press conferences, or judicial proceedings or unusual and episodic events such as accidents and disasters. Credentials may be issued for journalistic work in other restricted or sensitive contexts, such as prisons, hospitals, and military facilities. Further, special government-issued credentials may permit journalists to use technical equipment or cameras in restricted areas and allow access to information that may not be immediately public, such as behind-the-scenes briefings, data releases, or embargoed electronic communications.

Credentialing issues touch on long-running questions about whether journalism stands as a profession analogous to law or medicine, or whether it is a category of work defined by its function and practice, with a broad spectrum of roles running from professional to amateur, commercial to noncommercial. These debates may be seen more broadly within the well-established field of the sociology of credentialing, which has often focused on educational attainment but can provide an analytical framework for more “informal” types of credentialing. Such credentials, including those obtained and used in media work, can serve to foster forms of social solidarity, build up concepts of professional authority, delineate boundaries between in- and out-group members, and validate claims to competence, whether professional, moral, or technical (Brown & Bills, 2011).

The idea of a press credential is theoretically conditioned on the premise that citizens should have access to information about the workings of government and civil society and that news media play an important role as information intermediaries in achieving transparency and public knowledge. In many democracies, this notion of the press as a central instrument in ensuring and carrying out collective information rights and obligations on behalf of citizens has continued to advance in the context of a broader movement toward the “right to know” across many domains (Schudson, 2016). Traditionally, it has been argued that special media access in this way provides a vital check on government abuses, particularly as central authorities have grown stronger (Dyk, 1992).

In countries with greater degrees of state control over media institutions and civil society, government may strictly regulate the licensing and credentialing of journalists. Officials may revoke credentials (or threaten to) based on perceived transgressions of rules and norms; credentials may be used as a point of leverage and a tool of censorship. Credentials are therefore a key area of interest and contention in advocacy for press freedom globally. International professional organizations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), as well as national journalists’ trade unions in specific countries, strongly advocate the use of credentials as a form of legitimation of status and protection against interference and extrajudicial suppression, detention, and even violence. In highlighting widespread and ongoing suppression of journalists worldwide, the Special Rapporteur to the Human Rights Council of the United Nations has noted that governments

must permit journalists to obtain an “identification card to allow them to have access to certain events.” However, the Rapporteur stipulates that state authorities should not impose preconditions, such as the holding of a credential, on reporters in order to be able to do journalism, as robust and uninhibited protections and freedoms are crucial to the meaningful practice of news work (La Rue, 2012).

Credentials are more routinely revoked or threatened in countries with tighter state controls such as China, Russia, Turkey, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. Through international press organizations, relatively regular reports about such countries surface involving situations such as: police temporarily confiscating credentials to intimidate journalists; authorities stripping correspondents of credentials in order to punish them for things they may say or print; or even the mass revocation of credentials by the government to retaliate against editors and reporters together for an outlet’s critical coverage. Different rules may apply to reporters who are citizens versus foreign nationals. In China, authorities have issued warnings that they will revoke the credentials of any domestic media members who attempt to pass information to credentialed foreign media. In countries with strict press controls, visiting foreign correspondents must not only obtain credential but must also abide by a potentially lengthy list of restrictions and submit to monitoring. In Vietnam, for example, reporters must carry their credentials and abide by the rules of the reporter guidance agency.

Issues over the withholding or revocation of credentials also periodically surface in the United States and Europe. Press credentials may be denied or revoked to punish outlets that do not provide friendly coverage. These disputes can arise as governments seek to distinguish between what they perceive as propaganda outlets and “legitimate” outlets, although such decisions are seldom without controversy and typically raise concerns about politically motivated retaliation against critical news outlets and government censorship. Further, the revocation of credentials can become a tool of foreign policy and diplomatic maneuvering, with governments occasionally taking away privileges from reporters in order to punish a foreign government. Governments have, from time to time, accused media outlets of being instruments of foreign governments and accordingly revoked press cards and reporting privileges.

In liberal democracies, officials typically justify the practice of credentialing and the circumscribed provision of press passes on the basis of limited space or capacity, or a need to establish security around, for example, a crime scene or a government facility. Journalists with credentials may even operate together in rotating “pools” within, for example, government ministries or when accompanying diplomatic travels, where space may be severely limited. Private venues and forums controlled by business, entertainment, and sports institutions may formulate their own credentialing rules in most countries. Given that private institutions may stipulate conditions of access in order to advance their public relations objectives, such event credentials rules sometimes serve as an institutional form of influence over journalists and can compromise news media integrity (Suggs, 2016).

Within legal regimes that operate on constitutional principles of equal rights and protections such as the United States, it is not always easy to justify granting special access to certain journalists, particularly if other members of the news media are excluded in the credentialing process. The problem of “selective access,” or government voluntarily

granting access or credentials to certain persons or groups while denying such to others, has been litigated at various times. Courts have generally demanded a reasonable basis for any classifications imposed under credentialing schemes, although the law in the United States, for example, is not necessarily uniform or well developed, and selective access problems remain widespread.

As publishing has changed in the digital era, allowing more nonprofessional newsgathering and reporting, authorities in many types of societies have struggled to formulate consistent credentialing policies for bloggers and other new entrants to media. Scholars have found evidence that, because of the rise of citizen journalism, some authorities such as police departments are increasingly giving up on traditional practices of credentialing and making distinctions among media producers, instead relying on more informal systems of granting access (Bock, Suran, & González, 2016). A 2014 survey of more than 1,000 media producers in the United States found that certain categories of producers were more likely to be denied credentials, including freelance journalists, photographers, and persons who identified themselves as activists; one in five media producers surveyed had been denied a credential at some point (Hermes et al., 2014). These sorts of access problems can make entrepreneurial journalism and the work of media startups all the more difficult, creating uncertainty about new outlets' ability to gather information, to establish a recognized public brand, and to gain credibility with audiences.

The importance and power of a press card or credential perhaps finds no greater test than in conflict zones or areas enduring sustained violence or terrorism. For generations, the display of a press credential in a battle zone often served as a badge of neutrality and quasi-immunity, conferring a kind of "medic"-like status respected even by nonstate militant groups until relatively recently (Fitts, 2015). However, the new information environment fueled by social media has changed traditional dynamics, as seen in the Syrian Civil War, beginning in 2011, where many credentialed and freelance journalists have been kidnapped, killed, or injured.

Given the powerful affordances of social media and the web for self-broadcast, there may be a diminished need for groups involved in armed conflict to work directly through the traditional press to disseminate their message. Further, the widespread embrace of citizen and participatory media by professional news media themselves—who draw on everything from eyewitness mobile videos to activist reports of all kinds—has created a hybrid environment mixing amateur and professional media. In this environment, citizens can fill important information gaps when credentialed journalists face direct suppression. Yet these blurred lines may also destabilize established protections for legacy media and, in particular, may leave freelancers who lack personal security-related resources increasingly vulnerable.

Situations of war and conflict have also brought about difficult and highly contested processes for credentialing "embedded" reporters who may travel with military operations across national boundaries. Practices for allowing reporters to accompany soldiers have evolved over the past century, at least since World War I, but there continue to be government-press tensions and ethical concerns for a wide range of reasons.

The jurisprudence of a right to battlefield access by journalists is not necessarily settled even in constitutional democracies. Still, the possession of a credential by a journalist can have important implications with respect to international law. Under the Third Geneva Convention, journalists who are accredited to a military force become “war correspondents” and therefore have the rights of “prisoner-of-war” status, whereas journalists without military credentials are to be treated as civilians.

Ultimately, the very concept of credentialing in media, with its faint historical echo of government licensing of the early printing press, can seem to run counter to touchstone ideas of the freedom of speech and publishing. In the Anglo-American tradition, these ideas of unfettered rights run as far back as John Milton and his famous defense in *Areopagitica* (1644) of the freedom of expression—and his argument against parliamentary licensing of printers. Similar ideas found expression in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which stipulates that “Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.” Of course, no country has an unlimited right to newsgathering; no journalist can go anywhere, anytime. The issuance of a press credential merely facilitates a positive right to access under specific conditions outside the control of the journalist. Credentialing from external authorities therefore always carries with it, however latent, a notion of sanction or license for journalism practice. The credentialing process is continually susceptible to invidious distinctions based on political favor or disfavor with authorities. This unresolved complexity, problematic even in the more straightforward and relatively homogenous era of mass broadcast and print newspapers in the twentieth century, has only grown in an age of ubiquitous social media, blogging, and mass self-communication.

Given the abiding tensions over access and power that characterize the domain of credentialing, future research will need to take account of further-evolving definitions of journalism and reporting in a hybrid, professional–amateur environment. As digital communications networks and economic interconnectedness continue to create a need for a paradigm of “global journalism” (Berglez, 2008), differences in national standards for media access and credentialing, and their impacts on the freedom of the press, will need to be studied carefully. Countries such as China, where both domestic and foreign media access is controlled but where global media interest continues to grow, will be the locus of important contests that influence the direction of global press freedom (International Federation of Journalists, 2017).

In particular, it will be valuable to examine how government and private institutions respond to the changing environment of new information communications technologies in terms of further controlling credentials and media access. The ability to monitor journalists and their behavior on social media will give governments and private credentialing authorities new grounds and material for control over and potential revocation of credentials. As journalists engage more with audiences and become public figures in their own right, they may open themselves up to greater scrutiny by credentialing authorities. Further, journalistic uses of new media technologies such as drones and robots may require negotiations for new kinds of credentials, as newsgathering is complicated by novel questions of privacy and safety. New conventions and norms around credentialing may signal crucial shifts in power relations that deeply

affect the free flow of information and, ultimately, the effective functioning of civil society.

SEE ALSO: Censorship; Free Speech and Free Press; Press Conferences; Violence against Journalists

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