

Journalism Research in Practice: Strategies, Innovation, and Approaches to Change

Bonnie Brennen and Robert E. Gutsche, Jr.
For Publication in Journalism Practice

Keywords: change; engagement; innovation; journalism research; practice; scholarship

Thirty-five years ago, Lesley Stahl, who was then a *CBS Evening News* correspondent, reported critically on the television photo ops used in Ronald Reagan's presidential re-election campaign. In her reports, Stahl addressed the contradictions between the current administration's economic and social policies and the patriotic staged photo events. Her critical reports were supported by interesting and captivating pictures, known as wallpaper.

Stahl later recounted that after her reports ran, she received praise from the White House for the great visuals that she had used. Presidential advisers maintained that Stahl's critical commentary was successfully countered by the engaging pictures she included. As former Reagan advisor, Michael Deaver, has explained, in all competitions between the ear and the eye, the eye always wins.

Throughout the years, journalism and visual communication researchers have studied the disconnect between visual and text-based knowledge and have insisted that the invention of photography signaled the beginning of a challenge to the authority of words. Yet, many journalists continue to discount the power of images in their news reports. In a 24-hour news environment, journalists spend much of their time reporting on photo ops, media events, YouTube video and other manufactured images and yet, they frequently seem unaware that these images often contradict their print and broadcast stories.

Stahl's anecdote has been recounted many times throughout the years by journalism researchers, many of whom would like to forge better relationships with professional journalists. In a time when lies pervade the public sphere and authentic knowledge and evidence has become politicized, calls for stronger engagement between journalism researchers and journalists abound.

There's no doubt that higher education and research has been attacked for its social distance from communities and individuals; such a divide is sometimes phrased as a tension between town (the community and its citizens) and gown (the universities and its faculty). Scholars are criticized for writing to themselves and others in small circles of academic fields and journalists are characterized largely for being skeptical of armchair scholarship about practice.

Great strides have been made in collaborations between journalists and scholars in recent years, but to encourage greater engagement between journalism researchers and professional journalists, *Journalism Practice* presents this special issue, "Journalism Research in Practice: Scholarly Inquiry for Journalists." This fully open access theme issue showcases scholarly research of particular interest to working journalists. Twenty-

eight journalism research studies of significant interest to professional journalists have been distilled and revised for a more general audience.

Answering the “so-what” question, each author emphasizes the relevance of the research to working journalists, including perspectives on issues related to modern-day freelancing, digitization, and partisan influences on the press. All of the studies have previously been published in *Journalism Practice*, *Journalism Studies* and *Digital Journalism* and each contribution in this issue also includes a link to the original research study that may be accessed at no cost.

This special issue focuses on four main areas of journalism research. The first section “Addressing Journalism in Times of Social Conflict” recognizes the massive flux of journalism in terms of digital technologies but begins where most journalists do – talking about the stories that can be told through journalism, particularly in times of social change. Scott Eldridge II focuses on the role of journalists in storytelling and argues that journalists present information in narrative forms, focusing on some sources (or characters) as heroes – or anti-heroes, in some instances – and by analyzing the case of how media covered the ups and downs of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks. Nicole Smith Dahmen and her co-authors contribute to understanding how journalists cover – and are affected by – mass shootings in terms of how to cover perpetrators and other ethical challenges. In a piece by Tine Ustad Figenschou and Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk, readers engage with issues of far-right media influences on mainstream press and gain strategies for dealing with social pressures in a time of political contestation.

Articles by Andrea Wenzel, Halliki Harro-Loit and Kadri Ugur paint a picture of how journalists can engage with publics through offline engagement and listening tactics that can involve marginalized populations in public conversations and increase audience trust in media. Brian McDermott and his co-authors focus in on the interaction between reporters, photojournalists and those who agree to be photographed and interviewed to argue that the reasons participate with the press are many, the least of which being that journalism helps tell stories of everyday life – the good and the bad – and fulfills personal motivations of helping others, healing from an experience, and making memories.

The last three pieces in this section also provide a coherent conversation about journalism, storytelling, and explanations of social conditions. Miki Tanikawa draws upon meanings of globalization inherent in news that focuses on a society’s prevailing, provocative, or perpetuated “culture” that is used as a news “peg” that may, in fact, limit accurate portrayals of news events and stereotype. Renata Faria Brandão then takes crime news as representation of data analysis provided to journalists, or conducted by journalists, rather than representing actual actions or criminal behavior; they argue that data may represent power struggles within society rather than actual social acts. Finally, Saif Shahin rounds out the conversation of how journalists may – and may better – cover social contestation by analyzing how journalists covered “bad news,” such as human-made disaster through stories of blame or explanation.

Articles included in the section “Advancements in New Media and Audience Participation” discuss how journalists work and can work in the future amidst polarizing and political rhetoric that influences journalism today, particularly in an age

of increased participation from audiences and non-traditional media outlets. Pieces by Laura Ahva, Tine Ustad Figenschou and Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud discuss such influences from both the local level of how journalists can welcome but also deal with the challenges of “inbetweeners” in journalism – those on the cusp of the field – but also the influence of audience discourse in journalism at times of community crisis.

The role of new, digital avenues for journalists to explore and use in reaching audiences and covering both everydayness and larger social issues are addressed by Manuel Menke and his co-authors, and David Caswell and Konstantin Dörr. Here, we see how European newsrooms have established standards and strategies in increasingly convergent newsrooms while Caswell and Dörr provide insights on the role of automation and data journalism in action. The remaining pieces in this section also focus on how journalism operates on digital platforms and in new and yet to be realized interactions between journalists, sources, audiences, and language. Ester Appelgren writes about the “paternalistic side” of data journalism in that she challenges how journalists produce online, interactive content that directs, rather than guides, users to particular information and outcomes.

Andrew Duffy and Megan Knight provide perspectives on the role of social media use by journalists in creating and maintaining a sense of who constitutes being a journalist in a crowded field while Yngve Benestad Hågvar conducts a reading of how news media use language – and emojis – to interpret and present news on Facebook. Lastly, Trevor Diehl and his co-authors further explores the language of journalists on social media and presents ideas on how journalists might better interact with citizens while maintaining authority absent of “media bias.”

While the first two sections of the special issue deal with how journalists are addressing innovation and flux in a digital world, the section “Challenges and Solutions in a Changing Profession” breaks these issues down more concretely, focusing on specific cases of change and solutions. As news is increasingly challenged in terms of “truth” from outsiders and sometimes from within the widening field itself, Jane B. Singer writes about how journalists are engaging with rigorous means of checking facts to serve as societal watchdogs. To provide background to the state of the news, Allie Kosterich and Matthew S. Weber provide a recent historical analysis of change in New York City journalists that sets a tone for global discussions of how the news business has changed.

Also specific to the United States, Hsiang Iris Chyi and Ori Tenenboim outline change in news readership and discuss how news outlets have dealt with advancements online and diminishing returns in print to pave a path for sustainability. Valerie Belair-Gagnon and Avery E. Holt present a conceptual discussion about what industry changes have meant for the journalistic community in terms of who is (and can or should be) defined as a journalist and how that conversation is altered by advancements within the newsroom to address online data sets and web analytics.

The remaining four articles target in on specific features of today’s journalism landscape – factchecking and freelancing. Susan Currie Sivek and Sharon Bloyd-Peshkin contribute to this conversation by discussing the how factchecking operates in digital magazines in ways different than in print media, arguing that digital items

might escape the rigorous checking that occurs for print products. And as journalists are moved from the newsroom to make careers as freelancers in many cases, Birgit Røe Mathisen provides two articles about the potential and practices of freelance journalists. In her first piece, she discusses the entrepreneurial spirit of freelancing but also provides insight into the challenges these journalists face by working inside journalism but from outside the traditional newsroom. Mathisen also addresses how freelance journalists can deal with social and physical distance from editors and other reporters at their contracted publication, especially when freelancers need to address and overcome ethical challenges in their work.

Given that this special issue focuses on changes journalists face and provides working or future journalists with perspectives to shape the future of journalism, the final section "Possibilities for Journalism and Social Change" focuses on how journalists can think – and rethink – about the role of journalism and how it can interact with new technologies, audiences, and futures. Kristy Hess and Robert E. Gutsche, Jr. position the role of social news – obituaries, community events, and other things considered "soft news" – at the center of journalism, particularly in light of the success of Facebook, a social platform. Lis Howell and Jane B. Singer articulate the need for change in considering news sources, focusing on the role of women as source experts in UK broadcast news.

Philip M. Napoli and his co-authors outline a unique and replicable approach to assessing the needs of local communities that will assist journalists in providing necessary and desirable formats of information to fulfil the service function of journalism. Concluding the special issue, Karen McIntyre offers a piece about the social responsibility of journalism. McIntyre examines the effects of solution journalism – that which not only tackles the problems but focuses on what can overcome them – and questions how this form of journalism may influence audience perceptions and behaviors related to the issues covered through this method.