Fusion cuisine

A functional approach to interdisciplinary cooking in journalism studies

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Fusion Cuisine: A functional approach to interdisciplinary cooking in journalism studies

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Abstract: Journalism studies as an academic field is characterized by multidisciplinarity. Focusing on one object of study, journalism and the news, it established itself by integrating and synthesizing approaches from established disciplines – a tendency that lives on today. This constant gaze to the outside for conceptual inspiration and methodological tools lends itself to a journalism studies that is a fusion cuisine of media, communication and related scholarship. However, what happens when this object becomes as fragmented and multifaceted as the ways we study it? This essay addresses the challenge of multiplicity in journalism studies by proposing an audience-centred, functional approach to scholarship. We argue this approach encourages the creative intellectual advancements afforded by interdisciplinary experimental cooking while respecting the classical intellectual questions that helped define the culinary tradition of journalism studies in the first place. In so doing, we offer a recipe for journalism studies fusion cooking that: 1) considers technological change (audiences' diets); 2) analyses institutional change (audiences' supermarket of information); and 3) evaluates journalism's societal and democratic impact (audiences' cuisines and health).

Keywords: change, business models, democracy, functional approach, journalism studies, media technology, news audiences, public

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Introduction

Digitalization, media convergence and the rise of web 2.0 and 3.0 have in the last decade upended the media landscape in ways that journalism scholars are still trying to conceptualize. Concurrently, an increasing number of research techniques have emerged around these very same developments. In a field already predisposed towards multidisciplinarity, such transformations are intellectually seductive (to say nothing of overwhelming) and should be approached with caution. Accordingly, this essay seeks to address the ongoing challenge of multiplicity in journalism studies by proposing how we might simultaneously stabilize and advance scholarly inquiry in an era of change. Specifically, in thinking through what types of research questions we address, this essay argues that an audience-centred, functional approach to news and journalism encourages the creative intellectual advancements afforded by interdisciplinary experimental cooking while respecting the 'classical' intellectual questions that helped define the culinary tradition of journalism studies in the first place. In other words, how can we integrate the insights of Ferran Adrià's molecular gastronomy into the already rich kitchen of Auguste Escoffier's traditional cuisine?

Reflection on the role of news audiences offers a decelerating, stabilizing corrective to the rapidly evolving media landscape in which they exist. Without them journalism is pointless. Keeping them in mind therefore encourages meaningfulness to guide our research designs and usefully informs a number of leading themes in journalism studies. *Technologically*, for instance, an audience-centred approach means asking what impact algorithms, social and mobile media, the rise of alternative news providers and so forth have on news flows and how these are integrated in the different time-spaces of everyday life. *Institutionally,* such an approach frames questions in terms of the public negotiation of journalism's purpose, branding, and business models in a competitive informational marketplace. S*ocietally and democratically,* this orientation generates inquiries that depart from asking how more transitory, diverse publics, in capricious political-economic times, perceive journalism's role, relevance, and performance and the broader impact news has on them. By emphasizing the value of an audience-centred approach to generating research inquires on these three different levels, this essay attempts to marshal journalism's multidisciplinary character to advantage by giving it a clear target. By, in essence, flipping journalism studies' traditional object of analysis on its head – from journalism to journalism's publics – we explore the extent to which such an approach may more clearly signpost our discipline's scholarly value in the evolving landscape of media and communication scholarship.

Journalism Studies' Traditional Cookbook

To understand why a functional perspective toward conceptualizing change is valuable for journalism studies, it behooves us to briefly consider the opposite tendency that has been and remains dominant, namely considering journalism itself as our principle object of study. The long-established study of journalistic production and news texts is paralleled by a potent discourse of journalism's societal role and relevance that naturally leads to concern over its potential demise. The rise of journalism studies as a prominent sub-field of media and communications research has accompanied – one might even say been premised on – successive waves of perceived threats to its existence. From tabloidization (Sparks and Tulloch, 2000) to economic malaise and failing business models (McChesney and Pickard, 2011), technological fragmentation and disruption in the media environment (Pavlik, 2000) or fake news (Baum et al., 2017), all these concerns allowed for an acceleration in journalism studies scholarship. When the prominence of a democratic paradigm to conceptualize and evaluate journalism (Josephi, 2013) is wed with various forms of 'crisis talk' (Zelizer, 2015), the gravitational pull toward looking at how journalism is coping is hard to escape. It accordingly seems as though when it comes to arguing for the value of journalism, we often look back to grand normative theories to do so.

These discourses about journalism's greater purpose are as familiar as they are potentially determinative. They all first and foremost consider journalism as a key institution in democracy: as an information source, watchdog, public representative, mediator for political actors, and similar notions. Notwithstanding our understanding that these metanarratives tend toward overgeneralization, they nonetheless offer succour as the absence of these things, we assume, is problematic. But this begs the question – who are they problematic for? Journalists who stand to lose their job because of a precarious labour market? Certainly. Journalism programs that rely on student tuition fees to exist? Yes, them too. However, it seems to us that when academics and popular commentators articulate concern about journalism's future, what is really driving this disquiet is fears about the moral health of the public or citizenry. They fret about people not responding as the politically-engaged citizens assumed by normative press theory, even when presented with good journalism. They worry about the unruly masses satiating themselves on partisan commentary rather than quality news, or the dearth of critical literacy needed to distinguish 'truth' from misinformation. They agonize over the lack of willingness to pay. In short, the different fears around journalism's demise are typically anchored in concerns around the unpredictability of audiences. This is not an instrumental claim that audiences determine everything to do with journalism, however their relationship with it is always meaningful in the last instance.

Put another way, discussions on the democratic necessity of journalism are rather meaningless unless one takes journalism's audiences or publics seriously. Such claims are not new, of course, and bear a certain affinity to the logic underwriting the development of a variety of intellectual theories concerned with how people interact with media, from deliberative democracy, to civic engagement, uses and gratifications theory, social construction of technology, fan studies, and encoding/decoding, to name a few central frameworks. In this respect, while different disciplinary traditions have diverse analytic emphases, and accordingly employ divergent terminologies (from consumers, citizens, actors, users, publics, audiences, and many others), they do not refer to wholly separate realities (Livingstone, 2005). While the limited scope of this piece precludes examining such intellectual histories and parallels in detail, the common point of departure underlying them all is a call to test the robustness and importance of our conceptual inquiries with the people we are concerned they may impact – and treating them as more than a given. Although the title of this piece is playful our argument is serious: *understanding how audiences make sense of news and information and the functions it has for them in their daily lives is the classical basis for questioning that establishes the value of journalism studies as field.* We can – and should – borrow techniques and insights from related culinary traditions to create more interesting or well-balanced dishes. But if we focus on the kitchen and lose sight of news audiences, we give up what distinguishes our cuisine and makes it valuable to 'outsiders'.

The Savoy meets elBulli: A Functional Recipe for Journalism Studies Fusion Cuisine

When we look to many desirable social outcomes of journalism, their articulation is centred around discursive constructions that gained footing in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, as we have noted elsewhere (Broersma and Peters, 2013), the rise of the mass press in modernity was potentially less about the inherent value of its sense-making properties as it was a result of the logic of industrialization being brought to information. The 'trick' of journalism's business model was getting mass audiences to pay for a product (through their presence as consumers for advertisers, members of the tax and licence-fee paying public, or actively via subscriptions), that often contained little information they needed and which they couldn't judge in advance.

However, the product as a whole, 'the news', performed a host of worthwhile informative and social functions that became part and parcel of daily life. It did everything from conveying information about

current affairs, social issues, weather reports, and where to find jobs and housing to providing topics for conversation, putting one in touch with one's community, and structuring everyday life. In short, journalism connected audiences within democratic market societies (Schudson, 1978). Yet in continuing to assume it still fulfills these functions, we potentially miscast its present-day utility. If we want to understand how and why journalism's position in the informational ecology is changing, we should not look at what it could or should do *to* people but what it does *for* them instead. Putting forth such a 'functional' perspective[i] might raise eyebrows, evoking the ghosts of functionalism. However, using functionalism to interpret the news media is precisely what many already do when they conceptualize journalism in close relation to the normative rhetoric of the profession. In arguing against this tendency, we aim to reappropriate the term to capture positive insights gained from deploying it in a bottom-up articulation. Specifically, we outline a recipe in three steps – corresponding to how audiences experience technological, institutional, and societal and democratic changes – which we argue helps advance recurring inquiries in journalism studies by anchoring its basis of inquiry in what makes news and journalism meaningful to audiences.

Step 1. Consider technological change (Audiences' diets)

The technologically-inspired foci of a decade's worth of journalism studies scholarship points to a news ecosystem that barely comes to grip with one technology, if it does at all, before the next appears. We have seen a constant flow of scholarship focusing on the newest technological features and the practices which accompany them, such as blogs, chat, online news, citizen journalism, UGC, mobile media, convergence, audience participation, social media, transmedia, networks, crowdsourcing, cross-media, click rates, big data, algorithmic journalism, and on and on. Trying to piece this together becomes overwhelming and it is quite reasonable that many journalism studies scholars try to maintain focus amidst all of this change by considering specific impacts within the walls of journalism practice. When the focus does shift to audiences, there's a similar tendency to attend to what is easier to get and measure (e.g. Twitter feeds, click rates) rather than trying to get at the reasons behind what people actually use. These are reasonable limitations but limiting they are, nonetheless.

An alternative approach (Heikkila and Ahva, 2015; Broersma and Peters, 2017) is to start from people's daily communication habits in connected social spaces and then see where journalism and technological change fits in. In other words, following arguments that have been made to de-centre media (Morley, 2009; Krajina et al., 2014), the point is that training our gaze to start with people's lives where media is but one part, we become more receptive to considering influences outside our traditional object of study. Without thinking carefully about these personal 'realities', analysis and prognostications can easily fail.

For instance, it wasn't that many years ago that industry observers were convinced that the 'tablet revolution' was upon us (e.g. Doctor, 2011). Tablets were easily imaginable as a digital facsimile of legacy media and the question was not so much whether people would switch to tablets but how news organizations were going to adapt their business models. Yet longstanding insights from audience studies on the diffusion of 'new media' should have surely warned us that intervening considerations in the lifeworld, from the domestication of technology, to context of use, familial and peer-group norms, and material fit might complicate this adoption (cf. Livingstone, 2002). If we had considered this technology within broader lived contexts, we would probably at least have registered caution about its projected impact, given that mobile phones were already well-established as the personal media device par excellent. In 2011, smartphones were already far more prevalent amongst both youth and adults than tablets, and a high percentage were already using their mobile or smartphones to go online (Lenhart 2012). Mobile phones were a staple of our media diets, and given their quick integration in the fabric of our everyday lives, it made sense that people who wanted to surf news on a mobile device would eventually prefer their smartphone –

which was already offering a similar affordance, as well as many other more essential social functions than tablets.

In other words, audiences' diets are a mix of dishes and ingredients that are closely related to one another. Moving away from focussing on individual technological developments and how journalism anticipates these to instead consider how they interact culturally, institutionally and – most importantly – relationally with audiences' (established) lives provides a grounded approach to interpret the meaningfulness of technological change.

Step 2. Analyse institutional change (Audiences' supermarket of information)

Just as people's use of media evolves at different paces, the evolution of journalism's informational provision involves a Janus-faced balancing act of trying to respect continuity and retain demand. News organizations do, wisely, not easily abandon what got them there in the first place, while at the same time ensuring opportunities to grow the brand, harness new innovation, and find new funding streams are not missed out. In so doing, the news industry recognizes that the digital disruption of the media landscape means that emerging players continually challenge many of the previous functions journalism performed. From Twitter and Facebook being an increasing communicative preference of the political class, to various online startups taking over classified ads, travel advice, film and arts reviews, sports coverage and the like – private enterprise has been chipping away at journalism's informational dominance for the past couple decades. Journalism studies scholars have been attuned to this new reality for some time, and terms like fragmentation, proliferation, media environment, and so on speak to a new language to describe the ways media is engaged with and flows. However, it is important to recognize that a focus on the new 'hybrid' media system (Chadwick, 2013) should not just be a backdrop stock phrase journalism studies scholars use to argue for the importance of our work, but a central context that is actively considered from the bottom-up view of audiences and incorporated into our research designs.

This dialectic of confronting audiences' manifest and latent wants with informational supply is challenging for journalism studies (and might actually be an important reason for its focus on production and content) because, as Bird (2011: 490) argues, 'when one moves away from definitions of news that are producer oriented, and begins with the consumer, the very understanding of what constitutes news begins to blur'. In daily practice, media use seems in many cases not to be based on active and conscious choices in the 'supermarket of news' (Schrøder, 2015), but rather on a number of social and economic dimensions that audiences bring into play relationally against other media alternatives – a supermarket of information, if you will. News is now produced by a range of agents that might label themselves as journalistic or not, but satisfy the informational hunger of people.

Relatedly, recent years have seen a move towards a more active interest by scholars in the business models of news organizations, rightfully recognizing that a more profound and sophisticated economic understanding of their workings is necessary to comprehend the profession, its societal value, and where it is heading (Nielsen, 2016). From looking to crowdfunding, paywalls, new subscription models, alternative revenue approaches and many other possibilities, journalism studies scholars are (very) gradually becoming more comfortable with joining journalists in speculating how to create conditions for a more financially-robust enterprise. However, if we want to harness our expertise by cooperating with news organizations, be it for companies that demand profitability or public service media that must justify their government funding, we need to stand out from what they know themselves already – we don't need to tell a chef how she cooks. In basic economic terms, rather than looking to what journalism supplies, journalism studies may offer a competitive advantage in articulating what people will demand, and how they evaluate it against other

alternatives. Contrasting journalism with what different media, especially those outside the news business, offer the public demands analyzing which functions are complemented by journalism and which are fulfilled better by alternatives. It might even encourage thinking how to tender a worthwhile function when people can't yet clearly articulate such a want or need.

Step. 3 Evaluate societal and democratic change (Audiences' cuisines and health)

For audiences, news consumption in the era of mass media had tripartite significance in everyday life, which bore greatly on its societal and democratic value. First, it helped structure life through its distributional patterns and spatiotemporal contexts; the morning newspaper over coffee, news bulletins on the radio while commuting, and so forth (Peters, 2015). Second, news use enabled the potential of shared senses of belonging, through both regular, mass consumed stories that offered a space to participate in public life (Swart et al., 2017) as well as its highly visible presence (Anderson, 1991). Finally, news offered 'six or seven' functions, which came to be posited as essential to democracy (Schudson, 2008). The key question is how the transformations underway for digital news audiences impact such values. To answer this demands going beyond shifting usage patterns to attend to the differentiated social imaginaries and experiences of journalism.

One distinction for audiences between the era of analogue newspapers and online and mobile journalism is how news is perceived and felt. Distributed information flows increasingly precede the actual unfolding of the news, as Sheller (2015: 24) notes. 'Ambient flows of news re-situate how we understand where we are, who we are connected with, and what our present moment actually is. The now-ness of news, in other words, offers a new sense of the present.' In a similar vein, Papacharissi (2015) argues that the new technologies of journalism more effectively bridge audiences and events separated in time and space, potentially affording an affective resonance for people to find their own stories and place within them.

While such shifts have a potentially dramatic influence on audiences' affinity toward certain issues, events, and groups in society, at the same time it is important to remember that not all people experience them similarly. The continually increasing dynamism of information systems exerts differential pressures, and those with socio-economic and cultural capital tend to use such technologies successfully as resources in the 'speed-game' while others are left behind in a variety of ways (Rosa, 2017). The caveat for not just assuming the possibilities of informational architectures 'improving' journalism in the digital era is clear – in an era where more informational, interactional, and instantaneous possibilities are at hand, certain groups are more likely to experiment with and take advantage of new journalistic cuisines to the benefit of their broader informational health while others may turn inwards, or away, as in the case of politicized echo chambers or news avoiders. This means that any analysis of the democratic and social consequences of the new news ecology needs to be careful about speculating how different audiences are experiencing and leveraging these potentials.

Conclusion – Journalism Studies Gastronomy

In his preface to the renowned French culinary encyclopaedia, *Larousse Gastronomique*, the chef Auguste Escoffier noted,

The history of the table of a nation is a reflection of the civilization of that nation. To show the changes in the order and serving of meals from century to century, to describe and comment on the progress of the French cuisine, is to paint a picture of the many stages through which a nation has evolved … Those who

make a profession of gastronomy will find in this book matter for comparison between what used to be the art of good eating and what it is today (Montagne, 1961: n.p.).

While journalism studies – and even journalism itself – is certainly nowhere near as old as cooking, the balance implied in Escoffier's words between continuity and change, development and traditions, and the means of reading the culture of a nation could just as easily apply to the study of journalism. Traditions develop over time, but if we want to understand how journalism evolves we must always look to what is on the 'table of a nation', a necessary prerequisite before we offer judgements on 'the art of good eating'.

In this brief essay we have argued that – contrary to what might be the majority view – it is not journalism itself but rather news audiences or publics who have, often implicitly, underlined the emergence of our academic field. When targets of analysis seem to constantly shift and transform, it is easy to lose sight of this. This tendency is especially aggravated in the current digital era, when technological transformations are accelerated and established definitions of 'journalism' and 'the news' appear increasingly insecure. In such an environment, scholars risk collectively chasing the winds of novelty – We must study Twitter! We must scrape and analyze big data! We must study fake news! – over pausing to consider the historicity of why such change matters. Studying seemingly profound changes is not problematic per se (we have done so ourselves), as the opposite of innovation is stagnation, which is an undesirable goal for a discipline. However, a focus on change can become potentially problematic if it is employed too ardently or unthinkingly, especially in a landscape where change is increasingly posited as the norm.

When our tendency is to primarily focus on how technology impacts journalistic practice and texts rather than communicative flows and informational cultures more broadly, we may be caught unawares by the shifting sense-making practices audiences are employing in the digital media ecology, and misinterpret the roles journalism (continues to) perform for them. While we're not trying to promote doomsday 'crisis speak' we similarly don't want to run the risk of falling into what amounts to informational climate change denial by ignoring ecological shifts. Instead, we've tried to sketch a way forward by highlighting an audience-centred approach that encompasses historical premises, current practices, and future change. To better understand the current and future societal role and public relevance of journalism, if any, we suggest it is fruitful for journalism studies scholars to study what journalism does *for* people, how this relates to their needs and what others in the informational ecology offer. This reorientation of scholarship on what journalism *does* instead of what it *is* and *aspires to be* will hopefully change the way we pose questions – and makes for challenging but potentially more grounded research questions.

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[i] We develop the argument for a functional perspective at greater length in Broersma and Peters (2017).