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Dealing with the mess (we made)

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Published in:
Journalism

DOI:
[10.1177/1464884918760669](https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918760669)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Witschge, T., Anderson, C. W., Domingo, D., & Hermida, A. (2019). Dealing with the mess (we made): Unraveling hybridity, normativity, and complexity in journalism studies. *Journalism*, 20(5), 651-659. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918760669>

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Dealing with the mess (we made): Unraveling hybridity, normativity, and complexity in journalism studies

Journalism

2019, Vol. 20(5) 651–659

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DOI: 10.1177/1464884918760669

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Abstract

In this article, we discuss the rise and use of the concept of hybridity in journalism studies. Hybridity afforded a meaningful intervention in a discipline that had the tendency to focus on a stabilized and homogeneous understanding of the field. Nonetheless, we now need to reconsider its deployment, as it only partially allows us to address and understand the developments in journalism. We argue that if scholarship is to move forward in a productive manner, we need, rather than denote everything that is complex as hybrid, to develop new approaches to our object of study. Ultimately, this is an open invitation to the field to adopt experientialist, practice-based approaches that help us overcome the ultimately limited binary dualities that have long governed our theoretical and empirical work in the field.

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Keywords

Boundary work, complexity, constructivism, experientialist approach, hybridity, journalism studies, normativity, practice theory

Introduction

The concept of hybridity and related terms in journalism studies have afforded a meaningful intervention in a discipline that had the tendency to focus on a stabilized and homogeneous understanding of the field. The rise of hybridity can be seen as a response to rising complexity in both journalism practice and scholarship. Focusing on the *hybridity* of news professionals, institutions, technologies, and practices, scholars have aimed to address and make sense of the rapid changes buffeting journalism from all sides, and to inoculate scholarship against the danger that comes with focusing on stability, and with suggesting homogeneity. Theoretical frameworks that stress stability or suggest homogeneity prevent us from doing justice to the empirical developments and the dynamic and diverse nature of practices in the journalistic field.

Nonetheless, we need to reconsider the regular deployment of the concept, both conceptually and empirically, as it only partially allows us to address and understand the developments in journalism. With journalism characterized by change, complexity, and continuity, the field simultaneously features new states of stability and the rise of new structures. In this bind between change and continuity, the focus on hybridity comes with several potential drawbacks. If scholarship is to move forward in a productive manner, we need to develop new conceptualizations, terminology, and vocabulary, rather than denote everything that is complex as hybrid.

This article first examines how hybridity has become an important concept in journalism studies as a response to rapid digital, social, and economic changes. We then outline our main concerns with what we refer to as the ‘hybrid turn’ in research: the suggested historical homogeneity and stability and its relation to normative considerations in journalism. Last, we consider how to move beyond hybridity, inviting an experientialist, practice-based approach to address the limited explanatory value of the concept of hybridity now that it has become a catch-all term designed to overcome the ultimately limited binary dualities that have long governed theoretical and empirical work in the field. We ultimately explore approaches that allow us a deeper understanding of the nature of the hybrid object.

The hybrid turn

There is little doubt that the hybrid turn in journalism studies scholarship has arrived, and that the disciplinary advocacy of scholars pushing to adopt a more hybridized sensibility toward the object of their analysis has largely been successful. We do not fundamentally disagree with this turn; indeed, we ourselves have been at least in part contributed to pushing these developments (Witschge et al., 2016). Now is the time for stocktaking. To

understand what lies beyond hybridity (if anything), it is essential to understand the roots of the hybrid turn itself.

The most important book for understanding the hybrid media system in general is Andrew Chadwick's (2013) book of the same name, now in its second edition. It was a central intellectual event in the development of a general theory of institutional hybridity that moved from journalism to integrate questions of organizational form more directly into the larger literature of political communications. Chadwick's book directly tackles the manner by which the decomposition of unitary actors in the political sphere and the blurring organizational boundaries have reshaped the mechanisms through which communicative power is distributed in modern democracies. Chadwick's book has several parallels and predecessors grounded in particular cases and communicative forms that add empirical weight and detail to Chadwick's analysis.

At the heart of what we call the 'hybrid turn' is the desire to understand that which does not necessarily fit into long-used categories that have come to govern our theoretical and empirical work in the field: hard/soft, fake/real, professional/amateur, to name just a few. As the field of journalism studies came to understand that the binaries do not hold any longer, this hybrid turn has also translated into new terms that aim to describe 'blurred' categories of *producers* – produsers (Bruns, 2006), in-betweeners (Ahva, 2017), and semi-professional amateurs (Nicey, 2016) – and of *genres* – affective news (Papacharissi, 2015), participatory journalism (Singer et al., 2011), and infotainment (Brants, 1998).

The hybrid turn has also come to the fore in an increased awareness of the complexity of the field. Alfred Hermida's (2010) concept of ambient journalism posits social media, specifically Twitter, as awareness systems where news and information from institutional media circulate alongside fragments from diverse sources, with each competing for attention and influencing the other. C.W. Anderson's (2010) article on the Francisville Four is another example, tracing as it does the way a single, relatively minor news story traveled across the Philadelphia media ecosystem and was shaped, reshaped, and transformed as it 'hopscoched' from one institutional network to the next. Anderson's piece – like a larger project by Stephen Coleman et al. (2016) – has the advantage of looking at the operations of the hybrid media system within a single city, a lens also taken on by the Pew Research Center (2010) on the news ecosystem of Baltimore. Each of these pieces makes a different argument that sheds new light on the operations of journalistic hybridity. While Anderson (2010) demonstrates how the diffusion of news is largely the result of concrete institutional actions that move the news in particular ways, the Leeds study (Coleman et al., 2016) looks at the entire panoply of local media actors that create the 'sense of place' within the British city. The Baltimore study (Pew Research Center, 2010) demonstrates how central traditional journalistic organizations still are in producing the raw material upon which much hybrid journalism rests.

Since the publication of Chadwick's book, the notion of a hybrid media system has been applied to social media (Arthurs and Little, 2016; Hermida, 2016), verification (Giglietto et al., 2016), data journalism (Hermida and Young, 2017), and political communication (Dennis et al., 2016; Wells et al., 2016). The scholarship on journalistic boundary work and journalistic authority, as exemplified by the work of Matt Carlson (2017), can be seen as remarking on this turn in an oblique fashion. If the hybrid turn has

rendered the exact nature of journalistic institutions problematic, as well as the normative grounds on which they justify their importance within the larger political system, then the question of where the boundaries of journalism begin and end is now a question of organizational struggle rather than something that can be assumed prior to the start of any analysis. In other words, the concept of the hybrid media system has helped foster a strand of scholarship that seeks to understand how the authority of news organizations – never a sure thing – is hashed out in practice.

Mark Deuze and Tamara Witschge (2018) have helped summarize this particular argument by noting that ‘the supposed core of journalism and the assumed consistency of the inner workings of news organizations are problematic starting points for journalism studies’ (p. 165). They argue for the need to go ‘beyond individualist or institutional approaches to do justice to the current complex transformation of the profession’ (p. 165). In essence, they merge Chadwick’s theoretical nuance and ambition with a synoptic overview of the traditional, modernist understanding of journalism. They challenge journalism scholars to abandon the bulk of their core concepts in their analysis of the 21st century digital journalism landscape.

The trouble with the turn

While all these works discussed above have helped us move away from simplified understandings of the object of study, we are wary that the concept of hybridity has served as shorthand to encompass shifts in the production, publication, and propagation of news and information, and as an approach to capture complexity. As a catch-all phrase, it has served an important purpose, but we need to question its explanatory value and take the next step to not only name but also describe and theorize the complexity of the field. Moreover, the hybrid turn in journalism research may suggest a historical ‘purity’ that never existed. Of particular importance, the easy invocation of hybridity may act as a means of distancing or even ignoring normative considerations.

First, historical precedents point to hybridity in news production, institutions, technologies, and practices in earlier societies, such as the role of pamphleteering in the 1600s in England. At the time, ‘pamphlets had become part of the everyday practice of politics, the primary means of creating and influencing public opinion’ (Raymond, 2003: 26). With the rise of the journalistic press in England in the 1800s, pamphlets evolved into spaces for ‘a sort of footnote or marginal comment on official history’ (Orwell, 1948: 15), in some ways presaging the rise of blogs 200 years later (Moe, 2010). Similarly, Robert Darnton’s (1995) analysis of the news in pre-revolutionary France highlights what could be considered as a hybrid media system. He describes an intertwined media system where news and information circulated through conversations, gossip, songs, pamphlets, and books, alongside official journals and gazettes, where ‘the media knit themselves together in a communication system so powerful that it proved to be decisive in the collapse of the regime’ (Darnton, 2000: 29). Such examples serve as a reminder of the value of historical perspective in research. They illustrate how hybridity has been a factor in past media environments where generations experienced what at the time was seen as accelerated, tumultuous, and rumbustious transformation. Hybridity as a state of being for media is not as new as it would seem. Rather, it is the scholarly embrace of hybridity as a concept that is.

Second, the emphasis on the hybridity of social practices and their contingency has tended to underplay the role of norms in the evolution of journalism. Hybridity opened the door to considering that the ideals that govern the role of journalism in society are negotiated in everyday practices by the plurality of actors that engage in the process of news production (Domingo and Le Cam, 2015). The finding that the configurations of journalism as a social activity are contingent, that it is being continuously negotiated, was a crucial antidote against both technological determinism and implicit normative research frameworks (Borger et al., 2013). However, the norms that govern journalism practices and theories transcend the interactions between actors in a way that deserves more scholarly attention: they are powerful in structuring relationships because they are shared references that connect present, current practices with ideals, old and new.

If we are to understand the continued existence of structures and institutions in a field in flux we need to focus on how socio-technical arrangements depend on the ability of actors to align others to their interests, in networks of relationships that are necessarily contingent because they are recreated in every interaction (Domingo and Wiard, 2016). While such a constructionist view of society has been criticized for flattening existing power hierarchies (Couldry, 2008), we could argue that it actually allows explaining *how* order is maintained through the interactions between actors in their practices. Norms may play a crucial role in shaping how actors accept (or challenge) existing configurations of a network: different domains of human activity have different frameworks governing them, to which the actors refer to give meaning to their actions and agree upon their value (Latour, 2013).

Moving beyond hybridity

It is clear that the practices in the field of journalism demand a new type of scholarship to address the dance between stability and change, to capture the diversity in the field, to show the patterns amid apparent flux, to trace the interplay between norms and practices, and to celebrate the mire. We do not aim to replace any of the previous paradigms with a new one. Rather, we provide some sensitizing concepts that allow us to move forward in such a way that it does not reproduce or strengthen the dualities that underlie analyses in journalism studies. We strive for a truly inclusive research agenda, both conceptually and empirically, shedding light on that which has remained in the dark or that has come to be marginalized through our research (cf. Timmermans, 2015).

One of the main advances of the concept of hybridity is that it responds to the insufficiency of the binaries that exist in the field. These binaries are the result of an interplay between norms and practices in journalism, and the constructs applied by scholars to analyze these norms and practices. However, understanding phenomena through the lens of hybridity still bases this understanding in the same continuum, the opposition, the duality that brought about the need for hybrid terms. Here, we propose to understand the phenomena in the field of journalism – and more broadly in media and society at large – in such a way that we leave behind the binary distinction that is at the basis of much of our analysis all together. Consider all the different dichotomies used as frameworks to understand journalism and media, either by researchers or practitioners: objective versus subjective, commercially driven versus publicly motivated, entertaining or informing,

neutral versus attached, produced by professionals or amateurs, emotional versus rational, and, a more recently popular addition to the tree of binaries, fake or real.

Yes, the hybrid turn has added a 'both' option to the either/or dichotomy. But this does not yet provide an escape from the binary trap. We need to ask not only what purpose do these binaries perform but also what and who is excluded as a result of it? A way to go beyond hybridity in a more fruitful way, then, can be to ask how continuity is constructed, structured, and maintained. Hybridity does not mean there is no order, but rather that order is dynamic, unstable, and more fragile. What is relevant to understand is how that order is constructed, given the complex set of relations in any given context: what is accepted as ideal, as the norm, and how practices negotiate their coherence with norms or their rebellion against them. For an external observer, the relationships within a network may seem messy, illogical, perhaps even chaotic. For members of the network, there can be a logic, a 'mode of existence' (Latour, 2013) that holds journalism together through all the transformations that are needed to make it happen; there is a continuity in the discontinuous elements.

Quite simply, we are advocating for understanding journalism (and life!) as made up of inconsistencies. Taking that as our starting point, and shifting our attention away from either/or (or both, in the case of understanding phenomena as hybrid) distinctions, we are able to develop insights that better fit 'the realities of our experience' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 186). We can come to honor that the binary distinctions (including any hybrid categorizations ultimately based on them) are 'mistaken cultural assumption[s]' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 185). As scholars, we are arguably exceptionally positioned to provide new, alternative understandings. We need to see academic research for what it is: 'a radically contextual, problematic venture with a very complicated social mandate, if any' (Star, 2015: 14). We can acknowledge the nature and impact of our conceptual framework, addressing the need for more useful concepts to 'replace the either/or dichotomy of constructed versus real' (Star, 2015: 21) and other such dichotomies that guide our analysis.

We need an experientialist approach that acknowledges that 'we *understand* the world through our *interactions* with it' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 194) and helps us to comprehend that which does not readily or easily fit into rational theories and binary distinctions: 'our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 193). Some may argue that scholarship would become meaningless if we adopt such an experientialist approach over the standardized frameworks based on binaries that have governed journalism studies. We disagree. Research could grasp experience better by going beyond pointing out inconsistencies, paying more attention to how understandings and practices are *coherent*, even if not necessarily consistent. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) eloquently show how these are not mutually exclusive. If we stop trying to reduce the data to fit with our inherently limited oppositions, we can look for patterns; or, as it is called in practice theory (cf. Schatzki, 2005), 'bundles' or a 'mesh' of emotional states, material contexts, activities, and definitions, that may not necessarily be a consistent whole, but do appear to be coherent.

Such an answer to the increasing complexity of the social world does not rely on reductionism, but is focused on expansion. It allows us to provide inclusive accounts of this world, messiness and all. In that we may need to develop values that are now perhaps

rather marginal if guiding our practices at all, such as doubt (Costera Meijer, 2016), making (and staying with the) trouble, staying present (Haraway, 2016), and being open: ‘open to the data, open to being wrong, to redoing one’s own work, actively to seek out new views and mistakes’ (Star, quoted in Timmermans, 2015: 2). As pointed out by Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star (quoted in Timmermans, 2015), we need to design ‘classification systems that do not foreclose on rearrangements suggested by new forms of social and natural knowledge’ (p. 7). We need to be ready to see the conceptual mess that we made through neatly fitting everything in categories that never quite fit.

One way to address this empirical challenge of an experientialist approach is to take *situations* as the unit of analysis, rather than the social actors. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (1999) invite us to embrace normative pluralism asking us to acknowledge that each actor may bring a completely different normative world to a specific situation, complicating the process of deciding with the other actors what is appropriate behavior. Journalism is at the crossroads of different ‘orders of worth’: the common good, market competition, and social recognition. Actors interacting with the journalistic process bring in the rules of their own world, and journalistic actors are themselves caught between these different logics.

Being open toward the inconsistency of practices, including norms, we create an opportunity to reconcile our scholarly production with our own normative principles as citizens concerned with the future of journalism. Star saw this as the most delicate challenge for constructivist research: ‘How can we make a revolution that will be ontologically and epistemologically pluralist yet morally responsible? Can we be both pluralist and constructivist, hold strong values and leave room for sovereign constructions of viewpoints?’ (Star, 2015: 22). The same way we will acknowledge and analyze the norms of other actors, we can also render explicit our own moral ideals about what journalism should be and assume them in our interactions with our subjects of study, taking responsibility for our position as members of the field that we study. We can then aspire to humbly propose more sustainable configurations for the journalistic phenomena we are trying to make sense of.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Tamara Witschge received funding from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) for the project ‘Entrepreneurship at Work’ (number 276-45-003).

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