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Digital Journalism (Studies) - Defining the Field

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Introduction

This book brings together a collection of articles published in a *Digital Journalism* special issue in 2019 titled “Digital Journalism (Studies) - Defining the Field”, edited by the four of us in our capacity as the *Digital Journalism* Editorial Team. We had three ambitions with this special issue (c.f. Eldridge, Hess, Tandoc, & Westlund, 2019) First, to offer a review of research that has been published in this journal since its launch in 2013 to examine the current state of play. We commissioned a review article by a team of scholars with expertise with such reviews (Steensen, Larsen, Hågvar & Fonn, 2019). Second, we wanted to launch a new article format for the journal – the invited conceptual article (Westlund, 2018), and commissioned five articles to conceptualize ‘digital journalism’ from different research foci (Burgess & Hurcombe, 2019; Duffy & Peng Hwa, 2019; Robinson, Carlson & Lewis, 2019; Zelizer, 2019; Waisbord, 2019). Third, building on these articles, we authored an analysis of the breadth of discussions which have shaped the field of Digital Journalism Studies, outlined our vision of this field, and established the editorial agenda of *Digital Journalism* going forward guided by the Digital Journalism Studies Compass we introduced. In line with our vision for the journal and the rigorous work being developed in the field, all articles in this special issue were rigorously peer-reviewed by experts in the field. This book republishes the articles from the special issue in the original order and shape.

At the heart of the special issue and republished in this book, the five conceptual articles provide useful points of entry to “digital journalism”, something which many scholars have referred to in their work and discussed among colleagues. Yet, often this has occurred without first establishing a shared understanding of what “digital journalism” is. The conceptual articles serve as points of entry for addressing this shortcoming in our discussion of digital journalism, and by providing conceptual anchor points, these essays offer points of reflection which can be incorporated both in future research projects and in journalistic practice. For the journal, this collection of conceptual articles have offered inspiration for other scholars working to advance the field of Digital Journalism Studies, including in a widening range of conceptual articles. Throughout 2019 and spring 2020, *Digital Journalism* published more conceptual articles focusing on *Alternative News Media* (Holt, Figenschou & Frischlich, 2019), *API-based research* (Venturini & Rogers, 2019), *Creativity* (Witschge, Deuze & Willemsen, 2019), *Attention* (Myllylahti, 2019), *Placeification* (Gutsche, Jr. & Hess, 2020), *Meso News-Space* (Tenenboim & Kligler-Vilenchik (2020) and *Confirmation Bias* (Ling, 2020). Each of these offers a clear conceptual definition of a key idea for Digital Journalism Studies, while also including a discussion of implications for future research and benefit to empirical research.

Since its release, the special issue, which this book re-establishes, has gained traction in the field; each of the conceptual essays, the review article, and our analysis has garnered thousands of downloads, are regularly cited in other scholarly works, and have been recognized by the authors' peers, receiving multiple nominations for annual awards. We are immensely grateful to the contributors for rising to this challenge and producing highly reflective and clarifying articles.

We are excited about the opportunity to bring this collection of fine articles into this collected volume with Routledge. This introduction now turns toward outlining the academic discussions which have shaped the field, and the contributions made first in the special issue of *Digital Journalism* mapping the field, and now collected in this volume.

Digital Journalism: Past, present future

The book proceeds with the lead research article from the special issue, in which Steensen et. al. (2019) reviewed research publications in *Digital Journalism*, prominent book publications in the field, and the impact of this research. Steensen et. al. (2019) analysed keywords and citations across all issues of *Digital Journalism* to identify the dominant themes, degrees of diversity and interdisciplinarity, as well as biases and blind spots. They conclude by offering an initial and empirically based definition reflective of this body of work, from which they problematize research developments. For example, they argue that some concepts which have been introduced in publications are then rarely used by others. They also identify a tendency to ignore (often unintentionally) existing developments and concepts in the field while building new ways of seeing digital journalism. A more delicate approach to stitching the new with the existing is needed to balance continuity and change.

Next, Zelizer offers a provocation in her article on “why journalism is about more than digital technology”. To Zelizer, the digital is not an environment, it is a modality, a stage on which journalism plays out. She argues we would be best served to assess not only what is changing, but what structures and practices, ideas and values continue to stay the same. In other words, how much does a term like digital necessitate a nod to technology? What are the foundations that sustain and shape the very notion of ‘journalism’? Zelizer argues that digital journalism takes its meaning from both practice and rhetoric. Its practice as newsmaking embodies a set of expectations, specific practices, capabilities and limitations relative to those associated with pre-digital and non-digital forms, reflecting a difference of degree rather than kind. Its rhetoric heralds the hopes and anxieties associated with sustaining the journalistic enterprise as worthwhile. Digital journalism, she contends constitutes the most recent of many conduits over time that have allowed us to imagine optimal links between journalism and the public. Zelizer argues that the rise of networks, de-institutionalization and de-professionalization, increased participation and personal agency, have all been viewed as positive to enhance democracy, but we should always consider whether some structures – hierarchical, institutional or professional might indeed be a good thing. She also calls for broadened discussion on transparency, from anonymity in the news to the issues present in the blurring of boundaries between fantasy and reality. Zelizer asks us to take more time to consider how news is produced and avoid what has been described elsewhere in academic literature as ‘digital distraction’. Ultimately, she implores scholars to give a greater nod to history rather than a fixation on novelty, something Baym (2018) has

argued elsewhere in her analysis of the music industries and Hamilton (2018) has made a push for in examining the origins of broadcasting.

Next, Waisbord (2019) repurposes the classic “5Ws and 1H” framework for understanding digital journalism. A brief detour into the history of this time-honoured formula is perhaps pertinent to consider the balance of change and continuity that we will emphasise later in this essay. The idea of the ‘5Ws and 1H’, for example, stretches back as far as Aristotle and was popularized in poetry by British writer Rudyard Kipling at the turn of the 20th century. It emerged as a result of significant social and technological change and signalled a shift from stories written with a more flamboyant narrative style (see e.g. Errico, 1997). It reminds us how industrialization and technology can unsettle journalism practice but that some traditional values and approaches can also be reinvigorated or reinvented over time.

Waisbord salvages the “crumbling” pyramid model of news as an analytical device in his essay to assess the unprecedented developments in journalism. He highlights some of the obvious stakeholders and practices under this framework: *who* – anyone who uses the internet; *what* – content of digital journalism can be anything; *when* – shattered modern notions of time in news production and consumption; *where* – elides barriers such as geography and language to reach audiences; and *how* – the changing, at times disappearing, well-defined and agreed-upon norms and conventions shaping journalism practice. However, it is his discussion around the *why* that offers especially profound insight for digital journalism scholarship. Here Waisbord argues the very purpose of journalism now features such a chaotic array of motivations – from issues of self-presentation to social connection and support “along with the mainstays of making money, to scrutinize and reinforce power, educate and influence” that all must be carefully considered in an environment now designed for journalism to be practiced at a constant, hyper-speed. Further, in his view, the expanding networked settings and practices of journalism require deeper consideration for the networks of digital journalism are now “far more complex, open, noisy and unruly”. He draws on Peters and Witschge (2015) to suggest that while “participation in news” may not necessarily have virtuous democratic consequences, there are certainly more news producers that highlight the growing power of platforms such as Facebook and Google. Waisbord also points to the importance of scholars paying greater attention to what is socially considered and used as news.

Next, Burgess and Hurcombe draw on their expertise in digital media studies to provide an interdisciplinary perspective on digital journalism. They prefer to focus on the importance of the social as reference to the rise of social media or news platforms that are “born digital”. They extend the concept of social news to consider the rise of sites such as BuzzFeed, Junkee, PedestrianTV, which often promote politically progressive causes in their coverage and are directly distinguishable in the vernacular conventions and pop-culture sensibilities of social media. Burgess and Hurcombe emphasize the new genres and modes of journalistic storytelling that exploit connected digital technologies, highlighting the changing role of Twitter for “social listening” and as a tool to gather news tip offs or source quotes for stories. They draw attention to the increasing power of packaged metrics (based on social media data) that now contribute to shaping journalistic practices, values and priorities. This leaves media institutions increasingly responsive to these metrics and hence “mirroring the priorities and values of the

platforms themselves” or what Caplan and boyd (2018) refer to as “institutional isomorphism”. Such an approach like ‘social news’ must always be careful not to subsume or overlook journalism’s relationship to broader social realms and social connections beyond digital processes, but the “transformative and isomorphic” impacts of these new platforms and practices are certainly worthy of our attention.

Robinson, Lewis, and Carlson (2019) not only adopt a phrase like transformation to discuss digital journalism, they set out to develop a theoretical framework with which to understand this process. They offer a distinct contrast to Waisbord’s emphasis on the *revolutionary* changes in social and public life. To Robinson, Lewis and Carlson, transformation is a richer idea than that of change or revolution because it does not assume or equate to progress or the shedding of endemic structures. Rather it encourages a research perspective “centered on change whilst also allowing for maintenance of a foundational status quo”. Zelizer also issues caution over reference to ‘revolution’ in Digital Journalism Studies given that “most enduring change unfolds in bits and pieces, with no technology ever staying the same for long”. Robinson and colleagues suggest *transformation* offers a way forward for Digital Journalism Studies to encompass how the news media ecology is being reconstituted by mobile technology, social media and other digital platforms. The process – or myriad practices – that shape transformation can be factored in six commitments – context sensitivity, holistic relationality, comparative inclination, normative awareness, embedded communicative power, and methodological plurality. In other words, transformation becomes a framework with which to understand the balance between continuity and change. Robinson, Lewis, and Carlson position digital journalism as a subfield of journalism studies, providing a handle for us to problematise how to situate digital journalism scholarship, which we shall discuss shortly. Their approach to transformation certainly complements

Duffy and Ang highlight – joining the efforts of all of our authors in this volume – the difficulty in disentangling journalism from digital technology. In an approach similar to Steensen and colleagues’ work, they draw on keywords from articles in *Digital Journalism* to reveal a persistent newsroom-first approach (an argument made in earlier contexts by Wahl Jorgensen, 2009) that tends to emphasise how digitisation brings opportunities to journalism that have not been realised or explore a recurring theme of boundary work. Instead, they suggest Digital Journalism Studies should lose the normative accretions surrounding journalism and begin with the principles of digitisation. They balance a more direct, yet broader, societal approach to calling for scholarship that privileges the ‘digital’ over ‘journalism’. As a result, digital journalism becomes the embodiment of digital principles: “Digitisation sets the agenda for journalism to follow, rather than journalism setting the agenda for its digital incarnation to live up to – or not”. By digitalisation, they draw on the scholarship of Brennen and Kreiss (2016) to refer to the way domains of social life are restructured around digital communication and media infrastructures. A shift in this direction, they suggest, requires a greater distance from legacy news production and the newsroom to explore how digitisation is a feature of society and how journalism articulates or informs this.

Altogether, these conceptual articles crystallise the different perspectives and approaches to digital journalism that – when read as a collection – reveal the synergies, provocations and clear epistemological differences influencing research in this space. The final article advances these ideas by refining and defining Digital Journalism Studies. In

this final article, the editorial team offer an analysis of the emergent body of work defining this academic field, offering a guiding narrative for a field of Digital Journalism Studies to attune its work to (Eldridge, Hess, Tandoc and Westlund, 2019). In doing so, we hope to offer some clarity for researchers in the field, whilst embracing the diversity of ideas and ways of connecting the digital with journalism. The central concern is to lay the foundations for digital journalism as existing within its own distinctive field, moving beyond its place as a sub-field of journalism studies. The article outlines the 'Digital Journalism Studies Compass' (DJSC) to provide clarity as scholars navigate and plot the directions that Digital Journalism Studies may take in the future. By arguing for approaches that embrace the digital coupled with journalism, and continuity alongside change, we offer a heuristic tool scholars and students can employ as they navigate the digital journalism space as part of their own scholarly pursuits, enriching discussions in this exciting scholarly terrain.

We see this book as an opportunity to collect by tapping into contemporary debates and research into digital journalism, seeing this volume as a point of departure for developing research projects. In doing so, we see this book as complementing a series of recent handbooks which have helped scholars introduce digital aspects of journalism and journalism studies (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2020) and further establish a field of Digital Journalism Studies which endeavours to make sense of the specific developments of digital journalism research in its own right (Eldridge & Franklin, 2019). As a snapshot of this burgeoning field, these volumes and others (e.g. Franklin & Canter, 2019; Witschge, et al. 2016) reflect the intellectual depths being plumbed by scholars working in this field.

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