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Join the coalition: collective action spaces in pioneer journalism and the reimagination of journalistic epistemology.

ANDERSON, B.

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“Join the coalition”:
Pioneer journalism and the reimagining of journalistic
epistemology

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About the project

- Aim: Examine how transformation-focused journalism communities produce knowledge vis-à-vis their audiences, publics and wider world
- Research design and scope: Multiple case study, transnational (global) pioneer communities
- Methodology: Metajournalistic discourse analysis, 30 semi-structured interviews, multimodal discourse analysis of pioneer journalism stories

The research problem

- Journalism's **epistemic crisis** and loss of epistemic authority (Carlson, 2017, Steensen, 2019)
- Converged media, dislocation to non-proprietary platforms, broken monopoly of legacy media, (inter-)active and fragmented audiences, and public realisations that news is a construct **challenge the validation of news-as-knowledge** (Ekström & Westlund, 2019)
- Callison and Young (2019) locate the epistemic crisis of journalism in **its traditional *view from nowhere*** (the neutral, distanced regime of reporting), rooted in “sedimented power relations”. They see the possible solution in a **“relational” epistemology**: “relating oneself and one’s knowledge in systems and social order within which knowledge is produced, valued and mobilised” (p. 13)
- Soul-searching in newsrooms old and new **to reconnect with audiences/publics**: new styles and strategic rituals emerging (e.g., emotionality), **challenging journalism’s traditional norms** and practices (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, Steinke & Belair-Gagnon, 2020)
- New conceptualisations of journalism: as “a dynamic and dispersed practice” in constant process of **“becoming”** (Deuze & Witschge, 2020, p. 32)

'Pioneer journalism': A definition

- “Pioneer journalism” (Hepp & Loosen, 2021): transformation-focused actors/collectives who experiment with journalistic practice and who, through their **imagination and shared visions of journalism’s “possible futures”**, can ultimately effect “the re-figuration of [its] foundations” (p. 15)
- “Peripheral actors” (Deuze & Witschge, 2020, Schapals, 2022) YET they serve as “models or imaginaries of new possibilities”, **gesturing towards what journalism “could be”** (Zelizer, 2017).
- Pioneer communities are “imagined collectives” (Hepp, 2016) in deep mediatization, a **hybrid figuration between a social movement and a think tank**, united by a mission to “bring about **media-related change**” (p. 927)
- Knowledge production: **integral to pioneer communities’ identity and goals**. Studying pioneer journalism epistemic praxis can sensitise us to **shifts in journalistic epistemology** and its possible futures.

Research Questions

RQ1: What is pioneer journalists' vision about the epistemic role of journalism?

RQ2: How do pioneer journalism communities enact their epistemic values in their epistemic practice?

RQ3: How do pioneer journalists, through their epistemic praxis, reimagine journalistic epistemology?

Fieldwork and Data Collection

Initial sampling stage: 20 pioneer journalism organisations

1. **Field-mapping (2018-2020):** Seven journalism events in Central/Eastern Europe, South America, Southeast Asia (most online) organised by Hacks/Hackers, European Journalism Centre, Splice Media, Association of European Journalists.
2. **Initial sampling (2020):** 20 pioneer journalism organisations, **metajournalistic discourse analysis** as “traces of what matters” to explicate shared “matters of concern” (De Maeyer, 2016) and epistemic values.
3. **Focused sampling (2020-2021):** four cases – *Bureau Local* (UK), *The Current* (Pakistan), *New Naratif* (Malaysia/Southeast Asia), *DoR* (Romania). Interviews with 30 pioneer journalism producers.

| Journalism startup/collective | Country |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Bureau Local</i> | UK |
| <i>Coda Story</i> | US, Georgia and Russia |
| <i>The Correspondent</i> | Netherlands, Global |
| <i>The Current</i> | Pakistan |
| <i>Daily Maverick</i> | South Africa |
| <i>Decât o Revistă (DoR)</i> | Romania |
| <i>El Surtidor</i> | Paraguay |
| <i>The Ferret</i> | Scotland |
| <i>Frontier Magazine</i> | Myanmar |
| <i>IndigiNews</i> | Canada |
| <i>Inkyfada</i> | Tunisia |
| <i>Krautreporter</i> | Germany |
| <i>New Naratif</i> | Southeast Asia |
| <i>Outriders</i> | Poland |
| <i>R.AGE</i> | Malaysia |
| <i>Rappler</i> | Philippines |
| <i>Scalawag</i> | US South |
| <i>Splice Media</i> | South-East Asia |
| <i>Toest</i> | Bulgaria |
| <i>Wapatoa</i> | Myanmar |

Data Analysis

Phronetic approach to analysing qualitative research data (Tracy, 2018):

- Inductive <-> deductive iterative approach (tagging between theory/literature and emergent themes)
- Open (primary) and focused (secondary) coding cycles
- Codebooks crafted from emergent research data and ‘road-tested’ on rest of data
- 15 first-level codes, synthesised into two higher-level conceptual categories, and iteratively refined at every stage of data analysis

| Analytic level | Code Name | Code Description |
|-----------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2 nd level codes | Being Meaningful | A vision for reimagining journalism’s epistemology and role in society through the prism of ‘being meaningful’ – to make a difference, to create a better future through constructive, impactful storytelling, while embracing the best of old journalism ethics – accuracy, accountability, holding power to account, public interest, democracy and human rights – and the new epistemic values – moral compass, transparency, diversity, human dignity, and relational/situated subjectivity. The vision goes beyond information, towards collective care, advocacy, and action. |
| | Being Relational | An emerging relational epistemic praxis that is community focused and grounded in lived experience, human dignity and care. The media startups’ epistemic praxis seeks to build closer and deeper relations with their community members, networks, and the wider public and come together . Knowledge production is a collective endeavour that seeks to build an <i>imagined collective</i> around pioneer journalism to create stories and reach communities. <i>Being relational</i> goes beyond journalism-audience relations ; it extends to the encounters that pioneer journalism enables between journalism and world, generating epistemic capacities with wider social impact potential (akin to a social movement). |

Metajournalistic discourse analysis: Pioneer journalists' shared epistemic values

Being meaningful:

- Making a difference
- A hybrid vision of journalism ethics: mixing the **old** (accuracy, accountability, public interest, holding power to account, democracy and human rights) and the **new** (moral compass, transparency, diversity, human dignity, and relational/situated subjectivity)

Some in-vivo codes:

"A better future" (Rappler manifesto)

"Meaningful lives, meaningful knowledge" (Wapatoa manifesto)

"Meaningful journalism" (Coda Story manifesto)

Metajournalistic discourse analysis: Pioneer journalists' shared epistemic values

The meanings of 'being meaningful'

- Being useful, simplifying information for audiences (“simple content for a more informed life”, *The Current*)
- Empowering Southeast Asians to take action and build democracy through bridging information and action (*New Naratif*)
- Bettering the lives of citizens, bridging the divide between rural and city communities (*DoR*)
- Empowering underrepresented communities and giving them agency through co-producing “stories that matter” (*Bureau Local*)

'Pioneer journalism' communities as part-social movements (Hepp, 2016)

*“New Naratif is a **movement for democracy, freedom of information, and freedom of expression** in Southeast Asia. We aim to make Southeast Asians proud of our region, our shared culture, and our shared history. We fight for **the dignity and freedom of the Southeast Asian people** by building a community of people across the region to **imagine and articulate a better Southeast Asia.**”*

“Relational journalism” (*IndigiNews* manifesto)

*“IndigiNews **cares about people**. We understand the importance of developing **strong relationships** within communities and hearing a **range of perspectives**. We are trained in **anti-oppressive and trauma-informed** reporting, and understand that there are often **historical and political undercurrents** that impact communities today.”*

‘Being *relational*’: Pioneer journalism’s epistemic praxis

- **Mutual learning:** Dialogic knowledge production (coming together, building closer relationships, grounding knowledge production in lived experience and community agency, non-extractive, inclusive editorial approaches, soliciting ideas from audiences)

*"It's just so that people can share and often what you can generate through doing that is, I guess, **relationships of trust** between people, people sharing information at a **much deeper, more complex level** than they would normally in a conversation with a journalist... and also creating those conversations between different members of the community."*

(Bureau Local journalist and community organiser)

- **Community service and collective care** (people-powered epistemic approach, careful and thoughtful UX design, stories seen as actants-of-change generating capacities for action)

*"We strive to be a source of **balance and compassion...**" (DoR Editor-in-chief)*

‘Being *relational*’: Pioneer journalism’s epistemic praxis

- **Together in the *imagined collective*: Mobilising in collective action** (recruiting like-minded people to their cause, using activist discourse, impact-focused reporting - e.g., *Bureau Local*’s “Decolonise the news” and “News you can use” campaigns)
- **Towards knowledge-based advocacy** (moving beyond journalism’s traditional purely informative function, and extending to capacities to spark change - e.g., *New Naratif*’s Baca ‘democracy classrooms’)



*“Politically, we don't have an editorial line. **But morally, we have an editorial line.** For example, we are very pro-women, because we're a woman-led startup, we are pro-minorities, which is difficult in Pakistan to a large extent, because you get a lot of hate if you are pro certain minorities. We are pro-, you know, democracy... **we take the democratic line; that's something we don't draw lines on.**” (The Current Editor-in-chief)*

*“Journalism has a **responsibility to educate and empower, not just report**” (New Naratif CEO)*

*Journalism as a means to an end: the problem should not be simply about about saving journalism but “thinking deeply about **what journalism is for.** What’s the point of journalism and **what it can and should do.**” (Wales-based community organiser, Bureau Local)*

*“For me, **building a more inclusive, understanding, and accepting society** is really the bottom line of journalism.” (New Naratif freelance reporter)*

Reimagining journalistic epistemology from the ground up

Pioneer journalism producers go beyond their purely epistemic role as facilitators of knowledge and adopt, and indeed embrace, a semi-political role akin to grassroots activism. In so doing, they act as **agents of change**, slowly shifting journalistic epistemology beyond its traditional mission to inform towards social action and collective care, abandoning the *view from nowhere* and **actively embedding themselves in the world**.

Pioneer journalists adopt a more engaged role in society – “towards questioning, negotiating, and even reimagining reality” (Medeiros & Badr, 2022, p. 1356), thus moving beyond information and closer to something akin to ***knowledge-based advocacy***.

Through their epistemic vision and values and their experimental epistemic praxis, pioneer journalists push the boundaries of journalism, **gesturing towards some possible futures** and towards not only “what journalism could be” (Zelizer, 2017), but more importantly, **what it *could do***.

Five ways pioneer journalists reimagine journalistic epistemology

1. Challenging journalism's traditionally neutral and detached epistemic praxis by ***abandoning journalists' position as disinterested observers*** and openly taking a stand on issues that matter.
2. Engaging in ***knowledge-based advocacy*** – seeking to mobilise, empower, and create impact and democracy-building capacities.
3. ***Creating a circle of collective care*** – connecting and building bridges between people, stories and realities, and offering solutions and constructive approaches to issues.
4. ***Deep engagement and relationality*** – publics and journalists embedded in the knowledge production process, non-extractive approaches, mutual listening and learning.
5. ***Redressing epistemic injustice*** by giving people and communities agency and power to co-produce narratives.