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Why Change at All?

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CONCEPTUALIZING CHANGE IN JOURNALISM STUDIES: WHY CHANGE AT ALL?

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Abstract: This special section of *Journalism: Theory, practice and criticism* recognizes the change-focussed nature of our scholarship and reflects upon the pressures, possibilities, and perils presented by this orientation. In academic terms, journalism studies is still a relatively young discipline. While foundational studies of journalism enjoy a long and eminent history in disciplines ranging from communication, to sociology, political science, media studies, cultural studies, and linguistics, amongst others, the idea of a coherent field of ‘journalism studies’ is still only a couple decades old. The sustained efforts of many academics helped establish and carve out this territory, and the turn of the millennium saw the launch of both *Journalism: Theory, practice and criticism* and *Journalism Studies*. In subsequent years, the ability to self-identify as a community of scholars continued to formalize; ICA’s Journalism Studies division was established in 2004, while ECREA’s Journalism Studies section accompanied the founding of the association in 2005. Over the same period, courses on the study of journalism (as opposed to just its practical instruction) increasingly found their way into university degree programs, while research institutes, centres and departments brandishing the name journalism studies continued to appear. In sum, despite a relatively short timeframe, journalism studies as an identifiable academic field quickly established itself. In the aforementioned communication associations, it is now one of the largest thematic divisions. Given this growth, the maturity of field increasingly involves internal epistemic quandaries about how we study the phenomena that we do, what assumptions we smuggle in through our research questions and designs, and how our findings contribute to a deeper understanding of journalism. Such scholarship has been in the ascendancy in recent years and for this effort to continue, what is needed is critical engagement to formalize key commitments, illustrate fissures, and continue to push the field forward. As journalism studies comes of age, this special section wrestles with the question of change.

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Introduction

Conceptualizing Change in Journalism Studies

Why Change at All?

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A virtue of being a journalism scholar is that we rarely need to defend – or even explain – our topic of inquiry. When new acquaintances ask what we do and we respond that we study news and journalism, our inquisitors are usually happy to engage in conversation about it. Such discussions frequently turn to concern or confusion about the present state of news, the many changes that are happening, and what lies ahead in its future. While it's certain that not everyone shares a similar level of interest in the topic – and some surely don't care at all – what is clear is that the salience of journalistic change as a mode of understanding news is plainly visible. It is not a topic created by scholars, but a condition caused by the exigencies of the news media industry, occurring with different valences in different parts of the world. It is no wonder then that change, innovation, technological advancement, and future predictions occupy such a prominent position in contemporary journalism research.

This special section of *Journalism: Theory, practice and criticism* recognizes the change-focused nature of our scholarship and reflects upon the pressures, possibilities, and perils presented by this orientation. In academic terms, journalism studies is still a relatively young discipline. While foundational studies of journalism enjoy a long and eminent history in disciplines ranging from communication, to sociology, political science, media studies, cultural studies, and linguistics, amongst others, the idea of a coherent field of 'journalism studies' is still only a couple decades old. The sustained efforts of many academics helped establish and carve out this territory, and the turn of the millennium saw the launch of both *Journalism: Theory, practice and criticism* and *Journalism Studies*. In subsequent years, the ability to self-identify as a community of scholars continued to formalize; ICA's Journalism Studies division was established in 2004, while ECREA's Journalism Studies section accompanied the founding of the association in 2005. Over the same period, courses on the study of journalism (as opposed to just its practical instruction) increasingly found their way into university degree programs, while research institutes, centres and departments brandishing the name journalism studies continued to appear. In sum, despite a relatively short timeframe, journalism studies as an identifiable academic field quickly established itself. In the aforementioned communication associations, it is now one of the largest thematic divisions.

Given this growth, the maturity of field increasingly involves internal epistemic quandaries about how we study the phenomena that we do, what assumptions we smuggle in through our research questions and designs, and how our findings contribute to a deeper understanding of journalism. Such scholarship has been in the ascendancy in recent years (e.g. Blumler & Cushion, 2014; Steensen & Ahva, 2015; Peters & Broersma, 2017) and for this effort to continue, what is needed is critical engagement to formalize key commitments, illustrate fissures, and continue to push the field forward (Carlson et al., 2018). As journalism studies comes of age, this special section wrestles with the question of change.

Journalism studies is a somewhat odd field in communication research as its rise has paralleled – some might even say been premised on – the 'decline', in many ways, of its definitional object of study. The result is a

scholarly discipline whose very existence, paradoxically, is oftentimes tied to something many fear is disappearing for good. In such a climate the idea of change, and especially forward-looking change, gains almost paradigmatic status. Thematic panels from recent ICA conferences leave little doubt about this preoccupation in journalism studies; from ‘The Changing Business of Journalism and Its Implications for Democracy’ (Boston, 2011); to ‘Professionalization or De-Professionalization?’ (Phoenix, 2012); and ‘Professional Roles Revisited’ (London 2013). When the division celebrated its ‘10 Years of Journalism Studies at ICA’ with special panels in Seattle in 2014, many were defined, somewhat ironically, not by looking back but forward with titles like ‘The Institutionalisation of Journalism Studies, Understanding the Present and Contemplating the Future’ and ‘The Way Forward’. Similarly, the special panel theme of Porto Rico 2015 was ‘Pushing the Boundaries of Journalism Studies’. Fukuoka 2016 concerned itself with ‘Dialogues in Journalism Studies’, while ‘Reinvigorating Theory’ stepped to the fore for San Diego 2017. The popular biennial conference in Cardiff held since 2007 cuts directly to the point, labelling itself ‘The Future of Journalism’. Meanwhile paper sessions are awash with terms like: new directions, re-imagining, transformation(s), turn, new media environment, and so on and so forth. It is safe to say we are a change-focussed, one might even say change-obsessed, discipline.

This is understandable. Much like journalists chasing a scoop, the pressure to ‘innovate’ in scholarship is inherently forward-looking. This tendency is reinforced by funding agencies that demand academics predict the societal worth of a project before it is conducted, institutions that brand around revolutionary research and future-proof degree programs, and journals constantly in search of the next cutting edge topic. This is not problematic per se, as the opposite of innovation is stagnation, which is an undesirable goal for a discipline. But we should reflect more frequently about what the change-based nature of our scholarship implies. Much like continual talk of crisis (Zelizer, 2015) or an unwavering emphasis on democracy (Joseph, 2013), a ‘change paradigm’ in journalism studies may have unintended negative consequences.

In this respect, it is worth asking: is change a sensitizing or determinative concept? A given backdrop or reality? Things are always changing, so does focusing on this aspect limit the sharpness and stability of our conceptual reflections? Are we at risk, by placing change centrally, that our research inquiries take the rather predictable form of identifying how X is changing and what this means for journalism? Ruminating on such questions is, at its core, an exercise in asking what gives our scholarship value. The value of research in the arts and social sciences does not lie in its capacity to model and predict change, a realm of academia where the natural sciences exert epistemic superiority (Flyvberg, 2001). Instead, our scholarly impact revolves around contributing “to society’s practical rationality in elucidating where we are, where we want to go, and what is desirable according to diverse sets of values and interests. ... ‘fieldwork in philosophy,’ as Pierre Bourdieu called it” (Flyvberg, 2001: 168). In this respect, one of the dangers in placing change above solidity is the increased difficulty of moving from the surface to engage in deeper social questions. The continual beckoning of innovation is itself a form of distraction away from sustained political engagement (Pettman, 2016). For scholars, new technologies require an investment of time and resources in order that they be properly understood and studied. Staying relevant is often equated with staying current, furthering the urgency of attending to the new at every turn. No one would suggest that we ignore innovation, but we should be careful that doing so does not prevent us from questions of material and social power. This special section provides frameworks for addressing innovation without losing sight of the bigger picture.

Specifically, it reflects on this state of affairs in journalism studies by using the idea of shaping conversations around change as a point of departure. Along with being interested in questions of change, the authors in this section have also actively intervened in our scholarly community around such inquiries. From organizing conferences, to editing special issues and books, acting as part of executive committees in international organizations, and serving on the editorial board of journals, each contributor has actively sought, in one

way or another, to play a formative role in creating thematic conversations that help define journalism studies' object(s) of study. These activities do more than just shape conversations; they simultaneously serve to connect broad swathes of the journalism studies community.

Reflecting back on these experiences, the authors in this special section identify and engage with a number of key concerns about how journalism studies should think about its moving target of a topic, now that it has clearly come of age. Carlson and Lewis express concern that change gets too much attention at the expense of attending to stasis. As a corrective, their essay advocates that journalism researchers should adopt the perspective of 'temporal reflexivity' that considers broader time frames and seeks to make visible static elements of journalism that get taken for granted. Witschge, Anderson, Domingo, and Hermida begin by addressing the rapid rise of 'hybridity' as a central concept for addressing journalistic change. This concept has its merits in prompting scholars to consider a wider range of interconnected phenomena, but it also has its limitations for understanding the complex social and technological processes that occur around news. They propose the shift to an 'experiential' model that works from the ground up to track how various actors interact to make, share, consume, and critique news. Similarly, Peters and Broersma take issue with how the continued focus on news industry change obscures understandings of journalism's deeper societal functions. Instead, they suggest a reorientation of journalism studies toward journalism audiences, arguing that scholarly inquiries which depart from how and why people use and experience news, and then work backwards toward journalism institutions, may allow for more meaningful interventions. Wahl-Jorgensen also takes up experience as a central concept, but instead focuses on the lived experience of journalists. She contends that a life histories approach sensitive to the affective labour of news workers offers a useful corrective to research overly focused on celebrity journalists or too wedded to objectivity. Finally, Josephi pushes against the emphasis on journalistic change by reiterating the centrality of skills for journalism. Doing so recognizes the resiliency of news making skills, their role in differentiating journalists from others, and their commonality across different journalistic contexts with differing normative commitments. Taken together, these five essays push us to think in different directions to avoid falling into the trap of continuously chasing change at the expense of plumbing the depths of journalism's complexity.

Ultimately, this special section's remit argues that if change is one of our discipline's clear anchoring concepts, then meta-reflection matters for understanding why and how the field is shaped as it is. The goal is to step outside the research to think critically about the patterns of choices that get made, and to ponder what goes unasked or unnoticed because it falls outside the gravitational pull imposed by the change narrative. Doing so requires a step in the direction of provocation to spur greater consideration of how change permeates the field. We hope to foster a deeper engagement with how we think about change both in the empirical work that is the hallmark of the field and by encouraging more metatheoretical work clarifying and debating the key questions for journalism studies.

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