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GEOGRAPHIES OF JOURNALISM

The Imaginative Power of Place in Making Digital News

Robert E. Gutsche Jr. and Kristy Hess
Geographies of Journalism

*Geographies of Journalism* connects theoretical and practical discussions of the role of geotechnologies, social media, and boots-on-the-ground journalism in a digital age to underline the complications and challenges that place-making in the press brings to institutions and ideologies. By introducing and applying approaches to geography, cultural resistance, and power as it relates to discussions of space and place, this book takes a critical look at how online news media shapes perceptions of locales. Through verisimilitude, storytelling methods, and journalistic evidence shaped by sources and news processes, the press play a critical role in how audiences shape interpretations of social conditions “here” and “there,” and place responsibility for socio-political issues that appear in everyday life.

Issues of proximity, place, territory, news myth, place-making, and power align in this book of innovative and new assessments of journalism in the digital age. This is a valuable resource for scholars across the fields of human geography, journalism, and mass media.

**Robert E. Gutsche, Jr.** is Senior Lecturer in Critical Digital Media Practice at Lancaster University, UK. His scholarship surrounds place-making in news as imposing social control. He is an author and editor of several books, including *The Trump Presidency, Journalism, and Democracy* (2018).

**Kristy Hess** is an academic of Journalism and Communications Studies at Deakin University, Australia. She is largely interested in researching the sustainability of local media in a digital era and its connection to place-making, boundary work, and power.
Disruptions refers to the radical changes provoked by the affordances of digital technologies that occur at a pace and on a scale that disrupts settled understandings and traditional ways of creating value, interacting, and communicating both socially and professionally. The consequences for digital journalism involve far reaching changes to business models, professional practices, roles, ethics, products, and even challenges to the accepted definitions and understandings of journalism. For Digital Journalism Studies, the field of academic inquiry which explores and examines digital journalism, disruption results in paradigmatic and tectonic shifts in scholarly concerns. It prompts reconsideration of research methods, theoretical analyses, and responses (oppositional and consensual) to such changes, which have been described as being akin to “a moment of mind blowing uncertainty.”

Routledge’s new book series, *Disruptions: Studies in Digital Journalism*, seeks to capture, examine, and analyze these moments of exciting and explosive professional and scholarly innovation which characterize developments in the day-to-day practice of journalism in an age of digital media, and which are articulated in the newly emerging academic discipline of Digital Journalism Studies.

**Native Advertising**  
*Lisa Lynch*

**Geographies of Journalism**  
The Imaginative Power of Place in Making Digital News  
*Robert E. Gutsche, Jr. and Kristy Hess*

**Disrupting Journalism Ethics**  
*Stephen J. A. Ward*

Geographies of Journalism
The Imaginative Power of Place in Making Digital News

Robert E. Gutsche, Jr. and Kristy Hess
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– Kristy Hess
Introduction
The power of place-making and journalism

Our scholarly discussion on the geographies of journalism begins in Hollywood. In 2016, the critically acclaimed film *Lion* premiered and told the true story of a young Indian boy, Saroo Brierley, separated from his family after he fell asleep on a train. The authorities, believing his next of kin to be dead, eventually permitted a well-intended Australian couple to adopt and relocate him to Tasmania. Now living far from his birthplace, Brierley continued to possess the burning desire to find “home.” As an adult, he used Google Maps to locate the tiny Indian village where he was raised, drawing on nothing but the childhood memory of a water tower, river, and train line to guide him.

To Google executives, Brierley’s story became a triumph of technology. Western media, meanwhile, developed a fascination with the boy actor “plucked from slumdog Mumbai to Hollywood” (Roberts and Sachdeva, 2017) to play the role of Brierley in the film. When the child actor struggled to secure a visa to attend the premiere in the United States, journalists and Hollywood heavyweights were quick to use their influence to rectify the situation (Alexander, 2016). Yet, these same individuals and institutions gave little attention to the fact that hundreds of other Indians were also being denied access to the US amid dramatic changes to border control.

The film – and its subsequent media coverage of technology, trial, and triumph – highlights how economic, cultural, and physical distance from a perceived center are often viewed as obstacles to overcome. Sometimes this “center” is where there is the greatest cluster of resources and power. In other contexts interpretations on geography, people, and related issues may be based on our sense of place in the world – our homes, neighborhoods, or communities.

The production and promotion of *Lion* reveals how media and technology play a role in both bridging and reinforcing these divides and highlights the role – and control – of news media to help connect, shape, and reinforce
our understandings of places along with the opportunities and inequalities within our geographies.

At its heart, this book unpacks journalism’s relationship to geography, especially its relationship to place-making. We are interested in the way news media shape perceptions of location but also how the news shapes people’s connection to the physical and digital spaces where journalism is practiced and how this relates to legitimacy and power. By place, we mean the physical, social, and digital spaces and sites to which individuals attribute meaning and which become more significant when this meaning (both imaginative and physical) is shared or contested by others.

Benedict Anderson’s (1983) well-cited (yet problematic) notion of imagined communities – despite its top-down and colonial approach to place-making – may indeed highlight the relationship between media and the building of collective identity through a shared sense of time and space. *Geographies of Journalism*, however, questions how this imaginative power works in an increasingly mobile and transient era – from the way we perceive both familiar and unfamiliar places and people to the new territories being carved out by news media in digital landscapes.

Central to this are issues of power and a focus on the role of journalism in patrolling boundaries and generating divides between insiders and outsiders. Social theorists, philosophers, geographers, and communication thinkers from Pierre Bourdieu to David Morley, Doreen Massey and Henri Lefebvre to Edward Soja, bell hooks, and David Harvey inform our thinking throughout this book. The roots of geographic study are combined with concepts of symbolic and imaginative power and violence, ideology, myth and narrative, doxa, ritual, and mobility to consider journalism and its relationship to place.

In unpacking the geographies of journalism, we make an important distinction about the way we understand journalism: there is a need to expand focus from the role of journalism in the public sphere to examine its “place” in the highly contested social sphere. By the social sphere, we mean the realm of our everyday within which our social lives help us make sense of who we are as individuals and ultimately as collectives (Hess and Gutsche, 2018).

It is within these spheres where we construct connections to others beyond our intimate lives and, where appropriate, meaningful behavior and practices are negotiated. News media play a distinct role in establishing social norms which function as forms of social control and order, maintaining approved standards of daily life, institutional structures and practices, and dominant explanations of the world around us.

The social sphere becomes a permeable shell through which journalism scholars can better probe ideas of collectivity, virtue and vice, ritual, myth,
sociability, social honor, and control as they relate to place. It is our contention that journalists, then, should be examined as active place-makers rather than objective bystanders in the places they serve and that certain media outlets continue to wield more power and influence in certain settings than others. We also strongly believe that journalists should be held accountable to engage with reflexive tools to not only acknowledge this power but to guide journalistic practices into the future.

Too often, scholarship focuses on the “place” of journalism in the digital age through concepts such as boundary work, which is applied similarly in other political and newsroom-centric sociological and cultural studies (Deuze and Witschge, 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2010), to provide an inward-looking view of the norms and conventions shaping the journalistic profession. Such approaches can frequently be at the expense of studying the ways in which news media relate to the spaces and places in which people interact with each other as viewed through a lens of power. In this respect we address power as an ideological process that maintains “winners” and “losers” within society, rooted in language that is aligned with moments of violence (physical and symbolic) that reinforce actions against particular individuals and groups for the benefit of some groups over others.

Throughout the book, and which we unpack later, we discuss the concept of “sense of place.” By this concept, we mean a process that generates feelings of inclusion and acceptance but which reminds us that there are always environments where we feel “out of place” – even “put in our place” – and that there are times when these sensibilities are guided by those we deem legitimate place-makers in certain contexts.

Massey’s (1991) idea of global sense of place, for instance, points to a “power geometry” in a globalized world. News media and larger media conglomerates continue to be among the power elite which hold influential positions in social flows and movement (Massey, 1994). In the digital realm, for example, filter bubbles can certainly narrow the scope of information flow in online spaces and create a myopic view of the world for a particular user. Yet, we should not overlook the fact that filter bubbles are a new spin on an age-old practice: What makes news and interests us always is determined by our day-to-day practices in the places that “matter,” by notions of who we are, where we have been or plan to go, and who we feel belongs alongside us.

More recently, Reese (2017) highlights that a “spatial turn” has made concepts of fields, spheres, and networks much more relevant in the digital age while assemblages and nodes have become increasingly part of the conversation of mapping journalism’s new virtual terrain. In this book, however, we begin by returning to the roots of geography studies – especially
Introduction

its physical, social, and cultural dimensions – to provide a foundation for understanding journalists as place-makers in the digital era.

This book provides an overview of geography as an area of study and outlines foundational areas and debates relevant to journalism over time – physical, social, cultural, media, and the material turns. This means traversing and condensing wide scholarly terrain; however, it is not our intention to provide an encyclopedia of geography studies here. What we have sought to do is highlight the gaps in and the richness of this field to create a kaleidoscope of complementary lenses through which to approach geography and journalism.

Throughout each chapter, we draw on news media coverage and interviews with practicing journalists to illustrate key contentions. This involves data from qualitative studies undertaken as part of our own research as individuals during the past several years that canvases parts of Australia and the United States. Our specific research focus has been across the local media sector, which offers a particularly rich area of inquiry for a book about place-making given we can study journalism’s intricate relationship to place in smaller settings, whilst acknowledging its role in wider global flows and movements (Gutsche, 2014a; Hess, 2013).

At times we adopt a pooled case comparison approach (see Oldfather and West, 1995). Pooled research is a form of secondary data analysis that has emerged in more post-modern qualitative studies. The approach makes use of pre-existing raw research data (interviews, diary entries, and focus group transcripts) for the purpose of investigating new questions or verifying previous studies (Heaton, 2004). Oldfather and West (1995) argue that “pooled case comparison” is based on the informal sharing of qualitative data.

In contrast with comparative methods that begin with interpreted findings, pooled case comparison sets aside categories and properties from previous analyses (Oldfather and West, 1995). Raw data from separate studies are literally pooled to create a new data set from which fresh categories and properties are derived and the sources of individual bits of data remain visible throughout the analysis.

Overview of the book

Chapter 1 provides the overview of geography studies in Western contexts during the past several decades. This return to the roots of geographic underpinnings provides a much-needed foundational landscape upon which to build this and other projects that use terms such as “space” and “place” interchangeably or lack a historical context in how geography can be viewed from physical, social, cultural, economic, digital, and media perspectives.
These approaches are applied throughout the book to push boundaries of how current work within the field of journalism studies addresses geographic elements.

A book on geography would be insufficient without a discussion on the key debates around place and space and their relationship to news media and journalism. This book situates issues of power at the forefront of such discussions, as presented in Chapter 2, to highlight the power of territory as a vital yet often overlooked component of the space and place literature in relation to journalism. The trichotomy of place, space, and territory prompts a recalibration between the need for speed and mobility and the careful construction of space and place over time. Through this discussion, the relationship between news media and Facebook and the contestation for political, moral, and social influence is highlighted. It is here we argue that the social sphere is the new highly contested territory that warrants a much greater emphasis in discussions on journalism’s relationship to place and space.

In Chapter 3, we explore the symbolic and “imaginative power of place.” Here, we adopt and merge theories of social space and cultural meaning to equip the professional journalist (and scholars) with the reflective tools to understand the power of and the power inherent within place-making. We draw on Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic power – the power to construct reality – as a precondition for imaginative power – that is the power to imagine or construct what we cannot see or to reinforce meanings of reality through verisimilitude. Complementary constructs of myth and doxa are also adopted to demonstrate how certain dominant ideas are reinforced and perpetuated by those with symbolic power, including journalists.

We highlight the notion of “imaginative power,” meanwhile, as that which enables place-makers to be innovative, creative, and to envisage or discover the news all the while building upon the dominant and frequently hegemonic presuppositions of the creator and audience related to location and populations. Indeed, imaginative power should not be considered emancipatory, as it can be used to generate binaries – ideals and fallacies – especially in terms of what we cannot see or those who are in places at a distance from our own.

In Chapter 4, we outline the demarcation of space and news zones. This may seem like we are covering old ground, but the ways in which spaces and places are constructed have received little attention in journalism studies and so it is important that we build this foundation here. In this chapter, we argue more work is needed to understand the way journalists demarcate the physical boundaries in which they generate news before territories evolve and before rules and ritualistic practices are cemented. We pay specific attention to news media and the demarcation of space in physical geography, that is the neighborhoods, suburbs, towns, and cities where we
live, work, and play as a sometimes forgotten or understated starting point in complicating news in digital spheres. We then discuss the characteriza-
tion of these zones in the context of cultural geography and the relationship to the symbolic and imaginary power of place.

Chapter 5 sees us extend our thinking around other important concepts such as proximity and distance in the context of place-making given their integral relationship to news values and journalism. We contend that existing scholarship on news proximity tends to bypass one of the most important dimensions of them all – proximity to power (both physical and imagined) in changing physical and digital contexts.

Here, we pay particular attention to what we term “performative proximity,” which reinforces media power in places of meaning in the digital age. By performative proximity we mean the coming together of powerful elites in physical and digital and virtual space to not only reinforce the significance of an event or issue but to reinforce the legitimacy of those who are “there” – and, in effect, those who are not. In discussing proximity, we also extend upon three other elements – socio-ideological proximity, temporal proximity, and the way audiences perceive journalistic proximity to places.

Chapter 6 shifts to a critical examination of news media and their relationship to social surveillance and control in the spaces and places they serve. We highlight political developments using technology to control, but also focus on the cultural dimensions of shaming and boundary work to shape acceptable behavior and expectations within places. In so doing, this chapter further aligns geographies of journalism with the social justice and critical geographic studies of those who examine elements of the “right to the city” that place people and collectives at the center of public place-making.

The book concludes with a discussion of the challenges ahead for journalists as place-makers in a period of rapid mobility and change. It highlights several suggested methodological approaches (arguably underdeveloped in journalism studies) to examine the geographies of journalism from anthropology that crosses physical and digital terrain to affective and critical cartography, critical and reflexive studies, and border studies.


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