

# From the Shipping News to Snapchat: Problems of Space, Place, and Power in Journalism

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When I moved with my family to Northern England from Miami in January 2018, I knew I was leaving the familiarities of my home country, my daily bouts of MSNBC’s *Morning Joe*, the occasional check-in with FOX News, and access to *The New York Times* on newsstands at Starbucks. What I didn’t realize was that in May 2018, I would be cut off from online access to my hometown newspaper, the *Tomah Journal* in Tomah, Wisconsin, when the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) took hold.

GDPR mandates that businesses with online content in the EU must seek a user’s permission to track her geographic location, how she uses the website, and what other sites she might visit online before she can access the company’s website. For businesses that do not comply with the law—as of April 2019, this includes hundreds of news outlets, including the *Chicago Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times*—their websites are left fairly blank. A message on the Tribune’s website, for instance, reads:

Unfortunately, our website is currently unavailable in most European countries. We are engaged on the issue and committed to looking at options that support our full range of digital offerings to the EU market. We continue to identify technical compliance solutions that will provide all readers with our award-winning journalism.

Lee Enterprises—which owns dozens of newspapers, including the *Wisconsin State Journal* in Madison, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and my hometown newspaper—has likewise not complied with GDPR as of April 2019. For expats, travelers, tourists, and possible (albeit scarce) global audiences for some of these papers, GDPR creates a barrier worse than any paywall. The corporate rationale for non-compliance is as stale as it is specific: “Internet traffic on our local news sites originating from the EU and EEA is de minimis,” a Lee Enterprises spokesperson told Nieman Lab, “and we believe blocking that traffic is in the best interest of our local media clients.” The general reason that U.S. news sites refuse to comply with GDPR is that the efforts are not cost-effective.

I reported for the *Tomah Journal* in high school and other Lee Enterprises-owned publications throughout college. Later, these became websites where I found obituaries of high school classmates and family friends and learned about crises, celebrations, and changes in local communities. More than a year after living abroad, my local U.S. news sites remain unavailable overseas, and I feel as though I really am far away from home—even on the World Wide Web.

Without this local news, I am left only with my imagination of what could be happening back home and conversations with family who discuss local issues over phone calls

and texts. My reliance on assumptions and imaginaries about these people and places I used to be able to read about—indeed, even visit and talk with—has increased and my sources of alternative or contesting information have lessened the more time I spend away. No longer can I easily ask my neighbors what they think about news events. Nor can I more easily visit my parents and my old stomping grounds to “check the facts” about daily life by “being there.” More and more, news explanations of everyday life in and around my home town, and my home country, are filtered to me through additional layers of interpretation since I do not get news directly from the news source. Even news from major cities, such as Chicago and Los Angeles, arrives through filtered “foreign” voices of U.K. media or the distant voice of a news source based in neither city, since I cannot access news directly from either the *Tribune* or the *Times*.

The territorialization of journalism from the United States and other parts of the globe due to GDPR contributes to what digital consultant company Sourcepoint’s Brian Kane, in a 2018 interview with Digiday, refers to as a perpetuation of information “fiefdoms.” Most troubling is that these fiefdoms result not from actions of democratic governments or authoritarian regimes but at the choosing of corporate journalism. And while GDPR reveals on a global level various issues of power related to journalism’s spatial and social forms and functions, it also highlights a much-needed area of inquiry for Journalism Studies—intersections of space, place, territory, mobility, emotion, and time.

First, however, the field must overcome its confusion about the terms and paradigms involved in the geographies of journalism and solve its tendency to slight ideological power studies in its explanations for social and cultural phenomena in favor of sociological and techno-studies approaches. Nikki Usher’s monograph presents another welcome push in Journalism Studies to complicate space-place dynamics in news, along with cultural and ideological investigations to present wholistic understandings of news placemaking as a power force. And, she makes room for conversations about complications in intersections of news, space, and place.

## **Placemaking in Journalism: A Mix of Confusion and Culture(s)**

The most basic challenge to understanding “place” and “space” in journalism and in journalism studies is finding common definitions. As scholars pull ideas from literature, human geography, physical geography, environmental geography, and cultural studies, the terms become switched around, used synonymously, or mentioned colloquially. I urge Journalism Studies to locate “space” and “place” within dynamics that acknowledge the parameters of geographic location (“space”), and geographies of the imaginary (“place”).

In *Transplanted Chicago: Race, Place and the Press in Iowa City*, for instance, I turned to critical human geography to define space as “a particular geography to which people assign purpose or meaning, such as a city, a building, or a park.” Place, on the other hand, “refers to when meanings are assigned to a specific space.” In *Geographies of Journalism: The Imaginative Power of Place in Making Digital News*, Kristy Hess and I defined place as “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.”

Space is a bit easier to understand across audiences, whereas place exists in a postmodern realm, seen as locations, such as a digital platform or a city park, where cultural and ideological meanings are assigned. The park has social rules and landmarks, but it can also hold deeper meaning—a center of community identity, for example. Digital space is assigned paradigms of social meanings that shape roles, values, behaviors, and expectations; but a platform becomes a place when users form ideological and power structures of lasting meaning in the imaginary. Here, identity is shaped by social interactions governed by a collective’s (and a corporation’s) behavioral expectations, languages, roles, and values. Furthermore, Facebook, for instance, subscribes to the idea that its platform is designed and maintained to build “community”—not to benefit capitalism. In terms of the local newspaper website, branding and behaviors of posting, commenting, and sharing positions the site as being a place of “home.” In the United Kingdom, NorthWalesLives, for instance, presents itself as “Your new home for news, sports and entertainment in our region.” WEBO radio in Tioga County, New York, calls itself “Your Hometown Station.” Less overtly, the *Reading Eagle* newspaper site in Reading, Pennsylvania, puts users at home by breaking down its news offerings among “Berks & Beyond,” “Our City,” “Your Community,” “Tri-County,” “State,” and “Nation/World.”

James Ettema’s “imaginative power”—when journalists rely on salient and resonant storytelling from which audiences construct the reality of a news story—is key to a cultural understanding of news placemaking. Rather than seeing placemaking as merely the physical geographies and institutional parameters within which journalists work, an ideological level of analysis examines the meaning-making process of audiences who are transported into imaginations of where stories take place. This understanding of placemaking reveals how news operates in overt mentions of the present, moments of the past, and predictions of the future. News users rely on their imagination of the news event so that they can start the story in the bathroom, continue it on the train, and complete at lunch. Journalism’s imaginative power, then, allows users—and stories—to cross time and space while maintaining a coherent and dominant narrative of meaning, what Jack Lule, in his 2002 book *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism*, and others refer to as mythical news narratives.

To complicate matters more, each newscast, radio bulletin, newspaper or magazine, and push notification, website, or social media feed has a beginning, middle, and end to storytelling. But the signs of “welcome” to the start of a newscast and a “Goodnight, and good luck” indicate entrances and exits into the imaginary place of news. This signaling of authority at the breaking news ticker or sound prompts the user to stop mentally and physically to pay attention. In 2018, for instance, in announcing its new virtual reality library, the *New York Times* wrote that users viewing its 360-degree journalism would be “*joining* [emphasis added] our award-winning journalists at the center of it all.” This announced the space as authoritative, “centered” around the legitimacy of journalistic interpretation, and shared between

the user and the journalist. In these ways of entering, engaging, and exiting, journalism comes alive and operates where the user is located, possibly crossing geographic borders and over time as she engages with journalistic authority on her phone, in her ear, and always in her mind.

Still, Journalism Studies remains in a space and time that is trying to shape dominant interpretations of space and place in sociological terms rather than critical/cultural ones, where journalism is about enforcing control of mind and body, space and time, to form ideological meanings. Continued calls to explore the geographies of journalism appear in a recent upswing in interest related to spatial journalism, placemaking, geo-spatial approaches of news ecology, and critical socio-spatial perspectives. Yet, issues of power in the processes of building, identifying, and understanding complications of news geographies are set aside for discussions of trust, verification, and the public sphere focused largely on the tangible signs of journalism—not the imaginary ones. As news deserts grow, time and space compressions become more salient, and the consequences of media distrust are more overt, understanding the complications and inconsistencies in scholarship surrounding space and place becomes even more vital.

### **Placemaking as the Imaginative Power of Trust-Building**

Usher's idea of "place-trust" comes at a vital moment when the field must ask itself if and how it will wade into the uncomfortable realities of why trust in news media is wavering. The answers to why people distrust are based on social (and geographic) distance, although that's not the only explanation. Media distrust is rooted in problems inherent to journalism—its focus on indoctrination and control. Media trust is now an emotional topic, particularly in the current times of resentment, fear, and injustice, as I write in a guest editor's essay of *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, scheduled for summer 2019. But journalism scholars must set aside their exasperations about people's distrust of media and their appeals to people to trust journalism and to journalists to "do better." Critical scholars must acknowledge the "darker sides" of journalism that maintain injustice and hegemonic discourses about territory. My point in *Media Control: News as an Institution of Power and Social Control* is that U.S. local and national news legitimizes violence against undesirable nations and neighborhoods (geographies and territories), largely by colluding with business, police, and military to relay what constitutes those spaces, places, social disorder within them—and who is to blame for unrest. News may be a form by which to engage with democracy, but it also serves to maintain the powers that be.

Issues of journalism, trust, place, and space—particularly in the United States—do not operate absent of racial influences. Recognizing that public journalism, citizen journalism, and perhaps even solution-based journalism contribute to a hyper-professionalization of non-White discourses (within race-based locations of journalism as a "public sphere") extends whiteness rather than creating an avenue of resistance to dominant (i.e., White) power structures. Furthermore, scholars and journalists should be aware of the inherent problems within the very notion of "community journalism,"

which suggests that within a given geography is a single “community” that adheres to one shared identity and interpretation of everyday life. To gauge which voices shape the news and what journalistic processes are deemed most appropriate, scholars and journalists alike need also to identify which narratives are shaped by participatory and “community” journalism. Does the idea of being “off-the-record” exist for all communities? Is the language of quotes and opinion changed to Standard American English? What is gained—and lost—if a community is mandated to comply with dominant (i.e., White) journalistic ethics and practice, and how do these losses and gains influence the story of place? How do new modes of “doing journalism,” both solution-based and reciprocal, ask questions about reflexivity?

Another process of understanding connections between journalism, space, place, and trust involves realizing the ideological processes of how news creates us/them dynamics, in which the “Us” is dominant community and the “Them” is what threatens it. Consider this chronology:

- In 1919 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the local newspaper’s editorial pages blared “NAB NEGRO FOR ATTACKING GIRL IN ELEVATOR.” The story contributed to White rioting that leveled Black neighborhoods.
- Scholars and citizens alike silently supported the Islamophobic page-one banner headline of a *San Francisco Examiner* article reporting the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks with a single word, “BASTARDS!”
- Coverage of terrorism in Boston in 2013 and in San Bernardino in 2017, as I discuss in *Media Control*, explained issues of global-local terrorism through racist lenses of the suspects, ethnocentric notions of geopolitics that led to the events, and pastoral presentations of geographies that “came together” against a “common enemy.”
- News about the 2018 mass shooting at a high school outside of Miami, as I wrote with Kristy Hess in *Geographies of Journalism*, focused on the disruption of a suburban, light-skinned, and otherwise “safe” neighborhood. Meanwhile, journalists scrambled to places like Black inner-city neighborhoods of Chicago to discuss gun violence, as though the suburbs are void of armed violence.

Local news processes of creating an us/them binary in which media as a White institution present alternative explanations of the world and local spaces as based in racial difference emerges across the United States in annual news stories of Fourth of July parades. The binary also appears in the use of place-names in regions (“The Heartland”) and neighborhoods (“the South Side”) that are designed to create a sense of “community” or common identity of people who are “of it” and those who “are not.” Yet, these processes are rooted in nostalgic stories of the American Revolution and democracy’s benefits rather than in knowledge of the genocide of American Indians, while citizens, students, and scholars alike, subscribe to mainstreamed notions of the Civil Rights movement rather than promise of Black power.

Dominant voices in society ignore contestation of communities in rural America to instead highlight quaintness and calm, what Herbert Gans in his 1979 *Deciding What's News* refers to as “small-town pastoralism.”

Regional U.S. media are boosters of economic and racial inequality. They favor White corporations and citizens, even when these are revealed to be involved in racialized practices, segregation, and oppression. In turn, national and local news maintains society's dominant explanations for social disorder (and order) through narratives that enforce a collective's approved behaviors and identities of belonging within particular geographies. Indeed, news peddles to audiences based on ideological/political preference while maintaining American-centric and unifying histories, interpretations, and interests, evidenced in coverage from the Cold War to the War on Terror. Every cable channel, despite political leaning, remains attached to hegemonic rhetoric about territorialized American exceptionalism, whiteness, and capitalism. The press offers nationalistic rationales for governmental war-making, business journalism advances capitalism, and the mainstream press normalizes and continues dominant traditions through sourcing decisions, approved tales, and mythical narratives of nostalgia. Journalists, perhaps except for overtly opinionated ones, almost never question institutionalized interpretations of social life, definitions of territories, and denials of wrongdoing.

Instead, in the name of “truth,” journalists continue to rely on official police, business, and governmental sources despite widespread corruption within those ranks. Furthermore, these official “truths” supersede those of neighborhood residents in cases of contestation, such as violence or “disorder,” who are used in reporting merely for supplemental perspectives, not for commentary on social inequalities. The goal in these journalistic practices is to create a pretense of ideological distance between the press and power structures. No wonder audiences—across geographies and communities—simply do not trust members of the press. Meanings from residents of “the hood,” for instance, wouldn't make sense to the suburban reader, while the meaning and justifications of “maintaining order” by the suburban resident is rarely seen as justified or welcomed by those experiencing it. Focusing on dominant, powerful articulations within a realm of a single nation or community, therefore, diverts from the complications of alternative realities for news users.

Dan Berkowitz and James TerKeurst's seminal *Journal of Communication* article (“Community as interpretive community: Rethinking the journalist-source relationship”) identifies why journalists turn to “preferred meanings” to explain events in ways that bridge geographies, places, and time. Such news meanings make for cross-geographic common identities that connect the local press to the national and back again through a dual trickle-down/trickle-up cycle of indoctrination aimed at muting some voices and foregrounding others. Revealing the power of the press and place in creating contestation, these “preferred meanings” maintain both the authority and legitimacy of the press among its audiences and institutional partners in governance, business, entertainment, and military/police.

The influence of the proximity of a news event to a news outlet has fallen out of favor among scholars in a social-media-crazed environment that supposedly bridges time and space. But social, physical, and ideological distance between users, journalists, and geographies of coverage deserves exploration. Specifically, the role of proximity in news production and interaction helps to identify the imaginative power of journalism to shape news in ways that benefits its interpretive communities of journalists, institutional players, and audiences. In our *Journalism* article, Erica Salkin and I found that local, regional, and national newspapers presented news of a rape in Steubenville, a small Ohio town, in ways that supported cohesion of the news outlets' dominant audiences and geographic identities. The news staffs deployed explanatory news myths that they apparently assumed their respective audiences would find desirable, thereby setting an ideological agenda benefiting the powerful and ignoring the potential counter-narratives to the violence and its causes.

In short, my argument is that the ideological dimension of journalism in terms of power is what is missing in explanations of, as Usher writes, "how place [and space] intersects with how we come to know about the world and the impact of place [and space] on our lived experience." More than anything, studies of geographies of journalism should examine processes by which journalists reinforce the ideological powerhouses of their own regions in their articulations of "here" and "there" just as much as they focus on sociological meanings of where journalists work, and how, in a physical sense.

## **Digital Spaces and Power Bundling: Future Problems of News, Place, and Space**

From the bundling of news—when trading vessels from one nation would moor in another nation's port while trading, delivering "bundles" of news from one geography to another—to the scattering of communication across geographies via social media, such as Snapchat, that pulls and pushes media and meanings from one set of users to another, journalists continue to move in and of cultural and physical spaces and places. Journalistic acts of space, time, and technological innovation—from the speed of shipping lanes to social media feeds—are unlikely to change even as newsrooms shrink. Even more in the future, journalists will need to cover distant spaces without being there, and they will have the technology to do so. As news outlets adopt geo-technological advancements in mapping, real-time tracking, augmented and virtual reality for immersive storytelling in spaces near and far, scholars and journalists alike will do well to critically examine ideological and power forces in determining what and how distant and local geographies may exert hegemonic, place-based gaze.

Sociological explanations may dominate how Journalism Studies approaches people's lives and worlds on- and off-line. Scholars are reluctant to see journalism as a force that employs power for purposes of control and indoctrination, scholars and educators need to complicate explanations of how and why we are pulled into online spheres, spaces, and places. At the same time robots, artificial intelligence, and social

feeds make journalists more reliant on algorithms, programming, and proprietary platforms that come from outside news industries, controlled by corporations, and used with less public understanding and awareness of how these tools operate, cultural interpretations of these influences on journalism is necessary to explain the connections between space, place, power, journalism, and trust.

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