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The State and Future of Television News Studies: Theoretical Perspectives, Methodological Problems, and Practice

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Introduction

A decade into easy access to widespread streaming services, such as Netflix, has altered the television terrain of what people watch, how, and where. Binge watching has become a normal, desirable activity (Merikivi et al. 2019). Even the idea of “Netflix and chill” has become a colloquialism used throughout popular culture to represent opportunities for casual intimacy. In short, television through the use of DVRs, multi-platform viewing options, the spreadability of one’s iTunes or other digital library, and mobile functionality, such as YouTube cellphones, has become more accessible in new forms of temporality where these digital feeds are always at hand and are more interlaced with everyday life. Video news, not just entertainment, is along for the new ride (Morrison and Carlson 2018).

But what do these digital advancements mean for television news in terms of sourcing, interactions with audiences, relaying dominant ideologies, distributing content, and contributing to diversifying news landscapes? More importantly in this time of flux, where and how in the field of Journalism Studies are these and other questions being asked and answered? This special section of *Journalism Practice*, therefore, highlights four articles that should encourage scholars to do more in this area, to address and push the methodological boundaries in capturing and interpreting television images, languages, distributive innovations, and cultural meanings in terms of audience reception and interaction with television journalism.

From Netflix to the Nightly News: Where Have We Gone?

Television journalism studies has been complicated in recent years with the rise of satire and entertainment news (Baym 2010; Gutsche, Naranjo, and Martinez-Bustos 2015) and with an increasing focus on cable journalism, which features faces and voices of opinion and branded content (Hyun and Moon 2016). Cable journalism took a hit by journalism critics and scholars in the 2016 presidential election for the following—and some may say its promotion—of then candidate and now president Donald Trump. Political journalism on MSNBC told the liberal side of the story, replacing CNN as the “left-wing” news channel, while Fox News held tight to a conservative bend (Weeks, Ksiazek,

and Holbert 2016). YouTube channels such as The Yong Turks and the contentious website InfoWars rose in popularity to provide “alternative” visuals and journalism. And despite the influence of audiences on news through social media and the social function of YouTube (Djerf-Pierre, Lindgren, and Budinski 2019), in the U.S., news users still prefer TV news over other platforms (Mitchell 2018).¹

Not all changes facing the future of television journalism are centered around U.S. political affairs. Yet, political environments globally, largely influenced by the overreach of the U.S. media and political hegemon, have shown television news as a central feature of socio-political change directly influenced by technological innovation. The previous decade in U.S. television journalism—centered around advanced technologies and radically altered political landscapes shifting from the War on Terror to the war between the press and Trump—brings about new landscapes and portraits of how television journalists operate. Blatant political influence and ideological weaponization of television news, particularly at the local level, emerged in 2018 when Sinclair television owners demanded that local TV journalists produce station run promotions that spoke against “biased” and “false news,” an act directly connected between the conservative owners of the corporation and the Trump Administration (Stelter 2018). Journalists were ordered to read the following statement to viewers:

The sharing of biased and false news has become all too common on social media. More alarming, national media outlets are publishing these same fake stories without checking facts first. Unfortunately, some members of the national media are using their platforms to push their own personal bias and agenda to control “exactly what people think” ... This is extremely dangerous to our democracy.

The news readers also stated that their local station, of course, told the truth and was beyond reproach. Yet, such an effort by the broadcast company to influence local journalism, which was criticized by journalists in and outside the corporation, were matched by other overt efforts by the White House to shape journalistic content, particularly on television news. After CNN journalist Jim Acosta’s 2018 run-in with a young, female staffer during a Trump briefing (the staffer tried to take the microphone out of Acosta’s hand while he was speaking and his grabbing it back led to the temporary suspension of his White House credentials [Harwell 2018]) it became even more clear that the administration would continue to use the TV news spotlight to perform its versions of governance. It should also be noted that in this debate, the White House released a doctored video to make the interaction with Acosta seem more violent on his part.

Indeed, it was the visual, largely from television journalism, though also represented in photography, that has in the last several years formed a tangible foundation for most recent debates about “fake news” (for review, see Gutsche 2018). Open arguments among journalists and politicians about video (and still images) of Trump’s inauguration set the tone for Trump’s deepened attack against mainstream journalism that has escalated and shaped much of TV news streams from the local to the national level. For example, Trump’s White House has claimed that his inauguration was attended by more people than the inauguration of his predecessor, Barack Obama.

Journalists challenged the claim, using video and still images from the previous president’s gathering on the Washington Mall and placing them beside images of Trump’s 2017 inauguration, which seemed to show large gaps in the crowd. Debate and spin from the

White House led to the infamous use of “alternative facts” (McVittie and McKinlay 2019) to suggest that one side in an argument could and does use their own interpretation of events to make their case and that these interpretations are just as “true” as any other form of evidence. Here, the White House argued, journalists just didn’t like Trump and therefore wished to undermine his success, though it was later revealed that the images of the inauguration presented by government officials had been altered by staffers to make the Trump crowd look larger than it really was (Swaine 2018).

The/A State of (Digital) Television Journalism

Global political shifts to populism and widespread commentary delivered in “real” and “fake” news through visual media online has matched technological advancements of TV delivery and interactivity, including the use of virtual reality, 360° video and sound, use of social media to distribute TV reports and to engage with sources and audiences, live feeds such as via Facebook, YouTube, and Skype to increase geographic expanse for coverage and reach, and advanced multi-platform storytelling (Mabrook and Singer 2019; Rein and Venturini 2018).

Indeed, TV news has been pushed to match audience desires for on-demand viewing and interactivity led by companies such as Netflix, which has paved the way for subscription-based, multi-genre streaming and interactivity. The company has made several attempts at “choose your own adventure” video, for instance, including the 2019 “Bandersnatch” episode of *Black Mirror* where users (no longer just viewers) can select what path the story takes (Lawler 2018). And while news may not get to the point where people can select how they get to the end of the story, studies have shown that in print and with longform digital journalism readers already move independently around content, wanting to feel in control, and this desire will only become more demanding in a fragmented media world. We just might be able to “make our own” TV news story in the future.

Despite advancements and changes in technology and interests and behaviors of audiences, how TV news looks—the anchor desk, the ticker, the vox pop—has been embedded into societies to the degree that the talking head, live reporting, b-roll, and news style of TV scripts are contributing to the very forms of media designed to undermine mainstream journalism. Deepfakes, videos that alter voice and image to meet socio-political messages in ways that appear original to the broadcast (Bryant 2018), are becoming more problematic for all journalists (Walker 2019), especially those who capture (or who are captured in) the altered frames. It’s even more difficult for journalists to decipher what’s real when democratic governments, such as in the case of the U.S. and the CNN reporter, release fake video. Because TV journalists rely on visuals to tell stories, a segment about a house fire needs to show the blaze while a standup of the reporter at the scene makes the story and its issues more salient. Someone wishing to win a viral video can use those visuals and sounds to alter what is shown, what is not shown, and what is heard, especially relevant given the current challenges to and for journalists.

It may be, however, that the more the user becomes the reporter, able to capture her own information on breaking news via social media, visiting the scene through multiple citizen-captured videos, she can increasingly make her own stories that challenge the professional reporter—even if the journalist is physically at the scene. If this level of user

engagement and interactivity with established media is part of the future, a user's access to and familiarity with such technology puts them closer to a driver's seat of their own in producing reports on par in quality and content with the reporter's. To counter this, journalists will have to find even more ways to make users involved in the creation of verifiable and engaging visual journalism. That is what audiences demand.

One of the benefits of television journalism, particularly live feed journalism, is that it shortens audiences' senses of distances to spaces and places of news (Gutsche and Hess 2019). Just as a video game virtually transports a user in Phoenix, Arizona, for example, into a Navy Seal embarking on a journey in Afghanistan (which mirrors the U.S. military controller in an Arizona bunker flying a drone thousands of feet above the Persian Gulf), TV news will have to control its sense of citizen-user involvement and the genre's omni-presence to maintain its legitimacy and authority established in its Golden Days. More involvement by audiences in television journalism will not get rid of deepfakes, nor will it replace what may come next in terms of disrupting mainstream media authority. Yet, audience involvement in terms of sharing the live standup with more diverse arrays of sources—including relevant and compelling of citizen content (and compensating citizens for the content, while addressing their ownership rights)—may go a distance to maintain journalists' authority and increase audience trust.

Developing: TV News Innovations, Lagging Scholarship?

Examples of exciting developments in television journalism include during the 2008 U.S. presidential election when CNN used a hologram to do some reporting (Welch 2008) and in 2018 when China featured the first AI news anchor (CNBC 2018). TV journalists continue to provide the world with visuals of corruption and conflict, putting their lives in danger to do so, while sit-down interviews remain strong sources for sensational moments that are spread across social media. Gayle King's 2019 interview with entertainer R. Kelly about accusations that he has sexually abused young women for decades won clicks, views, and accolades from audiences and journalists alike for eliciting raw emotion captured by the camera (King 2019). Television journalism, particularly with the rise of Vice—an edgy news channel—also got a boost as a popular format when *The New York Times* as it started "The Weekly," a television show produced by a newspaper and digital company for FX and for streaming on Hulu.

So where does one go for consistent scholarly analysis of television news practices that are in constant change? The few journals that deal specifically with television often cover multiple genres, such as televised drama, documentaries, and animation in addition to journalism. A search over the past 10 years of *Television & New Media* for "television" and "journalism," for instance, yielded 209 articles, but many of these articles discussed depictions of TV journalism in television drama, in addition to a paper about *Game of Thrones*, politics and the public sphere. Roughly a quarter of the results dealt with professional journalism on television; five articles appeared when the search was for "television journalism." A search in *New Media and Society* found 254 results for "television" and "journalism" in articles since 2009 and included articles about satire and social media, digital Islamophobia, and celebrity activism. Here, about a quarter of the results, again, dealt with television journalism specifically; only one result was returned for "television journalism."

While quick web searches of academic journals may not be the best way to indicate a field of study, it does reveal the difficulties television journalism scholars face in separating (when appropriate) television journalism from the rest of television. More importantly, however, the lack of clarity is an indication of how well television, moving images, journalism, and entertainment are embedded into societies and cultures. Inherent in the challenges of studying television journalism is the benefit of diversification, which leaves an opening for theoretical work and innovative methodological advancements. Certainly, important work is being done related to television journalism and appears in several scholarly spaces, including books and the *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic News*, but scholars should consider how well we are covering these advancements—technologically, culturally, and critically—and what role television journalism plays in scholarship of the future.

Articles in this Section & Areas for Research

This special section of *Journalism Practice* presents four articles from Chile, India, Spain, and Kenya, each offering its own methodological innovations for scholars to consider, cultural influences of audiences and journalistic practice, and technological innovation that is directly influencing TV news practices in their geographies. From Chile, for example, Ingrid Bachmann and Constanza Mujica discuss argumentative strategies of television news and its emotional elements in highly contested political environments. They take a look at TV news-gathering practices, news-writing and delivery, and the blend of sensationalism and “audiovisual language” to attract and inform audiences. This article represents a theoretical approach that looks at TV news as text and is helpful, particularly, in contributing to international discussions of the medium.

Ignacio Bergillos, from Spain, interrogates the role and use of vox pops, which the author defines as “seemingly unscripted interviews with ordinary people that are usually employed to represent public opinion in news broadcasts.” Bergillos also interrogates the role of Tweets and Facebook posts that appear as vox pops, and questions the balance between their use, the ethics involved, audience interest in the visual element, and their informational value. From India, Sudeshna Devi discusses the role of opinion and commentary in television. Interviews with journalists reveal the decisions made in using opinion content in a crowded TV news market while also discussing the potential influence of such content on society. And from Kenya, Ruth Owino, John-Bell Okoye, Laura Anyasi, and Daniel Lemba Mule explore the technological means by which journalists circumvented government restrictions on press speech, challenging Western notions of limited agency of journalists working in nations with restrictive speech laws.

These pieces speak to each other in ways that encourage internationalization of the field and provide areas for those wishing to go forward with research in these areas. Yet, there are several other approaches to this topic that should also be explored. First, with the seemingly endless rise of cable and digital channels for visual news that allow users to watch and interact from their phones, computers, and TVs, work should continue to categorize and redefine just what television journalism is and isn't today. Scholars should further explore to what degree virtual reality and 360-degree journalism constitutes a type of television journalism of its own, as these immersive forms sometimes include journalists themselves and complicate the influence of eyewitness elements that retain

conventional television news work but appear in new spaces (for emergent work, see Mabrook and Singer 2019). Furthermore, journalists and scholars have long debated whether documentaries are, in fact, journalism; yet, as more television news channels like Vox, Telemundo, Vice, and CNN, produce and run documentaries, it would be helpful to know whether and how practical and philosophical lines are shifting.

Second, scholars should consider applying more cultural and critical analyses to work on television journalism to further investigate ideological and hegemonic functions of local television news to create a single sense of identity and shape local experiences for contested communities (Gutsche and Hess 2019). Journalism Studies continues to struggle with its marriage to normative assessments of journalism. While journalism classrooms are introduced to critical analysis of media through lenses of political economy, hegemony, gender, race, and class, these lessons largely fail to inform our scholarship as journalism research largely maintains a commitment to industry and democracy and to taking easy pot shots at journalism rather than examining the ideological influences upon how news is produced (Gutsche 2019). Missing is the use of television news, particularly at the local level, to address issues of contestation and indoctrination, representation, and social control. It might be that capturing these moments are more challenging given difficulties to access local stations and that it is much harder to tell local stories within the depths of their contexts than it is to rely on cable news that speak to national narratives. Overcoming these challenges, however, would be a great benefit to research—and to practice—by revealing the breadth and depth of ideological acts of the medium.

Third, scholars would do well to study technological innovations of television journalism (and other forms of journalism) by elevating continued, overarching concerns of the newsroom as a workplace and social space. Many TV journalists, particularly those at local and regional levels, are attached to complex contracts of employment that include such elements as non-competition agreements, which hinder the ability of employees to move about and take advantage of their talents and fair labor practices (Davidson and Harrie 2018). The inner workings of how journalists “work their way up” may not be new, but exploring how these working conditions influence how TV journalists show and tell stories about labor and economics, local unions and educators, and the experiences of workers generally could reveal connections of power inherent in how these journalists work.

Fourth, and also based in a critical political economy perspective, television journalists in larger markets—and certainly on cable and network news channels—continue to earn good money, which creates a social distance, at least economically, from the topics and people they cover. Earnings of cable TV news anchors, for instance, that put them among the best-paid professionals in the business, also land them right in the middle of the (largely) white elite of the profession and amid the social experiences of other elites. At the local level, TV journalists scrape by, especially those who are new, but still hold a social status among local power elites, often invited to galas and charity events, that produce interesting areas for future research (ie Bradshaw, Foust, and Bernt 2005; Yanich 2001). And, of course, ethnographic studies into the workplace would also reveal issues related to race, gender, and stigmatization that critical scholars should further uncover (Antunovic 2019).

Finally, there is great potential for journalism scholars to engage with audiences not only to learn about how they interact with TV journalism but about what meanings

they retrieve from the TV news and to interrogate intersections of theory and practice from a qualitative, audience-focused perspective (for example, see Gutsche et al. 2017). Much potential exists for using television news as a site of cultural interrogation, and scholars and journalists alike should dig deeper into meanings of the medium's messages, or at least what audiences say they see when they watch or interact with television news today.

Note

1. As a point of transparency, I frequently appear on television news channels to discuss U.S. politics, issues of journalism and media, and media representations of Donald Trump, which also informs my interpretations of TV journalism practices.

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