



The New Geography of Journalism Research

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THE NEW GEOGRAPHY OF JOURNALISM RESEARCH

Levels and spaces

Stephen D. Reese

In this essay, I consider the challenges of doing research in a shifting domain, where technology has made the concept of journalism itself problematic. For many years, I have used (in my own work with Shoemaker on media sociology) a levels-of-analysis hierarchy of influences perspective to sort out the factors impinging on the symbolic reality produced by journalism, but a “spatial turn” has made concepts of fields, spheres, and networks much more relevant. Understanding these spaces requires thinking in less media-centric terms as we identify the newly coupled assemblages put together in producing digital journalism, beyond its traditional institutional containers. These include algorithmically restructured atomic units of news in content and different configurations of global journalism. A new wave of ethnographies has begun to tackle these challenges, using the kind of thick description that characterized the field in the pre-digital era.

KEYWORDS assemblage; ethnography; global journalism; levels-of-analysis; hierarchy of influences; media sociology

The future of journalism requires new thinking, as we try to accommodate the emerging, unsettled, and shifting digital-enabled configurations of newswork with the kind of predictive, generalizable stability sought by social science. In considering this challenge, I would like to explore in this essay some concepts that I have worked with over the years and consider how to adapt them in this new period of our field, what I will call the “new geography” of journalism research. And I find myself approaching this new geography with analytical preferences that have become steadily less linear and more spatial. Although much of the research I am familiar with in journalism studies (what I will also refer to as *media sociology*) has a decidedly American focus, I observe that many new studies I draw on, particularly in the area of digital journalism, come with a British perspective. With *Journalism Studies* and newer publications such as *Journalism Practice and Digital Journalism*, Cardiff University has provided an important platform for an increasingly international community of scholars—which has included strong participation from students and colleagues at my own institution.¹ Consequently, I was particularly pleased to be asked to provide a keynote at the 2015 Future of Journalism conference, from which this essay is adapted.

I am accustomed to thinking of media sociology from a levels-of-analysis perspective, as an organizing framework. Of course, I have noticed the “spatial turn” in the metaphors we use to describe media and journalism: whether networks, fields, or

spheres, so in recent years I have tried to address those ideas as best I can, and want to think here about how I might reconcile them within the levels framework. I realize what a difficult field we have to theorize, when the master concept of *journalism* itself is so problematic and unstable. When Pam Shoemaker and I revisited not long ago our book, *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content*, I realized how much had changed since the last revision effort we made in 1996—the industry, profession, and the technology (Shoemaker and Reese 1996, 2014). As a result, we made the case to the publisher for a new title, signifying more than just a third edition. A *hierarchy of influences* model had worked well to disentangle the relationships among professionals and their routines—and the news organizations that housed them. But both the units and levels of analysis in journalism theorizing have been destabilized and restructured. The public sphere is constituted with new configurations: of newswork, institutional arrangements, and global connections, which have produced new emerging deliberative spaces (Reese 2009). We are all faced with the need to adapt our research thinking to this changing master concept.

A Sociology of News Historiography

Some historical background gives context to this challenge. The early twentieth-century perspectives on journalism were at home in the University of Chicago School of Sociology, which emphasized community-based, multi-method participant observation. Communities existed *in* communication rather than affected *by* it. That changed when the communication field migrated east to the world of Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton at Columbia with a more narrow media effects focus (Gitlin 1978; Reese and Ballinger 2001). There were a couple of prominent American studies in the 1950s regarding the news gatekeeper and social control in the newsroom, but these did not catch on at the time with the larger field. But several years later social protest and upheaval in the 1960s brought greater concern about how journalism was implicated in a discredited power structure, leading to a broader interest in the inner workings of institutional journalism—as represented most visibly by a number of newsroom ethnographies.

In her recent *Journalism Studies* essay, Sarah Stonbely (2013) locates a group of such studies in the later 1960s and 1970s that she argues represent a “cornerstone” of American media sociology, covering that “legacy” period of media development centered around a handful of major broadcast and print media. Among these she identifies Edward Jay Epstein’s (1974) *News from Nowhere* (about network television news), Mark Fishman’s (1980) *Manufacturing the News*, Gaye Tuchman’s (1978) *Making News* (about local newspapers), and Herbert Gans’ (1979) *Deciding What’s News* (about national newsmagazines and television). I would certainly also include Philip Schlesinger’s *Putting “Reality” Together* about the BBC (Schlesinger 1978). The Glasgow Media Group would put a critical edge on this work somewhat later in their analyses of “bad news” (Glasgow Media Group 1976, 1980, 1982). All of these texts broke with the prevailing communication research tradition by emphasizing news as an organizational product that had to be socially constructed, not simply transmitted to the audience. These became classic examples of newsroom sociology, time consuming but rich in detail, and served to anchor until recently our understanding of how newswork happens. (In

our work on *Mediating the Message*, Shoemaker and I embraced both a variable-analytic and ethnographic tradition, although in my own work and in this essay, as she has pointed out to me, I have gravitated more toward the latter.)

A new wave of news ethnographies was precipitated by the migration of news online. Prominent examples include the work of Pablo Boczkowski (2004, 2010), especially in showing how technology has affected the newsroom. David Ryfe's (2012) more recent analysis of three American newsrooms showed that journalists have not adapted very well to change, using the tensions embedded in their profession to reconfirm and justify the same procedures they have used since before the industry upheaval. Within the Gans tradition, Nikki Usher (2014) provides the most recent single-newsroom ethnography of the *New York Times*. This may, in fact, be the last of its kind, in choosing an elite news organization as the embodiment of the profession. Her participant observation shows that despite the major technological shifts, "many of the routines and practices of news production observed in the golden era of news ethnography remain constant" (228). Chris Paterson and David Domingo have collected several international studies, leading to the conclusion that the routines surrounding key values of immediacy, interactivity, and participation show remarkable similarities across a diverse host of other online settings (Domingo and Paterson 2011; Paterson and Domingo 2008). Thus, the newsroom tradition of research has been updated, but analytical challenges remain and begin with the definition of the newsroom itself.

New Spatial Geography

The conceptual boundaries of journalism have shifted with global connectivity, so we have various terms to describe the new journalistic system. But they all suggest a more networked quality. This extends to the broader deliberative arena to which journalism contributes, a space now often loosely deemed a *networked public sphere*, or even a *global networked sphere*. Benkler (2011), for example, uses *networked fourth estate* to refer, along with professional journalists, to those citizen and other social movements that combine to form a more decentralized and redistributed democratic discourse.

Jeff Jarvis (2006) uses *networked journalism* to refer to the new collaborative relationships between professional and citizen in creating new information; and journalists have become nodes in this larger structure (Haak, Parks, and Castells 2012). Others use the *networked institution* concept to capture the need for news organizations themselves to become more collaborative (e.g., Anderson, Bell, and Shirky 2012). Journalism can no longer be easily understood within organizational containers but extends across traditional, more well-defined boundaries in unpredictable ways. These spatial metaphors—whether networks, fields, or spheres—point to the blurring of lines between professional and citizen, and between one organization and another. This is a different way of thinking about media than studies of production within institutions.

Adding a more organic quality to the picture leads to yet other terms like news *ecology* and *eco-system* (Anderson 2013), still suggesting interconnected but diverse units, all participating in a similar space with a differentiation of roles. Traditional legacy media provide an anchor for smaller publications, bloggers, and citizens, who react to and supplement what happens in the larger press. Thus, this new organic metaphor

captures the practice, product, and institutional dimensions of networked journalism. This eco-system shift is revealed in new forms of newswork. For example, the relentless flow of abundant information has led to a new breed of *news aggregators* who add value through digesting and repackaging information—stripping it down to its core components. Mark Coddington (2015), for example, has done innovative recent ethnography on these professionals and their news narratives, traditionally housed within article story structures but which now get broken down into smaller “atomic units.” They can then be restructured, reordered, annotated, aggregated, and widely shared—ordering them back up into different narrative structures.

Of course, this flow of dis- and re-aggregated information would not be possible without the computational power now available. Journalism, like other forms of knowledge-production, has encountered its big data moment, which has led to theoretical shifts to better understand the restructuring of news and potential for interactivity. Access to new tools brings greater analytical power to journalists but also changes the way they can structure stories to allow greater utility for the audience and enhance what Jay Hamilton calls “accountability journalism” (Hamilton and Turner 2009).

Technology has reshaped the journalistic field in a more general way by importing new values. As news organizations rely on those outside the professional field for digital expertise, the values of the technology culture have become linked with journalistic practice. The open source concept, for example, is both a practical approach to coding but also a philosophy of sharing, including the DNA of its design. Lewis and Usher (2013) argue that the ethos of open source—embedded in hacker culture and emphasizing iteration, tinkering, transparency, and participation—opens journalism, drawing it out from its closed professional boundaries into greater transparency.

Hierarchy of Influences

So, how does a traditional levels-of-analysis perspective fit into this new eco-system? A *hierarchy of influences* model considers factors at multiple levels that shape media content—the journalistic message system—from the micro to the macro: individual characteristics of specific newswriters, their routines of work, organizational-level concerns, institutional issues, and larger social-systems. In our description, we say it “takes into account the multiple forces that simultaneously impinge on the media and suggest how influence at one level may interact with that at another” (Shoemaker and Reese 2014, 1). At each level, one can identify the main factors that shape the symbolic reality and how these factors interact across levels and compare across different contexts. I think that approach still has value. For example, as key concepts developed within journalism research, it has become helpful to unpack them across this kind of levels-of-analysis perspective. I have done something like that for the concept of *professionalism* across the five levels in the context of the *global journalist* (Reese 2001). Vos and Heinderycks (2015) examine another key concept, *news gatekeeping*, across these levels.

In addition, evaluating the *simultaneous* contribution of multiple levels gives greater explanatory power. Surveys of journalists, for example, by David Weaver et al. (2007) examined the contribution of different nested contextual factors on journalistic work (organization, medium, etc.). This has been extended by Thomas Hanitzsch’s

cross-national team to include the social-system level in a hierarchical approach to factors shaping international journalism (Hanitzsch et al. 2011).

But this new geography of journalism has problematized and destabilized both the units and levels of analysis in journalism, so much of the most important theoretical effort in recent years has been directed at exploring the very definition of journalism and its boundaries (Carlson and Lewis 2015). In this respect, journalism becomes a jurisdictional project, policing those boundaries and defending its prerogatives. But this boundary work can still be organized at different levels. Institutionally, for example, this happens when the *New York Times* attempts to differentiate itself from WikiLeaks (Coddington 2012).

For a number of reasons, then, a levels-of-analysis perspective has been a valuable guide to theorizing journalism, but to what extent must it be reconsidered? The journalism of the twentieth century was synonymous with the prevailing industrial forms: news was what news organizations produced, and journalists were the professionals who worked for them. A *hierarchy of influences* approach worked well with this model to disentangle the relationships among professionals and their routines, and the news organizations that housed them. How does this framework adapt to the new media world where the lines are not as tidy? We do have to recognize that the work of journalism and our questions about it are not so easily nested now within a set of hierarchical levels. The aggregates traditionally signaled by levels—whether community, organization, or nation—are containers that do not have the same meaning they once did, as new structures are woven outside of and through institutional frameworks.

Research Challenges

Capturing the workings of these new eco-systems brings new methodological challenges. The ethnographer must decide the appropriate *site*, identify the *social actors*, and describe their practices. But when news production becomes more diffused, with journalists working and communicating remotely, or in small organizations loosely aligned with a larger parent company, or dispersed across platforms, the single site becomes more difficult to select—as Simon Cottle (2007) has pointed out. How can ethnography be done on decentralized, deterritorialized communities? What is there to observe? Newer efforts fittingly have shifted away from a location-based “factory floor” ethnography. Phillip Howard (2002, 561) has demonstrated the utility of a *network ethnography*: “The process of using ethnographic field methods on cases and field sites selected using social network analysis.” In his case demonstration, he identifies a distributed “e-politics” community—a loosely configured professional group of digital tool developers for political communication. He locates the critical actors through their strategically located position in the network that links them together—and targets interviews accordingly.

Beyond these methodological challenges, the new eco-system requires new concepts. In social network analysis, connections typically are found among homogeneous nodes (whether people or news hyperlinks), but related to the network is the richer concept of *assemblage*, which can include human and non-human, material and non-material. This concept is useful in many areas of social science to capture dynamic phenomena spilling out of existing categories, becoming recombined in new ways, and

not as easily identified within a single level of analysis. The idea of assemblage is appealing in reflecting the new reality, suggesting elements that cut across those levels. But that means the boundaries between levels are not always as clear. For example, the routines of newswork level and individual professional level become merged when considering a combination of individual workers and their technological affordances that form integrated actor-networks.

Technology has become a multi-scalar phenomenon, not easily located at any one level. An assemblage can be a contingent set of relationships to accomplish shifting social objectives not otherwise defined by formal institutions. In that respect, journalism is not some naturally existing and enduring category, but a complex and contingent assemblage—less product than process. This has led to new ways of theorizing socio-technical systems and examining their interconnections, such as Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT), borrowed from science studies (reviewed in Turner 2005). This radically descriptive "ontologically flat" approach blurs the human–technological lines, rendering both *actants*. But the assemblage concept has richer utility than its association with ANT. C. W. Anderson (2013, 172) argues more broadly that newswork itself is one of "assemblage" and "can be envisioned and described as the continuous process of networking the news" across "news products, institutions, and networks ... drawing together a variety of objects, big and small, social and technological, human and non-human" (4). He maps online hyperlinks in the Philadelphia community to show a form of assemblage within a news ecosystem (Anderson 2010).

Assemblages also direct attention outside of journalism organizations to those places where journalism plays an integral part, especially in political communication. Chadwick (2011) does this with political information cycles as a complex assemblage of modular units, a "hybrid media system." Recent studies of political campaigns, for example, use the concept to capture the relational aspects of mobilization, where elements are assembled in ways that have an identity, outside of a more formally constituted organization (Kreiss 2012; Nielsen 2012). Networked assemblages encourage reordering relationships and rethinking a linear process of influence in favor of constantly changing interest clusters driven by information entrepreneurs. Traditional political communication studies, for example, have treated news production as responding to state actors as it relays information to citizens, either in a *cascading activation* process (Entman 2003) or through the *indexing* of news construction to the boundaries of the political system (Bennett 1990). Elite circuits of information exchange among institutional players, however, do not map onto this relationship so easily. As Aeron Davis (2007) has argued, policy-making networks—a form of assemblage of elite actors—constitute micro-spheres of power that do not correspond to representative politics. Journalists are integral, often captive, parts of these networks, not just the recipients of political newsworthy information.

The idea of *global journalism* brings other kinds of assemblage, beyond Peter Berglez's (2008) content-based idea of the "global outlook." The growing use of cross-national research helps untangle institutional-level variables, but emphasizing the national container for these fields may overestimate the degree of homogeneity in national media. Certain components of a journalistic field are more likely to converge toward a more global standard—as I argued previously (Reese 2001)—while the printed press, more firmly rooted in historical styles, may be less likely to change. Corcoran and Fahy (2009) take a more pan-national approach to global journalism, examining how

power flows within and across national contexts through elite-oriented media, whether the *International New York Times*, *Wall St. Journal*, or in their case the *Financial Times*. The *Financial Times* is global in the sense that it has a privileged place in European Union discourse, with a core audience among globalized elites. Journalists' critical systemic role is to become part of networks of information flow that support elite structures.

Globalization adds a different dimension that works beyond these nested levels-of-analysis hierarchies to produce subnational spaces. Global phenomena operate at multiple scales and are not neatly located on a continuum ranging from local to international. Saskia Sassen (2006) points to not only the disassembling of the state, but reconstituted arrangements: new global assemblages of, in her case, territory, authority, and rights. Ethnographic analysis of newswork need not be abandoned in the search for new globalized forms of journalism, and may be especially helpful. Research may take the form of case studies with thick description of new sites for investigation. For example, Firdhaus (2012) has studied Al Jazeera journalists working in Malaysia, signifying a subnational, *glocal* journalistic space embedded within the global media-hub city of Kuala Lumpur.²

Mediated Spaces

As I hope to have shown, the future of journalism's networked public sphere is constituted from new assemblages: newswork, institutional arrangements, and global connections, which give rise to new emerging deliberative spaces. So, finally, I would ask: what shape do they take on and with what implications for healthy democratic discourse? Journalism research has a long tradition of equating these spaces to a mapping of media content, and content-based studies are growing in number with vast amounts of media material available for analysis. This is particularly true in research on online content that takes the hyperlink as the fundamental connecting feature and allows the mapping of the networked space, including blogo- and Twitter-spheres. These analyses often provide striking visualizations of the patterns, but which still must be related to larger structures. In explicating the idea of these *mediated* spaces, the challenge, perhaps counter-intuitive, is to conceive of them from a less media-centric perspective. Journalism is itself an assemblage but also a part of others that lie both inside and outside institutionalized structures. Also the assemblage concept alerts us to these wider combinations of media and non-media elements that must be identified.

In some of my own recent work, I have looked at what I call *mediated spaces*, which become globalized—in my example, for Chinese environmentalism. I think of assemblage in this case as involving not just media but international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), grassroots groups, and government policy makers—and, in many cases, online citizens (Reese 2015). These assemblages can be more difficult to define as they give rise to mediated spaces that emerge and contract in less predictable ways, and in places one might not expect them. In our recent edited collection, *Networked China*, my Texas colleague Wenhong Chen and I use the related concept of *glocalized media spaces* to capture these networks of civic engagement (Chen and Reese 2015).

I would argue nevertheless that a *hierarchy of influences* framework is still relevant to the world of journalistic assemblages. Even in a dramatically restructured news

environment, hierarchical power is still with us, reasserting itself in many areas, not the least of which through the State; and much of the work of journalism continues to occur in organized, institutionalized settings. As recent studies show, journalistic structures and routines are, perhaps surprisingly, robust. This is true even for non-news organizations that practice journalism as a part of their social mission—including advocacy NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch, which investigate, report, and disseminate information, not only to provide to traditional media organizations but to share directly with their stakeholders (as shown in recent work by Matt Powers [2014]).

Tracing new forms of assemblage helps illustrate the new journalistic eco-system, but they need to put in a larger structured context. The idea of a proliferating number of contingent and ever-shifting assemblages is to some degree at odds with the drive in social science for explanation (as Rodney Benson [2014] recently has pointed out for the more radically descriptive versions). We seek predictable aggregates of social material, congealing into institutions that have a history and life of their own. However shifting they may be, assemblages are still located within a framework of power, even if not so clearly. Indeed, the challenge is to determine which ones are really significant and worth examination. There are potentially too many to imagine trying to describe them all, even if they persist from one time to the next. A levels-of-analysis framework reminds scholars to identify in which larger macro structures their phenomena of interest are located. This recalls the value of hybrid methods, such as network ethnography, which find some systematic, agreed-upon way to identify significant sites for analysis. We need deeper ethnographic work in some of these emerging spaces guided, where possible, by digital mapping. Also we need other creative guideposts for finding the most interesting and significant assemblages, locating them within larger social structures, and investigating them using the kind of thick and multi-method description for which the field was known in earlier decades.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES

1. A related but more professionally oriented conference pulls some overlap of scholars, hosted annually at the University of Texas by my School of Journalism colleague, Rosental Alves: the International Symposium for Online Journalism. I have been privileged to work with many outstanding doctoral students at Texas, but in this area of research I would particularly acknowledge Seth Lewis (now at Minnesota) and Mark Coddington (Washington & Lee) for helping keep me current with emerging issues of digital journalism. In their publications they also have contributed to the Texas–Cardiff connection.
2. I was on the dissertation committee for this research with a particularly global amalgamation of Malaysian student, working with a German adviser (Ingrid Volkmer), at an Australian university (Melbourne), including UK (Brian McNair) and American (me) committee members.

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