Commentary

About Actor Positioning in Journalism…Slowly

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Abstract
In this commentary, I argue that adopting a practice-theoretical research approach helps us to better understand the dispersed nature of journalism and its large web of actors, both traditional and non-traditional. I take innovation as an example that can be fruitfully examined through the practice lens. I also propose narrative positioning analysis as an additional method for digging more deeply—and slowly—into the positions that these varied actors adopt, are offered or placed into.

Keywords
innovation; journalism; narrative positioning analysis; non-traditional journalism actors; peripheral actors; practice theory

1. Introduction

Imagine all the different people who have been involved in the work before we see a news article. This work, the news process, involves a long chain of very diverse actors, and this chain is what we as journalism scholars must understand—even if it sometimes seems an impossible task. We must comprehend such a vast area and understand how distinct fields interact. How to go about it?

I argue that adopting a practice-theoretical research approach (e.g., Ahva, 2017a; Ryfe, 2018; Witschge & Harbers, 2018) may help us to better understand the dispersed nature of journalism and its long chain—or large web—of actors (Domingo & Le Cam, 2014).

We know that the actors in the news process comprise not only journalists in the traditional sense (e.g., reporters or editors) but also, for example, technologists (Lewis & Westlund, 2015), citizens (Ahva, 2017b), hackers (Lewis & Usher, 2014), and data analysts (Belair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018). These non-traditional journalism actors bring with them diverse but significant ingredients that shape what we eventually interpret as news: technical platforms or applications, eyewitness photos or viewpoints from afar, lines of code to gather data on the web, or information about news consumption habits that will influence future publication decisions.

2. Metaphors Matter

For this reason, journalism research—and particularly this thematic issue—focuses on a spectrum of non-traditional journalism actors who play a role in the news process. The notion of *peripheral actor* refers to the metaphorical position that journalists have typically assigned to newcomers to the field, accepting that they may bring innovations or necessary ingredients to renew journalism, but nevertheless positioning them as peripheral to the core of news making (Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018, p. 71).

Journalism scholars have self-reflectively noted that the peripheral positioning may also be partly due to the ways that scholars discuss such actors (Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018, p. 71; Witschge & Harbers, 2018, p. 108). With chosen terms, concepts and metaphors, we may reproduce distancing or marginalization despite having other intentions. Therefore, additional notions have

been coined to provide a more holistic understanding of journalism, such as *explicit* or *implicit interlopers,* and *intralopers* (Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018).

However, metaphors and concepts can also exaggerate the centrality of actors in relation to others. Consider the case of alternative media. Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich (2019, p. 861) note that for a long time, the focus was on *alternative* only in the sense of *progressive* or *left-leaning.* Hence, research largely focused on analyzing the leftist alternative media actors. Therefore, we must be careful with the metaphors we use and expose them to critical re-examination if necessary.

I prefer to understand the notion of *actor* as a stand-alone concept and propose answering the important research question regarding positioning based on the empirical research material. In other words, we do get to the question of whether non-traditional actors are positioned as peripheral, central, or something in between (Ahva, 2017b)—but we will get there slowly.

3. Let's Start from Practices

If we rush to study the actors without first identifying the practice of news-making that interests us, we may lose the possibility of examining whether and how peripheral positioning exists. For example, are technologists (such as web developers) actually that peripheral, or have they, in fact, acquired a central and powerful position in journalism? If so, to which aspects of news work does their power extend, and how? It is crucial to examine *in relation to what* their positioning is happening. Therefore, it is important to clarify what is the practice we are focusing on.

I suggest that we start from practices and do this in a theoretical way. The practice-theoretical research approach helps us to go beyond dichotomies and recognize the important bridging roles of particular actors as well as the material, social, or discursive trading zones where the exchange between actors takes place. Practice theoreticians refer to these zones as *arrangements* or *architectures*; they represent the conditions that permit certain practices to survive and cause others to wane (Kemmis et al., 2014).

4. Help from Practice Theory

So, let's say we are interested in learning more about how journalism can renew itself or how innovation influences what eventually becomes news. We would ask: Who are the actors involved in the news chain that have contributed to the creation of new journalistic approaches, products, services, or business models (cf. Pavlik, 2013)?

We can seek help from the manner in which the concept of *practice* itself has been formulated in practice theory (e.g., Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001). Practice theory is well established in sociology that is interested in bridging the gap between individual agency and structure (Giddens, 1985) and in anthropol-

ogy that zooms into everyday lives and cultural practices (Bourdieu, 1977). Furthermore, the notion of practice has become significant in science and technology studies via actor-network theory by underlining how human and non-human actors reciprocally constitute one another in practices (Latour, 2005).

Practice theory (as a joint family of practices) has also been advanced and applied as a theoretical framework in the study of media and journalism, albeit surprisingly recently (e.g., Ahva, 2017a; Couldry, 2004; Ryfe, 2018; Witschge & Harbers, 2018). Most recently, Ryfe (2019) has proposed that practice theory helps to understand why journalism in the current state of disruption is changing so rapidly, but also in many more ways, remaining much the same: Some practices are durable because they hold the entire "fabric" of journalism in place. Moreover, many studies touch upon practices in journalism even if they do not explicitly adhere to the *concept* of practice.

But for me, the analytical benefit of practice theory lies in the fact that as a concept, practice can be further deconstructed into basic elements. In the complex media environment, it serves as simple enough a concept to guide the collection and analysis of research material. Based on previous theorizations, I have conceptualized practices as *regular social manifestation*s that consist of: (1) *activities*; (2) the *materials* needed for them; and (3) the *meanings* given to those (Ahva, 2017a). To illustrate this, imagine a practice as a triangle representing the consistent relational coming together of specific doings, things, and sayings (cf. Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 34; Shove, Pantzar, & Wattson, 2012).

5. Seeing Innovation as Practice

In examining the practice triangle of innovation in news journalism, we can start by deconstructing innovation into its active, material, and symbolic elements by posing a number of questions: (1) What is being done when innovation is believed to happen, and what tasks relate to the creation of new journalistic products and services? (2) Where and with what tools is renewal and creation happening, and are there any other material requirements for innovation? And (3) How is the creation of new approaches, products, or services verbalized, made sense of, or criticized, and by whom?

This approach offers a way to conceptualize innovation as a practice comprising activities, materials, and meanings that are in a regular relationship with one another. If we recognize these regularities in interrelationships, we can also identify the relevant actors to be studied.

In terms of research methods, the practice-theoretical approach invites us first to engage, for example, in online and offline observation, informal interaction, listening, participation, or (audio)visual documentation (cf. O'Reilly, 2015). Thus, we need (mainly) qualitative and observational methods (Ryfe, 2018) to

map how, where, and why innovation is enacted or performed in journalism.

In this mapping, we learn who are the *actors that seem necessary to enacting the practice of innovation*, and we may end up with actors such as journalists, newsroom managers, data analysts, business consultants, and platform developers. This is a varied bunch, but nevertheless one that represents a significant group of actors (and informants) in relation to the practice of innovation.

Finally, their peripheral or central positioning can be assessed against that practice. For example, business consultants may have a central role in news innovation but may be peripheral in the practice of, say, news selection.

6. So, Finally, about Positioning

We could go further by collecting the personal or collective narratives of the identified actors. This is a methodological direction that interests me but of which I have no experience as yet. However, narrative positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997) seems promising if we wish to learn more about the durable discursive and relational arrangements of innovation through the medium of language (cf. Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 32). If we are interested in the material-economic arrangements, we might be better off with different methods, such as examining *place* through documenting newsrooms' architectural blueprints or following and making explicit the techno-economic interrelations between newsrooms and external companies via network ethnography (for a broader argument on "place," see Usher, 2019).

Narrative positioning analysis, instead, stresses that people situate themselves through narration, but they are also positioned by others, as well as by structures and ideologies (Hyvärinen, Hatavara, & Rautajoki, 2019). In positioning analysis, the researcher can focus on three levels of analysis (Bamberg, 1997, p. 337). The first is the level of the told story, where the focus is on what had happened in the past: How are the actors positioned in relation to one another within the reported events? The second is the level of current interaction, or what is happening while the story is told: How does the speaker position him- or herself to the audience? The third level pertains to structures as they can be identified in identity-focused normative discourse: How does the speaker make claims beyond the local situation? When we narrate, we continually position ourselves and others in the past, in the present, and in relation to durable normative-structural elements (Bamberg, 1997).

To continue with my example, we could analyze how journalists, analysts, consultants, and developers tell about past innovations and how they position themselves and one another in relation to those occasions. We can also analyze how they position themselves in the research situation (interview or observing) in relation to innovation or how they perform their positions, and, finally, which discursive structures seem to enable

innovation. The role of the researcher is to examine how such discourses achieve their coherence and persuasive power (Bamberg, 1997, p. 341).

7. To Conclude

The combination of the practice-theoretical approach and narrative positioning analysis that are discussed above can be used to guide the analysis of various actors in journalism *in a shared framework*. We can examine journalists and non-journalists side by side; in fact, we can examine all the actors required to enact the practice we have chosen to study.

In this approach, it becomes a matter of empirical analysis to determine who are the relevant actors in specified practices. Furthermore, the notion of practice, as conceptualized here, always carries with it the dimensions of activity, materiality, and meaning, which can shed light on the durable arrangements that enable or restrict the practice.

After all this, we can slowly start making sense of the actors' self-identified, mutual, and structural positionings. We can assess whether they are at the periphery or in the center, and whether they are leading, isolated, trapped, or bridging actors in the examined practice. By linking back to the arrangements, we might even be able to assess why the positions are as they are.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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