

Deconstructing Digital Journalism Studies

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the formation and state of digital journalism studies as a field of research. Our point of departure is that journalism studies is an interdisciplinary field that draws inspiration and conceptual tools from many research traditions, most notably from those of political science, sociology, history, language studies as well as cultural analysis (Zelizer 2004); but increasingly also from fields like science and technology studies (STS) and economics. All these disciplinary traditions thus play a role in how journalism is being analyzed. With the increased need to understand the significance of “online, multimedia or cross-media, convergent, and otherwise distinctly digital journalism” (Deuze 2008: 199), the discrete field of digital journalism studies emerged at the start of the new millennium. The aim of this chapter is to offer an overview of the emergence of this field of research and discuss its interdisciplinarity as well as assess its current standing and possible blind spots.

We will begin the chapter with spelling out how digital journalism studies has evolved from being dominated by a discourse of *revolution*, via *evolution*, to a discourse of *deconstruction*, which we argue, currently dominates the field. Today, when news is something you find in your personalized social media feed and decisions about “newsworthiness” are, at least to some extent, left to third-party algorithmic manipulation, digital journalism studies is marked by the need to address fundamental questions about what the object of its inquiry really is, and how journalism can be deconstructed in order to make sense of this in a digital age. This current discourse of deconstruction is marked by increased theoretical awareness through interdisciplinarity because the domain of digital journalism can neither be understood solely through a single disciplinary tradition, nor can it be left to mere empirical examination.

This chapter then presents and discusses a meta-analysis (research on research) on articles published in the recently (2013) launched journal *Digital Journalism* which will be compared with a similar meta-analysis of articles in the journals *Journalism Studies* and *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*. This analysis aims at uncovering the main paths of theorizing within digital journalism studies. We find that digital journalism studies is marked by four strong research traditions borrowing from sociology, political science, cultural studies and science and technology studies. The dominating discourse of deconstruction currently

found in digital journalism studies thus seems shaped by influences from these disciplinary traditions.

Digital journalism studies from revolution to deconstruction

In an early review of online journalism research, Kopper, Kolthoff and Czepek (2000) concluded that empirical research at that time was difficult to find, and that most of the empirical inquiries were market-driven and non-academic, interested in how one could make a profit out of journalism on the web. This research, along with the more prediction-based and non-empirical academic research at the time, was predominantly normative. The potentials and threats of digital technology in general, and of the Internet in particular, were seen as major game changers that would *revolutionize* journalism.

We find a typical articulation of this discourse of revolution in a 1997 *Columbia Journalism Review* essay written by John Pavlik:

Since networked new media can be interactive, on-demand, customizable; since it can incorporate new combinations of texts, images, moving images and sound; since it can build new communities based on shared interests and concerns; and since it has the almost unlimited space to offer levels of reportorial depth, texture and context that are impossible in any other medium – new media can transform journalism (1997: 30).

Such statements dominated the academic discourse on online journalism from the mid to late 1990s, a period Domingo (2008) has identified as the “utopian wave” of online journalism research. This discourse of revolution and utopianism was enmeshed in a “web” of technological determinism that spilled over to the next wave of academic research, labelled by Domingo “the descriptive/empirical wave”. The empirical investigations of this wave of research continued to be marked by a discourse of revolution, as the main aim seemed to be assessing the impact of new, digital technology on journalism. The results, however, curbed the early enthusiasm. Online journalism, as it turned out, did not utilize new, digital technology to the same extent scholars had previously predicted (for overviews, see Domingo, 2006; Steensen, 2011).

The discourse of revolution was therefore balanced with a counter-discourse that emphasized the resilience of journalistic practices and cultures; a discourse of *evolution*. Researchers emphasized that old practices and cultures of journalism were resilient to change and that journalism was not drastically transformed by digitalization. Instead, it was slowly evolving. Deuze (2008b: 110) framed this discourse of evolution in the following manner:

[T]echnology is not an independent factor influencing the work of journalists from the outside, but must be seen in terms of its implementation, and therefore how it extends and amplifies previous ways of doing things.

The discourse of evolution emphasized that new technology cannot change journalism overnight, as it is only one of many factors that shape how journalism evolves. Researchers started to pay more attention to the long lines of development within journalism, also in pre-internet times, and argued that newsroom cultures are conservative (e.g. Heinonen 1999, Scott 2005, Boczkowski 2004, Deuze 2008b), and this discourse was thus marked by linear thinking concerning the development of digital journalism.

However, the evolutionary discourse also implied a search for new theoretical approaches with which to understand both how journalism evolved and why technology did not create rapid changes. Central to this development was what Domingo (2008) labelled the “constructivist wave” of research into online journalism. Researchers started to question technological determinism with more rigour and were instead interested in doing in-depth (often ethnographic) case studies with the aim to understand “innovation as an open process” (Domingo 2008: 17) with various players involved. This wave of research was largely inspired by the publication of Boczkowski’s seminal book *Digitizing the News* (2004), which introduced perspectives from science and technology studies (STS) to journalism studies, thus allowing for a greater theoretical understanding of the interplay between technology, materiality and social practice related to the production of online journalism. As Boczkowski later stated in a reflection on his work with *Digitizing the News*: “I realized that technology was a vastly under-explored territory in journalism scholarship” (2015: 2).

The trend of theorizing “the digital” was thus initiated by the constructivist wave and the discourse of evolution, and it has continued in what we here identify as the discourse of *deconstruction* that today seems to dominate the field. Digital journalism studies has by now reached a point of maturity in which theorizations about the phenomenon are increasingly called for, not only to understand the many emerging and changing practices and cultures of journalism, but also to investigate the essence of journalism in the digital age. In other words, digital journalism is no longer only seen as something that is constructed within technical, social, cultural and economic structures; it is seen as a domain that needs to be deconstructed in order for us to understand the new meanings that journalism acquires within the entire digital mediascape. Boczkowski, for instance, has argued a need to shift “the stance of theoretical work from tributary to primary” (2011: 162), suggesting that theorizing digital journalism is not only a means to reach an end, it is the very end one wishes to reach in order to rediscover what journalism is and might be.

Several books published recently address this need to deconstruct and re-conceptualize journalism, and their titles alone are clear expressions of a discourse of deconstruction. In *Rebuilding the News*, Anderson, (2013) argues that the classical newsroom is no longer the epicenter of newswork; bloggers, citizen journalists and social networks are, alongside journalists, important actors in the new “news ecosystem”. In *Rethinking Journalism* (Peters and Broersma, eds, 2013) the authors argue that the problems journalism is faced with today are far more structural than previously voiced and that there is a need to fundamentally rethink what journalism is. In *Boundaries of Journalism* (Carlson and Lewis, eds, 2015) journalism’s demarcations towards other professions and businesses are deconstructed, as are previously established internal boundaries between different journalistic genres and groups of journalists. Carlson’s (2015: 2) notion in the book’s introduction serves as an apt example of the dominant discourse, as he points out the continuous need to deconstruct and then re-construct journalism:

Journalism is not a solid, stable *thing* to point to, but a constantly shifting denotation applied differently depending on context. Whatever is distinct about journalism, must be continuously constructed.

We must, however, note that the very brief history of digital journalism research outlined above is a construction in itself. Inquiries into digital journalism are not as clear-cut, periodical and linear as our narrative might suggest. For instance, normative perspectives on digital journalism still thrive (Kreiss and Brennen, 2015), and technological determinism is still apparent in the field, as is the discourse of revolution (Steensen, 2011). The need for greater theorization and deconstruction was also articulated quite early on, for instance by Heinonen (1999) and Singer (1998).

Furthermore, the STS-perspective introduced as part of the evolutionary discourse has been further developed and refined and is now one of the paths through which digital journalism is currently deconstructed. However, technology is only one option among many, and there are other possible paths for theorization. In the following section, we will therefore identify these paths as the ways in which different disciplinary perspectives have paved the way for researchers to study digital journalism.

The disciplinary paths of digital journalism studies

To investigate these paths and the interdisciplinary nature of digital journalism as a research field, we conducted an analysis of article abstracts published in the one journal dedicated to the sub-field of digital journalism studies, namely *Digital Journalism* (Taylor & Francis). We analysed the abstracts of all articles published in the journal from the inaugural issue published in 2013 to issue number 2 in 2015 (73 abstracts in total).

In the following discussion we will also draw from an earlier set of keyword and abstract analysis of articles published in the two most significant journals dedicated to journalism studies; *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* (Sage) and *Journalism Studies* (Taylor & Francis). The keyword analysis covered all articles published from the inaugural issues of both journals in 2000 through 2013, and the abstract analysis covered the volumes of 2002 and 2003 (90 abstracts); and the volumes of 2012 (105 abstracts) from both journals (for more details on the sample, see Steensen and Ahva, 2015). The aim of these analyses was to map the disciplinary perspectives of journalism studies from the era of digitalization towards the more coherent field of digital journalism studies.

Our method in the abstract analysis was simple: we close-read the sampled abstracts and coded each according to what we interpreted to be their main disciplinary “home” or inclination. We based our coding on Zelizer’s (2004) description of the dominant disciplinary perspectives in journalism studies: *political science, sociology, history, language, and cultural analysis*. In addition, we included *economy, philosophy, law and technology* (cf. Zelizer 2004: 8) as disciplinary perspectives that influence journalism studies (see Steensen and Ahva 2015 for details on the coding process).

This categorisation is of course dubious in that the borders between disciplines are not always clear. However, we found it useful to anchor our analysis in existing frames to avoid losing our analytical focus in the interdisciplinary contours of the field. Furthermore, in the following discussion, we will take a step away from the disciplines themselves and try to elaborate the emerging paths of theorizing within digital journalism studies. While doing this we will also accompany our discussion with additional examples from digital journalism literature.

Before moving to the results, it is important to note that the inherently interdisciplinary nature of (digital) journalism studies leaves ample room for research that does *not explicitly* adhere to any particular theoretical framework or that can be easily traced back to a distinct disciplinary tradition. In the earlier set of our journal analysis this became apparent in the large amount of publications that did not draw on any explicitly named theories in their abstracts or keywords (Steensen and Ahva 2015: 11). This finding may be a sign of empiricism; a tendency to justify argumentation with strong empirical evidence only. Or it can, as Siapera and Veglis (2012: 10; see also Steensen and Ahva 2015) suggest, be a sign that a substantial strand of research into digital journalism follows the path of grounded theory. This approach aims to produce typologies and models via data collection and analysis, thus contributing to middle-range theory building. While acknowledging this, we wish to next focus on the more explicit role given to theoretical approaches and their disciplinary roots in digital journalism studies.

Sociology of digital journalism

According to previous reviews (e.g. Siapera & Veglis 2012: 10; Domingo 2008: 18-19) as well as our own analysis, sociology seems to hold strong as the central disciplinary tradition from which digital journalism studies draws. According to our analysis of abstracts from *Journalism* and *Journalism Studies*, 30 percent of all articles in the entire sample (N = 195) fell in line with the sociological tradition. The situation was almost similar with the newer set of abstract (2013-2015, N = 73) from *Digital Journalism*: here 31 percent drew from sociology. Sociology was thus the most popular discipline in all the journals. In fact, Deuze (2008) has suggested the “sociology of online news” as a framework that can offer avenues for studying how technologies, regulation and policies, industries and organizations, career paths, market structures, as well as audience conceptions emerge in the professional practices of digital journalism.

Our analysis suggests that a dominant theoretical sociological framework is professionalism. This framework has offered conceptual tools to study journalists’ professional role perceptions, values and norms, as well as work practices in the digital era (see: Singer 2003). According to our mapping, this type of research within digital journalism studies focuses for example on emerging professional practices, the impact of new technologies and media (such as social media) on journalists’ attitudes, the evolving forms of gatekeeping and the transformation of news values in the digital age. Also, the blurring of boundaries often pointed to in contemporary digital journalism studies (see for instance Carlson and Lewis, eds, 2015) is often related to professionalism and analyzed through the sociological framework of “boundary work” (Gieryn, 1999). Another trend is to analyse professionalism in a global context related to different “cultures” of journalism, a concept Hanitzsch (2007) has deconstructed into three essential constituents: the institutional roles, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies of journalism. In addition, classical sociological theorists, such as Pierre Bourdieu, continue to play a role in how digital journalism is theorized (Siapera and Spyridou 2012).

Political science and digital journalism

In our initial analysis of *Journalism* and *Journalism Studies*, we found that political science was the most dominant perspective of publications in the first set of abstracts from 2002-3 (32 percent). However, over time we noticed a trend where political science as the typical disciplinary backbone of journalism research was giving way to sociology: the proportion of studies affiliated with political science decreased to 25 percent in 2012. Our analysis of the recent abstracts in *Digital Journalism* reinforces this trend: the political science framework was apparent in only 7 percent of the abstracts from 2013-2015.

However, this does not indicate that theoretical frameworks associated with the political science tradition (such as agenda setting, democracy theories, public sphere and public opinion) have lost their relevance in digital journalism studies. For example, as Natalie Fenton (2012: 120) puts it: “neither journalism nor the Internet *creates* democracy and democracy does not invent journalism or indeed the Internet”. Therefore she calls for continued attention to the ways in which the processes of democratization – as well as de-democratization – are apparent in the digital context. Furthermore, questions of civic engagement and political participation are increasingly discussed in relation to digital journalism (e.g. Correia 2012) but also “beyond” it, in the broader context of digital and connective media environment, since the position of a “citizen journalist” is globally opening itself to various actors, such as activists (see: Allan and Thorsen 2009).

So, even if the political communications paradigm seems weak in (an admittedly limited sample of) *Digital Journalism*, we note that these theorizations are developed in the context of other journals and publications, perhaps because the research questions are also reaching beyond journalism to the entire digital media landscape, such as theorizations related to the concept of “mediatization” (e.g. Strömbäck and Esser 2014). This strand of research is interested, for example, in the questions of how “the media logic” is shaping political communication and affords possibilities to bypass the traditional gatekeeping of journalism with the help of social media, such as Twitter (e.g. Ekman and Widholm, 2015). As such, the notion of “public sphere” is currently deconstructed in political communication studies at large, especially related to the interplay between politics, journalism and social media (see: Moe and Enli, eds, 2013).

User-oriented cultural analysis of digital journalism

What seems clearly different for digital journalism studies when compared to journalism studies more broadly is the position given to audiences or users in research. This means that whereas reception studies or audience studies have for a long time been seen as separate from “traditional” journalism studies, users have played a central part in how digital journalism has been theorized from the start due to the interactive and participatory possibilities afforded by the web. This has resulted in the deconstruction of the producer/consumer paradigm that is especially clear in the tradition of cultural analysis.

According to our analyses, the studies affiliated with cultural analysis have maintained their position as the third most popular disciplinary reference for journalism studies and digital journalism studies research, just after sociology and political science in *Journalism Studies* and *Journalism*, and after sociology and technology in *Digital Journalism*. We have named this approach here as user-oriented cultural analysis. Within this label, we find studies that theorize digital journalism from the perspective of user cultures; the habits,

routines and rituals of the online audiences that are adapting to and shaping the contours of the increasingly mobile and cross-media environment defined by digital technology (Picone, Courtois and Paulussen 2015).

This approach draws, for example, on anthropology (e.g. Bird 2011) and cultural studies (and also partly from language studies, e.g. Hartley 2012). For example, Graeme Turner (2010) from the cultural studies perspective, wishes to avoid jumping to conclusions about the democratizing effects of digital journalism, but rather wishes to discuss the increased appearance and agency of ordinary people in the media – the demotic – including journalism-like practices such as blogging but also that of entertainment (Turner 2010: 71-97). Hartley (2012: 59-93), in turn, advocates theorizing digital journalism through cultural studies in order to understand how popular culture as the source of popular self-representation is shaping journalism via digital, online, self-made media, such as blogging, UGC, Web 2.0 applications, and e-zines.

However, it should be noted that user-orientation's prevalence in digital journalism studies extends beyond its conspicuous role in cultural studies, and user-focused research is found in research that draws from all the mentioned disciplines. For instance, there are studies on user-generated content or mediated (political) engagement that are sociologically or politically-oriented, too.

Socio-materiality of digital journalism

The fourth main disciplinary perspective in digital journalism studies is that of technology. According to our analysis, the trend of technologically oriented theorization seems to be on the rise. In *Journalism* and *Journalism Studies*, technology as a disciplinary background appeared as a minor (sixth place) but thriving perspective: its proportion rose from 3 percent in 2002 and 2003 to 7 percent in 2012. It is perhaps of no surprise that in *Digital Journalism* (2013-2105), technology holds the second place with 19 percent. It seems reasonable that theories related to technology, such as innovation theory, social construction of technology, anthropology of technology, and especially STS-inspired socio-material perspectives such as actor-network theory have been in the repertoire of digital journalism studies from the start (for summaries see: Siapera and Veglis 2012: 11-12; Domingo 2008: 20-25). With these theories, scholars have aimed to understand how technology and journalism are shaping each other.

Altogether, the growing popularity of Bruno Latour's (2005) actor-network theory for the study of digital journalism (e.g. Anderson 2013; Primo and Zago 2015) seems to suggest that there has been a neglect in earlier journalism studies in taking into account the ways in which materiality (both physical materiality such as machinery, telephones, screens, desks, humans, etc.; and non-physical materiality such as applications and algorithms, etc.) play a

role in the journalistic process, or rather, in the formation of the news network (Domingo et al. 2015). Boczkowski (2015: 65) argues that journalism studies is currently undergoing a “material turn” in which researchers aim to “reveal the broad spectrum of actors” implicated in the newsmaking process, and “the spatially distributed network of connections – that include the newsroom as one key locale, but not the only one – from which the news emerges”.

In this increased emphasis on materiality and technology, the concept of the network has become popular, focusing on the ways the digital environment has provided possibilities for tracing the associations between various actors, for example in how page visits (the act of clicking, reading or checking) leave traces that can be tracked and measured. Furthermore, the promises of “big data” for journalism research and practice have evoked discussion among scholars, and steps have been taken from merely technological or empirical research towards a more a holistic understanding – embracing aspects of epistemology, expertise, ethics and economics – of big data in the context of digital journalism (Lewis and Westlund 2015).

Discussion

The analysis above shows that digital journalism studies today approaches its object of inquiry through deconstructive theoretical perspectives predominantly adopted from sociology and science and technology studies, but also from political science and cultural studies. This result suggests that digital journalism studies as a field of research is indeed multidisciplinary. This kind of spread identified here reflects a varied theoretical tool kit for digital journalism studies to draw from. However, when we compare the discourse of deconstruction that we identified as the dominant register in the beginning of the chapter and the results of our analysis, we can see that digital journalism studies has entered this current discursive environment through rather traditional research avenues. This is clear especially as sociology remains the predominant disciplinary perspective of journalism studies.

It should be mentioned, though, that the interdisciplinary nature of digital journalism studies goes beyond our categorizations. Whereas the perspectives of philosophy, economy and history were all reasonably well represented in the analysis of *Digital Journalism* with 4 percent each, the emerging perspectives in the category of “other” were also equally represented by, for example, visual studies (4 percent) and geography (3 percent). A slight surprise was the fact that the perspective of language was so marginal with only one percent of articles belonging to this tradition. This seems to suggest that studies focusing on strictly textual aspects of journalism are currently not at the heart of digital journalism studies, at least not in this particular journal.

In other words: The theoretical deconstruction of journalism in the digital age seems to leave behind some blind spots, especially related to perspectives from the humanities, like theoretically informed qualitative analysis of text. It may seem as if the availability (and to a degree, the hype) of big data has pushed quantitative, statistical analysis of media texts to the forefront, thus leaving perspectives like genre theory and sociolinguistics behind. Genre theory would for instance push researchers to highlight the importance of previously established conventions and expectations to a text production system like journalism, in order for it to uphold its social function (Steensen, 2013). Overlooking such perspectives might therefore make digital journalism studies prone to emphasise change and innovation over continuity and legacy.

Furthermore, even though perspectives from STS have contributed greatly to problematizing (and challenging) technological determinism, this trait still holds a firm, albeit more subtle, grip on digital journalism studies. In the growing body of socio-material research on digital journalism, materiality is often reduced to mean elements of technology, thus promoting technological matter over other things that matter.

Conclusion

This overview of digital journalism studies as an emerging research field has focused on three different discursive moves, and located how digital journalism studies research has conceptualized its research object by drawing from various disciplinary traditions. Our discussion locates digital journalism studies as a cross-disciplinary field, with sociology, political science, cultural analysis and technology providing the four strongest research pillars. These disciplinary perspectives have provided the most typical routes through which digital journalism has been theorized from the start of the 2000s, but these four are not the only research avenues. The current state of research reflects the idea that *interdisciplinarity*, in its fullest sense, makes possible, even desirable, the combination of elements from various traditions to theorize digital journalism. These combinations, we believe, are gaining ground in digital journalism studies, especially if the research field continues to take the challenge of deconstruction seriously.

Further reading

Bablo Boczowski's seminal book *Digitizing the News* (2004) provides an early example of how perspectives from science and technology studies can be applied to digital journalism

studies. The two volumes (2007 and 2011) of *Making Online News* edited by Chris Paterson and David Domingo, provide rich evidence of how ethnographic methods can pave the way for theory building in digital journalism. Readers interested in current theorizations of digital journalism may find the double special issue of *Digital Journalism* (3: 1, 2015) and *Journalism Practice* (9: 1, 2015) edited by Steen Steensen and Laura Ahva and entitled “Theories of Journalism in the Digital Age” an interesting read. In this double special issue over twenty scholars offer their takes on theories that might help grasping journalism in the digital era. To better understand the ways in which journalism today is deconstructed due to processes of digitalization, Matt Carlson’s and Seth C. Lewis’s edited volume *Boundaries of Journalism* (Routledge, 2015) is a good starting point.

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