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Creativity in (Digital) Journalism Studies: Broadening our Perspective on Journalism Practice

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ABSTRACT

Creativity in journalism studies includes the use of arts-based research, artistic methods, and other ways of theorising, researching, analysing and presenting data on journalism. Its purpose is to recognise and capture the many forms of journalism that are currently practiced, to develop new approaches to research (digital) journalism, and to enable the telling of the widest possible variety of stories about (digital) journalism. Creativity has a triple implication: as a concept that informs what we are looking for when studying journalism, a guide for the range of available research methods, and an inspiration for the stories we tell about our research.

CONCEPT DEFINITION: Creativity

KEYWORDS

Creativity; methodological innovation; speaking nearby; journalism; digital journalism; innovation; experiential knowledge; situated knowledge

Dear journalism,

Hereby I wish to inform you of my resignation. In this letter, I will present the most important reasons for leaving the profession.

When I started working as a journalist, writing was my biggest passion, and I thought that I could change the world doing so. I hoped to get a job at a renowned newspaper, where I would put my knowledge of the world to use. I was looking for a place to tell stories and find an outlet for my voice. With this voice I was going to safeguard and critically question our democracy.

But now, having spent some years working as a journalist, these dreams have stalled. Journalism is not what it can, nor what it should be.

Instead of being autonomous in the selection of stories, journalists are always competing for assignments, working against rather than with colleagues. All those journalists on their own islands. We could think collaboratively, but this just does not happen. Creativity increases when you work together, a product gets better by working in a team. But in reality it does not work that way. The fact that, especially as a freelance journalist, you are always pitching stories and thinking about paying the bills, turns you into a cleverly disguised vacuum salesperson.

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What also bothers me is the way journalists parrot each other. They want to score quickly, but often forget journalistic principles of taking in different perspectives and doing proper research on how a situation came to be. Employers no longer care about quality, but only have an eye for reaching a bigger audience. It is a world of confirmation bias and cherry picking. If there is no time and space for finding the facts and doing the right research, there is no reason for me to stay.

And then there is the constant meddling with my reports. Journalism seems to simply be a new word for 'picking a fight'. When reporting a story you come across a variety of people, each with their own idea of what is going on. In the end you weigh all the different sources and materials and create your own story. But there are always editors who do not agree with you. Why can't they just trust me to be an expert in what I do and that I wrote it down professionally? I will no longer put up with the struggle of changing my article because someone thinks it is not good enough or thinks I should add this or that. Don't they know how much time I already put in and how little money I make?

I spent years in college, I have a master's degree, and I make less than the local plumber. Honestly, I can make a better living elsewhere. The reward for my knowledge, skillset and professional product is an absurdly low amount. I will no longer put up with the job insecurity and the unfair pay. Not knowing each month whether you will make ends meet. The stress, oh the stress of living the life of an independent journalist!

And then there is the fact that investigative journalism is always looking for the worst in people. Always on the lookout for conflicts of interest, abuse of power and corruption. It makes it seem as if the world is made up of bad people. By publishing only the negative things, we as journalists give a skewed picture of reality. Journalism, in this form, does not present the world as it is but puts up a huge smokescreen.

You also should not be in journalism for the status. It is seen as a low step on the social ladder. Friends and family sometimes look at you with a wary eye. 'I don't know how you do it,' is something you hear often and that does not motivate.

I wish you were more open to different perspectives and dialogue, to sharing ideas and enthusiasm to explore new ways of doing things. But for all the talk about innovation, you do not really want anything to change. Look beyond the horizon and beyond the well-travelled paths. I am looking for an employer who is open to renewal and who has integrity. A title or company that I am proud to work for – not someone that treats me as if I am just someone that costs them money. I will work somewhere where there are future perspectives and where my ideas are met with excitement rather than cynicism. Where there is less rivalry among the staff and where I get an energy boost rather than come home after work feeling (and looking) like a zombie. I would like to be paid a fair wage, have a healthy work-life balance, and be respected in my job. None of these things seem to exist in the journalism I experienced, and I have had enough of this.

*Yours truly,
A Journalist.*

Introduction

The letter above has come into being as our partial response to the need to use more creative methods of collecting, analysing, and presenting data in journalism studies

(Archetti 2017). It is comprised of excerpts from 33 separate resignation letters written by Dutch journalists upon invitation at a research event we organised. The originally handwritten letters give us insight into the emotions, motivations, and frustrations of newswriters, providing alternative, and a more personal, access to the journalists' lived experience. This composite letter, we argue, is an alternative, and we hope, engaging way to present the ways in which journalists experience their profession. We deem it a creative intervention that allows us to challenge or complement prevalent research methods in (digital) journalism studies. In this article, we call for a broadening of our perspective on journalism, specifically through the concept of "creativity." The currently dominant vocabulary, methods and ways of analysing and presenting research are inadequate in addressing the multitude of experiences in the profession (Deuze and Witschge 2019).

Elsewhere (Deuze and Witschge 2018: 166), we have argued for the need for a "broader definition and understanding of the field," in the hope that it can help us move beyond the "consensual body of knowledge, range of research methodologies, and theoretical developments" that have come to dominate the field of journalism studies and education. There are many ways in which we can tap into the sentiments, shifts, and trends in (digital) journalism, and indeed much has been written about how the field is changing and how journalism studies needs to reconsider its theories to address these. The creative writing that is the letter of resignation is then not so much to provide insight into the "poetics of leaving" the profession (Spaulding 2016), but rather to co-author the reality that journalists are living in, instead of viewing it from a distance. Creativity, we argue, allows us to gain insight into experiences, motivations and emotions in journalism, allowing us to tell the diverse stories of journalism in a more inclusive way.

When applied to research, creativity can be seen as an "all-encompassing term that includes artistic and arts-based work but also the broader sense of creating, making, and doing" (Brown 2019: 1). Applying creative and arts-based methods in research brings with it advantages that, we argue, will make our research on journalism practice more relevant. As van der Vaart, van Hoven, and Huigen (2018) point out: (1) creative and arts-based methods provide us with new perspectives that traditional methods do not provide, and allow us to question currently dominantly disciplinary approaches and understandings; (2) they allow us to address complexity that does not need to be expressed to fit within binary distinctions; (3) they allow us to include and express affective and experiential knowledge, where the research subjects become partners rather than mere objects of study. So, while creativity is an important element in journalism *practice* (Coffee 2011), we here focus on its importance for journalism *studies*. As is the case with journalism *practice* (Fulton and McIntyre 2013), there is little attention for understanding journalism *scholarship* as inherently creative. We recognise with Montuori (2003: 253) that "the traditional academic writing style is useful but dreadfully limited and limiting since it leaves out so much of who we are," and provides very little space for the improvisation and creativity that are needed to address our subject of study adequately.

Cristina Archetti (2017) offers an inspiring exception in her call for and use of creative writing—such as poetry—in journalism studies. As Archetti argues, such an approach helps us

[T]o realize that there are issues related to objectivity in conducting research that go beyond the mere correct application of a methodology; that a considerable part of the reality and practices of journalism we study can be neither captured nor expressed through academic enquiry (and texts) alone. (Archetti 2017: 1123).

Beyond allowing for more ways for scholars to express their research, creative writing stimulates “a researcher’s engagement with the senses, feelings and the surrounding reality” (Archetti 2017: 1111). Such approaches have been used more widely in social sciences and humanities (see van der Vaart, van Hoven, and Huigen 2018), including but not limited to educational research (Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind 2005), organisational research, and health care research (Lapum et al. 2011). Although some in media studies adopted similar approaches (see for instance Costanza-Chock 2014), in journalism studies it is still relatively uncommon (for exceptions: Gutsche 2014; Archetti 2017).

Ultimately, we argue that such approaches are needed to complement current research methods and ways of telling stories about the field. Indeed, to adequately capture the many forms of journalism that are currently practiced, the various spaces for change and innovation, and to break open our at times limited understanding and ways of telling stories about journalism, we need to break away from traditional conceptualisations of journalism or solely understood through the lens of democracy and its institutions (Deuze and Witschge 2018). As dancer, fashion designer, psychotherapist and author Roberta Štěpánková (2015: 313) states, at some stage in our academic lives we may ask: “Is my storytelling right?” But as she reminds us: “there are no ‘correct’ stories, just multiple stories.” So the question here, is how do we tell multiple and multiperspectival stories, and also, where desired, tell them in new ways?

Why do we need creativity in journalism studies?

We argue that creativity is key to recognising and acknowledging the inherent diversity in newswork. Considering creativity as a constituent element of (digital) journalism opens the field (of journalism studies and education) up to the myriad of ways in which journalism is practiced. But to open up journalism studies to the diversity of practices, we need to go beyond age-old concepts (such as news values and news cultures, democracy and democratic functions, truth and objectivity), traditional objects of study (employed journalists working in newsrooms), and output of legacy news media (predominantly focusing on written text). To do so, we suggest that creative approaches allow us to gain insight into the multitude of journalisms (including, but not limited to traditional forms), recognising how none of our objects of study are stable, nor that they should be necessarily consistent in order to qualify as an object of study. Creativity, in this context, is as much of a perspective as it is (or can be) a method, and a way of scholarly sense making and storytelling.

But what makes a research method creative? Creativity is generally associated with ideas, attitudes and subsequent behaviours that are in some ways considered to be new, unique and original (Csikszentmihalyi 1996). It can refer to a(ny) person, a professional field, a process as well as a product, and to society as a whole (for example as in how culture plays a profound role in the way society functions).

The extent of what is deemed to be creative tends to be associated in the literature with some form of normative evaluation: the person, product or process has to have some kind of value, impact or recognition. The shadow side of writing and thinking about creativity attunes us to the tendency to discard projects and people before they achieve their potential (Bilton 2015). Creativity can be quite impatient. Creativity can also privilege the individual over the collaborative process, decontextualising the creative act and overemphasising the individual and their self-belief. Another key critical point to be made is that the creativity of anything or anyone depends on an institutional context and embedding with (human and non-human) resources, capital, and other support necessary. The creative work or worker is part of a “world” and their creativity must therefore be understood in terms of its specific context, rather than (just as) the “genius” of anything or anyone in particular (Becker 1982).

In short, when invoking the term “creativity,” we need to adopt a context-specific, processual understanding that allows us holistic insight into the way in which creativity takes place in a particular domain. In journalism studies, when researching creativity, a limited view is taken on creativity as the focus has been on technological innovation (and to some extent on changes in business models and market opportunities), and not so much on creativity broadly conceived. When applying creativity not *in* but *to* journalism studies, we need to ask: how can we tell more inclusive stories about journalism? We argue that in doing so we can also spot creativity as tool in the field of journalism better too. Currently, the focus in journalism studies has been to consider shifts and innovation in journalism practice more or less exclusively through technological and economical perspectives. However, if we adopt a more creative perspective, and focus on capturing the diversity of experiences, emotions and practices of journalism more openly, we will notice how creativity and innovation are very much everyday business for journalists. As such, creativity has a triple implication: as a *concept* that informs what we are looking for when studying journalism, a *guide* for the range of research methods at our disposal, as well as an *inspiration* for the kinds of stories we can tell about our projects.

Gathering stories creatively

As an example of how to apply creative methods in journalism studies, we would like to document a research event with Dutch journalists we organised as part of the NWO-funded projects “Entrepreneurship at Work” and “Exploring Journalism’s Limits” (both led by Tamara Witschge). These projects aim at theorising emerging shared understandings, everyday work activities, and material contexts of entrepreneurial journalists to understand how these challenge traditional conceptualisations of journalism. To do so, they adopt practice-theoretical and action research approaches (see Witschge and Harbers 2018; Wagemans and Witschge 2019), and employ a mixed methods framework to capture the various stages of the journalistic process.

As part of this research we were seeking a research approach that was developed and employed with the journalists as partners, rather than mere object of study. Towards this end, we collaborated with VersPers, a Dutch network and publishing platform for starting journalists. We co-organised a research event featuring interactive workshops. Rather than a static measurement tool, we developed assignments that

invited substantial input from the participating journalists. The main theme addressed in the event was the affective relation that journalists have to their profession and how they position themselves in relation to peers, publics, and others involved in the journalistic process and their role in society. The workshops were:

- *Writing a love letter, or an ode to journalism*: To capture how journalists relate to their work, we invited them to write a love letter. They were invited to consider the main things that they appreciate in the profession, or why they fit together, where their passion lies, or—if this is the case—why and how they have a marriage of convenience. The journalists were invited to be creative and for the handwritten letter, different props were available, allowing different ways of creative expression.
- *Writing a letter of resignation to the profession*: To tap into feelings of frustration, doubts, fears and concerns that journalists may have, we asked the journalists to write a letter of resignation, not to their current employer, but to the profession as a whole. They were asked to provide some of the main reasons that they consider prevalent in deciding to quit.
- *Drawing a network map*: The journalists were asked: Whom do you work with—both journalists and non-journalists? Whom would you like to work with? This workshop allowed insight into how journalists differentiate between those they denominate as journalists and those involved in the making process that they collaborate with, but whom they deem as outside of the discipline.
- *Who is your audience?* In this workshop, journalists were invited to reflect on whom they considered as their audience, what they (think they) know about them, and whom they would like to reach as their audience, and how they want to reach them.
- *Visualise yourself as an object in the public domain*: Together with the artists of cultural education startup OneDayArtists, the journalists made a joint artwork in the form of a city. Each journalist was asked and guided to visualise their own role in society, and was asked to do so in the form of an object in the public domain. This visualisation allowed us to ask about societal functions without falling into the standard verbal metaphors and proscribed ideas about what a journalist's role is.

The journalists self-selected, and were recruited through social media and via the personal networks of the researchers and the event co-organiser VersPers.

Each of these workshops can be seen as a way in which journalists were invited to tell stories creatively. Stories about themselves and their relation to the profession (the love letter and the letter of resignation); stories about their peers and the others involved in doing journalism (the network analysis); stories about their audiences; and stories about their role in society (the visualisation). In each of the assignments there was ample space for the journalists to get creative in the way they told the story: they could write, draw, doodle, and reinterpret the assignment.

Speaking Nearby

Let us return to the resignation letter at the beginning of this article. By giving the assignment to journalists to fictitiously resign, they were asked to tell a particular kind

of creative story about their working life. In assembling these letters, we as researchers also engaged creatively with the material. We were not only analysing the material, but had to *study with* the people (Ingold 2018: 11) to turn these letters into an assemblage. As such, the resignation letter is not an attempt to come to the “one true story” to tell about what it is like to work in journalism, but it does offer *multiple true stories* about newswork.

We argue that, rather than using the academic formula to document a current state of journalism and reify it into a single coherent story, the collective of letters reassembled into one statement offers a way of “speaking nearby.” This term, coined by Trinh T. Minh-Ha (quoted in Chen 1992, 87), refers to:

[A] speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it.

What is true about the letter is perhaps more akin to wisdom than to knowledge, following Tim Ingold’s view when he states that “knowledge fixes and puts our minds at rest; wisdom unfixes and unsettles” (Ingold 2018: 9). The letter of resignation, like the other methods described in this paper, can be seen as a way of knowing that is deeply embedded within the messy reality of making major life-decisions such as the decision of resigning. It is a situated and practical knowing, where statements are made with intended consequences. Speaking nearby, and in the language of the participants, we are able to gain closer insight, we argue, and tell a more powerful story, that taps into the knowing of the research participants and allows us to move beyond the limits of the known vocabulary in journalism studies, into the rich and diverse practices.

In conclusion, we hope to show with our argument and this particular example how we can employ creativity in journalism studies. We also hope to have shown how important we deem this approach to be to recognise, acknowledge and prioritise a diversity of practices and peoples that make up contemporary newswork as well as academic research. We passionately advocate a celebration of this kind of scholarship as supplemental to the existing ways of doing research and documenting scholarship. If we want to truly grasp the full range of (digital) journalism’s futures, it is exactly this deliberate use of creativity that provides a shining light on the road ahead.

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