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Abstract

In this article, we call for a critical reflection on the lens that we adopt when researching journalism and communication. Adopting a lens of wonder can enhance our ability to consider the rich diversity that can be found in the field. Through a variety of research projects, we show how through wonder we cannot only understand how journalism is becoming but also make space for “becoming with”: we show how we are complicit in journalism’s future. Focusing on the paradoxical nature of journalistic practices as something we learned from our work with journalists, we illuminate and open up the much-at-onceness of journalistic life.

Keywords

wonder, suspicion, journalism, communication research, creative methods, becoming, “becoming with”

Introduction

In May 2018, we asked a group of 33 journalists how they would visualize themselves as an object in the public domain. Their subsequent drawings resulted in a highly diverse and multifaceted joint artwork, with journalists visualizing their role as a cityscape drawing on a wide variety of metaphors (for the full art work, including additional reflection: <https://adobe.ly/2IGR0EI>). The objects that they felt represented their work and their role in society best include garbage that strayed through the city picking up stories along the way, directional signs like road signs, and lighthouses.

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Some of the objects can be seen as less metaphorical and more a direct representation of how the profession tends to be seen, such as a mailbox or a telecom shop. Others drew on symbols that refer to their work as meeting places: a fountain or benches to gather at. And then there were those clearly referring to their role as making information public, showing society what it may not want to see: putting out the dirty laundry; offering a huge mirror in which citizens can view themselves.

We are struck by the diversity, breadth, and scope of the ways in which journalists view themselves, as revealed through this creative method. The fact that the journalists involved were so willing to engage this way is also astonishing. The exercise—part of a larger event and research program involving different encounters between the worlds of art and journalism—has been of tremendous value. Although not representative of how journalists in general view themselves and their work, the cityscape they reflexively drew strikes us as particularly complex and diverse. This is significant given the ways in which the common understanding and dominant practices of journalism have been normalized, leading—among practitioners as well as scholars—to a rather homogeneous (“high modernist”) idea of what journalism is and what the profession is for (Hallin, 1992).

Furthermore, the different ways in which journalists self-represent their role is at odds with the criticisms that tend to be leveled at journalism as a profession, both from academia as well as by pundits and the (distrustful) public in the media: the profession tends to be rather ambitious and righteous in its dominant self-representation, but in practice does not (or cannot) live up to its self-proclaimed ideals. It fails to adequately represent different (especially minority or otherwise marginalized) voices; it is largely uncritical about its dual-market structure (serving advertisers and audiences simultaneously); it remains silent on what “quality” means and tends to omit the public from considerations thereof (Costeria Meijer, 2001); whole villages, cities, and regions are not catered to in any consistent way; it tends to overwhelmingly focus on the issues of the day (failing to report on either historical trends or what can be done about such issues in the future); it has a built-in bias toward the existing social order and dominant classes in society and in election time favors horse-race coverage over explaining the issues (see, for reviews, McQuail, 2013; Peters & Broersma, 2017).

These are but some of the issues that journalism is generally criticized for—that serve as the basis for its “suspicious treatment.” Indeed, in an engaging intervention, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2017, p. 1251) states we should not look to journalism to meet the functions of journalism, but rather minimize our expectations of journalism: “We do not get more from journalism simply by wishing for more.” Here, we start from the assumption that journalists do want more and that there is actually more that journalism presently offers, but that we have been limiting ourselves when choosing our lens, as well as when considering places to look at. We suggest that we, as journalism scholars and educators, have set up journalism to fail, and invite adopting a view of wonder next to—or in place of—suspicion.

With this essay, we invite students and colleagues alike to reflect on the stories we tell about our research, moving beyond fretting about whether our storytelling is “right” (for example, conforming to certain academic conventions) and instead

acknowledging “there are no ‘correct’ stories, just multiple stories” (Štěpánková, 2015, p. 313). To inspire this kind of intentionally multi-perspectival, perhaps even hopeful scholarship, we first discuss the limiting lens that has been dominant in journalism studies. We then bring together some of the main findings from our recent and ongoing research projects that show how choosing a sense of wonder allows us to gain new insights, ideas, and ways of both practicing and presenting our research. Finally, we reflect on what is at stake with this alternative, supplementary approach to journalism and communication research.

We Set Journalism Up to Fail

The stance that we would like to put forth here is that the rather bleak outlook on journalism we have as critics and students of journalism is partly the result of our own limited perspective on the profession and the field of journalism. We generally do not spend enough time pondering the tremendous drive and diversity of practices in journalism, if we see it at all. Journalism today is so much more than that what appears in the pages of *The New York Times*, on the screen when the BBC broadcasts its reports, online when *The Guardian* or any other news outlet files breaking news. The places where journalists work, where journalistic work gets published, and where newswriters find their voice are many, most of which never appear in our academic journals or in our classrooms.

When considering new theories and concepts for journalism and communication research, we would suggest including a deliberate endeavor to open up what we consider journalism to include (and thus what is deemed worthy of scholarly and pedagogical attention). Thus, here we propose an alternative or additional role of academics that goes beyond a suspicious reading of the profession and avoids our tendency to do our work in a “spirit of skeptical questioning or outright condemnation, an emphasis on its precarious position vis-à-vis overbearing and oppressive social forces” (Felski, 2015, p. 2). We see academic theorizing and research as complicit in the perceived crisis or even “downfall” and otherwise multiple failings of journalism, while at the same time as able to do justice to and help grow the many and diverse ways in which journalism is and can be practiced. Ultimately, here we ask how we as media scholars can *allow for wonder to exist* about the field.

To allow for wonder, rather than suspicion, to inform and inspire our way of looking at the object of study, we embrace a sense of wonder as, for example, to be found in the works of Adam Smith and René Descartes—as articulated by Jesse Prinz (2013) in his assessment of wonder as “humanity’s most important emotion.” In this reading of wonder, it consists of three dimensions: *sensory* (all our senses are engaged and every sensory perception counts), *cognitive* (instead of relying on previous theory and experience to make sense of something, we focus on seeing it anew), and *spiritual* (as we allow ourselves to be genuinely moved and inspired by what we perceive).

An emotional state of continuous awe and astonishment is front and central in Heidegger’s philosophy (Capobianco, 2010). For Heidegger, observing and confronting the world puts one in a state of continuous awe and astonishment. Such a state of

being in awe and astonishment, marveling and wonder is a way of holding oneself back while being enraptured by that from which it steps back. Heidegger asks us to “courageously take up the risk of holding ourselves open unto the Open” (cited in Capobianco, 2010, p. 85). In media studies, such an openness and marveling perspective can for example be found in the works of Paddy Scannell (2014) and John Durham Peters (2015).

Such an approach does not mean that we ask for an uncritical or unreflective stance, but rather that we aim to tap into the stories of journalists as they experience and feel them, including the contradictions, unmet needs, and conflicting interests that exist in these experiences. Readers may be worried, about what Mayer (2008) calls “bizarre forms of complicity” (Mayer, 2008, p. 145) that can be the result of a truly open and direct conversation with those we research, in our case journalists. We would like to challenge the “assumption that whatever is *not* critical must therefore be *uncritical*” (Felski, 2015, p. 2). For us, adopting a lens of wonder asks us to be *self*-critical as well as critical toward that which we research: what is our role, and how open are we toward what is happening in our domain of study?

To work toward journalism and communication research beyond suspicion in an embrace of wonder, in this essay we focus on what we can learn from the creativity and diversity among journalists who, for a variety of reasons (some of which not necessarily voluntarily), opted to practice journalism outside of existing news companies—something generally labeled as “entrepreneurial” or “startup” journalism. Since 2013, we and our graduate students have been closely studying a variety of new journalistic ventures all over the world, inspired by the question what “journalism” looks like if it is in the process of being reinvented, when it is practiced from scratch. We see this global trend of a startup, entrepreneurial or rather “pioneer” (Hepp & Loosen, 2018) culture as exemplary of the richness in the field, but acknowledge that this is creativity and diversity can be found anywhere across the world of professional media production. A book-length account of the first 5 years of our “Beyond Journalism” project was published early in 2020, on which we draw on here (Deuze & Witschge, 2020).

In this article, we aimed not to necessarily “understand” what journalism is, but rather take the reader on a journey with us through the multiple stories of journalism we (and our students) encountered when visiting, observing, interviewing, and working with journalists who started their own media company or collective in 12 countries across six continents. Acknowledging that journalists do not merely act so as to have academics categorize their work, we ask for practicing what anthropologist Tim Ingold calls “the art of inquiry,” where those that inquire join those researched “in their hopes and dreams” (Ingold, 2018, p. 218). This somewhat distinct to much of the ways in which we have researched in the fields of journalism and communication. Simply describing and giving an account of what is happening in journalism is a sure way to make journalism fail to act in this world—to just account for things:

is also to lay them to rest, to silence them or neutralise their power, so that the things themselves cease to engage our attention as active and ongoing forces in the world. They are, so to speak, accounted for, ticked off, put in their place. (Ingold, 2018, p. 218)

Description without engagement, recording without wonder: these are things we do as researchers that freeze our object of study rather than setting it free. The question is not so much how can we better account for what happens in journalism—in even greater detail, with more sophisticated (quantitative and qualitative) methods—but how we can reconsider our role in this, and better “correspond” with it (Ingold, 2018). We should perhaps start from the understanding that journalists “act and work in order to make a difference in the world” (Ingold, 2018, p. 218), and move forward with the question what our responsibility is in responding to this.

In taking this responsibility, we do not suggest that there is one particular “right way” of doing journalism studies. As stated from the outset, there is no right way of doing research or telling the story, only multiple ways and multiple stories. This does not mean, however, that no “differences exist between ways of telling about society” (Becker, 2007, p. 285). Calling for more diversity in our storytelling, we acknowledge that “contemporary social science has crippled itself by imposing strict limitations on the permissible ways of telling what researchers find out about the things they study” (Becker, 2007, p. 286). And, as is the main point we highlight here, this has everything to do with our understanding of what is knowledge and how we come by this knowledge. Can our critical and self-reflexive (rather than suspicious) stance allow for moving along with our subject in marvel, wonder, astonishment, and awe?

Where We Got Stuck

In 2013, Beate Josephi noted how new understandings are slow to develop in journalism studies. Today, we can see though the field is changing and interest is picking up in new approaches, truly new insights and approaches are slow to come into being, struggling to gain ground. Although numerous colleagues engage in cutting-edge and creative work, new topics for research are opening up, and a significant global push is underway to thoroughly “dewesternize” and otherwise diversify the field, the key journals, and handbooks, and publishers in journalism studies tend to privilege work that fits more or less neatly within established boundaries and theoretical frameworks. Any divergent material tends to be compared and set against what is considered to be the legitimate status quo. We do not suggest that this is a deliberate policy of industry gatekeepers—we view it simply as a way for the social system of academic work in our field to self-organize and reproduce itself in ways that make sense to most.

The benefit of such autopoiesis (Görke & Scholl, 2006) is replicability of studies, calibration of standards for such crucial aspects as measuring research output, and standardization of key elements of the scholarly process (such as the formulation of research questions, the operationalization of key concepts, the documentation of a literature review, and the outline of a methodological framework)—the side effect of which is the strengthening of the position of certain scholars, labs, schools, institutions, and publishers as “renowned” experts in the field both nationally and globally. The downside is a growing reluctance and sometimes even resistance toward (more or less radical) different ways of doing things. In the process, important

voices, observations, and perspectives (may) get lost—at least, that is at the heart of our concern. What can we see if we look at things differently—with wonder and surprise, unshackled by convention and routine, as far as that is possible?

Indeed, if we were to take this call seriously, we need to consider how we challenge such conventions (as it possibly also affects our scholarly “success,” whether measured by output in certain dominant outlets, research funding and tenure, or less tangible indicators, including the sense of worth and belonging in the field). This is particularly hard given the long and stable development that journalism, as a profession, has “enjoyed” in most countries around the world. Whether working under conditions of censorship, pressures of nation-building, or with expectations of providing a society with social cement, journalism is widely recognized and seen as a set of values, principles, and practices enacted in different ways and settings with a “sense of wholeness and seamlessness” (Hallin, 1992, p. 14) around the world. The field of journalism studies—the scholarly pursuit of knowledge about journalism—developed alongside its object into an increasingly sophisticated and consensual body of knowledge, range of research methodologies, and theoretical developments.

This focus on coherence and consensus does not do justice to the insight that journalism is more than a neat sum of its parts and to the need to accommodate a more dynamic, unruly, or at the very least radically pluralistic consideration of the profession. Indeed, as Zelizer (2013, pp. 469–470) notes, “many existing discussions of journalism have become insular, static, exclusionary, marginalizing, disconnected, elitist, unrepresentative and historically and geographically myopic.” Similar critiques of the often-narrow scope, ethnocentric approach, and mainstream orientation of mass communication research generally and journalism studies in particular have been voiced in the past—especially in work by scholars coming from non-Western parts of the world (see, for example, Gunaratne, 2010; Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). Regardless of the colorful variety of journalistic forms and functions existing and emerging in the world, much of journalism scholarship has tended to shield its eyes from the blinding light of diversity—instead arguing for unification. The consolidation of journalism studies in the literature mainly serves the modern project of bringing an inherently unruly object under control (Steensen & Ahva, 2015, p. 3). It is crucial to recognize that the supposed core of journalism as well as the assumed consistency of the inner workings of news organizations is anything but consensual, nor is it necessarily the norm. At the same time, it would be a mistake to assume that the new types of journalism emerging inside and alongside legacy news organizations are necessarily different or oppositional to the core values, ideals, and practices of the profession.

Thus, here we want to stress, as we have outlined in our book, it is not just a matter of finding a better definition of journalism, however inclusive it would be. We ask instead that we apply our “wonderful” attention to the way in which we understand (and thus research and report on, as well as teach) journalism. Arguably, we would be able to provide a definition of journalism that speaks to more or less traditional notions of the profession as carried out within the context of venerable institutions such as *The New York Times*, the BBC, *O Globo*, the *Asahi Shimbun* or *El Pais*, while including what journalists are doing at any of the entities documented in the online database Multiple

Journalism (multiplejournalism.org), or at any of the organizations around the world that we document in the Beyond Journalism project. We could collectively build a definition that provides an alternative way of viewing the field, which would focus on the intentions behind work as much as the outcomes and functions of the work, thereby including many important markers. But that is not what we are after here.

We want to offer a more radical alternative: rather than defining journalism, we suggest we focus on telling the stories and showcasing the widest possible range of experiences that are being lived under the banner of journalism, by those who consider themselves journalists in some way. We want to focus on what their stories tell us about all the different things journalism can be—a type of business or industry, a set of norms and values, a range of routines and rituals, a language and a discourse, and a lofty ideal as much as a menial practice. We need, then, to highlight differences and find ways to not simply explain them away in terms of a consistent framework—such as journalism’s occupational ideology, its sensemaking practices of gatekeeping and routinizing the unexpected, or its functioning under a hierarchy of influences.

Becoming of/With Journalism

Journalism worldwide is becoming a different kind of profession. The lived experience of professional journalists is precarious, fragmented, diverse, and networked. How do we tell stories that allow us to reconsider the profession’s realities? The first step in approaching this field from a sense of wonder, we argue, is to move beyond a conceptualization of journalism that views it as a distinct and bounded organization of newswork and beyond its classical categories and boundaries. We suggest that to adopt the art of inquiry fully is to employ a process-oriented approach that not only allows us to see journalism as continuously becoming but also asks us to see how we “become with” our object of study.

Let us explore both these options in turn. First, to recognize that our object of study—journalism—is dynamic requires us to adopt an ontology of “becoming” rather than “being” (Chia, 1995). With Robert Chia, we propose a perspective on journalism that privileges “reality as a processual, heterogeneous and emergent configuration of relations” (Chia, 1995, p. 594). The challenge for journalism studies is to understand such an ontology of *becoming* in the context of an ideology of *being*: understanding that journalism is not something that “is,” but rather that “becomes”—through an ongoing diversification of practices and places of doing newswork. As such, it is important to let go of the desire to make claims about “the” profession, what it is (or what it should be), and what it means to a working journalist and rather develop a heightened sensitivity toward mapping and articulating divergent practices, definitions, as well as ideological interpretations that in turn produce many different *journalisms* on a social systemic level.

Most of the established theoretical frameworks for journalism research have difficulty capturing the profession in terms of its becoming. We are exceptionally good at critiquing journalism in terms of what it should be (and therefore what it is not at the time of measurement), but fail miserably when it comes to appreciate how it is in a

continuous process of transformation. We argue that the most relevant question in this context is not *what* journalism is becoming, but rather *how* journalism is becoming. Journalism, like other “entities,” be they individuals, organizations, or societies, “are deemed to be epiphenomena of primarily fluxing and changing patterns of relationships and event clusterings” (Nayak & Chia, 2011, p. 283). Such an approach then demands not the “spurious” benchmarking of theory to the actual practices, but rather a recognition of the “contingency, emergence, creativity and complexity” (Nayak & Chia, 2011, p. 283) at the heart of journalism (and life). If we take this as our starting point, this means we need to adopt an approach that focuses our attention to the “micro-practices of ‘everyday practical coping’ and ‘ongoing sensemaking’” (Nayak & Chia, 2011, p. 283).

Radically adopting a processual understanding of life, and thus journalism, coupled with an embrace of marveling at what life is means to remain open to the everyday reality of the world coming into being:

That “all things flow” is the first vague generalization which the . . . intuition of men has produced . . . Without doubt, if we are to go back to that ultimate integral experience, unwarped by the sophistication of theory . . . the flux of things is one ultimate generalization around which we must weave our philosophical system. (Whitehead, cited in Nayak & Chia, 2011, p. 282)

It means to dare letting go of our theoretical classifications through which we categorize, classify, and measure journalism. It means to (creatively and critically) appraise its practices toward taking up the call made by William James to abstract:

from all conceptual interpretations and lapse back into his immediate sensible life . . . he will find . . . a big blooming buzzing confusion, as free from contradiction in its “much-at-onceness” as it is alive and evidently there. (James cited in Nayak & Chia, 2011, p. 282)

In the next section, we discuss how adopting such an approach allows us to show the “much-at-onceness” in the field of journalism, while acknowledging the similar embrace in recent international comparative projects of such diversity and hybridity of journalism (see in particular Hanitzsch et al., 2019; Mellado et al., 2017).

A starting point must be that understanding journalism as becoming also implies we need to understand how we “become with” with journalism in our research. This goes further than the self-conscious positioning of the researcher common in qualitative and interpretative approaches. The challenge we face is to explore the “much-at-onceness” without reducing it to neat categorizations, or suggesting there is something wrong with journalism because it does not fit our theoretical (and normative) framework. This is where we suggest “becoming with” provides us with an answer. Already two centuries ago, writes Ingold, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe:

proposed a method of science which demanded of practitioners that they should spend time with the objects of their attention, observe closely and with all their senses, draw on what they observed, and endeavour to reach a level of mutual involvement or coupling,

in perception and action, such that observer and observed become all but indistinguishable. It is from this crucible of mutual involvement, Goethe argued, that all knowledge grows. (cited in Ingold, 2018, p. 217)

More recently, Donna Haraway (2016) has indicated how we need to “become with.” Much like Ingold’s suggestion that we are not merely observers of, but need to become responsible actors, Haraway (2016, pp. 71–72) speaks of “worldings” where “scientists, artists, ordinary members of communities and nonhuman beings become enfolded in each other’s projects, in each other’s lives, they come to need each other in diverse, passionate, corporeal, meaningful ways.” In a way, we are asking to become consciously complicit in journalism’s reality, rather than “merely” taking the stance of the outside observer, asking to aspire the “noninnocent, risky, committed becoming involved in each other’s lives” (Haraway, 2016, p. 71).

It is important to note in this respect the nature of boundary work and classification that we as researchers are involved in (Star, 2015). If we are to open ourselves up to the realities of the world, it means we acknowledge that

what we commonly take to be individual entities are not separate determinately bounded and propertied objects, but rather are (entangled “parts of”) phenomena (material-discursive intra-actions) that extend across (what we commonly take to be separate places and moments in) space and time. (Barad, 2011, p. 125)

Returning to Ingold, we can learn from anthropologists who “see a world of intricately enmeshed relations rather than one already divided into discrete and autonomous entities” (Ingold, 2018, p. 219). For him, anthropology is

not about describing the world, or wrapping it up. It is, in the first place, about attending to presence, about noticing, and responding in kind. It means acknowledging that persons and other things are there, that they have their own being and their own lives to lead, and that it behoves us, for our own good, to pay attention to their existence and to what they are telling us. Only then can we learn. (Ingold, 2018, p. 219)

However, we are not simply advocating an uncritical adoption of the techniques and frameworks of (media) anthropology here. Our concern goes further and includes what Görke and Scholl (2006, p. 645) call an “epistemologically radical constructivism” in line with Niklas Luhmann’s argument that the actions, attitudes, and behaviors we document and observe as researchers are inevitably “artifacts of processes of attribution, the results of observing observers . . . which emerge when a system operates recursively on the level of second-order observation” (cited in Görke & Scholl, 2006, p. 645). As Maturana and Varela (1980, p. 8) famously articulated, “everything said is said by an observer.” Such self-referential awareness in our studies is a critical first step, whereas an additional becoming-with perspective opens up our object of study to the possibility of shared storytelling and world-making, rather than the researcher inventing her own reality through observation and description (however much grounded in theory and method).

What then can we learn about journalism when we become with, when we correspond with journalists' dreams and hopes rather than view their actions as concrete entities that have nothing to do with us, that we simply observe from afar? We argue that such an open stance allows us to correspond with crucial concerns that are alive in the field such as how diverse, creative, and innovative practices come into being, under what conditions does autonomy and creativity thrive and proliferate, how professionals "make it work" in ways that include, yet go beyond, salaries and pension plans. In other words, what are the dreams, desires, hopes of journalists, and crucially what makes them happy and thrive? This is not trivial. In fact, it may be the most important question facing the profession and its observers today.

What Wonder Reveals: Much-at-Oneness in Journalism

In the introduction of this article, we alluded to what an adoption of wonder—in this case through creative methods (see Witschge et al., 2019)—may result in. To further highlight what can happen when we are open to our research object, we draw here on the data we gathered in our project *Beyond Journalism*. For this project, together with graduate students, we researched 22 startups or journalistic collectives in 11 countries between 2014 and 2019.¹ In total, more than 125 people were interviewed by a research team consisting of 24 graduate students and us (for more notes on the project, please see Deuze & Witschge, 2020; the book documents the first phase of the project as our research is continuing).

We have focused on startup journalists, who by their very nature can be seen to operate outside of and in deliberate challenge to traditional frameworks and contexts of journalism. The journalists involved in starting up small news companies or editorial collectives outside legacy media can be seen as pioneers in the field. Pioneering communities are, in Andreas Hepp's (2016, p. 920) terms, "experimental groupings related to new forms of media-technology-related change and collectivity formation." These communities "have a sense of mission" and have "a sense that they are at the 'forefront' of a media-related transformation of society as a whole" (Hepp, 2016, pp. 924–925). So, they are involved in defining what journalism is, "engaged in a continual process of interpretation of themselves" (Hepp, 2016, p. 927). They can be seen to fulfill the role that Oscar Westlund and Seth Lewis (2014) describe as "agents of media innovation."

What can we learn from researching such actors if we start from a sense of wonder? We show here that it allows us to ultimately gain an appreciation of the paradoxes involved in being a journalist and doing journalism today (without needing or wanting to straighten such contradictions over). This in turn confronts us with our own biases and conflicting expectations when observing journalism in action today. It in other words shows us how there is much going on at once in both the professional and academic field. We see a deep appreciation among the journalists that we have researched of the paradoxical nature of professional identity in journalism. Here, we summarize this insight and highlight four key contradictions we found in our explorations—contradictions that forced us to look differently at their work, at our own work, and (therefore) at journalism as a whole.

First, we see that for many, if not most journalists, journalism is a passion project, which brings with it a very specific relation to *autonomy*. A normative sense of autonomy is key to their professional identity, while by all accounts the factual (or perceived) autonomy of the reporter today is reduced because of the need to self-commodify, to cross-subsidize and to promote and publish, next to just producing news and information. Autonomy is furthermore a contested subject, given the twin developments of social isolation of the independent, freelance, or otherwise “atypically” employed newsworker, and their social reality of more often than not working in (temporarily assembled) groups, teams, or collectives of some kind. In both instances, “autonomy” is a relative, highly context-dependent concept (as much as it is an ambivalently lived reality).

Second, we found a highly complex relation of journalists to others in the field. We researched those who deliberately went on it on their own, but to be part of a *community* of peers, to have a sense of belonging was a striking part of being able to thrive in this setting. Time and time again, our participants would relate to the collegiality and social support gained through working in a startup environment as their key motivation to opt for this precarious existence (at times choosing this over an already established career in a newsroom). At the same time, the sociality of journalists on the job can be quite a struggle for many, as the working environment tends to be at least in part based on rivalry, (creative) conflict, and intense competition. Such competitive spirit is both cherished—such as the rush to get a by-line on the front page, to lead out the evening news, to push a breaking news alert to online users—and lamented as it amplifies “not wrong for long” journalism in a rush to be first, to keep up with the pressures of constantly publishing something “new” to satisfy the demands of digital distribution (which privileges a constant stream of updates). We found that many of the startups we visited deliberately moved away from breaking news as a critique of the daily grind of journalism. Competition for them featured as competing with established, mainstream outlets for attention; competing with other ventures for a chance to acquire subsidies, funding support, or sponsorships; even competing on an intrapersonal level as their desire to do journalism has to be negotiated next to the need to earn a decent living.

Third, we came across—contrary to what the lack of attention in practice and research on this would suggest (Deuze, 2019)—the importance of *creativity* in journalism for those practicing it. Our data suggest the enjoyment of journalism as a craft and exercising one’s creativity is a perhaps understated yet significant element of what it means to be a professional journalist—even if it is generally absent in the common discourse among journalists or poorly managed at the level of the news organization. Lynch and Swink wrote as far back as 1967 about how advantageous a “creative aptitude” would be for journalists, noting, however, that newsroom conditions were generally not particularly conducive to creative storytelling practices, instead relying on “set structures, pat phrases and clichés” (p.372). Creativity today is seen as a key competitive advantage, and particularly in management circles gets touted as the critical factor that sets media companies in general and news organizations in particular apart from many other industries (Malmelin & Virta, 2016). But what was striking in

our data and experience is how much of a necessity it was for so many of those we interviewed: it was why they loved their job (outside legacy media).

A fourth and final paradox we would like to highlight here relates to how journalists give meaning to what they do, what their “grand narrative” of the profession is. Those working in the field tend to idealize their profession, as this *ennoblement* is a fundamental feature of their identity—even when the experience of working in that profession can be anything but delightful.

Quite often our interviewees would discuss their experience of working in or for “traditional” news organizations as dehumanizing, suffering through meetings, being judged for their productivity (rather than quality), and not feeling as if they were contributing to something meaningful. On top of that, they experienced the working environment as unsafe, with regular rounds of lay-offs, restructuring projects, and managerial overhauls. Still, despite all of this, they see the profession as something special and wonderful—which in part enables them to justify the risk and uncertainty of striking out on their own.

This struck us as particularly significant, as it also related to our own experience of straddling the normative expectations academia has of journalism (as a fourth estate, watchdogs of society, cornerstone of democracy, and so on) with those of our theoretical perspective of wonder, critical self-reference, and becoming with. Perhaps we were expecting hoping for a completely new and splendid articulation of journalism, instead finding these pioneers treading traditional ground in the way they would talk about the profession and its role in society. What those in the startup scene kept telling us, over and over again: the industry is broken, the profession is perfect. We had to acknowledge that the profession for many is a noble endeavor—especially if you make it yourself, in precarious circumstances. This does not mean journalism becomes a completely different profession—it gets rearticulated to different contexts, settings, and feelings.

From a suspicious reading, we would perhaps too easily try and explain these paradoxes away and foreground the perspective that suggests that journalists cannot have a more critical and reflective view of the profession, as they are too involved. We suggest here that it is all there at the same time. Many different sensemaking narratives coexist: the stories that voice passion and an almost romantic zeal for the profession coexist with a realistic and at times grim recognition of profound precariousness as a structural feature of job and career. Such narratives do not negate or contradict each other; we actually found they at times reinforce each other. The emotional story provides fuel for journalists to convince themselves that they can make it work, especially when faced with dire circumstances (Beckett & Deuze, 2016). At the same time, when the going gets tough, clients and contracts dwindle, and the remaining work consistently gets underpaid, journalists will more often than not blame themselves, articulating a dwindling passion. Critical reflection and passionate engagement sometimes clash, but at other times coexist independently of each other, taking up different positions in the hierarchy of sensemaking tactics and strategies of media professionals. As such, it is important to tell and consider these stories next to one another, providing

insight into prevalent discourses recurring in the conversations with journalists, careful to not fold in (or explain away) one with the other.

In light of the similarity in the motivations and intentions with “traditional” journalism, it is interesting to consider the kind of journalism the participants in our project are making—both in terms of a profession, as well as the kind of stories and reports these startups and collectives file. In our mapping of the products and services that the companies and collectives in our sample provide, we found a wide variety of activities, products, and services that served to enhance, extend, supplement, or otherwise facilitate the “brand” of the startup in question. Examples include Zetland (Denmark) turning its work into an theater show, Inkabinka (USA) using news to develop software, several outlets offering their members chances to publish their own news reports or otherwise ask them to contribute their expertise (such as *Mediapart* in France, *Follow The Money* in The Netherlands, and the *Correspondent* in the Netherlands and now internationally), *Code4SA* (South Africa) developing data training programs for citizens to do their own investigations, or startups simply using their status as being truly independent from any kind of commercial or political influence to claim legitimacy in their country (such as *La Silla Vacía* in Colombia and *Investigative Reporting Project Italy* (IRPI) in Italy). All of this occurred next to “traditional” types of news and investigative reporting. As we conclude in our book: “If anything, the impact of startup journalism is that it opens journalism up to multiple imaginings, both in terms of what it does, and how it makes sense of itself” (Deuze & Witschge, 2020, p. 128).

Conclusion

There is increasing attention for the need for inclusivity in the field of communication and journalism today (see, for instance, Rao, 2019). Here, we have suggested that with wonder, rather than suspicion, we gain more access to the rich diversity of experiences and practices already present in the field. As Joep Cornelissen (2017, p. 369), reminds us, it is important that “different questions get asked and different modes of knowing sit alongside each other in a complementary fashion.” The dominant tools of researching and telling stories in journalism studies are too restricted to do justice to the diversity of voices present in the field—as local, community, alternative, grassroots, minority, and independent media organizations tend to be all too often ignored in both journalism studies and education. So, how do we make sure that “particular ways of knowing” do not become suppressed (Cornelissen, 2017, p. 370) and that we enhance the “variety, novelty, and innovation in research” (Corbett et al., 2014, p. 4)?

Our aim with the *Beyond Journalism* project is to tell new stories, and expand our storytelling format (what we choose to tell our stories about, and how we are telling those stories) as well as what we understand journalism to be. With this, we do not want to provide “one best way” model for journalism, but are interested in all the specificities rather than some generalities in the field (Gartner, 1993, p. 236). This focus is inspired both by a theoretical and methodological preference—as outlined in this article—but also an appreciation of the very real circumstances that journalists face throughout the profession today. For that we have highlighted a process-oriented

approach that deliberately considers the becoming of journalism: seeing journalism (and life) as always in the making, we need to open up to all that is going on at the same time. To let go of our overly narrow and excluding classification systems, we furthermore suggested the concept of “becoming with” to consider it is not only journalism that is becoming, but *we* are becoming-with journalism and are involved in its making, and share (at least some of its) responsibility.

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