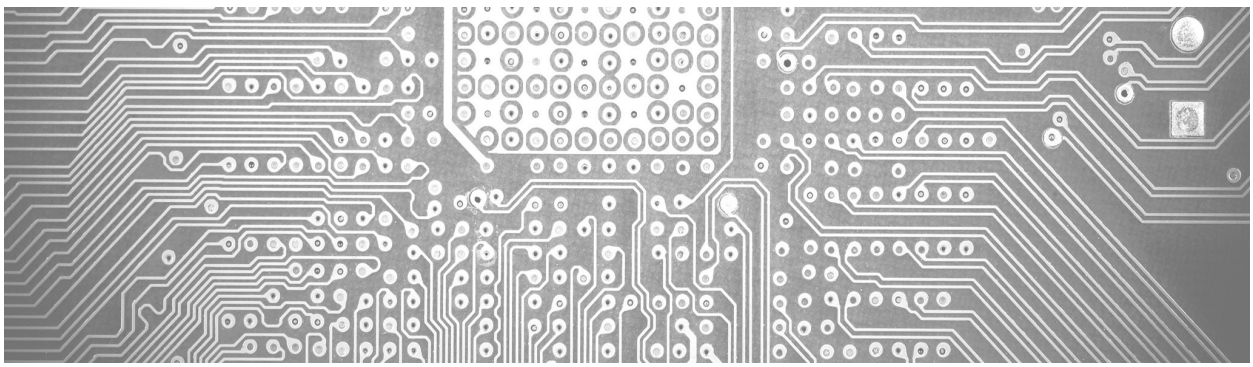
The SAGE Handbook of Digital Journalism



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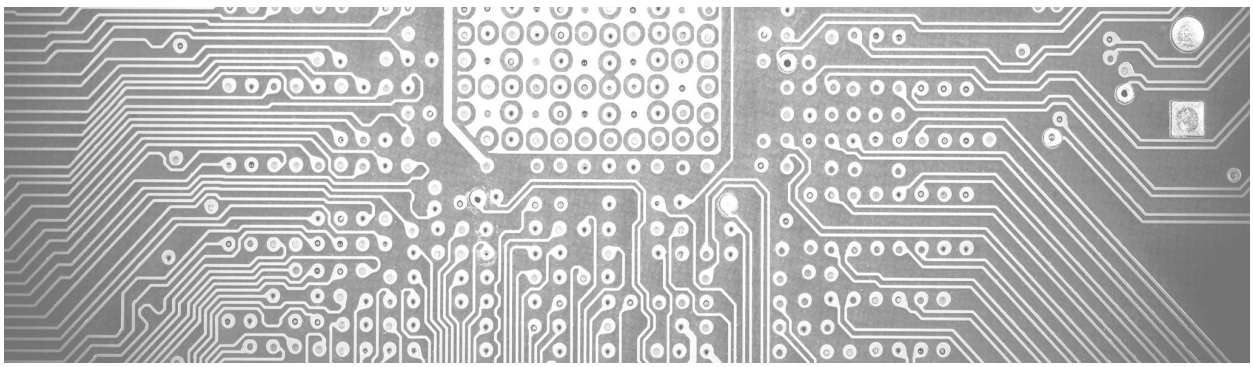

Edited by
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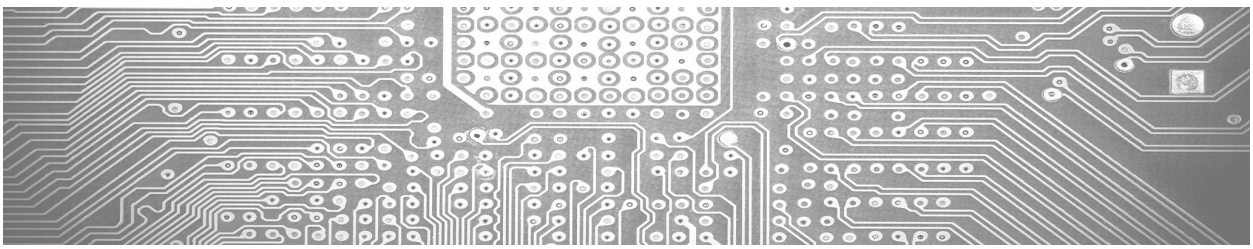
PART IV

Research Strategies

Tamara Witschge



To capture and respond to the many changes in the journalistic contexts and practices highlighted in this Handbook, we need new research strategies. What is more, the varied and, at times, radically new theoretical conceptualizations of journalism demand new research perspectives and methodological tools. As the different contributions to the Handbook demonstrate, the context, practice, and views on journalism have undergone considerable change and development. Scholars in Journalism Studies need to address this in their research. There have been a few contributions in the field that aim to do this (see, for instance, the special issue of Digital Journalism edited by Michael Karlsson and Helle Sjøvaag, 2016, volume 4, 1). Even so, there is still a need for both critical reflections on the methodological perspectives as well as how-to guidance in applying new methods or adapting existing methods to changing practices and contexts in journalism. This concluding part on research strategies aims to do just that: to critically interrogate and inspire our methodological responses to the changes in the field.

The first three chapters deal with researching journalistic production practices. Sue Robinson and Meredith Metzler (Chapter 30) open this part with a thoughtful and provocative chapter on a well-known method used in studying news production: ethnography. They ask to what extent this method is still suited for studying news in the digital era, critically discussing the newsroom-centricity that has been at the heart of this methodology in its application to date. They help to reconceptualize the term 'ethnography' and call for developing *ethnographic sensibility* as an approach rather than a technique, whilst at the same time providing clear and concrete pointers for ethnography of journalism in the digital age.

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The theme of research sensibility is echoed in the chapter by Juliette De Maeyer (Chapter 31), who addresses the material turn in Journalism Studies. With changing work environments and the rise of digital production technologies, scholars grapple with how to research this material context. De Maeyer critically discusses recent studies that have more or less successfully paid attention to the material aspects of news work. The chapter argues that what is needed is a reflective *sensibility* to materiality to capture the complexity of the production process and the role of different actors within it. De Maeyer provides us with clear pointers on how to take into account the material context in a meaningful way, helping Journalism Studies hone its approach to researching digital journalism in all its facets.

The last chapter, focusing on researching news production processes, is by Zvi Reich and Aviv Barnoy (Chapter 32), who provide theoretical reflections and hands-on instructions for applying 'reconstruction interviews'. Born out of the need to connect production processes to the content produced by journalists, this method aims to provide detailed insights into the way in which news is made. Increasingly popular in the field of Journalism Studies, this is the first time that the methodology is developed as a how-to guide as well as reflected upon: what are the premises and implications of the method?

Moving on to the content of journalism and related consumption practices, the chapter of Anders Larsson, Helle Sjøvaag, Michael Karlsson, Eirik Stavelin, and Hallvard Moe deals with issues of sampling (Chapter 33). They identify the difficulties journalism scholars face when trying to define and sample a journalism that is increasingly 'liquid' in the digital era. They discuss strategies that help us deal with a boundless object that is fragmented and dispersed, and address the issues faced in the different stages of data collection. They also provide information and instructions on how to computer-code this material.

Following on from this, Axel Bruns (Chapter 34) highlights ways in which we can access the wealth of data more or less readily available to us in the digital era. He discusses the big data produced by journalists, as well as that relating to consumption practices. Bruns offers a critical reflection on the limitations of the type of research associated with big-data analysis. In this way, scholars can find both a helpful introduction to data and tools to collect, scrape, or otherwise access this data, as well as the considerations that need to be taken into account to do so productively and judiciously.

The last three chapters in this part include the audience more squarely. Kim Schrøder (Chapter 35) provides a qualitative counterpart to big data for accessing news consumption practices, and focuses on the experience rather than the existing content available in the form of big data. Presenting an answer to the challenges that the researcher into news user practices is faced with, he introduces the Q-method as a way to do justice to the complexity of news audience practices. Taking the user as a 'point of departure' and arguing for the need of 'a non-media-centric, cross-media perspective', in-depth interviews featuring Q-methodology are introduced as a way to gain insight into the subjective experiences of users and news media use in everyday life.

In similar vein, Irene Costera Meijer (Chapter 36) argues that we need to start from the news user in our research to provide meaningful insights into journalism. She too discusses specific, innovative tools that will help scholars gain access to the complex, fragmented, and diverse nature of news use. Simply adding an audience perspective is not enough, she argues: there is a need for research tools that are as complex as our research object. Moreover, we need a new vocabulary to address what news is for the audience, and what it is for, she argues. Most centrally, she advances the notion of doubt as an answer to the complexity of journalism in the digital era: as scholars we should not

strive for a neat and coherent understanding of news and news use, but rather through triangulation we should highlight tensions, contradictions, and uncertainties.

The last contribution of this part, bringing the Handbook to an end, is by Wiebke Loosen and Jan-Hinrik Schmidt (Chapter 37). Like Costera Meijer, they argue for triangulation, but discuss this more broadly as a research strategy through which we cannot only compare and contrast news use, but more importantly compare and contrast content, use, and production practices. They critically discuss why methods, when used on their own (whether it is content analysis, ethnography, or surveys) are not sufficient to analyze and understand journalism in the digital age. They introduce triangulation and the mixed-method approach, discuss the theory behind this, and provide ample examples of how this can be employed in Journalism Studies.

These chapters together provide a rich, reflective, and useful guide to help journalism scholars apply established methods, develop new sensibilities and approaches, and reflect on their practices to date. The research strategies put forward vary in terms of their focus (production, use, content, or a combination), their nature (qualitative or quantitative), and the basis of their inquiry (using existing data or gathering new data), but each in its own way is a response to the challenges and opportunities facing journalism research. The variety and richness of the approaches bodes well for Journalism Studies, and we are confident that the research strategies proposed here will inform, instruct, and inspire journalism research to flourish in all its diversity and vivacity.