

Studies in Big Data 140

María-Cruz Negreira-Rey  
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# Blurring Boundaries of Journalism in Digital Media

New Actors, Models and Practices

 Springer

# **Studies in Big Data**

Volume 140

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Editors

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# An Introduction to the Study of Journalism and Its Boundaries



María-Cruz Negreira-Rey , Jorge Vázquez-Herrero ,  
José Sixto-García , and Xosé López-García 

**Abstract** We introduce the book's scope, based on the concept of the blurring boundaries of journalism. The chapters are presented following the structure of the book. The contributions offer an overview of the limits that define journalism—its actors, models and practices—in today's hybrid communication system. Their contributions are framed in the discussion of the principles of journalism, the strategies and models for sustainability in the digital environment, the relationship with old and new actors, the evolution of formats and narratives in digital journalism, the adaptation to mobile and social platforms for news use, and the challenge for journalism posed by artificial intelligence.

**Keywords** Journalistic boundaries · Journalism · Digital journalism · Digital media

## 1 Background

The metamorphic process that journalism has undergone in the last two decades (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2020) cannot leave anyone indifferent, least of all the researchers in the field of communication. The different stages of digitalization, the impact of high technology, the emergence of new actors that feed technologically mediated communication, the rise of social networks, the platforming of society, the

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growth of new channels and formats, as well as changes in usage and news consumption have challenged the fundamental journalistic precepts, routines and practices, questioning many of its norms.

The last twenty years have marked a turning point in the development of journalism, in its practice and in the research conducted from the field of communication and from other scientific areas. Journalism, which has enjoyed a rich and relatively stable history of professionalization, with a wide variety of scholars from different disciplines theorizing that history (Deuze and Witschge 2018), now exists in a social scenario that has radically changed, along with the network society and the evolution of global geopolitics. The changes in digital journalism—which involve much more than technology (Zelizer 2019)—have fueled the role of new entrants into the field and have required legacy media journalists and digital natives in dominant positions to reconsider their definition of journalism, as well as their practices (Perreault and Ferrucci 2020).

The emergence of new actors—bloggers, influencers, web developers, amateur journalists, news app designers, active audiences—and their relationship with journalism has left no one indifferent in the field of communication and journalism studies. The limits, the boundaries, the central actors in the field, and the peripheral actors have brought back into focus some of the usual debates in journalism. The theorizations and definitions of the past are subject to revision because of renewed difficulties in drawing clear boundaries between what is journalism and what is not. The journalistic field sees opportunities for digital journalism and for maintaining a central role in the democratic and pluralistic societies of the future, but also many threats. Disinformation, which has become a key problem for contemporary democratic societies, and which must be fought with media literacy (Sádaba and Salaverría 2023), and native advertising, which raises ethical concerns due to its misleading dimension for the audience (Beckert 2022), have become two of the major risks.

The frequency and depth of changes in journalism, together with poor practices, have contributed to the erosion of trust and credibility of journalistic products. The importance of having reliable information in such a difficult context as the COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the consequences for citizens' trust in the media (Adam et al. 2023). In this context, discussions have multiplied on the need to establish sustainable models for quality journalism and to establish mechanisms to support its role in the democratic and pluralistic societies of the third millennium. Trust and honesty, fundamental values of journalism, have once again shown their importance and the relevance of the media nurturing these values and of citizens trusting the news (Myllylahti and Treadwell 2022). This restoration of trust demands more transparency from the media and journalists, even if, on some occasions, this transparency reduces the perceived quality of the brand (Prochazka and Obermaier 2022).

In this changing and transformational context in society and in the field of communication, with innovation—a diverse and thriving field (García-Avilés 2021)—in journalism as one of the driving forces of these transformations, the conceptualization of the field's limits and theorization are essential to respond to the challenges. The existence of a large group of researchers who analyze the different perspectives at the international level, with relevant projects and suggestive results, offers a certain

confidence in the capacity to offer answers to successfully face the most immediate challenges. But the challenge is there, and we know we need scientific evidence for the theorization of a journalism in transformation. All steps forward in this direction will be very encouraging.

## 2 Journalism and Its Blurring Boundaries

Blurring boundaries have been used for some years now to explain journalism in change in the digital age (see Banjac and Hanusch 2022; Carlson and Lewis 2015; Koch et al. 2023; Lewis 2012; Maares and Hanusch 2020; Meier 2018; Nørgaard Kristensen and From 2012; Scott et al. 2019). In the state of flux in which journalism finds itself (Spyridou et al. 2013) under scrutiny, with progressive drops in citizens' trust in the media (Newman et al. 2023), observing the evolution of journalism's boundaries helps to understand the phenomena and to anticipate challenges and opportunities. Indeed, although journalism may be in a moment of crisis (Pickard 2020), the interest in its evolution and, specifically, concerns about what happens at its boundaries indicates that it is still relevant (Loosen 2015). Such boundaries are not static, and their evolution is affected in the multiple perspectives that shape journalism studies, so it is relevant to consider how the most recent changes influence the definition of those boundaries.

When it will be 30 years since the first digital media outlet, the prominence of digital-native media (Salaverría and Martínez-Costa 2021) and a determining influence of platforms (Nieborg and Poell 2018) are confirmed. Technology, in its widest sense, has provided journalism with new ways of producing, distributing and receiving information; innovation in formats and narratives has become increasingly common and it does not cease in the search for better solutions to explain what is happening in a complex world. We thus arrive at a 'Total Journalism' (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2022) that deploys all available techniques, from the essential elements of journalism to the most advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence and automation, 5G, blockchain, immersive technologies, or Web3.

Journalism has also been affected by changes in social context. Informational needs have driven modalities such as fact-checking (García-Marín 2020) in a scenario of global disinformation. The emergence of new peripheral actors (Tandoc 2019), influencers, alternative media and counter-media demand the redefinition of the boundaries of journalism. At the same time, it requires a redefinition of the role of journalism and the journalist in our society.

Along with the widespread globalization of our time, digital development fosters proximity media and enhances the foundations of journalism in local and hyperlocal communities (Gulyas and Baines 2020). Another changing and challenging aspect is the shift towards the audience (Swart et al. 2022), with renewed conceptions of who the audience is, the promotion of communities and initiatives that involve the public in the discussion and decision making; these are sometimes linked to new business

models, with memberships and subscriptions being increasingly implemented by major newspapers.

The blurred boundaries of journalism include innovative and disruptive proposals. In this area of exchange and confluence with other fields and disciplines, both threats and opportunities for the future can emerge. Therefore, in a global post-pandemic context, we consider it necessary to address in this book the different perspectives emerging in the redefinition of the boundaries of journalism.

## ***2.1 Principles of Journalism Under Discussion***

Today's journalism is developing in a hybrid communication ecosystem in which the boundaries of journalism are necessarily being redefined. The authors López-García and Gutiérrez-Caneda (2023) argue that the response cannot be characterized by indifference to the consequences of the profound transformations that have taken place. They point out that it is necessary to address the open challenges, among which stand out the search for sustainability, the influence of hi-tech and ephemeral journalism, or the actors that impact the journalistic field and its periphery with their actions on the network.

As a profession in crisis, journalism faces the challenge of profitability, loss of quality, and connection with increasingly fragmented audiences in a context in which information consumption through social media leads to immediacy, superficiality and decontextualization (Larrondo Ureta et al. 2023). The authors explain how the theorization, practice and research of the journalistic profession are moving towards technological and epistemological paths. Beyond the technological innovation in the hybrid news media system, journalism continues to struggle for its significance and social function, although its boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred.

Solito and Sorrentino (2023) also argue that journalism is more necessary than ever. Journalism continues to maintain its identity, even if its processes are transformed and a greater number and type of actors are involved in its interweaving of influences. In the digital context, journalism and its functions are being redefined, but its mission and influence remain the same.

## ***2.2 Strategies for Sustainability in the Digital Environment***

While the fundamental principles of journalism and its role in society are being discussed, new media models are emerging or becoming normalized in the current digital context. Authors Vara-Miguel and Sánchez-Blanco (2023) address how digital innovation is also modifying the traditional business models of news organizations. They explore the new sources of revenue and business models implemented by digital media companies. They also analyze the threats and challenges that new sources of financing such as payment for content, e-commerce or native advertising involve for



the media industry, the development of the social role that journalism should play in modern democracies, and access to news content.

The boundaries of journalism are also redefined in relation to local media, exploring the limits of geographical boundaries and the relationship of news media and journalists with the citizenry. Negreira-Rey and colleagues (2023) analyze the conceptualization and blurring boundaries in the study of hyperlocal media in Spain and the Netherlands, also proposing elements that improve the methodology for research on hyperlocal media. They diagnose a significant growth of hyperlocal news outlets with political and cultural factors determining the models in both countries. However, these authors point out the lack of economic resources for the development of viable journalistic projects.

The process of platformization also imposes new challenges for the media and the maintenance of their independence. Pöyhtäry and Sirkkunen (2023) study the Finnish media context based on interviews with chief editors and media experts. The authors expose the strategies through which the organizations defend the boundaries of the news media business, in a country with a high level of public trust in the media. They emphasize that professional values are based on ethics and a strong system of self-regulation. Likewise, representatives and experts maintain a positive view on the ability of news media to defend their boundaries and survive in the digital environment.

### ***2.3 Tensions Between Old and New Actors in Journalism***

At the borders of journalism there are also the so-called pseudo-media, which Palau-Sampio (2023) analyzes based on a mixed-methods study. In this analysis, the author assesses whether pseudo-media adopt the six journalistic role performances of traditional media and finds that they mainly imitate them and their watchdog role. Furthermore, she warns that most of the pseudo-media items analyzed show polarization and clickbait traits, omitting essential journalism ethics.

The relationship between political power, the citizenry and the news media has also been transformed in the digital environment. Casero-Ripollés and Ribeiro (2023) present a study in which they analyze how social media have changed the role and influence of citizens in the public debate. The authors focus on the limits of political journalism through social network analysis over a big data sample of tweets related to negotiations for the formation of the Government of Spain. They argue that the influence of journalists and politicians is greater than that of citizens. Overall, the fact that citizens can become connective influencers and condition the digital political conversation ends up having effects on political journalism.

Canavilhas and colleagues (2023) provide a contemporary approach to the study of the relationship between journalism, politics and risk communication. They do so by reviewing how research on political journalism has evolved and the issues that set the agenda in the current context, determined by the political discussion in the digital public sphere and the blurred boundaries between journalistic and political actors.

The authors also revise the political positioning of the main Spanish and Portuguese media and the legal framework for press freedom and the exercise of the journalistic profession. Finally, they address the role of political and journalistic actors in risk communication based on the case of radon gas.

## ***2.4 Evolving Formats and Narratives in Digital Journalism***

The development of digital media and journalism has made it possible to exploit the dimensions of hypertextuality, multimodality and interactivity in the production and dissemination of journalistic content. After almost three decades of digital journalism, Vázquez-Herrero and Van der Nat (2023) study how innovations in digital storytelling techniques have introduced new journalistic and audience practices. The authors analyze the production and reception of interactive and immersive digital storytelling and present several significant cases that blur and redefine the boundaries of journalism from the perspective of design, production, or audiences, opening several debates for reflection. Lovato and colleagues (2023) also study interactive narratives, focusing on nonfiction products in Latin America. Through numerous relevant projects from this region, the authors highlight journalistic and documentary production that challenges classic narrative models and takes advantage of the potential of the digital ecosystem.

Innovation in journalistic narrative through new formats is addressed by García-Ortega and García-Avilés (2023), who study the ephemeral content of Instagram Stories, viral journalism on TikTok and the adaptation of comics for reportage. The application of these formats and the adaptation to the language and logic of social platforms impacts professionals and journalistic practices, challenging the boundaries of traditional journalism. New possibilities are opened up for news coverage, there is a greater hybridization between information, entertainment and fiction storytelling techniques, and narratives with a greater emotional impact on the audience are exploited.

## ***2.5 Adaptation to Mobile and Social Platforms for News Use***

The evolution of digital journalism has been marked by the adaptation of media and journalists to new platforms and formats of content consumption, necessary to make their news content accessible to audiences. One of the major transformations, which is still ongoing, is the adaptation to mobile technology and devices, which Silva-Rodríguez and colleagues (2023) study. The authors review the evolution of mobile journalism, which has moved in step with technological advances, and which has opened up new possibilities for the production, distribution and consumption of news content, also giving rise to new professional profiles. Mobile journalism expands the borders of journalism by integrating with traditional media, building new spaces and

forms of participation with the audience, and challenging innovation in the face of new devices and platforms.

Together with the content consumption on mobile devices, in recent years we have also witnessed the rise of audio formats, which Martínez-Graña and colleagues (2023) study. The authors analyze the daily podcast as a new format that challenges the routines of traditional journalistic media and allows for innovation in language and journalistic narrative. Based on the analysis of the daily podcasts of five leading news media in Spain, both legacy and digital natives, the authors identify characteristic features in their subject matter, structure and language. They find common characteristics in deep-dive podcasts and newscasts. Daily podcasts bring editorial prestige and a new way to reach audiences, especially younger ones. However, they raise doubts about the hybridization of informative and editorial or opinion content identified in the analyzed pieces.

The adaptive evolution of journalism to different types of media has given rise to successive waves of journalism—from print, broadcast and digital to social media journalism—, which are studied by Hendrickx (2023). The author analyzes each of these phases, discussing the main features from four distinguished actors: media practitioners, media users, media regulators, and media researchers. A fourth wave begins to be visible, with an effect on how news is produced, disseminated and consumed. Media strategies try to achieve brand awareness on the new channels and follow the trends set by the audience in terms of information consumption, especially among the youngest, to the point of challenging some of the boundaries of journalism when they land on platforms where entertainment predominates, for example.

Regarding social media as platforms for the diffusion and consumption of news content, Zago (2023) analyzes the phases of news recirculation in the digital environment and social media, as well as their implications for journalism. Digital platforms expand the channels of dissemination and interaction with news, which affects its promotion, debate and interpretations, raising awareness of news events, creating and shaping news events. This recirculation expands the boundaries of journalism and poses challenges for media and professionals, such as the control over the spread of their own content and its uncontrolled use by consumers, which can have disinformative effects.

## ***2.6 Tackling the Challenge of Artificial Intelligence in Journalism***

In recent years, automation has entered newsrooms and begun to change journalistic routines, raising questions about the need and role of journalists and opening ethical debates. Recently, artificial intelligence has become a major part of the debate on journalism and its limits. Pérez-Seijo and colleagues (2023) study automation, robotization and the application of AI in newsrooms through an analysis of the Spanish,

Portuguese and Brazilian cases. This work reveals that the rise of AI is still emerging, which also implies the need to be aware of the challenges of algorithmic journalism.

On the other hand, Beckett and colleagues (2023) analyze the impact of intelligent journalism, another way of producing news that is blurring the traditional boundaries of journalism. Recent initiatives of generative artificial intelligence, such as Dall-E or ChatGPT, reveal new ways of producing content. For this reason, the authors also provide a thought-provoking decalogue for the creation of intelligent content.

### 3 An Open-Ended Conclusion

This book aims to be a contribution to the contemporary complex panorama of journalism and the central debates that occupy its study by academia. In recent years, the transformation of the communicative and media ecosystem, the technological evolution and platformization, and the change of roles and behaviors of audiences have contributed to broadening and diversifying the actors, models and practices of journalism. Its boundaries have become blurred, and questions have emerged to define, or redefine, what is and what is not news media or what is and what is not journalism.

The authors of this book contribute to the discussion of the principles and fundamentals of journalism in today's hybrid media system, its survival in the current technological and professional context and its capacity to influence. They also analyze strategies and models for the sustainability of digital media, one of the great challenges facing journalism. Journalism must find the formula to continue fulfilling its role in democratic societies, even when relations with other actors in the public sphere, such as political power or citizenship, are transformed and strained.

The evolution of technology and the digital environment continue to expand journalistic production practices and their limits. Innovation in content involves increasingly multimedia, interactive and immersive formats and narratives, which seek new forms of connection and consumption experience for audiences. Journalism is also expanding its boundaries in its adaptation to an ever-increasing diversity of platforms, characterized by ubiquity and its social dimension.

Recently, advances in artificial intelligence and the popularization of generative AI tools have renewed the debate on their integration into journalistic routines and news media. So-called intelligent journalism challenges the limits of what we conceive of as the role or tasks of journalists and introduces new factors for study and discussion, such as the ethical implications or the biases inherent to algorithmic mediation.

There is no doubt that the boundaries that define journalism—its actors, models and practices—are flexible and will keep expanding as technology continues to advance and the communication ecosystem evolves. Journalism must continue to adapt to the changing context in order to fulfill its role as an informative service to society. The challenge remains to reach citizens and connect with audiences, at a time when trust in journalism is under threat, concern about misinformation is growing and part of the public avoids or is not interested in news. Beyond any boundaries

and innovation process, journalism must defend its principles in order to become recognizable and reliable for citizens.

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# **Principles of Journalism Under Discussion**

# Hybrid Media Communication Ecosystems: Redefining the Boundaries of Journalism



Xosé López-García  and Beatriz Gutiérrez-Caneda 

**Abstract** The third decade of the third millennium will probably go down in history, among many other things, for the consolidation of the hybrid media communication ecosystem. This concept refers to the combination of two or more media of different types. New media and new technologies are taking place in a context of profound transformations not only in the uses and consumption of information, but also in the very conception of media and journalism. This context of hybridization and metamorphosis has prompted old and new debates on the limits of journalism. At the same time, many peripheral actors have forcefully entered the field to occupy relevant positions in the shaping of the journalistic space. The dispute has gained momentum and will likely remain prominent for quite some time.

**Keywords** Communication ecosystem · Hybrid media · Digital journalism · New media

## 1 Introduction

The initial stage of the third decade of the third millennium was marked by the strong impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It boosted digitization and fuelled the multiplication of hybrid systems in different fields, including education, social activities, and technologically mediated communication. Since the late 1990s, mass media has experienced a process of transformation that has involved the convergence of legacy media and emerging media. However, the pandemic's advent further accelerated the implementation of years of experimentation in this field, leading to proposals for the establishment of renewed media.

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The so-called new media—alternative media ecosystems compared to the traditional ones—used renewed narrative formats and had a new relationship with the audience (Cabrera-Méndez et al. 2019). They found a suitable culture to establish their innovative product models, designed for communication and information in the network society.

Digital native media have appeared on the web in recent years. They have inherited media structures and models, but they were born and designed for the Internet, with structures and techniques naturally adapted to the digital environment (Salaverría and Martínez-Costa 2021). These digital media have already made progress in the construction of models which, within a framework of diversity and depending always on the objectives and interests of the promoters, have explored formulas to better reach younger users and to make their dreams of innovation come true, especially in terms of dissemination, management, organizational culture, professional profiles, business models, genres-content and technological tools—these have been some of the most researched areas in recent years (García-Avilés 2021; Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2023).

After more than twenty years of initiatives, most digital native media are still active and with very diverse trajectories; the result has been an ever-changing hybrid media communication ecosystem. In addition to the approaches of developers and dominant models in the digital society, this transformation has been influenced by social networks (Safari 2018; Broersma and Eldridge II 2019) and the trend towards the platformization of society through connective structures that offer personalized services and contribute to innovation and economic growth (van Dijck et al. 2018). Nowadays, this context of native journalistic initiatives, social media and platforms feeds the new hybrid communication ecosystem where journalism struggles to maintain its space and adapt it to the new scenario.

## 2 The Legacy of the First Digital Stage

If we take as a starting point the year of the first media migrations to the Internet at the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century (Díaz Noci and Meso Ayerdi 1998), the first thirty years of digital journalism have shown, in different stages, the birth and consolidation of digital media or cybermedia and the consolidation of renewed journalistic practices on the web.

Digitalization's impact on journalism has been very significant, sparking many debates and provoking many uncertainties, with an increase in citizens' distrust of political institutions and the media (Kim and Buzzelli 2022). This fact has also unleashed processes of metamorphosis in the field of information (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2020) hitherto unknown in the evolution of journalism from its origins until the last decades of the last century.

This new specialty has been integrated with its own subjects and specialized master's degrees at different training centres. A good example is the Spanish case, where at the beginning of the current decade more than a hundred specific subjects

were taught in the curricula of Spanish universities (Masip et al. 2022), in addition to the integration of much content in a transversal way in the educational offer. From the beginning, not only did very few professionals doubt that the emergence of digital journalism was a modality that was entering the journalistic field with the will to remain, but there was a favourable trend towards experimentation and exploration of the new territories that were opened for journalism.

Today, some doubts have been dispelled. It has become clear that digital journalism is much more than technology because it is journalism that gives technology purpose, form, perspective and meaning, not the other way around (Zelizer 2019). Furthermore, digital journalism studies are concerned with much more than journalism produced, distributed and consumed with the help of digital technologies (Steensen and Westlund 2020). However, there are many open questions and challenges to making good digital journalism possible, especially in terms of business models and product sustainability (Castells-Fos et al. 2022).

Given the vital importance of journalism for the proper functioning of democratic systems, experts and citizen groups believe that the time has come to create the conditions for journalism to be maintained and to advance in a sustainable way (Kasem et al. 2015). This is the main challenge not only for journalists and the communication sector, but for today's societies as a whole: the search for sustainable ways for journalism in the present and in the future. Judging by industry reports, the current digital era has left many experiences of journalism in a context of interactivity and more user participation, but also with many challenges. The digitalization stage in the first two decades of the 2000s has left a legacy that the digital journalism of the future will inherit, and in this legacy, there are strengths but also threats.

### **3 New Players Communicating and Opening Debates**

Nowadays, the world is on the threshold of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab 2016), built on the Digital Revolution, and when it is being announced a fusion of technologies that will blur the lines between the physical, digital and biological spheres. In today's societies communication exists from many to many and there are more and more players not only communicating, but also intensifying their communication management actions in a ubiquitous mediation scenario (Aguado 2020).

In our societies, especially in the journalism field, we talk about the impact of AI, about AR initiatives, about the mobile communication influence and about VR contents. But we also talk about the noise and strong impact of disinformation strategies and fake news. Communication processes with artificial intelligence and artificial journalism are a phenomenon that have developed rapidly in a very short time (Parratt-Fernández et al. 2021). This tendency is increasingly present in newspapers, which has led to renewed debates on ethical, labour and social issues (Túñez-López et al. 2019). At the same time, these processes have contributed to a radical change in the characteristics of the news pieces.