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The Diversity of Scholarship on Journalism. How Journalism Journals Reflect Theories, Methods, and Topics of Journalism Research – a Content Analysis (2008 – 2009)

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Abstract

Over the course of time various changes in journalism created a diverse media landscape. Since generally journalism studies are closely linked to its object, this leads to the question whether the diversity of journalism is reflected by journalism studies. To answer this question, we conducted a content analysis of academic articles published in seven peer-reviewed English language journalism journals. In sum, the paper will lay open gaps and desiderata, draw conclusions and suggest possible improvements for future journalism studies in an emerging media landscape.

Introduction

Today, journalism studies is “one of the fastest growing areas within the larger discipline of communication research and media studies” (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009, xi). Can journalism studies be called only an “area” or is it a proper and distinct discipline showing even signs of transdisciplinarity involving new perspectives out of the combination of multiple disciplines? How can we identify as well as systematize new and old fields in journalism studies when facing tendencies towards more differentiation, heterogeneity, and also inconsistency? To answer these questions, we will have a look at the history and developments of concepts and theories in journalism studies.

Over the course of time various changes in journalism created a diverse media landscape. Since generally journalism studies are closely linked to its object, this leads to the question whether the diversity of journalism is reflected by journalism studies. To answer this question, we conducted a content analysis of academic articles published in seven peer-reviewed English language journalism journals. The sample comprises articles published in volumes 2008 and 2009. Not only abstracts but complete articles were encoded. The code-book consists of 18 quantitative and qualitative variables pointing at the following questions of which the results are indicators of the diversity (or uniformity) of journalism studies, for example:

1. Which theoretical approaches are applied?
2. Which field of journalism research do most of the studies belong to?
3. Does the academic research address the multifaceted media environment or does it focus on few specific topics?
4. Which methods are used?

Evolution of Scholarship on Journalism

If we look further at the institutionalization of journalism studies regarding the development and establishment of departments or schools, professorships and professional associations as well as an own terminology in the respective field, we will certainly agree that in most places of the world journalism, since a certain time, is an academic discipline.⁵⁵ It is a recognized discipline carrying a certain image in the scientific community. The huge number of scientific journals on research in journalism also provides evidence of a high level of institutionalization. Thus we can conclude that journalism is an academic discipline, even if not in all times and places.

Normativism: the journalist as a person

Having touched the increasing professionalization and institutionalization of journalism research, we will now focus on the history of ideas, approaches, concepts, theories and paradigms.

German researchers for a long time concentrated on a person-oriented, practical understanding of journalism. Also in other countries “a história do jornalismo é muitas vezes escrita como a biografia dos ‘grandes homens’” (Traquina, 2005b, 60). In the U.S.A., too, journalism studies were limited mainly to practical trainings. When researchers conducted studies with special attention paid to journalistic production and work context, their work was received sceptically by the practitioners who talked of “Mickey Mouse studies“ (cf. Zelizer, 2004, 20).

⁵⁵ In Brazil, for example, journalism studies started with Adelmo Genro Filho and his addiction to rather Marxist theories in the 1970s. Anyhow, many University institutes were not founded until in the 1990 (cf. Traquina 2005a, 14).

Discovery of analytical empiricism

Orientation towards individualism and normativism was rapidly losing its dominant role when researchers started to use the repertoire of empirical methods from social sciences. Wilbur Schramm pioneered empiricism relying on the works of Harold Lasswell (rooting in political sciences), Paul Felix Lazarsfeld (sociology) and Carl Hovland (social psychology).

Towards systems theories and integrative social approaches

The German scholar Manfred Rühl in the 1960s rejected the paradigm of normativism and did not see the individual journalist or “Mr. Gates” as the main research object anymore. His alternative: “The person as a paradigm is a much too complex and inelastic term to serve as a unit of analysis for journalism. In response to this, the term ‘social system’ is suggested, which permits differentiation between journalism and its environments.” (Rühl, 1980, 435-439) One has to admit that the term “system” is not used uniformly by journalism researchers till this day.

Internationalization and transdisciplinarity

International and intercultural comparative studies are increasingly enriching our knowledge about structures, actors, products as well as the functioning of journalism as such. Some researchers even talk about the “global-comparative turn” in journalism studies. To reinforce their assumption, Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch point to the new possibilities of communication and collaboration in a globalized world: “Journalism researchers are finding more and more opportunities to meet with colleagues from afar, made possible by the end of the cold war and increasing globalization. New communication technologies have triggered the rise of institutionalized global networks of scientists, while it has become much easier to acquire funding for international studies. As journalism itself is an increasingly global phenomenon, its study is becoming an international and collaborative endeavor“ (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009, 6). One has to admit that the focus of most of the studies still is on journalism in Western industrial nations. Nevertheless, researchers from Africa, Asia and Latin America are more than ever raising their voices and acting as a counterbalance to the hitherto dominating “Westernization“, or “Western bias” in journalism studies (cf. Wasserman/de Beer 2009). What is needed in future is a truly global research on media communication transcending and surmounting cultural, national, and disciplinary boundaries (cf. Weaver & Löffelholz, 2008, 8).

Analysis of scientific journals

The disciplinarity and transdisciplinarity of journalism studies can be well detected when looking at the publications in the field. The resulting spectrum will show which criteria mark the actual research and where interrelations to other disciplines can be found. It might also be an indicator for future research fields. But let us first have a look at the status quo of theories, methods and topics in journalism studies. Therefore we systematically analyzed seven reputable journalism research journals, all issues of volumes 2008 and 2009. We decided on the following journals because they have proved themselves relevant places for publication in an international research field, or they represent publications of journalism research which, up to now, have been more or less marginalized in the Western scientific world: "Journalism Studies", "Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly", "Journalism – Theory, Practice and Criticism", "Journalism and Communication Monographs", "Brazilian Journalism Research", "Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies" as well as "Pacific Journalism Review". Another criterion was that the field, "journalism", had to be mentioned in the journal's title because the title stands for the journal's (self-)concept. Nonetheless we did not include journals which turn more toward articles from journalism practice and not to articles from scientific sources.

All seven professional journals adhere to peer-review-system and have two to six issues per annum. The sample consisted of published scientific articles only. We did not encode editorials, obituaries, book reviews etc., only plainly scientific contributions.

The number of articles coded is: Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 68 articles, Journalism Studies 99 articles, Journalism – Theory, Practice and Criticism 66 articles, Journalism & Communication Monographs 13 articles, Ecquid Novi 21 articles, Brazilian Journalism Research 39 articles, and Pacific Journalism Review 43 articles. In total we coded 349 articles, 182 articles from 2008 and 167 from 2009. The little smaller number in 2009 is due to the fact that Journalism – Theory, Practice and Criticism had a special 10th anniversary issue in June 2009 which did not contain standard articles but 38 short essays plus editorial and book reviews, hence could not be used.

Journal	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Accumulated percentage
Journalism & Mass Communication Quaterly	68	19,5	19,5	19,5
Journalism Studies	99	28,4	28,4	47,9
Journalism - Theory, Practica and Criticism	66	18,9	18,9	66,8
Journalism & Communication Monographs	13	3,7	3,7	70,5
Ecquid Novi	21	6,0	6,0	76,5
Brazilian Journalism Research	39	11,2	11,2	87,7
Pacific Journalism Review	43	12,3	12,3	100,0
Total	349	100,0	100,0	--

Tab. 2: Number and proportion of articles

The coefficient of intercoderreliability measured $r = .92$. One has to admit that most times it was in the category “theoretical focus” that differences occurred. That can be traced back to the fact that in many articles the authors did not state clearly and explicitly their theoretical background.

The field of journalism research that the authors studied in their articles was encoded according to the Lasswell formular “Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?”. If the researches focused on the “who” we coded “communicator research”, if they focused on “what” we coded “media content research”, and so on. Multiple choices were possible.

Definitely in first place ranks communicator research. 64.5 percent of all articles treated this field of journalism studies. They are followed by media content research (49.6 percent). Then there is a big gap until audience research ranks on third place with 14.6 percent. Research on the channel resp. the medium as a product as such is quite rare: only 9.2 percent of all articles presented data or observations regarding this field of research.

Table 3 shows how the research fields are portioned according to the respective periodicals. In almost all journals communicator research and research on media content are the most important research fields.

Journal	Communicator research	Research on media content	Research on medium / channel	Audience research
Over all journals	64.5	49.6	9.2	14.6
Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly	35.3	58.8	4.4	44.1
Journalism Studies	68.7	47.5	16.2	5.1
Journalism – Theory, Practice and Criticism	78.8	39.4	1.5	10.6
Journalism & Communication Monographs	84.6	53.8	7.7	15.4
Ecquid Novi	71.4	28.6	28.6	14.3
Brazilian Journalism Research	61.5	61.5	10.3	10.3
Pacific Journalism Review	72.1	53.5	2.3	0.0

Tab. 3: Research fields (in percent)

Furthermore, the articles were encoded according to their main theoretical focus. As said above, many authors did not state clearly their theoretical affiliation but presented their research data without tracing it back to a profound theoretical background.

To have a solid instrument for dividing the single theories in larger sections we applied the eight theoretical concepts of journalism research according to Löffelholz (2003). He distinguishes normative individualism / gifted individuals, materialist theories of media / economic goods, analytical empiricism, legitimist empiricism, theories of action, systems theories, integrative social theories / three-level-integration and cultural studies.⁵⁶

If it was not possible to relate the applied theory to one of the concepts, the coder could write the concrete theory as a separate string variable. He could also tag that there was no theory applied at all. Thus the coding resulted in the following spreading:

⁵⁶ For further explanation of the theoretical concepts see also the synopsis of basic theoretical concepts in journalism studies in Loeffelholz (2008,).

Main theoretical focus	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Accumulated percentage
Normative individualism	24	6.9	8.3	8.3
Materialist theories of media	3	0.9	1.0	9.3
Analytical empiricism	110	31.5	37.9	47.2
Legitimist empiricism	21	6.0	7.2	54.5
Theories of action	23	6.6	7.9	62.4
Systems theories	11	3.2	3.8	66.2
Integrative social theories	4	1.1	1.4	67.6
Cultural studies	94	26.9	32.4	100.0
Total	290	83.1	100.0	--

Tab. 4: Theoretical focus

59 articles (16.9 percent) did not mention a specific theoretical focus. If we leave these apart and let the remaining 290 articles equal 100.0 percent, we have a high portion of 37.9 percent using theories of the “analytical empirical approach” category as theoretical background. One third of the articles regard cultural studies as the theory relevant for their research. The other categories are chosen in not such relevant numbers: 8.3 percent normative individualism, 7.9 percent critical theories of action, 7.2 percent legitimist empirical approach. The remaining three categories are even more neglected: materialist theories of media seem to be out of fashion since the end of the Iron Curtain and most socialistic regimes.

When looking at analytical empiricism in detail, there is a remarkably high percentage of articles treating agenda setting (10.3 percent out of all 349 articles) as well as theories of news selection (gatekeeping, news bias, news values theory etc.) (8.0 percent). These seem to be theories that can easily be combined with empirical research and have a solid standing in the theory portfolio of our discipline.

As said above, in a string we coded the theories that were not related to one of the eight categories, which have proved to unite the main theories applied in journalism research. But of course, as journalism research is a transdisciplinary field of study, too, researchers apply theories of different scientific origin. Some examples: cognitive theory, value theory and so on. These examples show the variety of theoretical concepts that can be found but also indicate a strong tendency toward theories from the field of psychology as well as political studies.

The following table shows the medium the authors brought into focus in their articles. Here again, multiple choices were possible.

Journal	newspaper	magazine	radio	TV	internet
Over all journals	38.7	7.7	8.0	15.8	17.5
Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly	33.8	11.8	4.4	17.6	23.5
Journalism Studies	46.5	4.0	8.1	12.1	18.2
Journalism – Theory, Practice and Criticism	31.8	4.5	6.1	16.7	12.1
Journalism & Communication Monographs	53.8	23.1	7.7	15.4	0.0
Ecquid Novi	38.1	0.0	33.3	9.5	0.0
Brazilian Journalism Research	41.0	10.3	0.0	20.5	38.5
Pacific Journalism Review	32.6	11.6	11.6	18.6	9.3

Tab. 5: Medium in focus (in percentages)

Surprisingly, 27.8 percent of all articles did not focus on a specific medium but concentrated on theories, conditions for professional formation of journalists, general cognitive effects or some other topic. The newspaper as traditional research object is in first rank in every journal. This also might be surprising thinking of the much longer time audiences are watching TV or are surfing in the internet but newspapers, above all high quality newspapers, are still seen as important definers for topics discussed in society. Furthermore, thinking of document content analysis they are an “easy-to-handle” research object.

Internet and TV are almost on the same level (17.5 vs. 15.8 percent). As the internet seems to be getting more and more important even in remote areas of the world, it might be of interest to pursue this development in future years. On the other hand it might also be interesting to have a look at past volumes of journalism studies periodicals and trace back at which point in time the internet “overtook” television.

Studies on magazines and radio are not so very popular.⁵⁷ Not even ten percent resp. of the articles of all analyzed journals chose these media as research object. A reason for the unusually high percentage of articles in *Ecquid Novi* treating questions of radio

⁵⁷ The high percentage of the research object “magazine” in *Journalism & Communication Monographs* has to be seen in relation with the small number of articles in that journal: only 13 (cf. table 2).

might be the utter importance of radio in remote African areas or in countries that tried or still try to amend the people's participation regarding democratic rights with the help of the media.

Getting back to outlining the internet as research object, we examined the field in more detail. There are plenty of possibilities to highlight the internet in a research study⁵⁸ but we focused on new employments like blogs, e-communities (facebook, xing etc.) or multimedia platforms like the photo-sharing platform "flickr" or the video-sharing platform "youtube".

In 39.3 percent of the studies dealing with internet-related issues the authors wrote about blogs or bloggers, in 8.2 percent about multimedia platforms, in 4.9 percent about e-communities, and 3.3 percent mentioned micro-blogging services like "twitter".

In our analysis we also asked whether the studies dealt with professional content (e.g. journalistic websites) or user-generated content (e.g. newsgroups, bulletin boards). The result shows that the investigation of professional content by far outnumbered the investigation of user-generated content (72.1 vs. 27.9 percent). Hence, scientists in our field still stick to analyzing content of professional journalists.

And how do they analyze and expand on their research topic? Is it mainly by relying on theory or by employing empirical approaches? As shows table 6, in most of the studies (68.8 percent) we found the presentation of results of empirical research.

Theory / empiricism	Frequency	Percentage
Mainly theory	109	31.2
Mainly empirical findings: single study	200	57.3
Mainly empirical findings: comparative study	40	11.5
Total	349	100.0

Tab. 6: Main focus on theory/empirical study

Within the articles presenting results of empirical research the single case studies prevailed (57.3 percent). There were only 11.5 percent that offered results of comparative studies (be it comparing countries, be it journalistic cultures or the like).

⁵⁸ For example there were single studies covering governments' websites, content management systems, websites and news content of social movements as well as "google" topics or wikis.

The studies concentrating on empirical findings did employ empirical research methods.⁵⁹ Again, multiple codings were allowed.

Empirical research method	Frequency	Percentage
content analysis	151	43.3
in-depth / guided interviews	70	20.1
(paper)written survey	29	8.3
observation	27	7.7
standardized oral survey	13	3.7
online survey	13	3.7
declared (laboratory) experiment	11	3.2

Tab. 7: Empirical approaches employed

The most demanded empirical approach very clearly is content analysis (43.4 percent). The empirical research method ranked second is not even half as much employed (in-depth or guided interview: 20.1 percent). Paper-written surveys as well as observations were used in not even ten percent resp. of the analyzed articles. According to our findings, oral and online polls do not belong to the common repertoire of journalism research either. And experiments come in last with only 3.2 percent of all articles.

If we exclude the number of 85 articles (24.4 percent) which did not employ any empirical research method, we have a new “method-sample” of n = 264 articles. Out of these 264 (100 percent) articles we had 210 that described the results of studies following a single-method-design. The remaining 54 employed multi-methodological approaches, the majority combining two different methods, but in six cases even three different methods. Out of these six, there were three studies combining content analysis with in-depth interviews and observation. Looking at the multi-methodological studies in general, there were 37.0 percent combining content analysis with in-depth interviews, 24.0 percent combining in-depth interviews and observation as well as 13.0 percent combining content analysis and paper-written surveys.

If we correlate applied method with theoretical approach we can see a strong correlation between content analysis and analytical empiricism. 70.0 percent of all the 110 articles referring to analytical empiricism as their theoretical background (see above), present the results of a content analysis. This is a coherent finding as there were many “classical” studies on news value theory etc. where a content analysis to detect the employment of certain news factors seems to be apparent.

⁵⁹Albeit the studies relying mainly on theory, of course, most times did not employ an empirical approach, there were some putting their focus on theory but presenting some short empirical data.

There was also a dense correlation between content analysis and cultural studies: In 43.6 percent of all “cultural studies”-articles the researchers had conducted a content analysis. Cultural studies were also closely linked to in-depth interviews (23.4 percent).

Studies from the theoretical category “legitivist empiricism” were strongly related to in-depth interviews (42.9 percent) as well as to paper-written surveys (23.8 percent). This is obvious as legitivist empiricism is interested in the motivation, self-concept and political affiliation of journalists as well as their image of colleagues, their audience, and the like (cf. Löffelholz, 2003, 35).

Regarding the country focus of the articles, it is not surprising that the three journals naming their landscape scope in their title, i.e. *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies*, *Brazilian Journalism Research* and *Pacific Journalism Review*, centre on journalism studies dealing with country-specific aspects from Africa, Latin America, Australia and New Zealand. The share of articles regarding continents is:

Continent	Percentage
North America	36.9
Europe	25.5
Australia / New Zealand / Oceania	14.8
Latin America	11.7
Asia	10.1
Africa	8.7

Tab. 10: Share of articles regarding different world regions (multiple answers possible)

Examples for studies on culture- or country-specific aspects are: post-apartheid, the Australian Federal Press Gallery, coverage of the Maori party’s election campaign. 51 articles did not focus on a specific country. If we discount these from the total n of 349 articles, we have 298 articles left where a specific country focus was named. Taking this new n = 298 = 100 percent, we have a strong share of 36.9 percent of articles dealing with the U.S.A. and Canada, for example analyzing U.S.-American media or portraying U.S.-American journalists, and about a fourth of the articles dealing with aspects of journalism in European countries⁶⁰. The world region “Australia / New Zealand / Oceania” was represented by 14.8 percent of the articles, Latin America by 11.7 percent. Placed second to last and last were Asia and Africa (10.1 resp. 8.7 percent).

⁶⁰ Turkey numbered among Asia.

Regarding questions of transdisciplinarity we wanted to know whether the scientists in their research stuck only and purely to the field of journalism or whether their research was tangent to other fields. The findings (table 8) show that most of the studies affected interrelated areas like politics, technology, history, but also advertising, public relations, and entertainment.

Disciplinary links	Frequency	Percentage
Politics	141	40.4
Technology	52	14.9
History	35	10.0
Advertising	30	8.6
Public relations	16	4.6
Entertainment	13	3.7
Economy	9	2.6
Other (culture, law, military, religion, science, sports etc.)	8	2.3
No specific disciplinary link	45	12.9
Total	349	100.0

Tab. 8: Disciplinary links

Researchers in our discipline have their specific perspective but from this “journalism” point of view broaden their scope and conduct research that is of importance to connected scientific disciplines like for example political or historical studies.

In an open string we coded the specific topics of the articles and afterwards built categories if some topics were mentioned over average. 4.6 percent of the articles laid their focus on globalization or Europeanization of journalism. 5.4 percent treated questions of profession and professionalization. A quite astonishing amount of 8.0 percent concentrated explicitly on gender or race aspects. Very few articles covered tabloidization or yellow press. Higher percentages were achieved by the following issues: Articles dealing with topics like ethics, values or normative demands in journalism were 16.0 percent of the total. Quality aspects in general were the topic of 12.6 percent of the articles. The quality debate thus is recognized but not thoroughly discussed in the journalism field. 20.6 percent of the studies dealt with aspects regarding structure and organisation in journalism e.g. in editorial offices or news rooms but also structures imposed from, for example, regulatory authorities.

Conclusion

As new theories in journalism studies make the field more complex and heterogeneous, journalism researchers have to trace the new approaches attentively. Crucial desiderata will be that they perceive journalism as a global phenomenon, taking into account its cultural, economic and political variety, and that they will enhance a meta-theoretical discourse, holding the balance of disciplinarity and transdisciplinarity in journalism studies.

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