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Challenging presentism in journalism studies: An emotional life history approach to understanding the lived experience of journalists

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen

Cardiff University

Abstract

This paper argues that studying the emotional life histories of journalists will help us better understand the profound changes and challenges facing the profession. The paper suggests that the field has been marked by “presentism” and requires new tools and vocabularies for studying how transformations in journalism have shaped journalists as individuals and journalism as a professional identity over the longer term. It proposes that an emphasis on emotional life histories allows us to think differently about the big and recurring debates in the field by: It offers us a way of seeing historical transformations from the bottom up, on the basis of lived and embodied experience. It provides a vocabulary and a method for explaining changes in journalistic professionalism, practices and self-understanding - including journalistic norms, role perceptions, identities, and news values.

Keywords: Emotion, Emotional labor, Journalism, Life history, Precarity, Presentism, Professionalism

In this piece, I will suggest that one key way of studying change in journalism is through charting the emotional life histories of journalists. The challenges facing the profession – and the changes it is undergoing as a result – are well known. Over the past several decades, and particularly since the emergence of journalism studies as a discipline, researchers have documented the radical technological, economic and social changes affecting the institution of journalism – and the ways in which it has transformed the work of journalists. Research tracing these changes in the conditions for journalistic work has been extensive and varied, using a range of research methods – from surveys to ethnography.

Complicating the work of journalism scholars, the profession and institution which is the object of journalism studies has been rather a slippery and unstable one, changing beyond recognition before the very eyes of the observers. However, given the relative youth of the field, and its emphasis on both radical change and the ways in which such change might affect the future of journalism, journalism studies as a field has, by necessity, been informed by what we might refer to as a distinctive kind of “presentism.” For philosophers, presentism means a view that “only presently existing things exist” (Mozerski 2011; Hinchliff, 2000: 576-577), while historians critique presentism in “abstraction of past ideas from their scholarly contexts, interpreted in contemporary terms” (Kuklick, 1980: 8). Here, I would like to appropriate this term in a distinctive way, following on from the perspectives introduced by scholars of collective memory (see Goodson, 2001 for a similar understanding). For methodological and conceptual reasons, linked to the relative youth of journalism studies as a scholarly endeavor, our presentism means that we are very well informed about recent events, trends and histories through research that provides us with “snapshots” of journalism (Meyers

and Davidson, 2014: 988). We know less about longer-standing shifts in the lived (and shared) experiences of journalists (see Siles and Boczkowski, 2012). Research on journalism history has provided invaluable insights into changes in journalistic styles and reporting practices based on analyses of texts. Yet due to the limited availability of historical sources reflecting the everyday life and experience of journalists it has been less able to examine this crucial element (but see Brennen, 1995, 2001; Hardt and Brennen, 1995). As Hardt and Brennen (1995: ix) argued, dominant historical approaches have generated a “top-down history of the press that privileged property and ownership at the expense of an understanding of newswork.” The outcome of a focus on “moguls” has been a “history of institutional power without any consideration of the rank and file and their contribution to the social and political empowerment of the contemporary media industries” (Hardt and Brennen, 1995: vii).

As a field, we therefore have limited knowledge of how transformations in journalism have shaped journalists as individuals and journalism as a professional identity over the longer term. While we can garner valuable information about shifting experiences, priorities, values, norms and professional roles from long-standing and cross-national surveys (e.g. Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1991; Weaver et al. 2009), we know less about why these changes occur, how they impact on journalists longitudinally, and over the course of their professional life spans. To understand such processes, we need to ask questions such as the following: How do shifts in the conditions of journalistic labor inform journalists’ experience and interpretations of their profession (Meyers and Davidson, 2014: 988) - and therefore, ultimately, the culture of journalism? What are the key generational differences in responses to change? How do experiences of change vary across different types of news organizations experience? To what extent do journalists view their profession as essential features of their identities, and how has this changed over time? How have changes in the

media landscape, including the emergence of portfolio careers (Cohen and Mallon, 1999) and the rise of digital journalism (Witschge et al., 2016), altered professional self-understandings? And, in turn, to answer such questions, I argue that we may helpfully draw on life history interviews focusing on journalists' emotional labor.

Such an endeavor is particularly important in the context of this special section's focus on shaping conversations about journalism. It allows us to think differently about the big and recurring debates that have for so long loomed large in the field. It offers us a vocabulary and a method for explaining changes in journalistic professionalism, practices and self-understanding - including journalistic norms, role perceptions, identities, and news values, to name just a few areas. To explain the implications of this approach, I will discuss the distinctive, yet closely connected ideas of *life history* and *emotional management in journalism* below.

### Life histories of journalists

A life history approach (e.g. Cole and Knowles, 2001) is used widely in fields ranging from medicine to education, psychology, anthropology and sociology (e.g. Goodson, 2001), but, bar a few exceptions, absent from the study of journalism. Pioneered by the Chicago School sociologists seeking to understand the experience of migrants and other marginalized groups, it is often described as "history from below," deliberately juxtaposed to conventional historical accounts which focus on the elite, the powerful and the victors. It is an approach that tell us much about the nitty-gritty of everyday lived experience which may often be unglamorous and unworthy of note, but which it intrinsically tied to broader social, political, economical, and technological transformations. Through the use of in-depth interviews, it sheds light on how individuals negotiate their identities over a lifetime, placing their accounts in broader contexts and highlighting how they experience major changes. Cole and Knowles'

(2001: 11) view of life history research provides a compelling explanation of how this approach helps us to understand interactions between individual experience and social contexts:

...is about gaining insights into the broader human condition by coming to know and understand the experiences of other humans. It is about understanding a situation, profession, condition or institution through coming to know how individuals walk, talk, live, and work within that particular context. It is about understanding the relationship, the complex interaction, between life and context, self and place. It is about comprehending the complexities of a person's day-to-day decision making and the ultimate consequences that play out in that life so that insights into broader, collective experience may be achieved.

For Cole and Knowles (2001) and other key proponents of a life history approach, such accounts are sociologically meaningful precisely because of the broader contexts that they illuminate: Individual lives do not unfold in isolation, but are deeply embedded within and shaped by particular communities, cultures and professions (see also Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918; Goodson, 2001: 130). They are part of collectivities that experience and react to sweeping change. Such an approach is particularly helpful because it allows us to see journalists both as individuals who have distinctive and embodied experiences, and as members of a rapidly changing sociological category. To appropriate James Carey's argument in "The Problem of Journalism History," it gives us access to "structures of feeling" by showing us how lived experience shapes ways of thinking and living and "how action [makes] sense from the standpoint of...actors (Carey, 1974: 4). It reminds us that journalists occupy distinctive subject positions within the journalistic field (e.g. Benson & Neveu, 2005), and that these positions not only shape their engagement with change, but also their ability to adapt and thrive under challenging circumstances. This means that some

journalists, and the organizations they work in, are better equipped with material and emotional resources to adapt to processes of “creative destruction” currently shaking up the industry (Schlesinger and Doyle, 2015) whereas others are structurally positioned to fail (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017). In other words, responses to change cannot be understood as occurring in a vacuum, but are instead profoundly shaped by structural conditions and power relations which have frequently remained invisible in scholarly accounts. Journalists working for well-resourced and elite news organizations like the *BBC* or the *New York Times* may be subject to similar forms of change as those working for regional newspapers or hyperlocal blogs, but better positioned to respond to these changes.

While the method of the life history interview has been used to study the *audiences* of journalism (e.g. Barnhurst, 1998; Peters, 2012), it has been largely absent from research on journalists themselves (but see Brennen, 1995; 2001). In one of the few studies to have employed a life history approach to studying journalists, Meyers and Davidson (2014) highlighted the importance of understanding journalistic “structures of feeling” (Williams, 1977). They suggested that the crisis in the journalism industry has induced an “occupational sense of passive resignation” which is all the more devastating in a profession which is defined by its proactive and energetic engagement with society’s power structures (Meyers and Davidson, 2014: 1002). Similarly, Penny O’Donnell and her colleagues, who have employed life history interviews as one of several methods in their research on journalists who have been made redundant, found that journalists were “emotionally traumatized” and experienced “anger and anxiety” following on from their job loss (O’Donnell, Zion & Sherwood, 2016). Morini, Carls and Armano (2014) drew on journalists’ employment biographies to understand how they negotiate daily work requirements and conditions. The relationship between the “passion” associated with journalistic labor, and the growing precariousness of workers’ professional lives was central to their analysis: They observed

that pleasure of work in journalism is undermined by precarisation and loss of autonomy, which leads to “emotional distancing and disengagement from work” (Morini, Carls and Armano, 2014, para 26).

What these insights demonstrate is that an interest in career life histories at a time of crisis and upheaval cannot neglect the role of emotions in shaping the individual and collective responses of journalists to change, and that such an interest offers us a way of seeing historical transformations from the bottom up, on the basis of lived experience.

### Emotional labor in journalism

To understand how journalists manage their emotions over the course of their career life histories means paying attention to a phenomenon which has tended to be invisible in research. Around the world, professional self-understandings and role conceptions are closely tied to ideals of detachment and non-involvement (Hanitzsch et al., 2011). The governing assumption of the profession has been that journalists are objective, impartial and distanced observers of events, and that emotion is anathema to responsible journalistic storytelling. This has meant that journalists’ experience and management of feelings (Hochschild, 1983) has been largely invisible and under-researched (Peters, 2011; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). The neglect of emotion could be seen as an epistemological blind spot which renders invisible what is actually a central constitutive feature of journalism.

However, recent scholarship has begun to take an interest in the place of emotion in journalism, as part of a broader “affective turn” (Clough and Halley, 2007) across humanities and social sciences. This includes research on journalists’ responses to traumatic events (Richards, 2007; Jukes, 2017), understandings of emotionality in their reporting (Pantti,

2010), and the place of emotion in award-winning journalistic texts (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013). David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker (2008; 2011) have pointed to the emotional labor of workers in the television industry, on the basis of an ethnography of the young television professionals working on a UK television show, demonstrating that “additional pressures are borne by these workers because of the requirements to undertake emotional labor, involving the handling of strong emotions on the part of talent show contributors, and to maintain good working relations in short-term project work, requirements generated by the need to ensure future employment” (2008: 107). In Richards and Rees’ (2011: 851) work on journalists’ emotional labor in traumatic situations, they found “a broad and fundamental ambivalence in the professional discourse of journalism between objectivity and emotional engagement, and a striking inattention to questions about the emotional impact of journalists’ work upon audiences.” Similarly, after interviewing 25 journalists involved in covering traumatic events, Jukes (2017: 4) concluded that “what emerges is a complex picture of journalists grappling with competing tensions – on the one hand a virtually hard-wired notion of what it is to be a professional journalist and, on the other hand, a visceral, empathic often instinctive affective dimension of practice.”

These insights point to the need to understand, through the use of life history interviews, the evolving ways in which journalists (a) are emotionally affected by their work, (b) carry out widely varied, and rapidly changing forms of emotional labor, and (c) are reshaping their professional identities as a result of changes in the emotional climate of the profession.

First, the patterned ways in which journalists are *emotionally affected by the pressures of the profession* - and the changes to this profession - are crucial to study if we want to make sense of the resources that individuals and institutions can mobilize to handle rapid transformations and thereby make a meaningful contribution to the central debates of the

field. Here, it is important to understand journalism as a profession which is profoundly shaped by *positive* emotional attachments. More than many other secular professions, journalists view their work as a “calling” (Weaver et al., 2009: 58). They are motivated to enter the profession by abstract ideals, frequently bordering on the spiritual: They view journalism as a public service and a “noble profession” (Weaver et al., 2009: 58). Journalists are emotionally attached to the news organizations they work for, the actual work they do, and the idea of bringing news to the public.

However, the emotional attachment of journalists is a precarious one, and varies according to social, economic and material circumstances (Cunningham, 2001; O’Donnell, Zion & Sherwood, 2016; Russo, 1998). Some two decades ago, Russo (1998) argued that due to the rapid decline in the fortunes of journalism, journalists’ attachments to and identification with their news organizations and the profession as a whole may be undermined. For Morini, Carls and Armano (2014), journalists who leave the profession continue to feel passionate about writing and sharing their ideas, but channel it into other activities. More recently, Scott Reinardy (2016), in his magisterial study of journalists’ experience of the collapse of the newspaper industry, has demonstrated such shifts in the profession profoundly affect journalists. For example, one of the journalists he interviewed found herself obsessively tracking job losses and newspaper closures and developing “newspaper depression” as a result (Reinardy, 2016: 8). These observations point to the importance of understanding the day-to-day emotional pressures of work - and the ways in which it accumulates and changes shape over the course of a career. Such pressures include not just the constant specter of redundancy, casualization, cutbacks and general job insecurity (Ekdale et al., 2015), but also the challenges of dealing with constant technological change (e.g. Pavlik, 2000; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009), worries about libel suits, and coping with the competitive environment of the profession, to mention just a few shared experiences.

Secondly, with respect to understanding the *rapidly changing forms of emotional labor* in journalism, (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018), life history accounts can help us to understand the ways in which journalists are socialized to acquire the tacit knowledge associated with negotiating the complicated emotional landscape of their work. A life history approach, at the same time, can help to highlight how forms of tacit knowledge, are far from rigid and stable, but rather dynamic, ever-changing and in need of constant renewal (Saint-Onge, 1996). Journalism is certainly not alone among the professions in performing emotional labor – it is central to the job description of social workers, psychiatrists and police officers, among many others. In fact, emotional labor is required and emotional intelligence is increasingly seen as an indispensable skill across fields of capitalist production (Illouz, 2007). At the most basic level, the practices associated with objective reporting – through which journalists refrain expressing their own emotions – are in themselves a form of emotional labor: They require journalists to “outsource” emotions through the reliance on quotes, and build them into storytelling structures (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013). But journalists also carry out much *invisible*, behind-the-scenes emotional labor, as they build rapport with sources, negotiate access and confidentiality, and consider audience responses. For example, the much-celebrated and high-prestige genre of investigative journalism might require the most complex forms of emotional labor, as reporters wrangle reactions and the attainment of sensitive information from sources, and negotiates access, forms of attribution, as well as carefully calibrate the generation of moral outrage and, through that, solidarity with the sufferers of wrong-doing (e.g. Ettema and Glasser, 1998).

Finally, the approach advocated here can shed light on how the collective emotional experience of journalists over time has contributed to a shift in the emotional climate of the profession. As a distinctive professional category, journalists have been shaped by patterned interactions between their personal histories and professional trajectories, their encounter

with new technologies, such as social media, and with larger processes of social change, including increasing organizational complexity and precarious employment. If journalistic norms, role perceptions, identities and practices are dynamic and subject to change, they are also profoundly shaped by journalists' emotions as they evolve over time and solidify in the bodies of individuals and the fabric of institutional cultures.

## Conclusion

In this brief piece, I have made the case that research into the emotional life histories of journalists can advance knowledge about change in the profession in several ways. An emotional life history approach enables us to understand interactions between individual experience and social contexts; to understand that journalists are shaped by embodied and individual forms of life experiences, but are, at the same time, part of larger institutional cultures and broader power relations. Emotional life histories allow us to examine the evolving ways in which journalists are (a) emotionally affected by the pressures of the profession, and (b) carry out widely varied, and rapidly changing forms of emotional labor. Finally, (c) an emotional life history approach facilitates a longitudinal view of the emotional climate a profession that has changed beyond recognition over the past few decades to understand the ways in which their professional identities and practices have been reshaped. Such an approach has otherwise been relatively absent from research because of the “presentist” orientation of the discipline of journalism studies, combined with its relative youth. It makes possible the creation of a new form of journalism history: A “history from below” which pays attention to the lived experiences of professionals.

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