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Introduction: The emotional turn in journalism

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Abstract

In journalism studies, an interest in emotions has gathered momentum during the last decade, leading to an increasingly diverse investigation of the affective and emotional aspects of production, text and audience engagement with journalism which we describe as an “emotional turn.” The attention to emotion in journalism studies is a relatively recent development, sustained by the concurrent rise of digital information technologies that have accentuated the emotional and affective everyday use of media, as well as the increasing mobilization, exploitation and capitalization of emotions in digital media.

This special issue both builds upon research on emotion in journalism studies and aims to extend it by examining new theoretical and methodological tools, and areas of empirical analysis, to engage with emotion or affect across the contexts of journalistic production, content and consumption.

In proclaiming ‘an emotional turn’ in journalism studies, the intention of this special issue is not to suggest a paradigm shift or a major change in the prevailing research agenda in the field. Rather, against the backdrop of the increasingly diverse field of journalism studies, it is to point out that the relationship between journalism and emotion represents a rapidly developing area of inquiry, which opens up for new research agendas.

Keywords: Affect, emotion, journalism studies, objectivity, technological change

Introduction

In journalism studies, an interest in emotions has gathered momentum during the last decade, leading to an increasingly diverse investigation of the affective and emotional aspects of production, text and audience engagement with journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). The attention to emotion in journalism studies, however, is a relatively recent development, sustained by the concurrent rise of digital information technologies that have accentuated the emotional and affective everyday use of media, as well as the increasing mobilization, exploitation and capitalization of emotions in digital media.

The historical scarcity of research on emotion in journalism studies can, in large part, be attributed to journalism's allegiance to the model of liberal democracy, and the associated ideal of objectivity and focus on rational communication. Emotional journalism was seen as a threat to the standards and normative ideals of journalism (Pantti, 2010). This binary opposition between rationality and emotionality has obscured the fact that journalism has always been emotional, given its central goals of capturing attention, connecting with the audience and creating engaging experiences (Peters, 2011). Indeed, since the turn of the millennium, social and political research has argued against equating irrationality with emotionality and strived for a reconceptualization of emotions as providing an essential basis for practical rationality, and as necessary for public deliberation and action.

The historical neglect of emotion in journalism studies had also to do with the specific ways in which the "home discipline" of communication studies has engaged with the concept. The study of emotion has thrived within experimental communication research, based on the idea of emotion as an individual psychological disposition. Along those lines, much research has focused on psychological responses to media content but has paid less attention to other contexts. The field of media studies, on the other hand, has a strong tradition of examining affective communications with a focus on the pleasures of popular culture and intensities emerging in encounters with media.

In journalism studies, the interest in emotion has been fueled by the general growth in research on the social, cultural and political aspects of emotion. Scholars across humanities and social sciences fields increasingly recognise the importance of emotion in social and

political life. This interest was described by Clough and Halley (2007) as ‘the affective turn’, or a move towards seeing emotion and affect as a prism for understanding the social in new ways.

In proclaiming ‘an emotional turn’ in journalism studies, the intention of this special issue is not to suggest a paradigm shift or a major change in the prevailing research agenda in the field. Rather, against the backdrop of the increasingly diverse field of journalism studies, it is to point out that the relationship between journalism and emotion represents a rapidly developing area of inquiry, which opens up for new research agendas. Thus, by using the term emotional turn we do not suggest a shared agenda for research on how emotion and journalism intersect. Rather, we acknowledge that this field draws on various disciplines and theorizations to enrich its enquiry. This diversity is evident in the varying definitions of emotion and affect, which also surface in this special issue.

Here, we do not intend to offer yet another review of the diverging conceptualizations of emotion and affect. What interests us is how conceptualizing and understanding emotion and affect might further inform inquiries into *the production and circulation of journalism, as well as into meaning-making and engagement with journalism*. Such an approach allows for research which engages with journalism as an institution embedded in and interacting with broader social structures and relations.

One of the most influential articulations of the distinction between affect and emotion can be found in the work of Brian Massumi (2002). He proposed that affect is best understood as a bodily sensation in an individual, a reaction to stimuli characterized by intensity and energy, but without a conscious orientation and interpretation. However, affect is also conceptualized as non-subjective, impersonal force that animates and moves human and nonhuman actors, and affords emotions with their intensity and quality (Paasonen, 2020). In a similar vein, we emphasize the inseparability of affect and emotion in this special issue. Emotion could be conceptualized as the relational interpretation of affect experienced in individual bodies (Davidson and Milligan, 2004) - one that may become public and collective through naming, articulation and circulation. Such a definition is closely aligned with a sociological approach, which sees emotions evolving out of the interactions of individuals

with culture and underlying social structures (e.g. Burkitt, 2014; Holmes, 2004; Stets and Turner, 2008). This approach suggests that it is both relevant and interesting to consider which emotions do gain purchase in the public sphere, why, and with what consequences.

This special issue both builds upon research on emotion in journalism studies and aims to extend it by examining new theoretical and methodological tools, and areas of empirical analysis, to engage with emotion or affect across the contexts of journalistic production, content and consumption. With technological development, innovative methodologies for analyzing emotions have emerged. For example, as Koivunen, Kanner, Janicki, Harju, Hokkanen and Mäkelä show in their special issue article, advances in the field of computational linguistics allow for sophisticated engagement with affective meaning-making in journalistic reporting.

Normalizing emotionality

Journalism scholars argue that emotional storytelling has grown in prominence as traditional news organizations are competing to engage their audiences through more personal and emotional forms and genres (Beckett and Deuze 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019). However, the change and continuity regarding journalism's relationship with emotion are always matters of empirical inquiry. Historical approaches are rare but existing studies point to a shift from the 1980s onwards to a more open emotional regime, which values individualized emotional expressions, also those of journalists, and allows for a wider register of emotions to be displayed (Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011).

Employing a historical approach, Thomas Schmidt's special issue article provides a valuable contribution to the discussion on tensions between objectivity and emotionality, in particular how emotional storytelling became a desirable mode of U.S. narrative journalism. Schudson (2001) analyzed how the social, technological and economic conditions made objectivity as a convenient occupational norm in U.S. newspapers during the late 19th century. In a related vein, Schmidt tracks how social and institutional conditions allowed emotionality to become an acceptable occupational norm in U.S. narrative journalism, a norm that ultimately allowed journalists to draw from their subjective emotional experience as a resource for reporting events. The central contribution of his study is to illustrate how

emotionality as a new occupational norm in narrative journalism contributed to a broader and more reflexive understanding of objectivity. He argues that this development in the narrative journalism genre worked to normalize emotionality in newspapers in general.

Affectivity in news texts and in the objects of journalism

In their special issue article, Koivunen, Kanner, Janicki, Harju, Hokkanen and Mäkelä go beyond examining emotionality in emotive expressions by asking how different linguistic structures participate in affective meaning-making in journalism. Theoretically, their article contributes to discussions on affect in journalism studies by proposing a revised conceptualization of affectivity as a quality permeating journalistic language through various linguistic constructs. Drawing on computational linguistics, Koivunen and her colleagues offer an innovative exploration in how affectivity operates in journalistic texts in response to journalistic genre conventions. Moreover, their big data analysis offers a unique view on the management of affectivity in news journalism, providing evidence of the coexisting rituals of objectivity and emotionality, as well as on the conventional locus of affective language.

Drawing on cultural studies, Moran and Usher call for a rethinking of materialism in journalism studies and consider the affective role of hard and soft objects in journalism. Extending that binary distinction, they introduce the idea of “unexpected objects” – “objects that are not typically considered to be part of the direct experience of producing or consuming news, but nonetheless have an affective dimension, creating the preconditions for a range of possible emotions.” Such unexpected objects may include company mugs, ticket stubs and press passes – objects which may have only tangential connection to journalism, yet may engender intense emotional attachments by both journalists and audience members. Ultimately, Moran and Usher’s new approach bridges the gap between the “material” turn and the “affective” turn, and points to a need to expand the study of affect within journalism studies by utilizing objects of journalism, from news buildings to paintings in newsrooms, to illuminate journalism’s affective and emotional dimensions that are vital in understanding journalism’s contemporary role.

Mobilizing emotions

It is widely acknowledged that emotions are performative – they are “doing something”, and therefore routinely used in public discourse to form communities while excluding other social groups (e.g. Ahmed, 2004). Emotions, then, are not only mobilizing but are strategically mobilized by a variety of actors (Wetherell, 2013) to invite audiences to adopt certain positions. The public display of emotions can be mobilized in constructive ways to create communities of solidarity, but negative emotions such as fear, anger, hatred and disgust are commonly mobilized to create hostility and divisions among groups.

Siapera and Papadopoulou’s special issue article contributes to this discussion by examining the production and mobilization of hate in alternative news journalism in Greece. The wider context of the article is the increase of far-right populism, a severe socio-political and economic crisis, and concurrent crisis for journalism in Greece. They conceptualize public emotions as an avenue through which uncertainty and anxiety is managed, and therefore always connected to the material circumstances in which they are expressed. Hate journalism, Siapera and Papadopoulou argue, emerges in situations of societal and political crises as a means of differentiating between those who belong and those who do not. They show that hate journalism functions to radicalise mainstream views by reproducing and reinforcing the reactionary and intolerant values of in Greece.

Research in journalism studies and related fields has frequently focused on negative emotions, such as anger, fear and hate. This is, at least in part, because negative emotions have been widely acknowledged as powerful mobilizing forces (Ost, 2004), but also because they are more widespread than positive emotions (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). In her article, Henkel examines less studied positive emotions – including mirth and pride - as mobilizing forces. Using critical discourse analysis, Henkel analyses how positive emotions were used in the context of the Brexit vote to create a myth, in a Barthesian sense, to naturalise Eurosceptic ideology. The dilemma of nationalism is whether it is about love for one’s country or hatred towards foreigners. Henkel shows that positive emotions constructed in the EU coverage served to affirm a distinct British identity and naturalize British defiance.

Journalism as a hate object

In the context of the consumption of journalism, emotion is a cornerstone for stirring audience (dis)engagement with news texts and building (dis)trust towards news institutions. This suggests the need to understand audiences' affective relations with news media. Such research expands the discussion of journalism and emotional storytelling to journalism as an object of affect and, further, might shed light on what motivates particular affective responses of attention, appreciation, dislike and hate towards news texts and news organisations.

The arrival of the Internet and social media, have clearly contributed to the threats and criticism journalism faces, and concurrently we have witnessed a rise of hostility and distrust towards the profession, as seen in President Donald Trump's open incitement of hatred against the professional media (Carlson, Robinson, Lewis, 2020). The incitement of hatred against journalism by elite politicians is indicative of the contested position of journalism and other belief-systems in the contemporary public communication. This development points to the need for an audience centered research that acknowledges the affective dynamics of contemporary publics and the emotional dimensions of trust and criticism towards journalism institution.

Ihlebaek and Holter's and Shin, Kim and Joo's articles in this special issue are two examples of such work. Both articles address popular media criticism as an affective media practice. Ihlebaek and Holter focus on Norwegian online news commenters that express far-right attitudes. They show that the distrust and aversion towards mainstream news media arises from the feelings of fear and anger: The informants, highly engaged with the discourse of fear of immigration and multiculturalism, communicate a sense of exclusion and anger towards what they perceive as a biased and unjust news media.

Like news comments sections, social media platforms increasingly function as key sites of popular media criticism, opening space for citizens to speak 'politically' and to contest media representations. However, hostility towards the press through digital media channels also opens up space for online harassment, which globally threatens the safety and the speech rights of journalists (Carlson, Robinson, Lewis, 2020; Waisbord, 2020). So far, the research on digital media criticism has focused on Western countries and right-wing

populism. Shin, Kim and Joo's special issue article contributes to the discussion of digital press criticism and online harassment of journalists by presenting its national particularities. They analyse the *giraegi* discourse in Korean social media sites spreading hatred towards Korean journalists. While in Western countries online attacks against journalists typically display populist and far-right ideologies, in the Korean context journalists are criticized for supporting conservative political forces that work against 'ordinary people'. The authors set up questions that deserve to be explored, such as to what extent expressions of anger and hatred against the mainstream media can be understood as a form of (legitimate) popular press criticism and to what extent journalists' reporting might be affected by the hatred they encounter online. Both articles call for comparative research that accounts for national similarities and particularities in the anti-journalism criticism and attacks by networked audiences.

In conclusion, the articles in this issue offer insights for future research that will continue to analyze the myriad ways in which affect and emotion are relevant to journalism studies. As the articles in this special issue show, the 'emotional turn' is neither uniform nor static. The articles open up spaces for interrogating a series of questions around the dynamic role of emotion across journalistic production, texts and consumption. First, as several papers for the issue highlight, a nuanced engagement with the role of *specific* emotions (ranging from hate, fear and anger to mirth and euphoria) has much to tell us about the political potential of emotional expression, and how such expression must always be understood as inherently ideological.

Second, the proliferation of platforms that allow audiences to engage with journalism – including social media, discussion forums, and comments sections – raise important questions about the affectivity of "dark participation" – or negative, selfish or downright sinister contributions (Quandt, 2018). As several articles for this special issue have explored, such dark participation now increasingly targets journalism itself. This, in turn, invites us to pay close attention to audiences' emotional engagement with journalistic texts – and how we should study the moments when this engagement threatens the speech rights of journalists.

Third, as Schmidt reminds us, there is an urgent need for careful empirical study and theorization of historical shifts in the role of emotion in journalism, and how it interacts with professional norms and values. Finally, as Koivunen et al. establish, the rise of big data and computational methods allow for conceptual and methodological innovation. The role of emotion in the production, circulation and consumption of journalism is all the more urgent to consider in the light of current and emerging technological conditions brought about by the digital era and the emergence of networked journalism.

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