Journalism and its Response to Crisis: Understanding the Role of Place and Community in Journalism Studies

As I enter the second half of issues for my tenure as the managing editor of the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, I am slowly, but excitedly, building toward a special issue end. Volume 48, issue 1 emphasized politics, while issue 2 focused on gender. Collectively, the two construct a narrative of what is and can be; they also push scholars to think more critically about the intersections of identity that emerge in our private and public lives. In the last issue, I shared that volume 48 of *JCI* focuses on the belief that “everything is political.” I continue to emphasize that in this issue but do so by curating articles about a medium: journalism.

Sadly, journalists around the world are not safe. They also don’t feel guaranteed a fair wage or even a job. There are incessant attacks from political agents hoping to discredit journalists, even identifying them consistently as the enemy of the people. This has led to an erosion of trust in journalism as a public institution, devaluing its role as a watchdog and a public service to the communities they support. Scholars Carlson et al. (2021) call this journalism’s crisis of relevance. Yet, their critique is now no longer novel. Instead, it is par for the course. So, what are journalists supposed to do to address these concerns? How can journalism continue to serve as a conduit for change and a challenge to power? This issue offers critiques, challenges, strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities to understand how journalism is intertwined with the political—with the body politic. Whether it is political because of the rights of the press or guarantees for safety, intersections of identity or responses to community needs and values, or impacts of infrastructures and commonly held beliefs, this issue shows that journalism is political. In particular, this issue explores how journalism is a politic of place.

This Issue

Volume 48, issue 3, contains eight peer-reviewed articles and one book review. Collectively, they tell the story of this issue’s theme: “Journalism studies and the power of place.” In this issue, we delve into the profound influence of place on journalism, a theme that unveils the dynamic interplay between media landscapes and their local contexts. The articles presented explore various facets of this interaction, from rural news consumption to the ideological impacts on journalistic practices.
Our lead article by Hess et al. focuses on rural Australia, uncovering the “latent” news audiences who, despite their disengagement, show a potential willingness to reconnect with local news under the right conditions. Their research reveals that cost, accessibility, and content quality are significant barriers, suggesting that understanding these dormant audiences can enhance local media strategies. From Australia to the United States, locality is central to the success of journalism. Mathews highlights this as he introduces the concept of “print imprint,” exploring how physical newspapers create a tangible connection with their readers, embedding a sense of ownership and identity. This relationship highlights the unique position of print media in shaping self-perceptions and the notable impact when such connections are severed, emphasizing the profound personal loss felt with the closure of local newspapers.

The next two papers in this issue center learning as a place for journalistic success. McDevitt’s study on the hidden curriculum of anti-intellectualism among journalism students in the U.S. examines how socio-demographics and student attitudes towards education influence perceptions of media’s role. This analysis suggests that journalistic education itself can shape, and be shaped by, local ideologies and the broader cultural milieu. Gutsche critiques the integration of technology in journalism, warning against the uncritical adoption of digital tools that can perpetuate existing inequalities. This essay calls for a deeper examination of how technological advancements are influencing journalistic norms and practices within specific societal contexts.

Readers will move from places of learning to evolution in journalistic places. In particular, these authors interrogate the actors within the place and how audience and consumption reflect journalistic norms. Perrault and Meltzer investigate the evolving journalistic discourse around the term “alt-right,” showing how shifts in media language reflect broader societal tensions and the media’s place within them. Their analysis points to the iterative process of meaning-making in journalism that influences and is influenced by community norms. Veerbeek et al. discuss the evolving role of public broadcasting, advocating for new metrics to assess public value beyond traditional consumption figures. This approach highlights the need for media to adapt to changing landscapes while maintaining a connection to the community it serves.

Journalism can also be interrogated in shared spaces. In this case, two of the papers in this issue analyze journalism on screens, discussing the idea of journalism as a central focus of film narratives, community needs, and democratic practice. Gastón-Lorente et al. analyze the Netflix series “When They See Us” to discuss how media representations can act as societal watchdogs, highlighting the role of media in shaping democratic processes through storytelling. Painter and Scherb use the film “Spotlight” to discuss the breakdown of Boston institutions, illustrating how media can both fail and serve their communities. Their study underscores the essential role of robust community connections in enabling effective journalism.

Together, these articles underscore the critical role of place in shaping journalistic values, practices, and impacts. They collectively illustrate how media, in various forms, interacts with and reflects its environment, contributing to a nuanced
understanding of journalism’s power and responsibility within its local and digital spaces. This issue illustrates the diverse and nuanced ways the concept of place influences journalism and its various stakeholders. Whether through the tangible touch of print media that shapes personal identity, the technological shifts that reframe journalistic practices, or the educational settings that subtly instill specific ideological values, the power of place is omnipresent and potent.

The theme “Journalism Studies and the Power of Place” is explored through multiple lenses: the latent potential of rural news audiences, the nostalgic connections to traditional print media, the cultural currents influencing journalism students, and the digital transformations reshaping the news landscape. Each article contributes to a deeper understanding of how journalistic entities and endeavors do not exist in isolation but are continuously interacting with and being shaped by their local contexts. This interaction is not merely a backdrop but a dynamic force that molds media production, consumption, and the resultant societal impact. The research presented highlights the need for journalism to engage with its local environment proactively and thoughtfully. As media continues to evolve in response to technological advances and shifting consumer behaviors, the necessity for journalism to maintain its relevance and effectiveness within its community context has never been clearer. Understanding the ‘power of place’ can help media practitioners and scholars develop more responsive and responsible journalism that informs, supports, and sustains the communities it serves.

Until the next issue. Shine on.

Reference

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