The Handbook of Global Online Journalism
Edited by Eugenia Siapera and Andreas Veglis

Few would argue that this is not a time of profound change in journalism around the world. The rise in networked global communication infrastructures has led to startling transformations in how the news is delivered, and also in the way journalists work. The Handbook of Global Online Journalism offers thought-provoking insights into the current state and future directions of technology-mediated news dissemination for our twenty-first-century world. It provides a comprehensive, state-of-the-art overview of the current relationship between the internet and journalism around the world.

Contributions from an international collection of practitioners and academics trace the evolution of journalistic practices, business models, and shifting patterns of journalistic cultures that have emerged with the migration of news online. Topics explored include the economics of online journalism, organizational changes, new practices and forms of contents, the politics of online journalism, and future trends. A final series of readings assesses the overall impact of the internet on contemporary journalism, and details the extent to which the internet is poised to completely overtake traditional newspapers as the medium of choice for the production and consumption of news.

About the Editors
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Review Quotes

"Scholarly, radical, and relevant, The Handbook of Global Online Journalism offers a thoroughgoing account of the digital revolution which is transforming every aspect of journalism and the ways in which news is produced, distributed, and consumed. It makes compelling reading for anyone who is interested in analysing the ways in which the future of journalism is unravelling."

Bob Franklin, Cardiff University, UK

"The worldwide fusion of technologies and cultures of journalism calls for integrative and interdisciplinary work. With this magnificent volume, Eugenia Siapera and Andreas Veglis benchmark the road ahead."

Mark Deuze, Indiana University
The Handbook of Global Online Journalism
Handbooks in Communication and Media

This series aims to provide theoretically ambitious but accessible volumes devoted to the major fields and subfields within communication and media studies. Each volume sets out to ground and orientate the student through a broad range of specially commissioned chapters, while also providing the more experienced scholar and teacher with a convenient and comprehensive overview of the latest trends and critical directions.

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The Handbook of Global Online Journalism

Edited by

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Introduction: The Evolution of Online Journalism

Eugenia Siapera and Andreas Veglis

In 1993, a couple of months after the launch of the first web browser, Mosaic, the University of Florida’s Journalism Department launched what is generally considered to be the first online journalism web site. It was a very basic, static web site, with a picture of the red-bricked wall of the Journalism Department. It was updated only occasionally, at nights and weekends, when the machine was not in use by others, running on a 486–25 processor with 4 megabytes of random access memory (RAM). About a year later, in November 1994, The UK’s Daily Telegraph launched the Electronic Telegraph, which was a similarly static page, with articles one on top of the other. The online publication followed the rhythm of print publishing, posting online contents once a day. In a 2001 article, Derek Bishton detailed the Electronic Telegraph’s remit: to explore the new medium, its technological and commercial possibilities, as well as the scope for the launch of the Telegraph as an online brand (Bishton, 2001). And in this rather slow, uneventful manner began the history of online journalism, and the creation of a new kind of journalism that has changed the face of journalism forever.

The 20 years or so since then have seen developments that were both gradual, such as the slow adoption of the Internet’s features of hyperlinking, interactivity, and multimedia, and radical, as witnessed by the shift toward the participatory web and social media. The initial reluctance of journalistic sites to employ these features was eventually replaced with unfettered enthusiasm, while more recently no self-respecting journalistic site remains without a blog, a Facebook, and Twitter account. Thus, the relationship between the new media and journalism, which began in fits and starts, has become a close embrace to the extent that it is difficult to imagine an exclusively offline journalism. Theorists, practitioners, students, and readers/consumers/users of online journalism are all involved and have a stake in this relationship, and seek to understand how journalism
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is changing, their respective positions in it, the various directions it takes, the ways in which it is practiced, and the implications these may have in public and social life.

It is therefore this relationship that this book attempts to document, map, and understand. It is this relationship and its trajectories across a globalized world that it examines and presents. But this relationship, as with all relationships, has its issues. As an entry point to these issues, this introductory chapter traces the evolution of online journalism.

The word evolution is used to denote the ways in which some aspects of journalism were inherited through a kind of “natural selection” and some sub-species of journalism have become or may be about to become extinct, while others may be thought of as genetic mutations. But all these contribute to the dynamism and eventual survival of journalism.

This chapter will discuss the history and evolution of online journalism, as well as the development of the “species” itself, tracing the various traits and characteristics and the ways in which these may have changed. This will be followed by a section mapping research into online journalism, concluding with a discussion of the rationale and structure of this Handbook.

On Dinosaurs, Extinction, and Mutations

The Wikipedia entry for “Evolution” lists the three main premises for natural selection as follows: firstly, there is more offspring than can possibly survive; secondly, traits vary among individuals, leading to different rates of survival and reproduction; and thirdly, trait differences can be inherited. But natural selection is not the only means by which evolution proceeds: there is extinction, in which a whole or a sub-species disappears, making way for other species to appear or thrive, but also mutation, whereby a sudden and spontaneous change occurs in the constitutive parts of an organism.

The most famous case of extinction is of course that of dinosaurs, a diverse species, whose life spanned over 160 million years only to come to a mysterious end about 65 million years ago. The exact cause of their extinction is still under discussion. Among the most likely explanations is an asteroid crash that led to their sudden demise, their failure to evolve brains and brain functions to adapt to their changing environment, and the pressure to survive in a challenging environment increased their stress level to the extent that led to their eventual shrinking and demise (see dinosaurfact.net). What is beyond dispute, however, is that their extinction made way for the rise of a new species, the mammals, who currently dominate the earth. On the other hand, while most dinosaurs disappeared with no trace, a particular family of dinosaurs, the Manuraptora, which includes the velociraptor, a small, fast and agile dinosaur, is generally considered to be the ancestor of birds, another hugely successful and thriving species. Extinction and adaptation feed into new life and/or the prolongation of older forms of life, while sudden changes, failure to adapt, and increased stress are very likely to have contributed to extinction.

This brief excursus on dinosaurs provides an instructive analogy with the current fate of some of the many species of journalism. The parallels are many: just like dinosaurs, traditional journalism, and print journalism more particularly, dominated for over 300 years. Just like dinosaurs, it faced a (more or less) sudden threat: the rise of the Internet and digital content platforms; it has difficulties developing new functions to adapt to a
changing environment; it faces prolonged stress due to a decrease in profits and an increasingly competitive environment. Will it survive or will it go the way of the dinosaurs?

Looking at the theory of evolution, alongside the history of online journalism, we can argue that some species may become extinct, while others may adapt to their environment. The extinction may pave the way for new kinds to emerge, while adaptation may lead to interesting and perhaps more robust forms of journalism. We can therefore examine the major traits that were inherited by the previous species, but also the new traits that have emerged, as well as their combination, which informs the new species. Finally, we can examine the mutations that have occurred, which may take the species into an entirely new direction: social media and open source/citizen journalism.

To begin with, it is now clear that newspaper and print journalism more specifically cannot continue in the same way as if nothing has changed in the last 20 years or so. For almost 300 years it followed more or less the same principles, the same routines of production, the same 24-hour news rhythm, the same way of addressing its audiences, the same structures for reporting the news. But now this is no longer possible: journalism’s environment has changed dramatically and journalism needs to develop new functions to adapt to this environment. If it does not, it will face the fate of dinosaurs. But, it is also clear that journalism is beginning to take on new features, expanding on its strengths and developing new ones, designed to adapt to its environment. It may be seen that it has bequeathed to its “descendants” its main traits and characteristics such as reporting facts, and providing informed analysis, comment, and opinion.

More specifically, the key “traits”, values, or defining characteristics of journalism, as listed by Deuze (2005: 447), drawing on Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) include: (i) that journalism provides a public service, typically in the form of collecting, collating, and disseminating information to the public; (ii) that journalism is objective and fair and therefore credible; (iii) that it is autonomous from vested interests; (iv) that it has a sense of immediacy and the ‘newest’ news; and (v) that it has an ethics of what is and what is not appropriate. These traits may form the backbone of journalism, but the reality of a fast developing technology, as well as socio-political and economic changes, means that journalism needs to reinterpret these values or traits in new ways in order to adapt to this environment. Indeed, new technologies are analogous to an asteroid crashing, with journalism feeling the ripple effect years later: new developments pose important challenges for journalism’s key traits, which may no longer suffice for its survival.

Public service is typically understood in terms of a top-down approach that journalism knows and can serve the public’s needs. However, as Deuze (2005) has argued, new technologies and new media have fragmented publics, which may have diverse understandings of their needs and interests. Here, the politics of journalism need to be rethought, and journalism must reinterpret its political functions in both a pragmatic and a normative manner (see Chapter 7 for a critique, and Chapters 6, 8, and 9 for alternative and radical reinterpretations). Objectivity and fairness may remain as guiding principles, but in the days of blogs and user-generated content, they are increasingly under strain; journalism’s credibility must be reinterpreted, perhaps through a reworking of accountability practices (see Chapter 15). Autonomy is a much-discussed value in journalism, praised by some (e.g. Bourdieu, 1999), but criticized by others (e.g. Schudson, 2005). The new media have had a very ambiguous impact on journalistic autonomy, as,
on the one hand, they offer journalists the possibility to operate independently, outside the confines of media corporations, but on the other hand, the proliferation of journalistic content on the Internet removes autonomy as it removes sources of funding that may have allowed independent investigative journalism. New, innovative ways of reinterpreting autonomy as collaboration or open source may fill in the void created (see Chapters 14 and 16). However, one thing that technology has done is to amplify the sense of immediacy that pervades journalism: scoops and new stories are broken every minute or so, while there is continuous coverage on Twitter and Facebook or live blogs running from newspapers such as the Guardian. Journalistic ethics is an area that needs urgent reconsideration due to the proliferation of online contents. At the same time, more broadly speaking, journalism ethics may be seen as a strategy by which journalists seek to exclude or discredit others who they consider are impinging on their “turf;” from this point of view, ethics is a kind of symbolic capital, mobilized in order to safeguard journalistic status and prestige (see Chapter 5).

While online journalism can be seen as a case of adaptation to the new environment through a reinterpretation of journalism’s main traits and values, this is but one of three evolutionary possibilities. The second one is the genesis of a new kind of journalism that has its own characteristics and fits perfectly in the new environment. This kind of journalism has developed its own features and requires a more tailor-made approach to understand its specificity. To an extent, the remit of this Handbook is to provide precisely this: a theoretical and empirically informed understanding of this new species of journalism. New traits, such as multimediality, interactivity, and hyperlinking, the rise of user contents, and the convergence of production, lead to an online journalism that is characterized by personalization (see Chapter 20), a different news-story structure (see Chapter 19), and which has been described as experiential and/or ambient (see Chapters 4 and 17, respectively) and which has its own values and conditions for excellence (Chapter 3).

The third evolutionary possibility is that of mutation. Here, journalism mutates into something new, different, and which may open new horizons. Mutations may occur randomly and in a random pattern. They may however be attributed to specific changes in the environment. In connection with online journalism, we can observe at least two such major changes: in the economics of online journalism (see Chapter 13) and in its production norms (see Chapter 2). The proliferation of business models detailed by Richard van der Wurff in this volume (Chapter 13) in fact implies a loss of economic capital for journalism (see also Chapter 5), while new production modes may be linked to new forms of journalism (see Chapter 9). We can therefore count social media journalism (see Chapter 17) as well as open source journalism (see Chapter 14 on crowd-sourcing and Chapters 8 and 9 on Wikileaks) as two such “mutations.”

It would be neat to consider these three descendants of journalism as occurring in distinct phases. And to an extent, they do: the first phase can be seen as one in which journalism sought to impose its own norms and criteria on the new media; a look at the history of online journalism confirms this. The first, static pages of legacy news organizations, such as Cable News Network (CNN), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Daily Telegraph, and so on, were quickly succeeded by new sites tuned toward multimedia and interactivity. Thus, in a second phase, journalism sought to adapt by
importing the features of interactivity, multimediability, and hypertext. In early 2000, Associated Press launched AP Streaming News offering multimedia content. A few months later, the *International Herald Tribune* launched its new site, which allowed users to flick over page turns and store headlines for viewing later, introducing customization and applying interactivity (Meek, 2006). The immediacy of online news was put to the test on September 11, 2001, when the stunned world turned to the Internet to find out what had happened; sites crashed under the demand, and news editors realized that immediacy is a much prized attribute in the increasingly competitive online news environment. In a third phase, new kinds of journalism emerged out of the new media environment. Two events are considered pivotal for the rise of new kinds of journalism: the Asian tsunami in December 2004 and the terrorist attack in London in July 2005. These two events were reported through the contributions of eyewitnesses, whose photos, videos, and stories appeared in blogs and news sites across the world. The shift of journalism toward a collaborative, open source model through social media was clear. In more recent years, the live and direct reporting of events such as the Mumbai attack in 2008 (see Chapter 18), the Iranian elections in 2009, and the North African revolts through Facebook and Twitter, cemented the relationship between social media and journalism.

This kind of time-based classification, however, belies a messier development of trial and error, regressions, and resistance. Journalism is following different paths in different settings; sometimes it leaps forward, while in other instances it seems stuck in the past. It is well worth looking at the concrete contexts in which journalism has evolved to understand the complexity of this evolution. Several chapters in this book provide historical and sociological analyses of online journalism in specific contexts, such as Australia (Chapter 22), Brazil (Chapter 21), China (Chapter 26), Germany (Chapter 23), Nigeria (Chapter 24), and the UK (Chapter 25). The different trajectories of journalism in different contexts point to the need to complement theoretical analyses with empirical studies that allow an in-depth understanding of the various paths of online journalism and its future directions.

Online journalism is an increasingly popular topic as recent titles suggest. Research has contributed immensely to our understanding of its shifting present and promising future. The next section will explore recent research with a view to highlighting what we have learned so far.

### Reviewing Online Journalism Research

A search using ‘online journalism’ as keywords in Google Scholar returns over 30,000 results, while Google Books returns about 2,500 results of books with “online journalism” in their title. This shows the increasing development of research into the field of online journalism and also the difficulty of summarizing and categorizing this growing body of research. Different researchers have used different entry points in reviewing online journalism research. In one of the most recent and comprehensive reviews, Steensen (2011) has explored this research from the prism of the three main new media features of hypertext, interactivity, and multimediability. While Steensen focused on technology, Eugenia Mitchelstein and Pablo Boczkowski recognized the volume and diversity of research into
Eugenia Siapera and Andreas Veglis

online journalism and wrote two very informative articles, reviewing research on the production and the consumption of online journalism (2009 and 2010), respectively. To these dimensions, we may add the dimension of theory, which cuts across research but which provides a more complete picture of research developments in the field. Theoretical developments increase our in-depth understanding of the past, present, and future of journalism, its internal dynamics and external relationships, as well as the main drivers for its development.

Technologically oriented research

Research into the new media inevitably looks into technology and the role it plays in socio-cultural shifts. Research in online journalism could not be an exception: in fact technology-driven research in online journalism dominates to the extent of attracting criticisms of technological determinism (Domingo, 2006). Such research, as Steensen notes, focuses on the features of the new media and traces their impact on journalism. While different researchers have explored different features, the three main ones are those that we have repeatedly used throughout this text: hypertextuality, interactivity, and multimediality. Research into these has attempted to conceptually specify them, to examine the possibilities to which they are linked, and to measure up the extent to which journalism actually employs them.

The conceptual specification of these features is actually a more complex task than it may appear at first glance. This is not only due to the shifting and overlapping patterns of these features, but also to the diverse ways in which researchers use them. Rost (2002) summarizes several definitions of hypertext, concluding that there are several types of hypertext, and that these may have a different relation to journalism. In its simplest form, interactivity has been defined as the extent to which users are allowed to participate in the modification of media contents and forms in real time (Steuer, 1992: 84, cited in Paulussen, 2004: np). At its most complex, interactivity is approached through its constitutive dimensions: for Downes and MacMillan (2000) these include direction of communication, time flexibility, sense of place, level of control, responsiveness, and perceived purpose of communication. Multimediality is defined in terms of a news output that contains more than two media, as well as the ways in which a news output travels across media (Deuze, 2004), but very often multimedia is conflated with both cross-media and convergence.

These conceptual difficulties are evident in the diverse operationalizations of these terms in research. In Steensen’s comprehensive review, we can see that hypertext is typically operationalized as links to other stories in the news site, as links within a story, and as links to external sites. The first kind, that is, links to other stories in the same site, is the most common form of hyperlinking. Interactivity may be operationalized in terms of human-to-human, that is enabling a two-way communication between people; it can also be seen as human–computer interaction, which includes the kind of interface available (e.g. menus, search tools, etc.); and as human–content interaction, which refers to the ways in which users are able to construct their own contents (Steensen, 2011 after MacMillan, 2005). In general, interactivity is on the rise, especially the human-to-human kind, with more and more news sites allowing users to comment and otherwise participate in the site, although
this does not include the selection and editing of stories. Multimedia, operationalized as the combination of different media in telling a single story, is, according to Steensen’s review, the least developed feature in online journalism, with journalists unsure as to how to use it and readers indifferent to it.

Research on production of online journalism

The above-discussed body of research, as Steensen rightly points out, shows that online journalism is lagging behind new technologies, and thus, to an extent, new developments in journalism cannot derive from technologies alone. It is perhaps this realization that drove researchers to examine the conditions of production of online journalism, which may explain the gap between new technologies and online journalism. In their review of the relevant literature, Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2009) have identified five different research themes within studies of production. These include the historical and broader context within which online journalism operates; the adoption and impact of innovations; the changing newsroom practices; professional and occupational issues in the production of online journalism; and the role of users as content producers.

Studies conducted here have contributed greatly to our understanding, showing the continuities but also transformations occurring in the production of journalism, partly driven by market and economic forces: for example, the competitiveness of the journalistic market has been an important driver of its online expansion (Allan, 2006; Boczkowski, 2004), while economic factors are certainly behind the movement toward convergence (Quinn, 2004). But shifts in production are also driven by resistance or readiness to the adoption of innovative practices in the newsroom (e.g. Domingo, 2008; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008; Thurman, 2008). Partly, such resistance may be understood as new technologies and innovation more broadly set different requirements to journalists, and impact their work in equivocal ways. For example, both Deuze (2004) in the Netherlands and Klinenberg (2005) in the USA have showed how multiskilling and the requirement to do more tasks than before have had a negative impact on journalists, while Quandt (2008) in Germany found that increasing time pressure has made journalism dependent on news agencies as well as on repetition of the same material. Given these changes, it is small wonder that the professional and occupational identity of journalists has also changed. Such changes mostly concern the role and function of journalism that can no longer be thought of as gatekeeping (Bruns, 2003); Deuze and Paulussen (2002) found that journalists have begun to prioritize elements such as speed and interactivity. There is little doubt that one of the major factors of change in journalism, is that new technologies have enabled users or the traditional readers of journalism to actively participate in the creation of contents. The participation of users led to claims that journalism has been radically altered – as Gillmor (2004) put it, it can no longer be thought of as a lecture, as it has become a conversation. But the rise of user-generated content is not universally seen as a positive development. It creates jurisdictional issues for journalism, as it impinges on its domain, creating debates such as the bloggers versus journalists debate (see Rosen, 2005; Rosen, 2011). Nevertheless, user content is here to stay and many journalists accept that their work has now changed to a more collaborative one that is the result of an interaction with users.
Notwithstanding the contributions of this research, Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2009) rightly point out significant gaps and possible future research directions. They call for more comparative research both across the field of cultural production and across different countries; for more historically informed studies; for ethnographic works on content creation; and for the creation of new, more radical concepts for apprehending online journalism. They hold that the traditional distinction between production and consumption of journalism needs to be reexamined, given the rise of user participation, and also because, we could add, professional journalists are themselves ardent consumers of journalism. However, the distinction is still valid, at least insofar as we can recognize news consumption as a distinct process in journalism even if it does not always correspond with a particular group of people. The next section discusses this strand of research.

Online news consumption research

There is little doubt that news consumption is on the rise, as more and more people become active new media users, and as more and more news media migrate online across the world. On the other hand, and as with most research in online journalism, research into online news consumption is very much driven by concerns relating to traditional journalism and traditional news media. Thus, one of the first questions to be asked concerns the extent to which online news consumption replaces the consumption of traditional media (see Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2010). A related body of research deals with the ways in which online consumption patterns differ from traditional news media consumption. Another issue identified by Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2010) concerns the extent to which online news consumption leads to audience fragmentation or conversely to homogenization. Underlying research into online news consumption is the normative notion that news and, more broadly, information is a necessary condition for political participation.

Specifically, as Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2010) contend, one of the main questions regarding online news consumption has been the extent to which it complements or displaces traditional news consumption. Research so far has failed to come up with conclusive and robust findings, but overall it seems that newspaper reading is, in general, on the decline. Thus, while Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham (2007) report that news readers consume the news in multiple media without necessarily distinguishing between them, large surveys, such as the one conducted by The Pew Research Center for People and the Press (2010) shows a steady decline of consumption of print news in the last 20 years. When people were asked where they got their news “yesterday,” only 31% said “from a newspaper” as opposed to 56% in 1991. In contrast, 34% said they got their news online, and when mobile media, e-mail, and social media were added, the percentage went up to 44% (Pew, 2010). However, the Pew research also showed that about two-thirds of all news consumers in the USA use traditional news sources, concluding that people have integrated the new media into their news consumption patterns, increasing the overall time spend on the news. In addition, online news consumption is mediated by demographic factors, especially those of socio-economic status, education, and age. The younger, better educated, and more affluent users are more likely to use the web as a news source (Nguyen and Western, 2007).
If we consider news consumption to vary not only in terms of the platform or medium used, but also in terms of the actual pattern of consumption, we can see some important differences between traditional and online news consumption. Firstly, the time spent on online news averages 13 minutes, compared with 10 minutes spent reading a newspaper, 15 minutes listening to the radio, and 32 minutes watching TV. But the most important change in news consumption concerns the ways in which this takes place.

Most online news consumers only graze the news, checking headlines from time to time rather than committing a certain time of day to getting the news. Moreover, the percentage of those getting their news at work has increased significantly, as more and more of us keep track of news sites from work (Pew, 2010). These patterns show an increasing fit between the ways in which online news is structured and presented and news consumption habits.

Such shifts contribute to debates concerning the extent to which the proliferation of news sources has led to an overall fragmentation of audiences, who no longer all tune in to watch the same news broadcast or read more or less the same newspapers. Thus, the rise of the “Daily Me” kind of news customization contributes to this fragmentation whose detrimental effects are described as balkanization (Sunstein, 2001). As we have seen above, news consumers are stratified in terms of socio-economic and other demographic criteria, and this is another cause of fragmentation. On the other hand, research has also found that this fragmentation may not be important as online news is characterized by less and less diversity and more and more homogenization either due to political economic factors (Fenton, 2010) or due to agenda-setting effects across the media (Coleman and McCombs, 2007). Thus, although audiences and consumers may well be divided across several categories and classes, they still consume the same news, as this is increasingly the same across both online and offline media.

Underlying this research is the understanding or normative assumption that news consumption is linked to political or civic participation. But again, research has failed to come up with conclusive evidence supporting this. Thus, while studies have shown that some young people may profit from the interactive presentation of online news (Tedesco, 2004, cited in Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2010), other studies have used user-generated content, especially in blogs, as a proxy for increased participation. However, most blogs do not feature political content, and those that do tend to reproduce and comment upon journalistic contents (Papacharissi, 2007; Haas, 2005). Other theorists, such as Bimber (2001), argue that if there is a correlation between online news consumption and political participation, this is due to the predisposition of news consumers to be interested in politics and not the other way round. Thus, they looked for news because they were already interested in politics and it is not news consumption that caused or triggered their political participation.

This body of work has provided important insights into the ways in which people engage with the news in online contexts, but, as Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2010) point out, there is still work to be done. They therefore propose an integrative research agenda that will combine theory building, innovative research strategies, and methods, and which will radically overhaul existing assumptions underlying research into news consumption. At the same time, we could add that the relationship between politics and online news and journalism needs to be clarified from both ends: both in terms of what
politics, and specifically democratic politics, requires from journalism and citizens, and in terms of the varied ways in which citizens engage with online journalism.

**Research and theory**

The plethora of research projects and findings in online journalism shows that important empirical work has been undertaken in this area. On the other hand, it may hide the dearth of theoretical work, which can help make sense of and contextualize these findings. In other words, we should try to apprehend theoretically the inconclusive and often conflicting evidence, the variety of viewpoints and approaches, the dichotomies and controversies found in the research of online journalism. Some of the studies cited above have employed a theoretical perspective, and this is reflected in their research questions and methods. Although there is no agreement yet as to which theoretical approach is more appropriate for the study of online journalism, most of these approaches can fit in one of the following theoretical strands: the sociology of journalism; grounded theory; and theories of technology and society.

**Sociology of journalism**

The sociology of journalism, which includes the sociology of news production, has contributed greatly to our understanding of the dynamics in journalism. Broadly speaking, the sociology of journalism looks at the ways in which journalism is created as a product of distinct historical, social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances (e.g. Chalaby, 1998). The sociology of news production looks at journalistic work more closely, and seeks to unpack the practices, values, organizational routines, ideas, and concepts by which journalism constructs the world (see Schudson, 2003). Clearly, there is much scope for this kind of theoretical work in online journalism. Most studies in Patterson and Domingo (2008) belong to this theoretical paradigm. For instance, Domingo examines the construction of online journalism as a set of practices, while others, such as Cawley (2008) and Quandt (2008) examine the practices, organizational routines, and cultures that feed into and construct online journalism. Steensen (2009) examined a particular kind of online journalism, that of feature writers, and concluded that the new routines and practices lead to a new kind of journalism professional, more attuned to the audience and less to news sources. More broadly, findings here indicate that online journalism has begun to develop its own routines, norms, and practices, which then shape the overall outcome, that is, online news; such practices include immediacy, interactivity, and multimediality. In this theoretical strand we can classify work on convergence (see among others, Singer, 2009; Chapter 2), which examines the ways in which media and their journalism are meeting and creating an altogether new kind of convergent journalism, with its own characteristics and requirements.

**Grounded theory**

A second strand can be considered as grounded theory, even if this term is not explicitly used. Grounded theory is understood as building theory from the bottom up, through observing, noting, categorizing, and analyzing data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Although grounded theory has a very specific approach to data and analysis, and although it is
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rarely mentioned explicitly in online journalism research – the exception here is Steensen’s (2009) work on innovation – it is a useful way of describing and understanding a strand of theory that does not begin with any assumptions, but which collects and analyzes data, seeking to understand inductively online journalism. Typologies and models of online journalism may be classified here, as they follow an inductive approach, beginning with the common characteristics of some forms of online journalism and coming up with broader inferences from there. Thus, Jo Bardoe’s (1996) and Mark Deuze’s (2003) contributions on the various models of online journalism may be understood as grounded theory, as well as Robinson’s account in this volume on experiential journalism (Chapter 4), and Siapera’s chapter on forms of journalism (Chapter 9). This work, operating at various levels of abstraction, describes the different parameters that define online journalism, its contents, and the different ways in which it relates to its publics. A parallel body of work seeks to identify more broadly how new media has changed the relationship between online journalism and society – for instance, work such as Hermida’s (2010; Chapter 17) describes the way in which the new media, and especially the ubiquity of social media, have made journalism so pervasive that it can only be understood as ambient, surrounding us all, all the time. Of note here is the conceptual agreement between Robinson and Hermida on the experiential dimensions of online journalism.

Theories of technology

A third strand of theoretical work on online journalism focuses on new technologies and the relationship between technology, society, and journalism. The main idea here is that since online journalism depends on technology, theoretical accounts should explore the relationship between technology and society as a means of understanding the development of online journalism. However, theories of technology are multiple, each positing a different relationship between technology, society, and journalism. The best known approach is the diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, 1995), which looks at the processes through which innovations are adopted by social groups. Combined with journalism, this approach understands online journalism in terms of a gradual adoption of new technologies, on the basis of factors such as relative advantage, compatibility, simplicity, triability, and observation (see Rogers, 1995). For example, Jane Singer (2004) has examined newsroom convergence as a case of diffusion of innovation, showing that its adoption depends on the extent to which its offers relative advantages, is compatible with existing technologies and practices, and so on.

Diffusion of innovation has, to some extent, explained the different rates of adoption of innovations in journalism, but followed to its logical conclusion, this perspective implies that eventually all journalists will adopt new technologies and that all journalism will become new media or online journalism. It moreover sees the process as driven by technologies themselves, thereby overlooking the dynamic interaction between different factors. This is where actor-network theory comes into play: it holds that technology is but one actor in a complex network, which includes not only journalists, but also new media engineers, programmers, designers, media organizations, users and the different ideas, cultures, and concepts they carry with them, and so on. These actors are all engaged in the production of online journalism, each with a varied contribution but which inevitably influences the whole ensemble. From the actor-network theory
perspective we cannot expect technology to have consequences or effects, rather, it constitutes one of the many actants in the network. Work here has examined how different actors in online journalism can be conceptualized (Turner, 2005), but perhaps, as Plesner (2009) has argued, the actor-network theory’s contribution to understanding journalism lies in the unpacking of associations, in de-normalizing what has become normal practice. Bradshaw’s chapter in this volume (Chapter 14) shows the role played by different actors in the network created around HelpMeInvestigate in steering the project in different directions. Some of the problems associated with actor-network theory include its lack of explanatory potential and the lack of attention paid to matters of power, as it more or less assumes that human and non-human actors are equally involved in the network (see Bloor, 1999).

A third perspective on the relationship between technology and society is the one associated with Wiebe Bijker (Bijker et al., 1987; Bijker, 1997). The social construction of technology perspective holds that technology is itself the outcome of a set of complex factors, including social, cultural, political, and economic parameters, whose interaction shapes technology and its adoption. This perspective views it as firmly embedded in society, and shaped by the interests and views of various social groups. On the other hand, technologies are themselves shaping the future as they influence and shape their social contexts, and as they are differentially appropriated by different social groups – in this respect, the relationship between technology and society is one of mutual determination. When it comes to online journalism and its relationship with technology, this approach holds that its adoption, as well as the ways in which it will be put to work, depends on a variety of factors, ranging from broader economic and social factors to narrower organizational and professional ones. For instance, Domingo (2008) has argued that technological development and implementation in online journalism must be seen as the result of a set of decisions made in concrete circumstances and shaped by the wider socio-cultural and economic context. Similarly, Boczkowski (2004) holds that adoption of innovation in online newsrooms is the result of organizational structural factors, work practices, and the representations of such innovations held by users. In the same vein, Paulussen and Ugille (2008) identified organizational and professional–ideological constraints in adopting user-generated content.

Taken together, these three theoretical perspectives have greatly enhanced our understanding of online journalism, its emergence, and development. Yet more work is still necessary to uncover the different dynamics at work both from a theoretical point of view and with an eye to the empirical world out there. Notwithstanding the contributions of these theories, we need to sharpen our theoretical lens if we are to understand the continuous and ongoing development of journalism in concrete settings.

To some extent the situation in online journalism resembles Rumi’s parable of the elephant and the blind men: one touched the elephant’s trunk and said it is like a tree branch, the other touched its leg and found it was like a pillar, yet another touched its tail and thought it was like a rope. In a similar manner online journalism is approached in a somewhat fragmented manner and the key is to understand that we can at best have a partial understanding of online journalism. And to complicate things even further, the dynamic nature of online journalism precludes any firm conclusions, as it develops and evolves continuously. In these terms, the current book constitutes an attempt to provide