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Bringing Up the Body: Uncovering the Subjectivity of Journalists

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss major contributions to journalism studies that come from approaching *journalistic practice* from the vantage point of the body – that is, understanding how journalists go about their work in ways shaped by their embodied experience. I will develop the argument that a consideration of the journalistic body requires a challenge to the fundamental underpinnings of professional practice, which are premised on the invisibility of the body. Foregrounding the body in relation to journalism practice calls for greater reflexivity in relation to the subjectivity of journalists. The paper discusses three overlapping insights resulting from such an approach: First, it requires attention to individual journalists' bodies and lived experience in relation to their *pasts* – or what journalists "carry." Second, it calls for attention to how they feel in the *present* – and how these affective responses shape their practice. Finally, it requires charting how journalists' bodies *interact* with other bodies, and the institutions surrounding them, as they go about their work.

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This special issue invites us to consider the body in journalism. This is a thrilling project; equally provocative and generative. Bringing a "corporeal turn" (Sheets-Johnstone 2009) into journalism studies opens opportunities for a broad range of research agendas across the field, in bringing to light issues and problems that have previously been invisible. It is a particularly timely project in the light of growing attention to emotion and subjectivity in journalism studies (e.g., Wahl-Jorgensen 2020) and increased attention to the wellbeing of journalists (e.g., Bélair-Gagnon et al. 2024). Together, these strands of work have generated a critical mass of scholarship attentive to embodiment.

Specifically, a corporeal turn calls attention to the place of the body across journalistic practices, texts and audience experiences. To mention just a few contributions arising from this shift, in the context of *production,* a corporeal turn involves attention to the embodied experiences of journalists as they go about their jobs. It implies that we must consider journalists as human beings first and foremost, complete with bodies

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and emotions, rather than the disembodied, distant observers imagined by conventional understandings of professionalism. In relation to *journalistic texts,* the corporeal turn calls attention to the fact the journalism is always, in the final instance, about bodies: Journalism encompasses stories of the lived and embodied experience of human beings. News photography and audio-visual journalism represent the human body for better and for worse, in and through powerful interactions with journalistic language (Taylor 1998). An understanding of the body in the texts of journalism, then, calls attention to the politics of representation, including issues of power in relation to whose body is represented, how, and why (Dawney 2019; Witz 2000). This, in turn, raises questions about the ethical responsibilities of journalism in capturing embodied humans in a responsible fashion (Chouliaraki 2006; Thomas 2016).

Finally, in the context of *audiences* of journalism, a corporeal turn occasions awareness about the embodied experience of news consumption. This encompasses taking an interest in "how news feels" to its audiences (Toff and Nielsen 2022), ranging from enjoyment (Kaspar, Zimmermann, and Wilbers 2016) and empathy (Kyriakidou 2015) to horror, boredom and fatigue (Hasell and Halversen 2024). And it extends to considering audience experiences of, and interactions with, the materiality of journalistic objects, whether these are newspapers, televisions or mobile phones (Fortunati, Taipale, and Farinosi 2015).

Centering the body in journalism, then, opens our eyes to a wealth of new research avenues aligned to an approach which takes seriously human embodied experience. Here, I want to focus on the major contributions to scholarly approaches arising from approaching *journalistic practice* from the vantage point of the body – that is, understanding how journalists go about their work in ways shaped by their embodied experience. I will develop the argument that a consideration of the journalistic body brings to the forefront a long-standing challenge to the fundamental underpinnings of professional practice, which have tended to render the body invisible. Ultimately, foregrounding the body in relation to journalism practice calls for attention to individual journalists' bodies and lived experience in relation to their *pasts* and *presents* but also necessitates charting how journalists' bodies *interact* with other bodies as they go about their work.

The professional body

In the first instance, such an examination requires an understanding of what we mean when we talk about the body. As feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (1995) defined it, we can think of the body as "a concrete, material, animate organization of flesh, organs, nerves and skeletal structure, which are given unity, cohesiveness, and form through the physical and social inscription of the body's surface" (1995, 104). This conception is helpful because it reminds us of both the materiality of the flesh, and the physical and social inscription on it, brought about by the body's interactions with the world. These interactions, and the inscriptions resulting from them, are only rarely accidental, and profoundly shaped by (but also shaping) our place in the world. Bodies are inscribed in gendered, racialized, and classed ways, and this inscription is disciplined and maintained by the social world and power relations surrounding us. This makes bodies "maps of power and identity" (Haraway 1990, 222).

In professional work (as well as in much of the social world), bodies are seen as "performing" entities (Styhrke, 104). Our bodies are integral to professional activities, but

therefore also inscribed, shaped and disciplined to conform with the requirements of the profession. A focus on the body in professional contexts entails seeing it not just as an "organizational resource that needs to be managed in accordance with various managerial techniques and methodologies [but] as the primary site of experience, perception, and emotions" (Styhre 2004, 102). Professionalism itself is predicated on policing the body to enforce occupational ideals. As Waring and Waring (2009) noted, "notions of professionalism have centred on a set of occupational ideals defined as male, public and rational" (349; see also Simpson et al. 2020). As such, concealment of the body is not an accidental act, but rather constitutes a structural underpinning of dominant understandings of professionalism. It is only by hiding the body that we can carry out the "privileged activity of engaging in abstract mind work" (Witz 2000, 12).

While "hiding the body" has been a prevalent approach across many professional fields, for some professions the body is unavoidably at the center and takes precedence over "abstract mind work." For example, fields of healthcare and medicine have paid attention to the embodied experience of patients, as well as the complexities of embodied care, since the 1980s (e.g., Toombs 1988). Growing attention to the social and cognitive components of health has contributed to the prominence of "humanistic medicine", emphasizing compassionate and empathetic care (e.g., Schwartz and Wiggins 1985; Thibault 2019). Similarly, embodiment has been foregrounded in other physically orientated professions – ranging from music and dance education (Sutela, Kivijärvi, and Anttila 2021) to acting (Norrthon 2019) and professional sports (Coupland 2015). What these professions share is the fact that the body is essential to professional practice, and that what counts as success is therefore inevitably tied to an explicit understanding and assessment of embodied performance.

By contrast, journalism, like other professions oriented towards knowledge work, has been profoundly informed by the mind–body dualism, which has tended to favor the mind and denigrate and marginalize concerns associated with the body (e.g., Archetti 2022). As Peters (2011) noted:

> This thinking has evident roots in Enlightenment perceptions surrounding the proper exercise of reason and emotion. Whereas discourses around reason locate it in the mind, emotions are located discursively in the body […] This rationale leads to a historical distrust of the body, the site of passions, lust, drives, and desire. (Peters 2011, 305)

The historical distrust of the body – and its inherent partiality, subjectivity and emotionality – has informed the professional ideal of objectivity (e.g., Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). As Epstein noted as far back as 1974, the belief in objectivity has translated into a "view from nowhere", adopting a valorization of the journalist as a disembodied, dispassionate, and rational observer (Epstein 1974). Journalists and journalism scholars alike have long recognized the impossibility of objectivity (e.g., Iggers 2018; Maras 2013; Schudson 1978). Despite this widespread recognition that journalists are inevitably subjective (Muñoz-Torres 2012), the emphasis in professional practice has tended to be on *overcoming* inherent biases to better approach the ideal of objectivity (Hackett 1984; Schudson 1978; Schultz 2021).

At the same time, journalism scholars have engaged in a long-standing critique of the profound epistemological limitations of the ideal of objectivity (Durham 1998), including the tendency to reproduce the views of the most powerful in society, and a focus on a

limited technical and procedural account of politics (e.g., Hallin 1985; Schiller 1981; Schudson 1978). Feminist scholars of journalism ethics have pointed to the usefulness of standpoint epistemology as a resource for acknowledging lived experience and developing an approach that reflexively acknowledges lived experience (Durham 1998; Steiner 2018).

We have also seen a lively debate on the topic within specific corners of the discipline – those that study specialist forms of journalism not traditionally associated with objectivity. For example, scholars of arts and cultural journalism, feature reporting and narrative journalism have long been alert to the role and value of subjectivity within the work of these specialisms (Chong 2019; Harbers and Broersma 2014; Steensen 2017). In the context of such specialist journalisms, it is built into the very fabric of professional practice. So, for example, arts and cultural journalism are premised on making inherently subjective judgements about cultural artifacts, backed up by professional, knowledge, expertise and experience. Feature reporting draws on the storytelling skills and emotional intelligence of the journalist, while narrative journalism centrally relies on rendering the identity and experience of the journalist explicit. Yet even conventional "hard news" journalism is widely acknowledged to contain elements of subjectivity, even if an emphasis on objectivity has contributed to rendering it invisible (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013).

Surfacing Subjectivity: The Development of a Reflexive Approach to Journalism

To understand the specific ways in which journalists are shaped by their embodied experience, it is necessary to identify and surface subjectivity. This entail a recognition that is in fact an *embodied* practice, carried out by human beings whose bodies carry history, meaning and markers of identity that shape interactions, and respond to other bodies in and through these interactions. Surfacing subjectivity means not just acknowledging its inevitability but also recognizing it as an indispensable part of what makes journalism valuable and distinctive.

The call to take seriously the body in journalism represented by this special issue gives us a new language, enabling us to re-center such questions. If we *make visible* the body, we turn to a preoccupation with making explicit what journalists *carry* in terms of their embodied life experience. This entails "listening to bodies as archives" (Puwar 2021, 3), understanding how our baggage - our embodied influences – shape professional practices and journeys. Such a conception represents a rupture with conventional epistemological assumptions of journalism as a professional practice. Attention to the body demands greater *reflexivity* around the subjectivity and embodied experience of journalists. When talking about reflexivity in this context, it represents a departure from dominant understandings of the term within journalism studies. Journalism scholars and "hackademics" (e.g., Harcup 2011) have used to term to call attention to the need for journalists reflect on their practice by bringing in relevant theoretical perspectives (Niblock 2007). Conceptions of the "reflexive practitioner" have been extremely helpful, both as an underpinning of inquiry into professional practice and as a compelling articulation of the value of journalism studies.

However, I here mean to refer to reflexivity in a somewhat more specific way, drawing on understandings of reflexivity long advanced by scholars of cultural anthropology and sociology (see also Steiner 2018). Among cultural anthropologists, calls for reflexivity were

originally motivated by the critique of Western, white, privileged (usually male) ethnographers. These ethnographers were observing and speaking on behalf of their usually poor, marginalized and "exotic tribal" subjects (Ntarangwi 2010), with limited awareness of their own privilege. Similarly to journalists, their (partial, embodied) subject positions were concealed in the cloak of scientific objectivity and value neutrality (Scholte 1978). For cultural anthropologists advocating reflexivity, it meant turning the "ethnographic gaze" inwards, deliberately problematizing the subjectivity of the researcher. Reflexivity is "the constant awareness, assessment, and reassessment by the researcher of the researcher's own contribution/influence/shaping of intersubjective research and the consequent research findings" (Salzman 2002, 806). Renato Rosaldo (2000) expressed the implications of such reflexivity in the following terms:

> The ethnographer, as a positioned subject, grasps certain human phenomena better than others. He or she occupies a position or structural location and observes with a particular angle of vision. Consider, for example, how age, gender, being an outsider, and association with a neo-colonial regime influence what the ethnographer learns. The notion of position also refers to how life experiences both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight. (Rosaldo 2000, 525)

Many of these features of the understanding of the "positioned subject" of the ethnographer also apply to journalists, who are by definition frequently outsiders to the events they are reporting on (Vos and Hanusch 2024).[1] Yet they are granted the privilege, through their professional authority (Carlson 2017, 11), to tell the authorized story of these events, on behalf of those who have been directly affected. As Steiner (2018) notes, drawing on feminist standpoint epistemology, reflexivity constitutes "a practical resource for working journalists, providing for a credible, ethical, socially, and epistemologically responsible journalism" (1858). Drawing on a reflexive approach enables journalists to acknowledge that they themselves are social actors, while "demystifying their practices and their privileged position in knowledge production" (Steiner 2018, 1858).

Centering the body makes visible a wide range of potential avenues for future research – as well as suggestions for reflection on the part of journalists. Here, informed by my own (partial and subjective) interest in the role of emotion in journalism practices (e.g., Wahl-Jorgensen 2019b; 2020). I sketch out just a few such possibilities, but there are many more. From my specific vantage point, I suggest that foregrounding subjectivity and the body requires attention to individual journalists' bodies and lived experience in relation to the *past* and the *present*, but also to understanding how journalists' bodies *interact* with other bodies in the process of carrying out journalistic work.

First, it requires attention to the history of journalists' bodies – what they carry with them into their roles from their past lives and experience (Puwar 2021, 3). Our histories include "traumas and obsessions" inscribed on our bodies (Puwar 2021, 3). Such experience may come from our personal lives but may also have been incurred because of our work. In journalism, there is growing awareness of the role of trauma resulting from covering conflicts and crises (e.g., Charles 2022). While the psychological impacts of such vicarious trauma are particularly well documented, medical research has also identified physiological responses to the combat situation among conflict reporters, including "metabolic, muscular, cardiovascular, and cortical and psychological anxiety response, as well as a decrease in memory accuracy" (Tornero-Aguilera, Robles-Pérez,

and Clemente-Suárez 2020, 231). Research on the impact of witnessing traumatic events has shown potential long-term neurological consequences, including lasting de-regulation and prolonged stress response (Sherin and Nemeroff 2011). Such long-term impacts shape personalities, decision-making and interactions, and therefore have tangible ramifications for journalistic work.

At the same time, the specific interests that journalists pursue are invariably defined not just by their experience but also by their identities. These identities, inscribed on the body, include race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class. In turn, identities inform journalists' orientation to their work and their interactions with colleagues, sources and the broader social world. This is significant, because journalists around the world are not representative of the population overall – with a larger proportion of journalists that are male, majority ethnic, young, and university-educated (Weaver and Willnat 2012, Chapter 38). Journalists, then, are positioned within broader hierarchies and socio-economic structures which may inform what stories they pursue and how they go about their work.

Second, foregrounding subjectivity requires attention to journalists' bodies in the *present*: How journalists *feel* about themselves and their work, whether they are covering parliamentary proceedings, community bake sales or natural disasters and conflicts. Such emotions, feelings and affective responses may involve being angry, tired, hungry, bored, or full of joy, pride and happiness (Bélair-Gagnon et al. 2024; Šimunjak 2022; Stupart 2021), to mention just a few possibilities. How do journalists' feelings affect their work, in relation to everything ranging from their resilience in responding to change to the kinds of stories they tell? How do their affective responses, in turn, shape their commitment to specialisms and topics over time? What is the role of journalists' histories and identities in shaping their emotional responses? Such questions are, in fact, increasingly salient in research as well as in professional discussions, paving the way for productive new avenues of enquiry.

Thirdly and relatedly, foregrounding subjectivity means looking at how the bodies of journalists interact with other bodies as part of the process of making the news. That entails, first, paying attention to power relations between journalists and their sources (Carlson 2009). These relationships are dynamic and may vary dramatically based on the role types and backgrounds of journalists. For example, a local journalist covering community sports will have a dramatically different set of interactions with their sources than a national political correspondent attending a campaign rally. Equally, journalists' access to settings and sources might be profoundly shaped by their socio-economic background and identities. An interest in such interaction also extends to the relationship between journalists' embodied experience and the institutional cultures of their news organizations, which vary significantly across platform and organization types, as well as time and place (e.g., Archetti 2022, 975; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019a, 676).

Seeing the body, then, is no trivial matter, but it is one that is essential to rendering visible what has for so long been neglected by journalists, their news organizations, and the scholars who study them. A corporeal turn invites us to develop new forms of reflexivity – as practitioners and scholars - that might ultimately enrich our enquiry. Rather than being compelled to pretend as if bodies didn't exist, we can come to appreciate exactly how embodied experience and interests shape the stories that journalists tell and therefore, what we come to know about the world.

Note

1. It is important to note here that observations around reflexivity in ethnography also apply to journalism scholars, even if a more detailed consideration of what such reflexivity entails is beyond the scope of this article.

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