Practice, Interpretation, and Meaning in Today's Digital Media Ecosystem

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Abstract

Historically, scholars of journalism have concerned themselves with meaning. It is ironic, then, that much of the most influential scholarship on digital media over the past two decades has concerned itself primarily with media practices. This line of thought was inaugurated by Couldry's call to "decenter media research from the study of media texts or production structures and to redirect it onto the study of the open-ended range of practices." This article uses research on journalism and digital political communication as a case study through which to assess the balance of gains and losses stemming from the practice turn and propose some paths forward for future scholarship. Across this article, I argue that alternate perspectives on practice (as found, for instance, in the work of the late James W. Carey) can recenter the very valuable research on media practice through a focus on the *ritualized aspects* of media practice, a concern with very real *media texts*, and by remembering that texts are not free-floating pieces of culture but are rather embedded in historically specific *mediums* which are only partially reducible to practice.

Keywords

culture, practices, texts, Wittgenstein

Introduction

Does the regular performance of routinized activities endow the social world with meaning? Does society "hang together" primarily because of people's practices? Are what audiences "do" with media fundamentally more important than the aesthetic and empirical content of that media? What is the relationship between journalistic *work*, the meaning of the content that journalists produce, and the political and social activities of both news audiences and democratic citizens?

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All of these questions draw our attention to the subject of this article: the "practice turn" in media and journalism studies, a turn which has occurred over the past 20 years at the level of both media production (Ryfe, 2018) and audience consumption (Couldry, 2004). Despite the explosion of studies which implicitly or explicitly draw on varieties of practice-oriented sociology (Ahva, 2017; Raetzsch, 2015; Witschge & Harbers, 2018), the full theoretical implications of this explosion in practice research have not been entirely understood or reflected upon (Ryfe, 2018), nor have the usual field defining "controversies" devoted much ink to debating the implications of practice (Benson, 2017; Costera-Meijer, 2016). The simultaneous presence and absence of "practice" within so much media and journalism studies research, I want to argue, has left the field ill-prepared to deal with methodical, political, and epistemological challenges, particularly those stemming from the growth of anti-liberal political sentiments, the rise of big-data social science, and the increasing importance of the visual objects within in political communication. This article argues that journalism studies has forgotten James W. Carey's central argument that communication is as much about *interpretation, texts, and meaning* as it is about production, technology, audiences, agency, and social structure. Practice theory, from both a production and consumption perspective, allows us to gain a first foothold in accessing these iconographic aspects of media life, but only if they continue to see media texts as semi-autonomous forms of ritualized communication, one whose possibilities and potentials are not exhausted by human practices at either a micro or collective level.

All of this matters for reasons that go beyond arcane debates within journalism and media studies. The bulk of practice theory was deployed in journalism studies in the decades roughly between the end of the Cold War and the rise of anti-liberal populist politics, a moment that was remarkable for both the institutional collapse of "golden-age" (Lemann, 2020) journalism and for the rise of entirely new constellations of digital technologies and journalistic practices (Downie & Schudson, 2009). Times, however, have changed—recent years have seen political transformations that appear to largely hinge on the *meaning* that a variety of actors attribute to a plethora of media texts, along with larger debates about the relationship between belief and political action . While it may be too soon to talk about the return of ideology to journalism studies, something of the sort seems to be in the air. It is unclear whether or not practice theory as currently constituted provides us with the tools we need to analyze these new developments.

In the pages that follow, I analyze the nature, implications, and limitations of the practice turn. This article begins with an analysis of practice theory more broadly, as well as the key statements from both Couldry and Ryfe about its application media research; Couldry was something of a practice-turn pioneer, particularly in the area of media consumption, while Ryfe was the first to identify the fact that a larger theoretical impulse underlay much of the ethnographic work in 21st century journalism, and by extension, in media production more generally. In this first section, I pay particular attention to the manner in which practice has been identified by both audience researchers and scholars of media production. In the second section, I try to clarify the stakes of this analysis, pointing out the fact that considerations of practice are largely absent from the major recent disputes within journalism studies, specifically in debates over

descriptive versus causal research and debates over the roles of audiences versus those of media producers. The implications of media practice research have more to do with relationships between *media ritual, media meaning*, and *the role of interpretation* (on the part of both the subjects of research and communication scholars themselves) as they do with debates over causality or audience studies. This second section alludes to the work of James W. Carey to more explicitly contrast the major disputes in communications research over the past decade with a more careful and nuanced focus on media texts and the autonomous interpretative work that goes into their creation, reception, and dissemination.

In the third section, "Why the Practice Turn is Not Enough," I highlight four limitations of practice theory: the way it is methodologically deployed in actually existing journalism studies; political problems stemming from the right of anti-liberal social movements, as well as the growth of "fake news"; sociology of knowledge problems related to the overlaps between bid-data science and practice theory; and, finally, larger theoretical lacunae and blind-sports. In the fourth and final section, I draw the work of a variety of scholars as diverse as Michael Lynch, Bruno Latour, Jeffrey Alexander, and Alexander Hennion to make the argument that future studies of the media need to focus as much on *cultural rituals* as they do situated practices, along with the very artifacts of *media texts* themselves and the *mediums* these texts are embedded in. To understand the way media and meaning relate to one another, we need to focus on meaning as reproduced through practice, but also on meaning as anchored in cultural ritual. And, we also pay particular attention to the various texts and medium-centered interpretive work that goes into these rituals if we are to continue thinking holistically about the social roles of journalism and media in the digital age.

The Turn Toward Practice in Media and Journalism Studies

What Practice Is

To argue that the turn toward practice in media and journalism studies needs a deeper theoretical interrogation, it is first helpful to know exactly what practice theory is and how it first came to prominence in both the study of communication and in the study of news more specifically. Even the term itself is contested. "The best short answer to the question, what is practice theory is that it is any theory that treats practice as a fundamental category, or takes practices as its point of departure," argues David G. Stern (2003) deploying something of a tautological argument to define a term of central importance. John Postil (2010), at another extreme, claims that "social theorists agree that there is no such thing as a coherent, unified 'practice theory,' only a body of highly diverse writings by thinkers who adopt a loosely defined 'practice approach'." A third attempt at a definition turns to allied thinkers; the usual philosophical antecedents are located in the writings of late Wittgenstein (2009) and (separately) Heidegger, with a modern theoretical lineage that includes Foucault (1976), Giddens, Bourdieu, Latour, and others. In essence, practice theory (and the practice-oriented sociology

that stems from it) argues that regular, routinized practices help create stable meanings and social structures, which themselves then feedback into these practices themselves. In Rouse's (2007) words, practice sociologists widely embrace

> notions that society or culture is the realm of activities and institutions governed or constituted by rules, of meaningful performances rather than merely physical or biological processes, or of actions according to norms rather than (or as well as) causally determined events are ubiquitous.

Rouse further identities practice theory as concerned with (a) reconciling structure and human agency (as seen in the discussion of the relationship between practice, meaning, and social norms, above); (b) with the body (also emphasized by Postil and Stern in their overviews); (c) with the notion of practice as both prelinguistic and dependent on hermeneutic processes; and finally, (d) deeply implicated in the self-reflexivity of the social sciences as well as possibly constitutive of those sciences. In Wittgenstein, we see glimpses of these ideas in his notion that acting upon a rule is only possible when particular background practices are shared as part of a "form of life." For Heidegger (1927), the notion that the use of an object is only possible when grasped as part of a cluster of other objects and larger practice-driven context, is similar. Foucault sees power, not simply as emanating from above but also rising up from below as part of a larger ensemble of practices that were quite often literally imprinted upon the docile body. Bourdieu reconciles the contradiction between structure and agency in his notion of habitus as

> systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (Bourdieu, 1980)

Latour (2005), finally, adds objects and nonhuman objects to the mix, arguing that the routinization of practices cannot be attributed simply to humans alone, but are made possible by and reinscribed upon numerous material agents. In Andrew Pickering's (1992) phrase,

> if practice carries within itself a teleological principle of making associations between disparate cultural elements, there is no need to look outside practice thus construed for explanations of . . . particular culture[es] . . . practice has its own integrity. (p. 17)

On first glance, it might seem strange that practice theory would have much to say to scholars of media, particularly insofar as it seems to focus on issues of practice over meaning and interpretation, or at the very least argue that all meanings arise from practices. What would be the purpose in analyzing media artifacts, after all, if they did not carry within them some underlying message or emotional resonance capable of being interpreted by human beings? It is ironic, then, that much of the most influential

scholarship on digital media over the past two decades has concerned itself primarily with media practices. This line of thought was inaugurated, arguably, by Couldry's call to "decenter media research from the study of media texts or production structures (important though these are) and to redirect it onto the study of the open-ended range of practices focused directly or indirectly on media" (Couldry, 2004). In a highly influential essay from 2004, Couldry presented this move as building on earlier work on media audiences conducted by Silverstone and others. "A practice approach to media," Couldry writes,

> frames its questions by reference, not to media considered as objects, texts, apparatuses of perception or production processes, but to what people are doing in relation to media in the contexts in which they act. Such a media sociology is interested in actions that are directly oriented to media, actions that involve media without necessarily having media as their aim or object; and actions whose possibility is conditioned by the prior existence, presence or functioning of media.

Couldry has clearly traveled a long way from this initial starting point. In a reflective essay from 2014, he argues that the practice approach needs to ground itself in an understanding of the larger "media manifold" (Couldry, 2014, p. 29), an almost entirely mediated space in which the process of "selecting out" particular media formats and *not engaging* with particular media formats is just as important as the classic question of what people do with media. Nevertheless, Couldry's move away from both the individual "consumption" of "texts" by "audiences" and the larger political economy of production practices can be seen, in retrospect to have arrived just at the right moment, a moment in which practices such as "sharing" "liking" "tweeting," and so on, first entered media research agenda as well as the consciousness of the wider population.

Couldry's intervention largely lies on the "audiences" side of the media studies ledger; equally important, according to David Ryfe (2018), is the turn to practice sociology in journalism production. Ryfe introduces the point made at the start of this article—that the most productive works of journalistic theorizing in the past two decades have been those that associate themselves, directly or implicitly, with practice-based sociologists. Practice sociology, Ryfe argues, has four major characteristics. It is concerned (obviously) with practices; how these practices are *performed*; how they weave together into larger environments; and how they shed a particularly important light on the relationship between social order and social change. Ryfe's contribution here is essential. He is the first journalism studies scholar, best I can tell, to argue that many of the newest generation of journalism production scholars are actually looking at the same thing—practices—a theoretical commitment which often leaves them with more in common than they realize. Ryfe also notes (and I will return to this later) that the vast majority of journalism production researches describe journalistic practices without attending to journalistic performances (eg, Ahva, 2017; Raetzsch, 2015; Witschge & Harbers, 2018).

What Practice Is Not

Such is the state of practice research on journalism and news production as we enter the third decade of the 21st century. But why does all this matter? The title of this special issue is "Advancing Journalism and Communication Research: New Theories and Concepts." If practice theory is well established in media research, how can I argue that this article constitutes a worthy intervention, or takes the theoretical state of the art in significantly new or interesting directions? I want to contrast the argument I am making here with the two major areas of dispute in journalism studies over the past decade. To the degree journalism studies scholars have openly argued about anything at all, they have generally confined their disputes to either debates over the role of audiences in the age of digital journalism or more normative and methodological debates about "description" versus "explanation" in journalism research. While arguments about practice research may superficially seem to be part and parcel of one or the other of these arguments, I contend that my concerns here do not reduce to these important areas of contention within the field. Comparing their interest and stakes may help clarify what, exactly, debates about practice are about.

Early research in digital journalism was largely, though not entirely, concerned with journalistic production and how production processes were changing with the onset of digital technology and tools. There were both field-specific and practical reasons for this focus. How journalism itself was changing was a matter of deep public concern, as evidenced by the number of public reports on the topic that emerged in the early to mid-2000s (Anderson et al., 2013; Downie & Schudson, 2009; Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, 2009). Pablo Boczkkowski's path-breaking book, *Digitizing the News* (Boczkowski, 2004), served to inaugurate a new wave of ethnographic research in newsrooms (Cottle, 2000), inspiring an entire generation of young scholars to consider the possibility that ethnographic studies of production were a worthy and important scholarly method. For a brief moment, newsrooms themselves flung open their doors to researchers, perhaps in part because they themselves were uncertain about what the internet was doing to their production processes and business models. The digital transformation of the news business, finally, led to a general rethinking of key academic concepts in journalism studies and political communication—how were long-settled issues of framing, agenda-setting, gatekeeping, and so on, changing in this new digital age? All of these conceptual evolutions, it seemed, could be better understood by paying deeper attention to media production processes.

The limitations of this focus quickly became clear and prompted a backlash among scholars who contended that this obsession with ethnographic studies of production ignored how the new journalism was being shared, consumed, and understood. Costera-Meijer (2016) led this push for an "audience turn" in journalism research, writing in that,

> journalism scholars' and practitioners' limited and sometimes even derogatory repertoire about user practices is the result of a deeply ingrained newsroom and media centricity of

Journalism Studies, even when they investigate audiences (cf. Costera-Meijer 2010, 2013a, 2013c). What is needed is a strong audience- and user-centered perspective, one that enables us to deal methodologically and conceptually with the complexities involved in changing news use. (Costera-Meijer, 2016, p. 546)

By 2019, this audience focus had consolidated so quickly that scholars were able to issue calls for a special issue of *Digital Journalism* on "advancing the audience turn" in journalism studies ("Join the Conversation," 2020) and some thinkers were even discussing moving *beyond* the audience turn. While this rapid oscillation between "turns" and "turns, revisited" is typical of some of the worst tendencies of journalism studies, the fact remains that a major area of conflict within the field in the early digital age was exactly this argument about the role of news audiences in the development of "post-industrial" journalism.

A later dispute was less concerned with the *object* of scholarly analysis than it was with scholarly *methods* and the ways that different methods contributed to certain "descriptive" tendencies in the field of digital journalism research. This debate was launched by Rodney Benson in his seminal paper, "From Heterogeneity to Differentiation: Searching for a Good Explanation in a New Descriptivist Era," which appeared in 2017 in Boczkowski and Anderson's *Remaking the News* (Benson, 2017). Benson's argument, in sum, was that a largely qualitative set of methodologies indebted to Bruno Latour, actor-network theory, and "thick description" had led journalism research to be a largely descriptive intellectual endeavor, neglecting both structural analysis and considerations of causality. Such pure academic description, while possibly a useful starting point and first wave of research, was inevitably unworthy of scholarly attention, which should be ultimately concerned with why things happen the way they do and how to change them. As Benson put it in an early draft of his paper delivered at a conference in 2014:

[Much contemporary digital media] research starts and ends with a descriptive account. We wait in vain for the explanatory analysis. Why? Why these findings and not others? The answers never arrive.

I call this the "new descriptivism."

I can't prove it with quantitative evidence, but I've begun to notice a widespread tendency of more and more research offering descriptions and nothing else: very detailed, very sophisticated, very interesting descriptions, but at the end of the day, just descriptions. What has happened to explanation? (And, related, as I'll ask in a moment: what has happened to critique?) (Benson, 2014)[1]

As seen by its journey from a 2014 conference talk to a major essay in a well-known edited volume, Benson's provocation has had a long shelf life, and has shaped the field in numerous ways. Whether as a result of his essay, or simply as a corollary to it, much journalism studies research in the past decade has moved far beyond its ethnographic roots, often drawing on political communication and comparative political science methodologies to advance structural explanations for the shape of journalistic systems.

As I will discuss further below, restrictions in ethnographic access to newsroom spaces have also begun to limit the amount of thick description and qualitative immersion researchers can actually engage in. By any measure, there is certainly much more audience analysis and structural explanation in digital journalism research than there was 15 years ago.

Nevertheless, my arguments in this article about practice are not reducible to either of these debates. Indeed, I think questions about media and meaning in practice scholarship take our analytical gaze in new directions. As we saw above, practice-based journalism studies can focus *either* on audience practices (Couldry) or the practices of news producers (Ryfe); likewise, practice sociology is amenable to both causal explanations or thick description depending on the analytical level one wishes to pitch one's tent. Debates about practice are thus not about audiences or explanation. They have more to do with the nature of mediation itself, as well as the role that ritual and culture play in the production and consumption of media texts. In the end, the questions I am concerned with here can only be answered by a more explicit focus on the nature of the medium through which texts are distributed, the aesthetics of those texts the manner in which readers integrate media messages into their larger cultures of belief, and the underlying *meanings* audiences attribute to a variety of objects of journalism. These are, to my mind, Carey-esque questions.

Without a doubt, practice theory has proven its use for scholars of media and journalism. The question for us today is whether changing social, technological, and particularly political contexts have left thus practice-turn vulnerable to critiques that it does not do enough to explain how media actually matter for culture and politics in the early 21st century. It is to this question that I now turn.

Why Practices Are Not Enough

In this section, I want to outline four ways that studying practices may no longer be sufficient for a fully engaged, mid-21st century media studies. First, I see problems with the way that practice research is methodologically deployed in actually existing journalism studies. Second, I want to briefly discuss some political problems in the way we might integrate the study of media practice into the rise of anti-liberal social movements on both side of the Atlantic (including the prevailing discourse surrounding so-called "fake news.") Third, I want to discuss what I see as sociology of knowledge problems related to the overlaps between big-data science and practice theory. Fourth and finally, I will briefly touch on a few larger theoretical lacunae and blindsports that I see as inevitably intertwined with the larger application of practice research in journalism studies.

First, I want to touch on some of the ways that the demands of practice theory, at its best, are now struggling to be met by a journalism studies scholarship that generally claims to align with practice-based approaches. According to Rouse, the relationship between language and tacit, bodily-based practices is a complex one that a variety of practice theorists have approached in different ways. For some, practices have a crucial dimension of "taken-for grantedness" that is often inaccessible to verbal articulation.

For these theorists, Rouse acknowledges, the key is to conduct ethnographic work; in these cases, "cross-cultural understanding, long integral to the self-conception of ethnographic practice, [arises from] immersing oneself in an alternative way of life as a participant or participant-observer." It thus makes sense that there was an alignment between the deeply embedded ethnographic work and some of the earliest practice-based research of early digital journalism studies (Anderson, 2012; Boczkowski, 2004; Usher, 2012). For scholars who might have given up trying to understand what the media did and thus refocused on what the maker and users of the media did instead, ethnography seemed like a logical choice.

It has been widely noted that more recent digital newsroom ethnographies (or those claiming to be ethnographies) have been of a different flavor than those of the first generation. Generalizing widely, the changes can be seen to boil down to a shorter period of time immersed in a particular field site, alongside a greater reliance on interviews. An early justification for this shift can be seen in Usher's (2016) recent work, with her conception "hybrid ethnography," def\ined as the pulling together "the best of interviewing and the best of ethnographic field research in a time frame that makes sense for a series of case studies" (p. 209), and perhaps the most extensive theoretical rationale for the practice is found in Coddington (2019). There are many interesting aspects to the notion of the hybrid ethnography. The trouble, of course, is how these shorter, interview-based ethnographies can be justified in a practice-based research that is fundamentally distrustful of the linguistic articulation of deep beliefs. If genuine ethnographic immersion is no longer possible in the early 21st century, or at the very least is extremely rare, how does this new qualitative work intersect with the embodied, place-centric claims of many early newsroom sociologists? (Gans 1979/2005; Tuchman 1978).

Scholarly methods for conducting practice-based journalism research have changed, often to the detriment of practice *theory*. What has also changed—and this is my second point—is the context in which practice research is taking place. I noted earlier that the shift to a practice-oriented understanding of journalistic production and consumption coincided with a political moment in which large-scale macro claims about the role of large structures in shaping political life (specifically, venerable critical concepts such as "ideology," [Hall, 1985], [Williams, 1978] "hegemony," [Gitlin, 1980] or "false consciousness" [Katz, 1987]) had faded from scholarly conversations. Some of the most nuanced, powerful, and explicit invocations of practice theory in journalism studies explicitly attempted to bring new digital issues to the fore of the field. Ahva (2017) used practice as a way to better theorize citizen participation in the news-making process, Raetzsch (2015) ties practices to processes of newsroom innovation. Witschge and Harbers (2018) saw practice sociology as a useful way to keep the meaning and purpose of journalism as radically indeterminate as possible in the face of occupational and professional uncertainty. Compared with these seemingly relevant and *au courant* preoccupations of digital journalism scholars, critical theorists seemed intellectually exhausted and out of touch with the new media moment.

Today, however, debates over large-scale infrastructures and their ideological effects have returned in new and different forms. Theorists of the global populist right, in particular, have begun to highlight the manner in which infrastructures of media and politics

have played a major role in the rise of anti-liberal populism around the world. Scholars such as Peck (2018), Cramer (2017), Hochshild and others have grappled with the deep ways in which questions of *identity and narrative* are channeled through mediated cultural forms and contribute to these developments in the American context. More generally, there is an increasingly vituperative debate about the role played by "fake news" in the seemingly irrational political behaviors that have suddenly gripped citizens and social actors. This strand of research has been pursued in both the American and global context, and has produced a veritable flood of academic work, industry reports, white papers, and journalistic think-pieces (for only a taste of this work, see Marwick et. al., [2017]—but the list itself is seemingly endless). Practice theory, at least as currently constructed, fits uneasily into this new world and this new communications landscape. Widespread assumptions about the importance of practice, the tenuous nature of media effects, and the opacity of meaning can no longer be sustained. The role of technology—particularly the role of technology in media making and sharing, notions drawn from actor-network theory, Bourdieuean sociology, and Couldry's work on audiences—fits uneasily with the new scholarship on global populism. The world has changed, and our theorizing must change with it.

Third, I think it is imperative that we confront some pressing sociology-of-knowledge problems that have emerged in the wake of the practice turn. In answering the previous question—what is the role of practice theory in the new political world in which we find ourselves, and in our new communications landscape?—we are led to conclude that possibly some of the greatest success of practice theory can be found in the very big-data techniques that power digital media platforms and make fake news possible (Anderson, 2020). Nick Couldry has grappled with this unexpected development, though from a somewhat roundabout and oblique angle. The very commercial infrastructure of digital media, he writes, enables practice-inclined researchers to suddenly access the very data about media use that they could have once only dreamed of. These actions, he notes, might be "banal" (sharing a post, liking on Facebook, etc.). But, he admits, "the traces of those banal actions are there for us as researchers to research, aren't they?" And as a result, "as researchers disposed and empowered to 'read' the world, we face a potential trap . . . As researchers so disposed, we are inclined to foreground processes that provide us with readable evidence":

> Today we face a deeply commercial version of this fallacy: our interpretative practices as researchers easily get entangled with the commercial drive of digital networks and social networking platforms (Van Dijck, 2013) to sell readable data about the processes they host as privileged access to "the social" (in the form of targeted consumers: Turow, 2011). As a result, we face, not a general scholastic fallacy, but what I would call an "inscription fallacy."

In other words, a sociological theory inclined to valorize practice (particularly, though not entirely, the practices of media *consumers*) suddenly has access to an incredibly banal yet incredibly rich set of billions upon billions of media practices, all collected by platform companies themselves. And while (as Couldry admits) these

practices are incredibly shallow, they can still act as a seductive corpus of inscribed evidence, one whose existence is especially seductive to those scholars who care less about what the media does than what people themselves do with media.

Fourth and last, practice theory presents a number of unaddressed theoretical difficulties, particularly when it concerns the consumption and production of *media*. First, what role do media artifacts play in practice, particularly given the fact that these artifacts are aesthetic, communicative devices in and of themselves? Given that Couldry's initial, explicit impulse in advancing a practice-oriented theory of media was to turn away from media texts, do texts have any role to play in a practice inclined theory of media use? Second and related, what is the role of interpretation and meaning-making in practice sociology, and how can questions of meaning be applied to practice media sociology? We have already seen that questions of meaning versus activity are debated within practice theory itself. What light can these debates shed on the application of practice sociology to communication in our digital age? Third: we are seeing a return of questions of power and ideology within practice sociology. Fourth and finally, questions of culture plague theories of practice. Does practice make culture? What is the relationship between practice, language, and meaning? Can practices be "added up" into a larger set of structures, either internal or external? Should culture even be thought of this way? As should be obvious, what I call theoretical questions here are inextricable from the other, more practical problems I discussed earlier in this text. In the next section, I want to try to answer these questions, and in so doing, to chart a path forward for the study of media and journalism in the post pratice era.

Babies and Bathwater, Practices, and Meaning

In this fourth and final section, I turn to what we ought to do next, given the general intellectual situation described above. The solution to the difficulties mentioned in the previous section is not to abandon the remarkable and generative work done on media practices, or within the larger practice-oriented turn in mainstream sociology. Rather, it seems that what is missing from these accounts is deeper understanding of culture as a field of symbolic meaning that goes beyond cultural practice. To formulate a theory of media culture that goes beyond practice, I draw on Michael Lynch's (1988) and Bruno Latour's (1986) work on the role of visual representations in scientific work and the research of Klett and Gerber (2014), whose discussion of "noise music as performance" attempts to navigate a middle path between actor-network theory and cultural narratival notions of individual meaning making. All of these resources, I argue, can help rectify the balance between studies of practice and power, on one hand, and meaning and interpretation on the other. All of them, it should be clear, see the influence of James Carey lurking in the background insofar as they focus *both* on meaning as reproduced through practice/ritual, but also pay particular attention to the various texts and medium-centered interpretive work that goes into thinking holistically about the social roles of journalism and media in the digital age.

Practices in Extremis

So far, the discussion in this article has been rather abstract, so it might be helpful to turn to a set of concrete examples to illustrate the theoretical dynamics I am outlining here, as well as some practical solutions. Take two pieces of journalistic content. In the first, a story runs on the right-wing American cable news outlet *Fox News*, a story that discusses the latest news on immigration to the United States from Mexico. During this broadcast, a set of stock visual images (Aiello, 2016; Frosh, 2003) are deployed to illustrate the story, images that include a set of faceless men with darker skin lining up in front a construction site, as well as generic shots of barbed wire fences and towers. In the second story, the elite broadsheet the *Financial Times* also discusses American immigration policy; included in this story is a data visualization showing U.S. immigration trends over the past 30 years, along with a second axis documenting the number of new businesses started by immigrants. The visualization is composed in cool, muted colors, complete with sharp lines and strong contrasts.

What do these pieces of journalism, ostensibly about the same subject—American immigration—*do* in the world? Is there even a way to resolve this question? In the terms of our discussion to this point, we can approach the answer the question in three ways. According to an identity, culture, and narrative perspective, we would need to analyze the way that the first story from *Fox News* taps into tribal notions of belonging to particular ethnic groups, the narratives that these pieces of journalism foster or repress, the way that different visualizations inculcate a sense of belonging or not belonging, and so on. For the second story from the *Financial Times*, it might be helpful to discuss the way various story cues, in particular the deployment of the abstract data visualization, tap into what anthropologist Karen Ho has called "a culture of smartness" (Ho, 2009). In Rick Perlstein's words, "we moderns spend enormous amounts of our conscious energy making evaluations about who is sophisticated and who is simple, who is well-bred and who is *arriviste*, and who is smart and who is dumb," and stories like the *Financial Times* help serve as identity markers for this evaluative processes.

From the point of view of practice theory, however, we would divide our attention between the practices of journalistic production of these media artifacts (in which forms of journalistic knowledge are embedded and ratified as proper through everyday practices [Lynch, 1988]) and journalistic consumption (a la Couldry, 2004). Through ethnographic or deep interviewing work, we could understand how these media artifacts are built, consumed, shared, and used along a variety of axes, and through these practices could hope to understand their meaning-in-use. Big data and "trace" analysis, finally, would be the furthest extension of this practice perspective. Carried out at a massive scale, it could look at how *Fox News* and *Financial Times* consumers posted these immigration articles to Facebook and Twitter, how they were shared and reshared, how different technical interventions allowed their sharing to be facilitated or blocked, their global reach, and so on.

What is missing from all of these accounts? With the partial exception of perspective one, what is missing is the *content* of the two stories, apart from a basic binary

distinction between their "truth" and "falsity" that could be deployed by fake news researchers conducting large-scale trace research. Missing from these analyses are the tenor and tone of the journalistic voices in the *Fox News* broadcast, the shading of the stock photographs which are used, the inflections of the music, what Reece Peck (2018) has called "rhetorical traditions and media styles that [Fox News] wields as marketing tools and political weapons." Missing, too, is any analysis of the muted, modernist style of the *Financial Times* infographic, the way abstraction is deployed as its own marketing technique and space of visual identity, the color scheme of the graphic, and so on. So, the question then remains, how can we devote proper significant attention to the aesthetics, styles, and information content of these journalistic stories without entirely reducing our analysis to the either discussion of hegemonic cultural meta-narratives or to a binary division between "fake" and "real" news. How can we discuss *meaning* without throwing the baby of practice out alongside the bathwater of Big Data research?

Formalism in Practice

Because I hope to supplement and modify practice-oriented approaches to the production and consumption of media content with approaches that concentrate on meaning as a thing not entirely reducible to practice, I want to conclude this piece by discussing the ways that different scholars aligned with a variety of practice approaches have themselves grappled with the challenge of what we might call formalist criticism. Are there moments when Bourdieuean, Wittgensteinian, and STS-inspired approaches to media themselves discuss aesthetics, meaning, and content? If so, how can we draw on these moments to better understand the relationship between content, meaning, and practice in the production and consumption of news?

In Latour's by now well-known article "Visualization and Cognition: Thinking with Eyes and Hands," the claim is made that the primary advantage of visualization and representation for the modern enterprise is that it allows a large number of epistemological allies to be brought together at once to advance truth claims:

> it is not perception which is at stake in this problem of visualization and cognition. New inscriptions, and new ways of perceiving them, are the result of something deeper. If you wish to go out of *your* way and come back heavily equipped so as to force others to go out of *their* ways, the main problem to solve is that of *mobilization*. You have to go and to come back *with* the "things" if your moves are not to be wasted. But the "things" you gathered and displaced have to be presentable all at once to those you want to convince and who did not go there. In sum, you have to invent objects which have the properties of being *mobile* but also *immutable, presentable, readable* and *combinable* with one another. (Latour, 1986)

It is in this notion of the visual, immutable mobile that the primary advantage and meaning of the visual enterprise lies. Key to this procedure of mobilizing allies, Latour argues, is *abstraction*. In his words,

The two-dimensional character of inscriptions allow them to merge *with geometry*. As we saw for perspective, space on paper can be made continuous with three-dimensional space. The result is that we can work on paper with rulers and numbers, but still manipulate three-dimensional objects "out there."

Abstraction is equally important for the ethnomethodologist of science Michael Lynch (1992). In Lynch's analysis of the everyday practices of laboratory work, he pays a great deal of attention to the manner in which visualizations act as a way to generalize, formalize, and represent the scientific visual work initially done by photographs. The key for Lynch is the scientific project of abstraction, which is in itself a two-step process. The central work done by a scientific visualization, argues Lynch is the manner in which it both selects and simplifies particular real world social phenomena ("selection") and the way that this selection is then aligned with a particular mathematic order that is attributed to natural objects ("mathematization"). Abstraction is once again the key here:

we see that [scientific] object[s] progressively assume a generalized, hypothetically guided, didactically useful, and mathematically analyzable form . . . tables and graphs abound in scientific publications. These visual documents integrate the substantive, mathematical, and literary resources of scientific investigation, and create the impression that the objects or relations they represent are inherently mathematical.

From an entirely different perspective and theoretical starting point, the intriguing sociological work by Klett and Gerber (2014) in "noise music" can help push us toward the reconsideration of, first, the relationship between aesthetic practices and aesthetic content and, second, the role played by indeterminacy in the elaboration and diffusion of particular cultural forms. Klett and Gerber look to combine two different understandings of the notion of performance; the cultural pragmatics of Jeffrey Alexander (2004) and the actor-network approach to music production of Alexander Hennion (2007). For Klett and Gerber, *indeterminacy* is the key to understanding noise music, both in terms of the actual musical content (noise is indeterminate) and also the embodied indeterminate experience of consuming such music in live performance. Intriguingly, Klett and Gerber define noise music as "the sheerest of musical listening experiences: indeterminate in construction, yet reliably indeterminate," and it is from this indeterminacy that the meaning of noise music arises. We see here a third attempt to probe the meaning of indeterminacy and abstraction from a practice-oriented yet aesthetically attuned perspective. It is a perspective that may also help shed light on the role and nature of journalistic artifacts, particularly those themselves inclined toward indeterminacy or abstract, mathematical formalization. Using Klett and Gerber to theorize the manner in which political news is consumed and shared on Facebook, for instance, we might better understand the way that the algorithmic logic of Facebook's news feed relates to the uncertain status of individual media texts and ways these indeterminate texts construct, in Ananny's words, "probabilistic citizens" (Ananny, 2019). Both theoretically (in their attempt to embrace a practice perspective on media meaning making but also attend to the nuances of media content) and also

empirically (in their focus on uncertainty) Klett and Gerber give us as clue as to what alternate form of journalism studies analysis might look like if done thoughtfully.

All of these potential paths forward, to my eyes, share a common set of concerns. They are, first and foremost, concerned with media texts themselves, and how these texts are interpreted in a complex and subtle ways by acting, practice-oriented agents. Second, they are concerned with the ritualistic aspects of practices, as well as logical and goal-oriented practice. Finally, they all attempt to get at "culture" in a way that does not reduce it to text, practice, or ritual, but rather sees it as emerging from a complex relationship between the three. All of these concerns can help push the practice-oriented nature of media research in interesting and rewarding new directions.

Conclusion

This article has had one primary mission: to argue that we must go beyond the widespread focus on journalistic and media practices and return to a more interpretive and meaning-focused analysis of journalism, one that takes the rituals, aesthetics, and cultures of media production more seriously. As I have noted throughout this paper, these are questions that largely occupied the work of the late communication scholar James W. Carey. Throughout his career, Carey tried to take media ritual and the medium itself seriously, all the while not reducing journalism or communication to simply texts or— even worse—dominant and hegemonic ideologies. In this way, he offers a nice way to supplement practice sociology without abandoning it completely.

It is *not* my goal in this article to replace one paradigm (the paradigm of practice sociology) with another paradigm, however gratifying that might be. I do hope, however, to draw attention to the way that much of the most exciting research on digital journalism and news has adopted a particular point of view with regard to its' understanding of the relationship of meaning to media content—one in which meanings come from practices. As I argued in the introduction to this article, a lack of concern with meaning, aesthetics, and media content has left practice scholars vulnerable to the behaviorist revolution in big data trace analysis, as well as to a political climate in which what the media "does" is being rethought through the rather facile paradigm of political propaganda and "fake news." The best practice scholarship has always been concerned with the subtlest, smallest, most contextualized variations in the way deep meanings are generated through what seem, at first glance, like shallow practices. If the depth and richness of practice-based research into media and journalism is to be preserved and defended then these theories must, ironically, move beyond practice and toward a deeper relationship with the aesthetics of media texts and the rituals that help sustain their interpretation.

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Note

1. The entire conversation generated by this intervention, including online responses to Benson's provocation from Daniel Kreiss, Juliette De Maeyer, Fenwick McKelvey, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (Benson, 2014), mark one of the few substantive theoretical fights in journalism studies since the emergence of digital forms of news in the early 2000s. They can be found at https://qualpolicomm.wordpress.com/2014/06/05/challenging-the-new-descriptivism-rod-bensons-talk-from-qualpolcomm-preconference/

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