

Weaving the future of journalism? Re-examining journalistic epistemology through an indigenous lens

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Extended Abstract

Journalism, historically considered a pillar of public knowledge, deliberation and democracy, has been shedding its epistemic authority as increasingly fragmented audiences migrate to "alternative" sources of information. Consequently, within the ever-convergent media ecosystem, discourses of innovation and futures thinking have proliferated as both journalism practice and scholarship have been occupied with the need to "save journalism" and reclaim its epistemic authority by reimagining what journalism could be.

It is in the context of these foundational shifts to the journalistic system that what theorists have termed "pioneer journalism" emerged, seeking to conceptualise and explain "the re-figurations of [journalism's] foundations" in a deeply mediatized ecosystem (Hepp and Loosen, 2021). Extant studies of "pioneers" - or transformation-focused collective and individual actors - in journalism (Anderson, 2021; Hepp and Loosen, 2021, 2022; Ruotsalainen et al., 2023) have examined how they reimagine journalism through their use of technology, their experimental practices, and novel ways of engaging audiences in their mission to "bring about media-related change" (Hepp, 2016, p. 927). The notion "pioneer journalism", however, has been almost exclusively applied to future-focused journalism communities in the Global North, with the exception of Anderson (2023), who expands the notion by applying it to the epistemic praxis of journalism startups in Pakistan, Malaysia and Romania, alongside the UK.

Over the past two decades, indigenous journalism has experienced a pronounced expansion across the world, and indigenous communities around the world have launched numerous journalistic organizations (Hanusch, 2013) that are steeped in the languages, epistemologies and cultural knowledge of their people. Increasingly, indigenous journalists have called for the critical examination of journalistic norms, terms, and practices to reflect the ways in which journalistic training reflects the White-centric and Western-settler-centric ideologies that originated the field (Sterritt, 2020, 2023). Callison and Young (2019), for example, suggest that digital technology has amplified and laid bare longstanding structural issues of inequality and representational harms inflicted on indigenous communities through established journalistic epistemic practices, which, they claim, are "rooted in sedimented power relations" (p. 202).

Thus, this project attends to the critiques set forth by indigenous journalists and theorists in its critical examination of the "pioneer journalism" paradigm which has become increasingly prevalent in journalism research and practice. The project seeks to critically examine the concept of "pioneer journalism" in the context of indigenous journalists who experiment in their journalistic praxis. It problematises and challenges the concept "pioneer journalism" from the perspective of indigenous journalists and against the background of the problematic colonialist legacy of the "pioneer" in the history of settler-colonialism. It follows calls for 1) examining indigenous journalism cultures, epistemologies, and conceptions of innovation (Bhroin, Sand, and Rasmussen, 2021; Hanusch, 2014; Ross, 2023) and 2) broadening the conceptual lens in Journalism Studies beyond dominant Western norms, cultures and epistemologies of journalism (Rao and Wasserman, 2007; Waisbord and Mellado, 2014; Ward, 2008; Wasserman and de Beer, 2009).

The study will specifically look at indigenous journalists' knowledge production practices – in terms of how they position themselves in relation to their audiences and the world, how they make editorial decisions, and the material products of their epistemic praxis. To achieve that, the co-investigators will apply a multi-method design, which includes interviews with 20-30 indigenous journalists working for digital journalism outlets in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, metajournalistic discourse analysis of the outlets' manifestos and "About" webpages, and multimodal discourse analysis of several stories produced by the interviewed participants. The aim is to determine how indigenous epistemic praxes feed into wider debates about reimagining journalistic epistemologies and to question, evaluate and critique the application of the concept of "pioneer journalism" in the context, and from the perspective, of indigenous journalists.

We ask the following RQs:

RQ1 Does the futures thinking that is inherent in definitions of "pioneer journalism" demand a reckoning with the colonial past in the context of indigenous journalists?

RQ2 Do existing/traditional conceptions of journalism innovation accommodate indigenous journalists and their epistemic praxes?

RQ3 How do indigenous epistemologies challenge, augment, or transform journalism as a form of knowledge, epistemic practice, and ways of relating to the world?