

Meaning-ful Encounters

Theorising knowledge production in community-centred pioneer journalism

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What is community-centred “pioneer journalism”?

- “Pioneer journalism” (Hepp & Loosen, 2021): transformation-focused actors/collectives who experiment with journalistic practice and who, through their **imaginations and shared visions of journalism’s “possible futures”**, can effect “the re-figuration of [its] foundations” (p. 15)
- Pioneer journalism as collective and relational epistemic practice: how pioneer journalists (co-)create knowledge for/with their communities and reimagine journalistic epistemology
- Knowledge production at the core of pioneer communities’ identity, goals and praxis (Hepp, 2016)
- Hailed as one of many possible solutions to journalism’s deepening “epistemic crisis” (Steensen, 2019)

Conceptual work

- Grounded in empirical observation (1st and 2nd level coding, theoretical saturation, cross-case synthesis)
- Draws on Hall's encoding/decoding theory and new materialist ontologies, specifically the concept of *encounters* (Barad, 2007; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Massumi, 2015)
- Power in new materialist ontology operates at the level of *encounters* (relational view of social and creative production)
- The space of knowledge production operationalised as “assemblage”

Empirical grounding

Research design and scope: Comparative case study of four pioneer journalism collectives in different journalistic cultures (*Bureau Local*, UK; *DoR*, Romania; *New Naratif*, Malaysia; *The Current*, Pakistan)

Methodology: Multi-method qualitative study, triangulating:

- 1) Metajournalistic discourse analysis
- 2) Semi-structured interviews (n=30)
- 3) Multimodal discourse analysis of seven stories

Meaning-ful Encounters conceptual framework

Concept dimension	Description
Production level (making meaning)	The enactive encounters between technological actants, metadiscourses (what matters to pioneer journalism producers), actors, communities that are consequential to knowledge production (mediated by the case-specific affects)
Story level (meaningful discourse)	The encounters of audiences with stories as “meaningful discourse”: how stories’ designed affordances generate agentic capacities vis-à-vis readers
Social level (social ‘meaningfulness’)	The symbolic encounters of journalists with the world through the stories’ social impact capacities

Data Analysis

Phronetic approach to analysing qualitative research data (Tracy, 2018):

- Inductive <-> deductive iterative approach (tagging between theory/literature and emergent themes)
- Open (primary) and focused (secondary) coding cycles
- Codebooks crafted from emergent research data and 'road-tested' on rest of data
- 15 first-level codes, synthesised into two higher-level conceptual categories, and iteratively refined at every stage of data analysis
- Using replication logic (Eisenhardt, 1989), the emergent concepts were refined and synthesised into a three-dimensional theoretical construct.

Analytic method: Ethological approach (Fox & Alldred, 2021)

Four analytical categories:

- 1) the ***relations*** within the assemblage between various actors and actants (bodies, things, ideas).
- 2) the ***affects*** created in the encounters between actants and forces.
- 3) the ***capacities*** to affect and be affected produced by the affective flows within the *encoding-assemblage*.
- 4) the ***micropolitics*** of the encounters within the *encoding-assemblage*, in terms of the agentic capacities produced in the microprocess of encoding as they materialize in digital story artefacts, and the subsequent capacities to affect that these artefacts can produce in future events - i.e., in (the aftermath of) decoding.

Meaning-ful Encounters definition

“The capacity-producing, enactive or transformational relations and interactions at all stages of journalistic knowledge production that create the conditions of possibility for agency, action, and impact on a personal, interpersonal, and social level.”

Framework dimensions

1. **Making meaning:** the encounters between metadiscursive actants (vision, mission), technological actants, pioneer journalism actors, communities, and wider networks at the knowledge production stage. These relations are mediated by the case-specific affect economy, with journalists navigating various affects (editorial orientation, community/audience imperatives, financial or political/socio-cultural) that are consequential to (but do not overdetermine) the material form encoding takes.
2. **Meaningful discourse:** the 'imagined' (encoded) encounters between the encoded story and audience/reader at the decoding stage. These relations are mediated by the affect economy of the artefact as *meaningful discourse* – its epistemic capacities and designed affordances, but also other affects beyond the interface such as the context of decoding (stories as *mini-assemblages*)
3. **Social meaningfulness:** the symbolic encounters between journalists and world via a story's 'afterlife' and metamorphoses, and its capacities for agency and social impact (stories as *actants of change*).

Meaning-ful Encounters: Meanings

Meaning-ful does not only relate to having or producing meaning, or to being socially meaningful, but to being agency-producing, transformational and enactive – i.e., the encounters that are material and consequential to the knowledge production process, that make possible what journalists can do.

Meaning-ful Encounters: Meanings

The *meaning-ful encounters* in pioneering community-focused knowledge production point to a productive collectivity, as actors, actants, communities come together to co-produce knowledge. This relationship goes beyond the duty to inform and extends to a circle of care that promises a nourishing, empowering and even transformational experience – for both communities and journalists themselves.

Meaning-ful Encounters: Meanings

Meaning-ful encounters go beyond the production of meaning and knowledge in journalistic representations of reality. They extend to giving agency and voice, and empowering people and communities by telling “stories that matter” (*Bureau Local* slogan). This epistemic praxis pushes the boundaries of how we think about journalistic epistemology by shifting the focus from showing to doing – i.e., to the social impact and value of journalism.

Meaning-ful Encounters: Applicability

- Theoretical application: the framework could be applied to studies of journalistic knowledge production and epistemology in various contexts.
- Methodologically, it connects meaning production and reception through a focus on story design, so it could be extended to examine decoding (which it gestures towards).
- Normative potential: it offers recommendations for meaningful and relational industry praxis to better serve and represent audiences and communities.