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Between futures thinking and a settler-colonialist past: a critical examination of "pioneer journalism" from the perspective of indigenous journalists and their epistemic practices.

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[Extended Abstract]:

Between *futures thinking* and a settler-colonialist past: A critical examination of “pioneer journalism” from the perspective of indigenous journalists and their epistemic practices

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 preoccupied 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” has emerged, seeking to conceptualise and explain “the re-figurations of [journalism’s] foundations” in a deeply mediatized ecosystem (Hepp & Loosen, 2021). Extant studies of “pioneers” - or transformation-focused collective and individual actors - in journalism (Anderson, 2021; Hepp & 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 studied in the context of 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 critique 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 epistemic praxis. It problematises and challenges the concept “pioneer journalism” from the perspective of indigenous journalists and against the background of the problematic legacy of the ‘pioneer’ in the history of settler-colonialism. It makes a contribution to the Journalism Studies field by following calls for: 1) examining indigenous journalism cultures, epistemologies, and conceptions of innovation (Bhroin, Sand, & 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 & Wasserman, 2007; Waisbord & Mellado, 2014; Ward, 2008; Wasserman & de Beer, 2009). The research questions that this study seeks to answer are:

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 To what extent 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?

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 answer the research questions, the co-investigators will apply a multi-method qualitative research design, triangulating semi-structured interviews, metajournalistic discourse analysis of indigenous journalism websites in Canada, the US, Australia, and New Zealand, and multimodal discourse analysis of a selection of stories.

During the first phase of the study, we will conduct semi-structured interviews with 20-30 indigenous journalists and journalism producers from news organisations (such as *The Tyee*, *The Narwhal* and *IndigiNews*, Canada; *Koorimail* and *First Nations Media*, Australia; *Indian Country Today*, US; and *Aotearoa Media Collective*, New Zealand) and experts from indigenous journalism organisations (Indigenous Journalist Association, Media INDIGENA and Barayamal). We will also be contacting prominent indigenous journalists who work in the mainstream press, broadcast and radio news organizations including CBC, ABC, CNN, and others. In conducting these interviews, we seek to understand indigenous perspectives on the concept of “pioneer journalism” and notions of journalistic innovation, but also to discuss their epistemic practices and examples of stories that they feel most strongly reflect indigenous epistemologies.

The second phase of the study will involve metajournalistic discourse analysis of indigenous journalism organisations’ (mentioned above) websites, specifically their “mission and values” and “about” webpages. Our aim is to explicate the material expressions of indigenous journalism organisations’ “matters of concern” (De Maeyer & Le Cam, 2015), more specifically, as they pertain to their epistemic praxis. Metajournalistic discourse analysis, or meanings *about* journalism, as Carlson (2016) argues, enables the examination of shared interpretations and understandings of journalism as they materialise in journalistic discourse and practice.

Because “texts are embedded in larger discourses about news” (Carlson, 2016, p. 364), in the third phase of this study, we will analyse a selection of indigenous journalism stories/texts produced or specifically mentioned by our interview participants. Following a relational and non-extractive interview approach grounded in the ethical principles of mutual listening and learning, and the co-creation of knowledge, we will let our indigenous interview participants actively participate in informing the story selection phase by asking them to nominate stories for further analysis. We will then carry out multimodal discourse analysis of the stories identified, following

Jancsary, Höllerer and Meyer's critical 'reconstruction' approach (2015), which helps explicate both the denotative and connotative functions of manifest content, but also the agentic capacities it generates for audiences and the wider world.

The triangulation of three datasets (interview, metajournalistic discourse, and multimodal discourse of texts) strengthens research validity, enabling a deeper and fuller examination of indigenous journalism epistemic praxis. 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.

In terms of project progression, this study has received ethical approval from the authors' institutions and participant recruitment is currently underway. We expect to be near the end of the second phase of fieldwork and moving on to the story analysis phase during the ICA 2024 conference. Some preliminary findings, therefore, should have emerged, and the ICA 2024 conference will be an opportunity to get feedback on the project as we move to the final stage of data collection and analysis. This project, therefore, will significantly benefit from participating in a 'Works in progress' session in terms of refining its analytic strategy, evaluating its validity, and its wider relevance to discussions in the field, through dialogue with scholars working on indigenous journalism, global journalism, and journalistic epistemologies.

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