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Citation

Hölsgens, S. R. J. J. (2024). Reassembling digital journalism through arts-based methods. In I. I. Eldridge, S., Cheruiyot, D., Banjac, & Swart (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Digital Journalism Studies* (pp. 531-540). New York: Routledge.
doi:10.4324/9781003334774

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4177576>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

REASSEMBLING DIGITAL JOURNALISM THROUGH ARTS-BASED METHODS

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Multimodal, artistic, and experiential modes of research offer an open-ended and imaginative invitation to study the everyday and disruptive practices of digital journalism. This chapter considers the generative potential of arts-based research for accessing the affective, emotive, and everyday experiences of journalists. Introducing a range of exercises, it provides methodological reflections and multimodal tools to think through the ways in which emergent artistic approaches help us to raise important and imaginative questions about the state of digital journalism. What role do the socio-spatial effects of newsrooms play in an age of unprecedented digitalisation? Which practices are ethical and productive in times of enduring crisis, uncertainty, and flux? And how can the arts help scholars and journalists to access and do justice to the divergence of journalistic approaches, norms, and output?

The structure of this chapter is inspired by Dara Culhane and Denielle Elliott's *A Different Kind of Ethnography* (2016), which introduces imaginative and experimental models for ethnography by merging theoretical reflections and hands-on exercises for readers. The exercises presented throughout the chapter are intended to draw attention to emergent arts-based methodologies, while pointing towards examples of work that might push the conversation of digital journalism studies even further. Each exercise is accompanied by methodological considerations, tangible use cases for digital journalism studies, and an example illustrating potential outcomes.

Exercise 1: Doing arts-based research, together

Using arts-based methods can be intimidating. Make a supportive page for your peers. Write, draw, record, or weave together a personalised gift that might help your peers during their upcoming (and potentially first) arts-based research project. Use found materials such as postcards, creative material produced with the help of large language models, or start with a blank slate. Consider the message you wish to bring across.

Entanglements of journalism studies and arts-based methods

Why is there a call for arts-based research in (digital) journalism studies? Does this artistic turn intimate a crisis of the social scientific approaches we've grown to love and loathe over

the past few decades? In short: what is all the fuss about? Focusing on the recent application of arts-based methods by scholars in media and journalism studies, three overarching narratives emerge.

First, journalism is in flux, not least because of its erratic kinship to processes of democratisation and emancipation, as well as its wavering relationality to an increasingly digital and network-based society (Spyridou et al. 2013). Researching journalism as a profession riddled with complexity and entanglements means attuning to the myriad approaches that constitute the practice – from watchdog journalism to a participatory *modus operandi* (Conboy and Eldridge 2017). Arts-based research enables researchers to attend to this complexity: it proposes tools to move beyond well-defined categorisations. As a result, arts-based research rigorously and creatively probes existing conceptualisations of digital journalism as a practice, profession, culture, and field of study (Hölsgens, De Wildt, and Witschge 2020a).

Second, there is an increasing number of studies scrutinising journalism as a creative practice that bridges news production, investigative research, design, arts, and entrepreneurship (Maiden et al. 2020). Reconsidering the hybrid and nondescript roles that journalists embody and perform, arts-based methods offer a framework for researchers to develop a methodology that responds to and represents such fluidity, hybridity, and ambivalence (Witschge, Deuze, and Willemsen 2019).

And, third, the affective turn in the humanities and social sciences – centring on issues of the body, feelings, and atmosphere – has encouraged media scholars to foreground emotive and experiential concerns in journalism (Hölsgens, De Wildt, and Witschge 2020b; see also, Kotisova, this volume). These include: *how do journalists embody or imagine their profession? What might a newsroom feel like? And if we position journalists as makers, creatives or practitioners, how can we better understand their work as an aesthetic and moral endeavour?*

Affect, cultural critic T.J. Demos (2013, 88) writes, “designates a flowing and transformative quality that makes it difficult to analyze, structure, or organize via interpretation.” Media scholars are increasingly turning to arts-based research as it affords approaches and output that move beyond conventional analysis and operate on an emotional and atmospheric register, inviting audiences to actively co-produce and co-construct meaning.

In short, arts-based research is particularly well suited for researching lived experiences through creative, oftentimes participatory processes. Such processes regularly result in open-ended outcomes (such as films, performances, interactive experiences) that invite audiences “to participate in the interpretive processes, rather than crafting definitive representative products towards interpretation” (Shields and Penn 2016, 9). In so doing, arts-based research offers multimodal and mixed-media extensions of discursive modes of academic publications, complementing existing epistemological and representational models.

The common denominator among arts-based research is its focus on practice-led and bottom-up approaches, ranging from new media and sound art to guided walks, performative art, and sensory ethnography. Anna Bagnoli (2009, 547), for instance, suggests that sketching and graphic elicitation offer “a creative way of interviewing that is responsive to participants’ own meanings and associations,” whereas visual anthropologist J.P. Sniadecki (2014, 26) in his description of film points to how “synaesthesia, the materiality of object, the execution of a particular gesture, the texture of a surface (...) can all trigger idiosyncratic reactions from viewers.” This methodological typology is open-ended, multi-sensory, inconclusive, and aesthetic.

Put differently, arts-based research aims to orient content, process, form, and output towards each other, drawing attention to the significance of embodied and tacit knowledge.

In practical terms, arts-based research is about learning by doing; knowing through making; and art as research. It has the capacity to elicit knowledge that embrace provocative, embodied, messy, imaginative, more-than-representational, performative, activist, and collaborative typologies (Borgdorff 2012; Rapp 2019; Rendell 2022). As such, arts-based research is seen as a fairly undefined or even “messy field of artistically inspired methods” (Wang et al. 2017, 29).

Crucially, the most effective and meaningful examples of arts-based research hardly claim to abandon existing forms of data collection. In fact, arts-based research was coined in the mid-1990s as an attempt to bridge the seemingly insurmountable gap between the arts and sciences (Barone and Eisner 2012). The overarching aim? Adapting “the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined” (Leavy 2015, 4). It is not a radical shift from the things we do, but rather a consideration of how we can take existing approaches in slightly different directions.

Exercise 2: Attuning to the things we know, visually

Consider a memory or experience from your research. Take a sheet of paper and draw eight square (or wide-screen) frames. In each frame, draw a moment, object, or person related to the project. Cut out the frames. Shuffle the paper cut-outs and make a random series of three frames – echoing the layout of a storyboard. Imagine possible links and contingencies between the various elements visible on the frames: could this elicit unsung heroes of the project, or provoke previously unimaginable entry points into the project? Reshuffle the frames and try again.

The aim of the exercise is to give prominence to the feelings and thoughts we might have about our work. It can be done in retrospect or in preparation of an upcoming project. In the latter case, the exercise is structured around various imaginaries (what people might we expect to play a role in our research? How do I feel about the possibility of this project succeeding? What more can the project be than the neatly described schedule we’ve submitted as part of our grant proposal?) Both versions of the exercise can be completed individually, or in small groups. When working together, shuffle all available frames to attend to the various perspectives and experiences in a research team.

Elicitation tools for digital journalism

As Steensen and Westlund (2021, 3) write, digital journalism studies goes beyond the entanglements of journalism and digital technologies. Rather, the field “is built on questions that disrupt everything previously taken for granted concerning media, journalism, and public spheres.” If the increasingly “complex media and information ecosystem of the 21st century” requires a reconsideration as to what constitutes journalism, then experimental and interdisciplinary methodological approaches might be needed to attend to this state of flux. Arts-based research has the potential of eliciting and addressing the complexity of digital journalism by employing innovative and more-than-discursive tools (echoing the working methods of avant-garde journalists working on/with/through the digital), while encouraging collaborative, participatory, and non-hierarchical forms of learning (Koski, Heyning, and Zwijnenberg 2016). This includes the cultural practices of digital technologies in newsrooms; the experiential dimensions of journalists navigating ever-changing new media platforms; and the increasingly blurred lines between authors and audiences of digital news production.

An overview of the three key benefits of arts-based research draws out the specific use cases for digital journalism studies:

Arts-based research challenges pre-assumed roles of researcher and participant by foregrounding participatory, collaborative, and possibly emancipatory modes of research. As data collection methods commonly include the co-production of artistically inspired output, research participants are consolidated as an integral actor in knowledge production.

Arts-based research affords polyphonic and multi-interpretable output that involves the spectator or reader in meaning-making processes. Open-ended by nature, this output opens up a hermeneutical space for knowledge production “in which the interpreter and the interpreted temporarily melt together in ever-receding interpretative horizons” (Borgdorff 2012, 49).

Arts-based research centres an experientialist and holistic approach. Operating on an emotive, sensory, and affective level, arts-based research calls attention to the life-worlds of research participants, and their feelings, moral practices, and lived experiences in particular. If, as Archetti (2022, 976) writes, we acknowledge “that lived experience [...] is a source of knowledge” for understanding the changes happening in the media industry and across journalism, then we need to develop ways of empirically accessing and articulating it. Arts-based research sets out to do exactly this.

Emboldening multiple viewpoints, experiences, and newly formed relationships, arts-based approaches can challenge strictly defining roles (researcher/practitioner), aims (knowledge/making), and frameworks (theory/practice). So, what might such an approach actually look like in a research setting? Let’s start unpacking a tool that is most readily available: elicitation.

Photo/graphic elicitation is an iterative method centred around the blueprints of semi-structured interviews. It can be considered a soft landing into the world of arts-based research. Elicitation invites both researcher and participant to make and discuss images. Such visual material affords the evocation of memories, emotive responses, and affective relationalities – and is introduced as a third party in interviews (Collier and Collier 1986). In so doing, incorporating visual material in one’s research recentres its emphasis from verbal discourse (or the interview itself) to something tangible located somewhere in-between researcher and participants, or, as sociologist Douglas Harper (2002, 23) puts it, “when two or more people discuss the meaning of photographs they try to figure out something together. This is, I believe, an ideal model for research.”

While it is possible to structure these conversations around existing images, the process of producing new images introduces practice-led modes of research that hold specific epistemological significance. Making something new, and reflecting on the processes of drawing and/or taking pictures, helps researchers and participants reconfigure and untangle their relations to each other and the topic at hand. Elicitation has a transformative potentiality. It bridges social worlds by tapping into tacit knowledge and helping “to validate the findings [...] if we conceive of a photo as a third ‘interactant’ in the interview” (Vassenden and Jonvik 2022, 171). The guiding question of this method is: *What can we learn from the things we observe?*

Exercise 3: Photo/graphic elicitation for a digital era

Step 1: Ask a participant to make photographs or drawings about a topic of choice. (e.g., their workspace; their perception of the digital; the societal role of journalists in times of crisis).

Step 2: Print the images and bring them to a research site for a semi-structured interview (45 minutes). The research site can be related to the topic of choice.

Step 3: Display all pictures on a table, floor, or wall. Ask the participant to identify a picture they find most striking. As per social scientific interview techniques, ask the participant open questions to uncover how they relate to the visible elements on the picture.

Step 4: Move to discussion of other still images. Present a collage of images, or ask the participant to show links between pictures. Ask if there are situations, people, or spaces that are invisible in these images.

Step 5: Finish the interview and analyse the material. Organise a follow-up chat and discuss your observations with the participant. Discuss what they found most surprising, interesting, vexing. Write up your research findings.

Step 6 (optional): Design or curate an exposition aimed at larger audiences by displaying the pictures and drawings, contextualised by quotations derived from the interview or follow-up conversation. This step can be completed in close collaboration with participants.

While photo/graphic elicitation techniques usually start with conversations on the indexicality of the image, the main emphasis here is on storytelling and collaborative interpretation. Such a reflexive epistemology includes the premise that “the meaning of the image resides most significantly in the ways that participants interpret those images, rather than as some inherent property of the image itself” (Stanczak 2007, 7). Making space for multiplicity, nuance, and complexity, elicitation techniques afford a framework for journalists to represent their lived experiences in a manner that includes yet transcends verbal discourse.

This method is particularly insightful for scholars interested in the complementary affordances of visual and oral interviewing. For instance: how do journalists imagine the impact of new media technologies on their workspaces? What are the objects, material culture, and digital tools that journalists find most useful or meaningful in their profession? To what extent are current media practices driven by interactions with mobile technologies? And what kinds of social groups and realities of journalists might be illustrated through photography? As many journalists working with digital tools have had formal training in or experience with photography, this method has an empowering and collaborative capacity. For a recent research project, I have asked journalists to make photos that they felt captured their professional identity: this enabled participant-driven interviews, highlighting topics that journalists found especially pressing to touch upon.

This approach also elicits meaningful discussion points with regard to ethical considerations. Who’s the author of this data? If we as researchers ask our participants to take pictures, how do we ensure issues of privacy and confidentiality? And to what extent should these pictures feature in research dissemination? Simultaneously, photo elicitation can ensure agency for participants, especially when they are in charge of the pictures taken and discussed. For this reason, researchers have decidedly opted for the photo elicitation interview to collaborate with participants in more precarious and vulnerable positions (Clark-Ibáñez 2004).

Walking the fine lines between the digital and the material

Elicitation techniques can be integrated into an ecosystem of complementary and divergent arts-based research methods, too. An example might unveil what this could look like. In 2019, artistic researcher/environmental scientist, Saskia de Wildt, and I conducted fieldwork at a newsroom in the north of the Netherlands. The overarching aim was to research the journalists’ lived experience of their workspace, in all of its affective, atmospheric, and

architectural capacities. A fusion of multiple local newspapers, the media outlet, was in the process of consolidating their approach to digital journalism. Redesigning the newsroom into an open office, management hoped to materialise the newspaper's core values and aspired transition to a future-proof journalistic brand.

Our research scrutinised Le Cam's (2015, 35) argument that an inquiry into the intersection of workspace and journalistic work practices would disclose the intricacies of professional relationships, editorial strategies, production processes, and working conditions, or as we wrote in our observations:

This inquiry into the organisation and ideological reasoning behind the physical workplace, in conjunction with a focus on how the space is perceived, lived and co-created, contributes to an understanding of the affordances and constraints that journalists experience when inhabiting the newsroom on an everyday basis.

(Hölsgens, De Wildt, and Witschge 2020b)

Rather than formally interviewing their editorial staff about their workspace, we started by asking the online news editor to give us a personalised tour of the recently renovated newsroom. Specifically, we encouraged him to focus on the sensory experiences of working within this space. Building upon the history and insights of psychogeography, the walk-along method (Degen and Rose 2012), and the guided walk (Moretti 2016), we traced the implications of his bodily emplacement in and sensory engagement with the spatial configurations of the newsroom. As per traditions in visual anthropology and arts-based ethnography (Hölsgens 2017, 2021), we filmed the walk.

During the walk-along, the editor would elicit his relationality to the place, structured around stories and memories related to in-situ artefacts (paintings, machinery, sculptures). Such stories, evoked through the objects we encountered, prompted the editor to express his felt perception about specific rooms, including their intangible heritage, sensory affordances, and interior design. Besides the experiential and performative qualities of elicitation technique, our proposed sensory walk also pointed towards the editor's identity formation "vis-à-vis social relations and social groups" (Low 2015, 301), not least because the tour was conducted in close physical proximity to colleagues and interviewees inhabiting the newsroom. Conducting the walk-along during a workday resulted in a rendezvous with a sports journalist, an impromptu chat with the chief editor, and an increasingly busier and noisier newsroom – echoing the editor's comment that an open office amplifies the buzz he experiences when important news is being made.

In other words: we orchestrated a staged, yet contingent condition during which the editor was invited to reflect on and verbally express his sensory engagement with his workspace. This elicited anecdotes and memories related to his core values as a digital journalist, embedded in material culture. Precisely because his role is so demanding and time sensitive, this more or less artificially created reflective session – lasting just over an hour – proved to be useful for him and his direct environment as well, in that he consciously worked through the kinds of routines, thought processes, and movements that tend to unfold intuitively and organically. It is, essentially, an intervention through which to foreground and magnify emotive patterns and embodied rituals, providing an opportunity for the editor to rediscover the newsroom as a site that triggers the senses in peculiar ways.

Rather than positioning a selection of images as a starting point for an interview, the entire newsroom was temporarily transformed into an elicitation device. The walk-along acted as

a starting point for further investigation: we spoke with fellow journalists using the newsroom and invited an illustrator to visualise the rhythms and patterns animating the space. What's more, our audio-visual documentation of the tour could be used as a call for action to critically assess the newsroom as a workspace: for the research participants, the sensory walk served as an action-oriented method, inviting all staff to rethink how the newsroom informs the work they're engaged in. The documentation elicited conversations about questions including: what kind of spatial configurations are available to us, how are we currently using them, and to what extent are they reinforcing or limiting our core values?

For us, as researchers, the elicitation method proved to be a starting point for an arts-based output: based on the filmed tour, we designed an interactive documentary representing multiple staff members' sensory perceptions of the newsroom. Contextualised by theoretical reflections, filmed material, sketches, soundscapes, and sensory charts, the outcome is an imaginative representation of a physical location based on sensory experiences. Rather than argumentative discourse, this audio-visual output invites "the viewer/audience to participate in the interpretive processes" (Shields and Penn 2016, 9); or put differently: attuning to the specificities of a field-site or topic by way of arts-based methods can be a generative approach to fostering open-ended and multi-interpretable modes of research, not least by bracketing the divisions between researcher, participant, and audience.

Exercise 4: A guided walk for journalists

Invite your research participants to take you on a guided walk. Choose a location familiar to the participant: their newsroom, their main area for news reporting, their digital workspace. Ask to take you on a tour on their usual route, inviting them to pay close attention to their surroundings: what do they notice, see, hear, feel? Whom do they encounter? How do they relate to the histories of a place? During the walk, refrain from merely moving from one landmark to another. After all, "walking tours are exercises in the imagination" (Moretti 2016, 99). Focus on memories, hopes, desires, critiques, imagined routes.

Record the walk in a medium of choice: sound recordings, photography, sketches, and films are some of the most frequently used formats in guided walks. Let the participant take an active role in telling you what to record. Review and discuss the recorded material together, applying the elicitation strategies discussed in the third exercise.

Unfinished engagements: zine-making and disseminating in the underground

The polyphonic and rupturing affordances of arts-based research point towards the necessity for multimodal and open-ended forms of expression and dissemination. Rather than auteurs whose arguments are conclusive and definitive, researchers employing arts-based methods work towards propositions and provisional insights. Susan Finley (2005, 681) writes that arts-based research also tends to include "socially responsible, politically activist, and locally useful research methodologies." Rather than withdrawn from societal issues, this field of research is explicitly positioned amidst communities, so as to help, collaborate with, and contribute to those involved in or affected by the research project. Karen Keifer-Boyd (2011, 3) suggests that arts-based research is capable of contributing to social justice, precisely because it presses close to feminist art activism: it is a form of responsibly listening to "subalterns' voices and entangled histories" by bearing witness to power structures and hegemonic

paradigms. And, crucially, it “stops traffic of harmful activities and products” by envisioning and working towards a socially just world of participatory economics.

Here, reflexivity, positionality, and rapport are key elements of the project’s operationalisation, particularly because there is the potential for reaching and affecting the everyday lives and environments of contributors, participants, and indirectly involved people. Not only is such an awareness an ethical obligation towards those involved in the project, but it also opens up a space for reflecting upon the doubts, challenges, issues, and predicaments that inevitably emerge throughout the research (Foster 2015). Consequently, arts-based research especially flourishes when bypassing specialised and discipline-driven language, so as to strive for inclusivity and accessibility. By combining this sense of responsibility and commitment to enacting change, arts-based research has a remarkable genealogy of developing useful tools, interventions, and forms of expression for academia and beyond.

Exercise 5: Making a manifesto for digital journalism

Based on literature review, interviews, or surveys, identify a pressing issue affecting your research participants. Invite a select number of participants into a shared (digital) space. Discuss the issue, so that everyone is on the same page as to what is at stake. Collectively formulate a vision and set of ideas addressing the issue. Translate this into a polemic and co-write a critique or manifesto.

An individual equivalent to this exercise could invite participants to write a letter addressing the identified issue, as if it is a persona.

An equivalent to this exercise has been used within digital journalism studies before, by asking participants to (a) write an ode to journalism and (b) write a letter of resignation to the profession (Witschge, Deuze, and Willemsen 2019). The main themes of these contributions are compiled in a single letter, subsequently performed by storyteller Onias Landveld. Resembling creative and networked practices in digital journalism, this output “tap[s] into the sentiments, shifts, and trends in (digital) journalism” by telling “the diverse stories of journalism in a more inclusive way” (Witschge, Deuze, and Willemsen 2019, 974). The project is a call to action for researchers working in digital journalism studies: how can we use creativity as “a guide for the range of research methods at our disposal, as well as an inspiration for the kinds of stories we can tell about our projects” (Witschge, Deuze, and Willemsen 2019, 976).

Conclusion: arts-based research as a site of contingencies

Arts-based research advocates self-reflection, collaborations, and experimentation. Its methods are complex, provisional, collaborative, and performative. This also points to a key challenge: how much room for experimentation, mistakes, and hick-ups is there, given the ethical obligation and responsibilities towards (a) our research participants, (b) our discipline, and (c) societal challenges? Can we justify open-ended research that leaves much of its interpretation and practices of meaning-making up to its audiences?

These considerations are crucial for media studies at large, and digital journalism studies in specific: what is needed to do justice to the complexity and diversity of the profession and practice? This question touches upon the key goal of this chapter; to make some arts-based methods readily available to scholars in digital journalism studies, with the hope of inviting readers to consider practice-led methodologies. The range of references, examples, and modalities mentioned are but an invitation; they are by no means exhaustive.

Rather, by highlighting a specific set of approaches used in case studies and providing uncomplicated templates, the larger ambition of the chapter is to encourage a new generation of scholars to take up the challenge to learn from the artists, activists, and scholars who have long done away with the barriers between the arts and sciences. Conducting arts-based research is, ultimately, a political act. Any researcher employing these strategies – especially those working in data-driven fields – forces themselves to reconsider the norms and conventions that we’ve all grown accustomed to, and to imagine an otherwise.

Further reading

The Journal for Artistic Research (jar-online.net/) offers a platform for disseminating arts-based research. Its publication technologies enable authors to work with unconventional formats. Cristina Archetti (2022) employs creative methods to express the experiential, situated, and embodied dimensions of journalism. Finally, Wang et al.’s (2017) *Arts-based Methods in Socially Engaged Research Practice* provides a user-friendly overview of some of the principal arts-based methods used across the humanities and social sciences.

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