

## ISOJ 2018: Day 2, Afternoon Session

### **RESEARCH PANEL: Cultural Change: Telling Stories, Shaping Identity and Normalizing Precarity**

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**Chair: Jane B. Singer**, Professor, **City, University of London (UK)**,  
and Guest Editor, **#ISOJ Journal**

- **Jan Boesman** and Irene Costera Meijer, **Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands**
    - *"Don't read me the news, tell me the story": How News Makers and Storytellers Negotiate Journalism's Boundaries When Preparing and Presenting News Stories*
  - Jonathan Groves, Drury University, and **Carrie Brown, CUNY**
    - *Changing "Habits of Thought": An Examination of Eight Years of Digital Evolution at the Christian Science Monitor*
  - **Henrik Örnebring, Karlstad University, Sweden**
    - *Journalists Thinking about Precarity: Making Sense of the 'New Normal'*
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**Jan Boesman:** Right. So, first of all, as Jane already did, I would like to mention my coauthor, Irene Costera Meijer, who unfortunately couldn't be here. I work with Irene at Vrije University of Amsterdam. But actually I'm from Belgium, which is an even smaller country than the Netherlands, in which three languages are spoken, but none of them is English, so sorry for all the language mistakes I will make. You can count them if you like. And Belgium is known for—Belgium is known for...?

**Rosental Alves:** Beer.

**Jan Boesman:** Beer, yes. Chocolates, okay. Actually, I expected no answer. [laughs] And I would say, yes, Belgium is known for nothing. [laughter] Except maybe for beer, chocolate and also for the popularity of cycling, cycling races. Here, we have a link with Austin. Because the first time I've ever heard of a place called Austin was when I was a 12-year-old boy in my hometown. And it was the start of a local race, and on the start podium, they presented an American rider, and they said he was from Austin, Texas, and it was, of course, Lance Armstrong. And this was long before he recovered from cancer to win the Tour de France seven times in a row, and long before the truth came out about all these victories. But back then, Lance Armstrong was already a story in Belgium, probably earlier in Belgium than in the states, because Belgium is very cycling mad. And he was already a story back then in Belgium, because he was very—he was very young, extremely young for a professional rider, because he only recently changed career for cycling, because he had grown up without a father, because of his style, his presence, so he was already a story.

And it was about that time that I decided that I wanted to write such stories myself, that I wanted to become a sports journalist. And to prepare for that career as a teenager, because I was about 12 years old, I started to write race reports, reports of cycling races. But the funny thing about that was that I did not write those reports after the race was finished, but I wrote those reports before the races were held. Actually, what I did was I wrote a scenario of what I thought or hoped the race—of how I thought or hoped the race would unfold. And for instance, in 1999, I wrote a scenario in which Lance Armstrong recovered from cancer to win the Tour de France, which was back then a very unrealistic scenario, because he recovered from cancer and he was not a specialist in that kind of race. We all know what happened. Maybe he won that Tour de France. And it's about that.... So actually, my scenario became reality.

And that is the mechanism I want to talk about with you today. That journalists make scenarios or at least story angles and that journalists sometimes find the story they are looking for. Because what happened, I went to university, and then I became indeed a cycling journalist, but a few years ago I changed to journalism for academia. And for my PhD, I interviewed journalists about the development of their news stories. So, I reconstructed, actually, their stories. For my post doc, what I'm doing now in Amsterdam, I do more or less the same, fewer journalists, but another type of journalist.

Actually, the journalists I interviewed could be categorized in two groups. For my PhD, I interviewed this, well, this kind of journalist—the news maker. That's a journalist who works on daily stories. A journalist that's a prototypical news maker works for a certain news beat, domestic affairs or economy. And he works on daily stories. He seldom leaves the news desk. He is scouting the whole day. He is very active on social media. And he presents his stories in a rather conventional, traditional way using the inverted pyramid style, for instance. So, that was the first category of journalists, you could say.

And now for my post doc, I'm interviewing another kind of journalist. You could call them the storytellers. These journalists are not specialized in a certain topic. They could write about politics, about sports, about whatever, you name it. But for them it was the style, the form was more important than the topic. These journalists, they, well, for them, oh, they don't like to be in a newsroom. They want to go out, because they want to be in the field, because that is where stories, good stories, are found.

In presenting their stories, these journalists, these storytellers, they challenge, actually, all things that are defended by the news makers. So, they don't like the inverted pyramid. They like to experiment with different storytelling, different ways of storytelling, such as narrative style, such as some of them with virtual reality and so on.

First of all, I have to get some water. Sorry.

So, what I found was a remarkable difference between news makers and storytellers prepare their stories. The news maker, a common practice between a news maker was that of predefining. Actually, they often—they often.... Sorry. They initiate story angles or sometimes scenarios about stories, and then they.... So, before they gather story material, before they speak to sources, they already had a pretty clear—more or less clear idea in mind of what the story should be. And it was very difficult sometimes for reporters, if they had contradictory information from sources, to change the story angle.

And maybe this sounds as not so really good journalism, but the practice of predefining has some important functionalities. For these reporters, first of all, predefining ensures that you have a clear story at the end of the day. It works more efficiently to call someone with a clear story idea in mind than to call someone without knowing what your story will be. Then secondly, predefining ensures that you do not just disseminate the story of your source, that you have a clear story in mind as a journalist yourself. And third, predefining was often defended as a way to be distinctive in an online media landscape. Because very often a story angle was initiated by a news chief, news managers, and those were the people who screened all similar stories in other media. They knew that from that certain angle they were sure that the story could have an added value in comparison with similar stories from other media. So, that was the reasoning.

So, as illustrated by this citation from a Belgian editor-in-chief, “So, we want to send our journalists in a certain direction. We urgently needed this with the emergence of online.” Well, that’s how she said it. “The news search has already been broken. The added value of a newspaper today, even an online newspaper, lies in its new and unique angles.” So, while predefining has some functionalities, there is also the trait that this may lead to a hypothesis-confirming journalism. That journalists are becoming blind for alternative perspectives.

And to go back to the case of Lance Armstrong, that he — actually, the idea that he could win the Tour de France was the dream scenario of the journalists back then in 1999. How unrealistic this scenario would be. It was the dream scenario. So when it happened like that, journalists were very happy, and they were not interested in alternative perspectives on the same event, which came out only many years later.

OK. Then the storytellers. My expectation was that the practice of predefining would be even more important for the storytellers, because you have all those storytelling handbooks, which emphasize that you need to have a scenario, a script, a baseline, an angle, a frame, before you start to do your research, before you start to speak with people, and so on. However, in practice, all those storytellers I interviewed, many of them were award-winning journalists. So, it turned out that their stories were—none of them were actually predefined. The storyline of their stories, the scenario or angle or how you would call it, that it’s evolved only gradually in the news production process. OK. And even more, storytellers, they say that good stories are just the result of luck, of reporter’s luck, and that’s not possible to have reporter’s luck if you predefine stories.

And this is illustrated by this reporter who said, "If you are too prepared, you cannot be surprised anymore. You must leave as much as possible to chance. Do not board up your whole trip with appointments. Then you are writing a premeditated story. While it is nicer to talk to people spontaneously, at the moment you talk with them, there is a lot going on. You encounter very unexpected things, the craziest things."

And another interesting thing about the storytellers was that while news makers are always talking about interviewing sources, these storytellers are talking about listening to people.

So, in conclusion, if you look at how stories are presented of these both group of journalists, the stories of the news makers have probably more truthful outlook, because they use conventional styles, such as the inverted pyramids. But if you look at the news production process, at what is unseen for the audience, you could argue that the stories of the storytellers are actually more the result of more open-minded, serendipitous search for truth or whatever; while the stories of the news makers are more often the result of finding what they are looking for.

So, that was it. I hope it made sense. And thank you for your attention.

[Applause.]

**Henrik Örnebring:** This is a very different context for me. I'm normally presenting at straight-up academic conferences. There's 20 people in the room on a good day. And I sit down at a desk and I read my prepared notes, and then, boom, you're done. So, this is, now, I have this like clicker, and there's like a screen in front of me, so I don't have to turn around. This is like science fiction to me. [laughter] Yeah, I'm at a Ted Talk is what it feels like. [laughter] So, if I get a bit overwhelmed, please forgive me.

Also, just advance warning. We heard earlier that you should always, like, end an email newsletter on an upbeat note so that people are happy. This is like the anti-newsletter. This is like super downbeat. Sorry, but we've had a lot of upbeat stuff here, so maybe we need a bit of downbeat stuff too.

So, let's start off with this. You've seen it. I'm not even the first person here to use this. I write in the paper that maybe the defining feature of journalistic jobs in this time is that there's less of them. There's maybe the same journalistic work that needs to be done, but you can't expect to be paid for it, maybe. And you can't expect necessarily to, like, get a permanent, full-time job.

Here are some numbers. Maybe you can't see them. They are from a survey of the income of freelance journalists in the UK in 2015. Those little turquoise dudes there on the top, they are the 34% of all freelance journalists who earned less than £10,000 a year. In 2015, the exchange rate was a pound was about \$1.50. So, 34% of freelance journalists earned less than \$15K a year in US dollars. 80% earned less than 60K. It's very hard to make a living off being a journalist.

We've heard a lot about getting multiple revenue streams. That's not just media companies [that] have to do that. If you're an individual journalist, you also have to do multiple revenue streams and find ways to make money on many different things. So, basically, journalism is no longer characterized by this kind of framework of stable, full-time employment. Meaning that in sociological terms, journalism is characterized by increasing precarity. It's precarious work. A lot of people have used this term. Perhaps the most well-known is the British sociologist, Guy Standing. He published a book in 2011 called *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, where he talks about like a whole new social class emerging, which is characterized by these insecure working conditions. And I would argue that journalism is now becoming part of that precariat.

And a very important element of precarity is that it's not just about sort of material or financial insecurity, but also about how this insecurity makes you think and feel. It, like, takes over your life. Another term from this sociology of precarity is that it's financial, social, and existential insecurity. You're, you know, you don't know where you're going to get your money from, and you don't know if you're even going to be able to work in the field that you've chosen.

And in journalism, we talk a lot about professionalism. And unsurprisingly, precarity has potentially grave consequences for professionalism. Wall of text. Boom. I'm not going to read it. You can read it yourselves while I'm talking. Because this is, what is professionalism? Well, it's this kind of collectively shared norms, practices, and codes. If you're a journalist, you know you share these values. That you should do certain things, like, verification. You should be fair, you should be a watchdog, and so on. And Standing and other people have talked about this, talked about precarity. They say, that, well, if you work under conditions of precarity, then this is like bad for professionalism. This kind of collective understanding, collectively shared norms and values, they erode if you are sort of constantly insecure in different ways.

Standing and others also talk about the role of digitalization and digital technology in exacerbating precarity. [He] writes that you spend a lot of time online. Could also say that, for example, if you can work on your mobile or on your laptop all the time, anytime, then you're also expected to work on your mobile and laptop all the time, anytime. Like, technology gives us a lot of wonderful things, but it also adds pressures, stress. So, that's one thing.

I was interested in this, because Standing is rather vague on how this actually happens in his book, so I've been interested in seeing, like, how this actually works in the lives of journalists [and] being a bit more concrete.

What have I done? What's the study? You know, this is like, if you're not familiar with academia, this is like the method slide coming up, where I tell you about how I did it, which in an academic conference is the most important slide here. You know, you can read it in the paper. I interviewed some people...[laughter]...in—in—in some countries...over a period of time. [laughter] So, I've studied this phenomenon and

other things, on and off, for about a decade now. So, and I have another project going that's also dissertated that's still ongoing, so I'm still gathering data.

And what I'm going to do next is that I'm just going to put some more walls of text. I'm going to put some quotes, from the people that I've talked to up there, because these quotes, I think, illustrate. They illustrate what I'm talking about. And they are very typical. They are indicative of trends in the data. And I'm going to sort of start with some quotes from the early period, where I started gathering data in 2008-09.

In this period, young journalists are feeling very much that they had to be entrepreneurial. If you will, *entrepreneurial*, that's just another word for precarity. That's putting a positive spin on it. It's putting a positive spin on that you have to take individual responsibility for your own career. You have to take individual responsibility for your skills training. You can't expect an employer to take care of you and help you with that, because you might not have an employer. And if you have one, they probably don't have money to spend to train you often.

So, it was also very visible in the material that, you know, these young professionals, they were consumed with thoughts about how to get a job, but getting a job was just means to an end. And what was the end? The end was getting the next job. And there you can see clearly, I think, these patterns of thought and habits of thought [and] how they change. If that's why you want to get a job, so that you can get the next one, like, what does that do to your understanding of being part of a professional collective, and so on? It's like a constant hustle combining these revenue streams, if you will, and that was exhausting to a lot of people.

And in this period, a lot of this stress was tied to having to learn new digital skills, new production technologies, so it was like an added stress to have to become tech savvy, and at the time, it was necessary, but it was also something that they felt that their employers didn't value, really. It wasn't what they wanted to do. It was like, tech skills was often portrayed as being — that was not the actual journalism, as you can sort of see here. And some people even, sort of, you can describe these digital skills as being a kind of meritocracy trap. Like, if you learn these tech skills, then that sort of traps you. Then, that's all you have to do. It will maybe get you a job, but not the job you want.

And I call it the meritocracy trap, because most of the people that I talked to had a very strong belief in this idea of meritocracy, which is actually quite deeply rooted in journalism, in this professional culture. That sort of, you know, if you're just good, then you will get a job. And if you don't get a job, that must mean that you're bad, right? So in itself, it's a word or an idea that places like a huge responsibility on the individual.

And then, flash forward to 2017, like the period we're in now, where I started doing interviews. While there is maybe a bit more positive spin, like, digital skills are more, sort of, they're more natural for journalists, with, I don't know, ten years. It was pretty quick. They are transferable, so you can use them to do other jobs. This

contributes to what I call non-exclusivity. Like, journalism is not an exclusive occupation anymore. I mean, exclusive in the sense that you do it exclusive of other things, but now you might have to work as a journalist for one day, and then you write ad copy the next day, or you do something else another day. And these digital skills are what make — they sort of empower you, because you can work in a lot of different things, but not necessarily journalism.

So, to sort of sum up a bit ten years of research, here are four key takeaways. I found that journalists are increasingly, what I call, primed for precarity. If you're sort of like a j-school graduate going out looking for jobs, you expect it to be this way. You expect that you will have to work for free or almost nothing, at entry level, in order to get in, and it's natural that it should be this way. You know, those of you who are, like, a bit older, maybe remember that there was a time would you could get jobs, and it wasn't this way.

And interestingly, like, what I call a reversed view of these digital skills, in 2008-09, it was what allowed you to enter the profession. In 2017, they are part of what allows you to leave. Great. I've learned these digital things. Now, I can go work in PR and actually get paid and be able to, like, raise a family and stuff.

Since I studied many different countries, I feel I also have to say something about the comparative points. And an obvious one, a lot of how this sort of manifests for people has to do with employment regimes. So, in countries like Sweden, Germany, and also Italy, which has like strong labor protections, labor law, social welfare systems, journalists, like other people, are a bit shielded from the worst of this precarity, yeah. Whereas, in Eastern Europe, which I've studied a lot, where journalists essentially never expected to have an easy ride, because the media industry never consolidated post-1991, in the same way that it has done elsewhere, then they are less bothered by it, because they didn't expect it to begin with. And so, I've written here, so, since we are in the US now, from what I know about the US, it's likely to be much more like Eastern Europe, like, a relatively sort of weak employment regime here and sort of weak welfare system.

And precarity also prevents collective solutions. If it's like getting a job is dog-eat-dog and all the responsibility is on the individual, then it's very hard to think about these collective things, collective norms, values. One thing that I was thinking when I was interviewing sort of younger journalists, like, where none of them talk about or mention mentors, where are those sort of older professionals helping them? There is no context. It's very hard to do that in the current context.

So, to end even maybe a bit ahead of time, I think maybe the most depressing takeaway is—[laughter]—seriously, is that if journalism can only be practiced by the people who can afford to work for free, then what kind of journalism do we get?

Thank you.

[Applause.]

**Carrie Brown:** All right. Your award for sticking around to the 4:00 p.m. research panel is, you get the little sweet musical stylings from our DJ Groves over here. [laughter] So, yeah, we figured, hey, what the hell. Let me know when you're ready. [bell ringing, clapping] So, that's the sound of one-million page views in a single day at The Christian Science Monitor. You can hear a little golf clap going on back there as they were celebrating that achievement. If that sounds a little bit familiar to some of you here, you get extra points as a loyal ISOJ fan, because five years ago, we stood in front of you on this very same stage and also played that sound. At the time, The Monitor was consistently getting between 30-and-40-millioni page views per month.

This is the monthly page view of The Christian Science Monitor today. So, you can see the change here over time. And you can see what their page views were back 2009 when The Monitor became one of the first newspapers to really stop the presses. They didn't just talk about going digital first. They actually completely killed their daily print edition; although, they did actually keep a print weekly. This is obviously a huge change in terms of metrics, right? It also represents a change in strategy, change in the way The Monitor thought about their goals and their work, a change in their routines and the way that they did their jobs.

And I mean, obviously, in some ways, this is a story of failure, right? I mean, that's a huge drop in terms of page views, just to keep on the depression train here. But at the same time, as we've talked about a lot over the past couple of days, page views are certainly not the only or even the best metric with which to judge a news organization's success. Maybe a smaller, more loyal audience that is willing to subscribe is actually more valuable than that kind of drive-by traffic.

And there's also a story to be told here of a willingness to change and evolve; although, not certainly without resistance. And in some cases, too fast, not necessarily giving enough time to a new initiative to allow it to really work.

So, what we're going to try to tell you about here is a little bit about what we've learned over time at The Christian Science Monitor in terms of what worked and didn't work in terms of their strategy and culture, with the hope that maybe that provides a little bit of insight for other news organizations also going through something similar. And we have been studying them for nine years. So, we do have a little bit of a longer perspective, I think, than most academic research is able to show.

So, a little bit of quick context here in case you have no idea what The Monitor is. They have always received a subsidy from the church, but they are not a religious publication. They are written for a broader audience. Very well respected. They won a number of Pulitzer Prizes. Particularly well known for their international coverage. The Monitor has a motto that was written by the founder, Mary Baker Eddy, "...to injure no man but bless all mankind." What they mean by that is essentially a very thoughtful solutions-oriented, non-sensational form of journalism. And this was something the staff had really internalized. They actually repeated this to us



regularly in interviews. So, that really sort of leaves the question, how do you evolve with that motto still intact, or, you know, even, do you?

And around 2008, 2009, the church announced that they were going to drastically cut back that subsidy. And we already know this is already a really shitty time for newspapers, right? There's a recession. Google and Facebook are increasingly gobbling up all of our ad dollars. So, there was a mood kind of desperation and a lot of survival anxiety. And they decided, how are we going to deal with this? Well, we're going to really just try to grow our audience as much as possible, by any means necessary, if we can.

Oh, this is just a little quick context about our methods, but you guys can read the paper if you want to know more. Basically, [we] spent a whole bunch of time there.

These are sort of our four kind of largest themes that we found over the nine years. And I'm going to go through each of them fairly quickly. So, the first theme is embracing experimentation and data-driven decision making. Now, this did not happen easily, because change—this is a huge shocker to anyone in a newsroom—is really, really hard. Right? And perhaps especially hard at The Monitor. They went very aggressively into broadcast in the 1990's to fairly spectacular failure. So, you can imagine how some in the newsroom [felt] when, you know, "Oh, there's a new technology called the internet that we now have to embrace." There was perhaps even more skepticism than there was in other newsrooms that this was a good idea to work on. But, I mean, the church was essentially saying, "You have to make up for a \$13-million cut in your subsidy. You're already down 20 staff members through layoffs. There may be more." So, they were pretty motivated to try to do something.

So, how do you grow your audience? Well, today, in 2018, a lot of this looks fairly familiar, but, you know, five, six years ago, a lot of this was a little bit more cutting edge. You can see things like SEO. Writing stories based on what's already trending on Google as a way to boost your traffic. Quizzes that require lots of clicks. They also did a variety of other new products. And it was really successful. And this was actually pretty exciting for the newsroom, even those that had been resistant for a while. I mean, it was working. They were in the conversation again, even if they were a little bit uncomfortable about how they had gotten there. These new sort of routines had taken hold.

But unfortunately, not so fast. The party was over very quickly. They realized that that ad revenue is not going to be enough even with this much higher traffic to make up for that lost subsidy. You know, Google, Facebook changed their algorithm very quickly. That presents its own kinds of challenges. And that led The Monitor to really pivot to what is kind of our second theme, which is audience really does matter. And we've heard that also here today as well—the idea that we really need to engage and understand our readers more. But that's harder. It's more complex. It's more threatening to the journalist's ego and sense of authority.

It's one thing to put a sexy headline on something. It's another thing to figure out how to really listen to and respect your audience. And even though journalists really do believe in our public service mission, part of that is still infused with the idea that we know what the news is. You know, we're the gatekeeper. So, The Monitor made, you know, some inroads into this strategy of paying attention to their audience.

You know, when I started in newspapers, this was essentially how we viewed our audience—very vague. I'm not even sure who this guy is exactly. But The Monitor decided to develop some personas. Greg and Miranda. This was essentially who they felt their target audience was. And by doing this, they were able to better kind of identify some types of information needs, gaps, how they could serve a more specific group of people. So in some ways, that was valuable. But again, this was difficult. The Monitor killed comments. Very few on the staff were really using social media in any kind of meaningful way, especially not to engage. They weren't do a lot of crowdsourcing or allowing their audience to participate in any way. So, they made some inroads here, but maybe not as much as they might have hoped.

So, that leads us to our third big theme. The breakdown of the traditional wall between business and editorial. Now, we're not talking here about allowing businesses to buy favorable coverage or anything that's like hugely unethical like that, but we're talking about increased communication and information sharing, which once would have been a big no-no. This began with John Yemma, who was the editor when they killed the daily print edition. He worked very regularly with the publisher at the time. Over the years that we've studied at The Monitor, a number of editorial staff have moved to the business side. They sit in closer proximity in the building, so that it's easier to kind of talk to each other and share information.

And in some ways, you know, that's a story of success. The Monitor was able to identify some potential good market segments that might be interested in new verticals. Passcode was a cyber-security vertical. They took a page from Texas Tribune—multiple revenue streams, events, etc. They started The Monitor Global Outlook, which was essentially a business intelligence publication. These started off pretty successfully. It was kind of exciting. They were growing revenue. They were still kind of young. They had a dedicated audience that was going up. But The Monitor actually decided to kill both of these publications, because they felt like, you know what? This is still too far away from our real core mission.

So, that's kind of the fourth theme here. The changing identity and concepts of unique value at The Monitor. It was founded in response to yellow journalism, right? That was the fundamental ethos of solutions from the beginning. Tried to chase that big audience. It didn't work. Went back to the original mission. Decided, "If we have to be a lot smaller, so be it." If nothing else, the church board that oversees The Monitor felt like at least we could serve people of the faith, which made even some of the Christian Scientists on the staff a little bit uncomfortable, because it was so different than what they had done before.

They started out with creating a new Unique Value Proposition (UVP). They were trying to differentiate a little bit more from everything else out there. Then they refined that a little bit to what they called Ump. They were constantly asking whether or not any given story that they had assigned or were doing constituted ump. And that's a little bit infused with Christian Science values.

So in some ways, this is a good story, because they are differentiating themselves a little bit. It makes sense to have a clear goal to know who you are and to really kind of have that as a measurement that you can hold yourself against. But in the bad part, in some ways, this is really a reassertion of that gatekeeper role. Reassertion of control, right? "We know what kind of journalism you need, and we're going to give it to you!" Right? So, a little bit different than what they had hoped for earlier.

So, this is really one of The Monitor's biggest products right now. It's The Monitor Daily, a newspaper. They have about 8,000 subscribers paying \$11 a month. They want to grow that to about 30,000. So, it's much, much smaller, and so is their staff. Another round of buyouts and layoffs. The Monitor is now at 40 people in the newsroom. But they do feel as though they are really fulfilling what they set out to do.

So again, a constant story of success, and of failure, and also one of constant change. It's never going to stop, guys. Like, you're never going to hit the point at which you don't have to innovate anymore, you don't have to change, and that's maybe one thing we've found.

So, these are a few takeaways. And if you want to talk to us more, here you go.

[Applause.]