

## Journalism To Go

*The changing spaces of news consumption*

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# JOURNALISM TO GO

## The changing spaces of news consumption

Chris Peters

*This paper contends that to understand how audiences engage with journalism in the contemporary age, we must conceive of news consumption not just as something we do, but as something we do in a particular place. It considers the experience(s) of consuming journalism, and reflects upon the influence "space" has in this equation. I ask how news consumption is integrated into, and shapes, the social spaces of everyday life, and how this may be transforming. The title, "Journalism to Go", thus has a tripartite meaning relating to changing notions of space, speed, and convenience in journalism. Specifically: journalism is now produced to facilitate increasingly mobile places of consumption (Space); journalism is now produced to adjust for the faster pace of the information age (Speed); and journalism is now produced to interact with and provide multiple channels of access for audiences (Convenience). This paper demonstrates the analytic importance of the first of these by considering data generated through Barnhurst's "Life History & The Media" project, which details young adults' stories of media use. This analysis uncovers that moments of media consumption do not simply take place in space; rather, the spaces of everyday life are produced through these socio-cultural practices.*

**KEYWORDS** audience studies; experience; mobility; news consumption; space

### Introduction

Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are. To localize a memory in time is merely a matter for the biographer and only corresponds to a sort of external history, for external use, to be communicated to others . . . For a knowledge of intimacy, localization in the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than the determination of dates. (Gaston Bachelard, 1994, p. 9—on the importance of space to memory, and experience)

**ABC NEWS ON THE MOVE** Access ABC News anytime, anywhere. (ABC News, 2011—marketing slogan for mobile services, including news alerts, video-on-demand, and iPhone app)

My earliest memory of journalism is sitting in our family living room, watching my father read the paper before going to work. Every morning he would eat a bowl of cereal, brew a fresh pot of coffee, and grab the *Globe & Mail* newspaper delivered to our front door. As I remember it, this daily ritual took about 30 minutes, the final 15 of which were spent sitting on the sofa, skimming through the lead stories of the day. Often our cat, Kipper, would sit on his lap, which my Dad seemed to enjoy even though it made turning the pages of our national broadsheet quite a trial. As he prepared to leave, he would pour the remaining coffee into a thermos, tuck the paper under his arm, and head out the front door. Although I have no memory of this, occasionally I would mimic him (see Figure 1).

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**FIGURE 1**  
Rituals of private and public news consumption.

This is neither a unique nor, to be a bit frank and self-aware, particularly interesting anecdote. However, I use it to open this paper precisely because its commonplaceness calls to attention a number of crucial themes that I wish to explore as part of this special issue on “The Future of Journalism”. First, it highlights where and when I was first exposed to journalism and how I learned about the rituals of news consumption. Second, if we were to trace this story further, we would see how my platforms of consumption shifted—from morning papers, to cable news, online journalism, and current affairs podcasts—and how the places, patterns and times I consume news changed along with these technologies. Finally, it raises the question of what my experience of journalism is, and how this has changed. While technology has transformed the possibilities for how I access the news, this is not the sole reason that the rituals associated with news consumption have adjusted over my lifetime: from something first witnessed and admired at a distance (watching my father read the paper on the couch), to something which prompted family conversation (watching the nightly newscast together in the living room), to something, as an expat, I now often consume to “experience” and “remember” Canada (listening to current affairs podcasts from my native country while biking in the Dutch countryside).

The point is simply that the spaces of news consumption matter, and matter significantly, for how audiences experience journalism. To tell a story of everyday life demands considering social space, and social space is increasingly inseparable from “media space” (Couldry and McCarthy, 2004). Yet despite the blindingly obvious nature of this observation, the relation between our experiences of news and the spaces of news consumption has largely been neglected.

This paper considers the experience(s) of consuming journalism, and reflects upon the influence “space” has in this equation. To contemplate the “future of journalism” means thinking about audiences, and, accordingly, it is crucial to consider how the everyday experiences from consuming journalism potentially shift when the spaces of news are transformed. While such shifts have occurred throughout history, the pace and consequences of these innovations are more fundamental today.

I evaluate this by interrogating data on media-use generated for Kevin Barnhurst’s “Life History & The Media” project.<sup>1</sup> Barnhurst’s project asked young adults to write about their past media experience, utilising a technique known as “limited life histories”, which allows subjects to write their own stories of media consumption. The approach explores the interaction between subjective experience and objective structures, such as the media system (Barnhurst et al., 2011). These essays were read to tease out what, if any, relationship exists between media consumption, memory, and space. What this research uncovers is that moments of media consumption do not simply take place *in* space; rather, the spaces of everyday life are produced by these socio-cultural practices.

Before I get into these specific findings, I first make an argument for why thinking spatially is of value to journalism studies. If we think of space and place as verbs, as active processes—spacing and placing—instead of nouns, we are in a better position to understand why, where, when, and with whom people consume news; how the increasingly fluid consumption of journalism (re)configures our experience of it; and how the places, patterns, and flows of daily existence are shaped by the media terrain we inhabit.

### Why “Space” Matters for Journalism

It brought the moon landing into your living room. Now it brings the Final Four to your cell phone. (National Association of Broadcasters, 2011—advertisement by the lobby group which calls attention to the changing relations between media use and mobility)

Despite news and news-like products increasingly occupying the mediated spaces of our everyday lives, a lack of research means it is unclear how contemporary audiences actually experience them. While there has been reflection on the dramatic transformations seen in journalism over the past decades, from dwindling revenues, to the spread of infotainment, audience decline, chaotic technological advancement, changing ethical norms, and professional alienation, such studies generally focus on the journalism industry itself (see Bourdieu, 1998; Franklin, 1997; Henry, 2008; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 1999; McChesney and Nichols, 2010).

What is lacking is a nuanced understanding of audiences, specifically; an understanding which reflects what Soja (1996, p. 1) calls the “inherent spatiality of human life.” News consumption is not just something we do, it is something we *do in a particular place*. As my earlier anecdote attempted to illustrate, if we “think spatially” about our own habits

and perceptions of media use, including news consumption, we quickly realise that such practices help structure and give meaning to the social spaces of everyday life (cf. Ek, 2006; Lefebvre, 1991). Accordingly, if journalism is to succeed in the future, it is crucial we understand where—and through what media—audiences consume news. This matters on three levels:

1. Ontologically, in terms of how we view ourselves as citizens—and by association, where, when, and how we use news to perform our civic role(s);
2. Epistemologically, in terms of how we come to learn about issues—and by association, how this shapes private and public spaces of knowledge; and
3. Phenomenologically, in terms of how we experience and feel about the news—and by association, how this impacts our connection with journalism.

Understanding how journalism can be used to promote civic engagement (see Couldry et al., 2010; Dahlgren, 2009) means first understanding how, where, and through what means people actually engage. This is essential knowledge for journalistic organisations that wish to:

- Implement strategies to engage a new generation of citizens/news consumers;
- Understand how to “package” news in a convenient and engaging manner to make it useful to an increasingly mobile and time-pressured public; and
- Formulate business models to adapt to the changing media landscape.

Without accurate and timely data on the changing spaces of news consumption, news organisations divorce the contemporary practices of the public—and by association, the possibilities for democratic awareness—from these decisions.

### The “Spatial Turn” in Scholarship

In what I am convinced will eventually be considered one of the most important intellectual and political developments of the late 20th century, a growing community of scholars and citizens has, for perhaps the first time, begun to think about the *spatiality* of human life in much the same way that we have persistently approached life’s intrinsic and richly revealing historical and social qualities: its *historicality* and *sociality*. (Edward Soja, 1996, p. 2—his overture and call for spatial thinking)

It is frankly surprising, given the attention to space in other academic spheres, that “thinking spatially” has not been embraced by journalism studies. For instance, in the area of criminology, a focus on space has played a significant role in academic and public policy discussions for the past few decades. From the use of lighting in darkened areas and pathways, to speed bumps to control traffic, to CCTV cameras which dot our urban landscapes, there has been widespread acknowledgement that human interventions in public space can have a significant impact on feelings of security. Similarly, various studies on public performance, from museum studies to the sociology of sport, attest that social space is crucial in determining how cultural products are experienced and consumed. So why has this thinking not taken hold for journalism?

Stimulating debate on how the shifting places and possibilities of news consumption fit with different audiences’ experiences of these transformations necessitates embracing the recent “spatial turn” evident in the humanities and social sciences

(Withers, 2009). Just as the cultural turn in social theory encouraged researchers to rethink static notions of identity and meaning (Nash, 2001), the spatial turn encourages us to go beyond conceptualising space as something steady. The mathematical Euclidean conception of fixed space—a location in which “action” occurs—bears little affinity to a growing emphasis on mobility in society. As Jansson and Falkheimer (2006, p. 14) note, “Communication as *common knowledge* and *experience*—is also a turn towards the *meanings of place* and the *places of meaning*, which are continually shared through communication. It is, we may summarise, a turn *from text to context*.” In terms of journalism, this means moving away from concentrating upon content, what people read/listen to/watch, to focus upon the where and how. It also encourages us to question with whom they communicate and the changing relationship between social space and the experience of journalism (see Figure 2).

To date, academic attention on these spatial aspects of journalism is bereft, although one can identify two strands of research in journalism studies where space is at least implicit. The first considers how new media open up interactive spaces of communication *vis-à-vis* citizen journalism (Atton and Hamilton, 2008), user-generated content (Hermida and Thurman, 2008), and similar developments. In these types of studies, the audiences are often heavy-users of journalism, or more colloquially, “news junkies”. Unfortunately, actual experiences—and not just textual contributions—are often left unexplored; many studies simply *infer the audience* from texts or interviews with journalists (see Chung, 2007). This shortcoming is exacerbated when the focus shifts to “average” citizens, whose perceptions are frequently considered in terms of the *potential* ways they *could* engage with journalism. In its worst form, such studies smack of optimistic technological determinism that masquerades as citizen empowerment.

Another strand which attends to the “spaces of news” considers the impact, from an economic and production standpoint, of new media on the journalism industry (Fenton, 2009; Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre, 2010). In these type of studies, digital developments and their potential act as the primary focus. However, the way that news consumption shapes our spaces of communication, or conversely, how different places influence how we consume the news, is superseded in such accounts by considerations of how developments in new media impact the speed and conventions of journalism (Allan, 2006), or shift demands on news work (Deuze, 2007), or change journalists’ self-perceptions (Zelizer, 2009).

While both strands effectively reshape our understanding of the journalistic field, the emphasis is on the production of news, its content, or the intent of journalists, rather than on the actual intake and experience of audiences.

This seems to indicate that all-too-often, scholars rely on a traditional twentieth-century notion of professional journalism to understand shifting audience conceptions of what news “is” (Peters, 2010, 2011). Accordingly, this paper’s title, “Journalism to Go”, embraces a tripartite meaning that attempts to underscore the relational aspects of news consumption—how changing notions of space, speed, and convenience in journalism may possibly be experienced by audiences. Specifically:

1. Journalism is now produced to facilitate increasingly mobile places of consumption (Space);
  2. Journalism is now produced to adjust for the faster pace of the information age (Speed);
- and

**FIGURE 2**

News on public screens in everyday life (Toronto Transit Commission, image courtesy of Onestop media) and for special events (CNN Election Night Party 2008, Times Square, image courtesy of Daniel Yahraes, <http://gingerfires.wordpress.com/photos/election-night-nyc-times-square-2008/>)

3. Journalism is now produced to interact with and provide multiple channels of access for audiences (Convenience).

While the latter two elements are frequently researched by scholars, a lack of similar consideration is given to the first. For the remainder of this paper, I employ data from the “Life History & The Media” project to demonstrate why this is a blind spot.

A lack of spatial awareness in journalism scholarship is somewhat problematic, as the dramatic rise of alternative platforms to deliver journalism over the last two decades—the iPad, smartphones, Twitter, podcasts, video-on-demand, online news, 24-hour news, commuter papers, and so on—must be seen as doing more than just multiplying the number of journalistic channels. When the places of news consumption change, the social uses and actions that flow from it change as well. The “spontaneous” revolutions of the twenty-first century—public gatherings convened through social media, as recently seen throughout the Middle East—are predicated on the practice of forwarding news stories



that began with the Internet. Fundamentally, the emerging technologies and increasingly mobile spatialities of journalism do more than just replicate news content—by changing the public's experience of journalistic consumption, they change what news *is*. If the 24-hour news revolution of the 1980s and 1990s transformed audiences' temporal relationship with journalism, the wireless revolution from 2000 onwards changed their spatial experience of news.

### Media Consumption and Space—Reading Young Adults' Life Histories

Space was treated as the dead, fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the other hand, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic. (Michel Foucault, 1980, p. 70—on the lack of importance traditionally given to space in social analysis)

The argument in this paper is relatively straightforward: that space matters for how we experience journalism and that how we experience journalism shapes our social spaces. As such, this final section simply tries to make the case for the legitimacy of this claim. Researching this question in depth is, of course, a challenging task well beyond the purview of a brief essay. Yet I offer a cursory glance into the role of space by turning to audience descriptions of their media engagement, specifically, the role of certain media products, historically, in their everyday lives.

The data I analyse derive from Kevin Barnhurst's "Life History & The Media" project, which began generating accounts in 1996. The process is a relatively straightforward one: participants are told to pick a topic and a medium, and then "make a chronicle [of events]", "adjust for length", "outline each event", "write naturally", "evaluate the meanings", "tell the other stories" and "compile the events". Participants are instructed to write about 4–10 events from their memories, and to "(outline, write, and evaluate) for each event or memory" sequentially.<sup>2</sup> It is crucial for this paper to note that the instructions are to write about memories of media use, not journalistic use, so most of the accounts focus upon traditional "entertainment" media rather than journalistic consumption. However, journalism does arise in a number of essays. For this paper, an initial and broad textual reading of 66 English-language, US-based stories, written between 1997 and 1999, was conducted to "read for space" and to note the different ways that spatiality was incorporated into the life stories. The stories averaged between two to four single-spaced pages, or about 1000–2000 words.

Readings were conducted over three stages. In the first stage, any mention of space—be it a generic location (at home, in my town, etc.), a specific place (i.e. my living room, in my fourth grade classroom), or implicit reference (looking at the TV, looking in to see what my parents were watching, and so forth)—was underlined. The stories were then read and analysed a second time to place them in three broad categories:

1. Media consumption shaping/creating social space;
2. Space mentioned in a descriptive fashion but not constitutive of social space; and
3. No real link between media consumption and space.

The classifications were performed conservatively, so each underlined passage was read in the context of the primary thrust of the anecdote and entire essay. If a given essay seemed like a borderline case, it was "relegated" to the category where spatial considerations were deemed less substantial. For example, a passage which read, "I sat

in my fourth grade classroom in 1985 amidst my classmates. We sat surrounding the television, supervised by my teacher, a former air force pilot, and were anxious to see our first launching of the Challenger space shuttle" (*News I Can't Forget*, 1997)<sup>3</sup> did not prevent this essay being coded in the second category [descriptive but not constitutive] because the primary emphasis of the piece was not upon that day, but upon exposure to violent images in the media. Similarly, the line, "I would just sit in the living room or my bedroom and sit and listen to this tape and another tape my dad gave me over and over and over again (*The Music Sounds Better With Me*, 1999)", was not enough for this essay to be moved from the third category [no real link] to the second because the focus of the essay was on music award-show fandom. Through this process, the 66 stories were divided into three different emphases *vis-à-vis* spatiality.

In terms of this division, the category of essays where the act(s) of media consumption, or "events" being chronicled were deemed constitutive of social space was evident in 25 stories, or 38 per cent of the essays under analysis. In these cases, the essay as a whole was determined to support the claim that the sociality and spatiality of media consumption were evidently interwoven. The second category, where there appeared to be a socialising sense of space but it was primarily being emphasised for "descriptive" or "literary" purposes occurred in 22 stories, or about 33 per cent of the essays. The final category, in which space was deemed superfluous to the life history being told, occurred in 19 stories or 29 per cent of the total number under study. The final stage in this process was thus to re-read the first category [media consumption as constitutive of space] to identify patterns and common themes. While there is limited space to explore these findings, I will briefly highlight some exemplary cases which appear to substantiate the assertion that separating spatiality from audience experience of the news is a regrettable oversight.

### *Spatially Mediated Memories—Young Adults Recollect*

What is significant in this study is how frequently media and space are co-constitutive and linked in the memory of media rituals and moments. In this pilot study, over one-third of the essays clearly demonstrated this relationship. This is quite telling, for what is enlightening about these stories is that actual media content—the *emphasis of much of what we do in journalism studies*—is completely irrelevant to the experience of media being told. This supports the notion that if we want to understand the meanings audiences make from news, studies of content must be augmented by a focus on "flow" (the conversations and uses of news by audiences). What the data from the "Life History & The Media" project seem to indicate is that ignoring space means that we face an incomplete calculus on what makes news consumption meaningful. Take, for example, this passage:

As I got a little older, life became much busier. Piano lessons, gymnastics, Hebrew school, and homework I considered impossible, filled my days. Even with my busy schedule, there was always time for TV, especially "The Cosby Show." Every Thursday night like clockwork, snuggle-time. Our V-shaped beige leather couch looked more like a blanket exhibit than a family room sofa. My dad lay on one side, my mom on the other, and my sister and I lay on the ground in a make-shift bed of blankets and pillows.

There were unwritten laws during snuggle-time that were always obeyed: no phone calls, work, or talk of work, just watching our favorite sit-com while spending time together. It

was as simple as that. Although my family ate dinner together almost every night, more conversations took place at snuggle-time than at any other. Looking back I've realized that it wasn't "The Cosby Show" that I loved so much. It was the routine of togetherness that my family had created (*TV Snuggle Time*, 1997).

In this essay, the routines of media consumption are spatially and socially remembered in concert. And in the entire essay, not a single aspect of content is mentioned. What matters to this participant is the family space created by the ritualised media moments. Lest one think that journalism is not similarly constitutive of space, consider the following account:

[Following dinner] My mom usually escaped upstairs, following a long afternoon of listening to my stories and being my endless companion. My sisters paired up on the dishes and chatted about the nuances of middle school and soccer practice. But one person escaped to his own world of after-dinner relaxation. My father usually left the table and went down the hall to the family room, where, from my soap box at the dinner table, I could see him in his lounge chair, magazine in hand. He did not read the magazine but every few minutes, for he was intent on the network news on television that evening. As the chatter about cute boys and ignorant teachers erupted into laughter by the sink, I watched the serious look on my father's face down the hall.

My father was the "tickle monster", the Bill Cosby fan, and the good friend of many. To see his face so serious meant someone had broken a dish or come home late, or perhaps had been caught in a lie. Why was he looking this way as my sisters laughed by the sink? What else had affected him so? There is no particular news story I can recall, for I didn't even know what the news was . . .

I soon learned that if I followed my father into the family room after dinner, he would talk to me, often about what was on the news (*Growing Up News*, 1997).

The parallels between this account and the personal anecdote which opened this paper are evident. It seems reasonable to assert that much of the pedagogical impetus for media consumption comes from observing our parents in our formative years, a realisation that appears to call out for ethnographic studies of media consumption in the home. What these excerpts, and many of the "Life History & The Media" essays make clear, is that spatiality is a critical aspect of consumption. If we want to understand the everyday audience uses of news, and how journalism can respond to the consumption shifts that are occurring, a consideration of space must surely be a part of the equation.

## Conclusion

If we want to uphold journalism and its function for democracy, recent developments point to the fact that the profession must redefine itself and adapt to the changing needs of the citizen. And if we consider the history of journalism, spatial considerations are key aspects of these shifts. During the Second World War, the spread of radio meant that people could crowd around it to listen to news updates collectively, experiencing triumph and tragedy together. Television became the focal point for news during the 1960s and 1970s, evening newscasts sparking discussion and debate across the dinner table. Newspapers have long been ubiquitous with coffee at the breakfast table as part of our

pre-work rituals. Television journalism also began to enter this space during the 1980s with the incorporation of breakfast news into morning household routines. The Internet revolution of the 1990s saw news consumption move from the home to the workplace. Free urban newspapers began appearing in world cities in the 1990s, establishing a foothold in a declining marketplace by organising their distribution around the spatial necessities of commuting. As the number of channels by which we can access journalism increases, and the spaces of journalistic consumption become more fragmented, mobile, and diverse, we must be attentive to how these shifts are experienced by journalism's various audiences.

Within journalism studies, there is a deficiency of such scholarship. To offer one example, much current work on user-generated content (UGC) does a wonderful job describing how new spaces of communication are fostered through social media, which provides insight into the types of information and conversations which occur in comments sections, chat forums, tweets, and so forth. These studies tell us about the possible ways that audiences can interact with contemporary journalism and what those who choose to participate are saying. But too often such research equates the substance of UGC as synonymous with the nature of audience experience, which is not necessarily the case. Research which situates news use within the daily life practices of audiences is critical if we want to bridge this gap. To improve our awareness, attention, and understanding of what the experiences of journalism will be in the future, we must certainly begin to speak with audiences, as opposed to just about them.

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## NOTES

1. Project directed by Kevin Barnhurst, University of Illinois, Chicago, <http://www.uic.edu/depts/comm/lifehist/>.
2. The complete instructions for participants are available at <http://www.uic.edu/depts/comm/lifehist/Documents/Text/lhinstructions.html>.
3. All stories are available at <http://www.uic.edu/depts/comm/lifehist/LHMPReadUS3.html>.

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