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Robert E. Gutsche, Jr. & Kristy Hess

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Placeification: The Transformation of Digital News Spaces into “Places” of Meaning

Robert E. Gutsche, Jr.^a  and Kristy Hess^b 

^aSociology/Media and Cultural Studies, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YN, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; ^bSchool of Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University, Princes Hwy, Warrnambool campus, 3280 Australia.

ABSTRACT

News websites, apps, and immersive environments have increasingly become places that extend one beyond her physical geography. Digital Journalism Studies requires ways to consider how journalism both shapes and is shaped by the places in which it is produced, practiced, and consumed. Current understandings of place in the news set a foundation for such understanding, though this work usually expresses meanings after a geography is demarcated and characterized whereas in digital journalism, newsmakers and users are frequently creating or reinforcing connection to “place” through mediated experience, interactivity, and amid new territories of online news environments. This article, therefore, argues for the concept of placeification that encourages scholarship examining how places evolve in digital news environments. For this article, we define placeification as “the array of processes and practices in which digital news spaces transform into places of meaning and significance. The term employs ification, a suffix that represents a process of becoming and which acknowledges the structure-agency of the place-making process.

KEYWORDS

Digital journalism;
geography; place;
placeification; power; space

Introduction

Audiences have forever experienced journalism among senses of space and place, from news being read from ancient pulpits of worship or heralded in public squares to longform journalism experienced on tablets and breaking news through pushed notifications (for review, see Gutsche and Hess 2019). Events of crisis and celebration now transpire from spaces the world over via livestreamed video, and news about social disorder, community togetherness, governance, and life and death often appear to each user as having occupied some physical geography. Within this coverage, journalists construct, challenge, or reinforce how and what we perceive physical and imaginary spaces. News products themselves - such as traditional newspapers and news bulletins - have long been tangible “places” of significance for audiences. They serve as information portals to the tangible places where we live and work whilst

offering a sense of comfort in their continuity, starting from the ritual of the morning paperboy to the evening news broadcast followed by the nightly weather report. The rise of digital space has unsettled, if not decimated, some of these routines and practices, however, while broadening our spatial awareness and presenting us the opportunity to engage with news anytime, anywhere. Today, homepages, watches, and mobile phones displaying news of a nation or neighborhood continue to function as places of geographic imaginaries, where a touch or tap transforms the tangible through testaments to ideological representations of realities that are embedded in journalism.

In this conceptual article, we argue Digital Journalism Studies requires an overarching concept to consider how journalism both shapes and is shaped by the places in which it is produced, practiced, and consumed. We wish to move beyond current understandings of place-making, which often focus on journalism's meaning-making function of and within established physical geographic spaces (i.e. Schmitz Weiss 2015), to unpack how and when spaces of news interactions *become* or *transform* into places. Therefore, we argue for the concept of *placeification* – how digital news environments shift from spaces that audiences move through and around into places of meaning and significance. The term placeification is based in understandings that space and place are highly contested terms across many disciplines and are further complicated with the continued advancements of mobility, locative media, temporality, the natural landscape, and the constructed environment. For our purposes here, placeification is defined as:

the array of processes and practices in which digital news spaces transform into places of meaning and significance. The term employs *ification*, a suffix that represents a process of *becoming* and which acknowledges the structure-agency of the place-making process.

Approaches to where journalists work, from newsrooms and crime scenes to city centers and press conferences, are experiencing a resurgence of interest in journalism's relationship to space and place (Schmitz Weiss 2020; Usher 2019). There, too, is interest in how digital technology and tools help audiences identify the "where" of news, both in terms of how people can seek information relevant to a given place regardless of their location and to identify with geographical coordinates when news happens – such as through the rise of mobile and locative journalism (Øie 2013). While these are relevant to our discussion here, it is the *transformation* of digital news space to places of meaning that provides the ideal environment to extrapolate placeification. Unlike the physical world in which we live, digital space presents an abundance of new and uncharted terrain that is being constantly discovered, mapped, and territorialized by those who lay claim to its nodes and coordinates. Placeification acknowledges the structure-agency of the place-making process by providing scope to explore how news space is transformed into places of meaning not only by news producers but in the ways audiences view digital news sites as portals or projections of broader physical and social spaces. It also provides scope to consider the tactics and strategies employed by media companies to make users feel connected or at "home" in ways that become accepted, acknowledged, and legitimate.

We begin this article by discussing conventional ways of understanding space and place and its adoption in Journalism Studies before expressing dimensions of

placeification that influence how digital news spaces become or transform into places. Given this article is about laying the foundations of what might be a useful concept in Digital Journalism Studies, we invite scholars to build upon and refine its value to the field and conclude the conceptual article with approaches for future research.

Space, place and place-making in journalism

Scholars from Human and Environmental Geography to Urban Planning, Sociology, and Literature agree that the term space represents the physical world and environment around us (i.e. Lefebvre 1991). Space is perhaps best positioned as something formed by and which mediates our relations with other beings, entities, and flows (Castells 2000). Spaces can be understood as demarcated geographies (such as coordinates on a map) or abstract representations in which we view the social world and which hold some social significance – a building, landmass, or classroom, all of which may all be tangible representations of space. In digital worlds, then, spaces include platforms, chatrooms, or interactive entry points to online content, and are locations where we work, move, interact, experience, leave, and return to.

The concept of place, on the other hand, is perhaps simply put as space that comes to hold cultural meaning (i.e. Cresswell 1996). It is intertwined with our individual and shared “senses of place” that build from deep, impressionable experiences or feelings of comfort that enable us to feel at ease or offer a sense of familiarity, emotional, physical social or physiological connection we cannot always explain (Massey 1991). We can have multiple senses of place, but importantly they take time and/or experience to develop (Tuan 1977). “Sense of place” is relevant here because – as we have argued elsewhere (i.e. Hess 2013) – when we develop strong connections to places, there is significant advantage to those whom are considered custodians of or holding influence over such places.

Scholarly traditions on place-making, including in Journalism Studies (Gutsche 2014), tend to rest on geographic characterizations of demographics, discourse, locative and space-based journalism, and mobile use in constructing and consuming news. Place-making has been adopted to assess how places are perceived in journalism coverage, including the use of maps and cartography to explain and describe geographic places and dominant narratives that characterize specific geographies. In Digital Journalism Studies, place-making is frequently linked to geo-tagging and geo-referencing to indicate some aspect of location and processes by which digital environments become spaces of interactivity and socialization for journalists and audiences. Broader Sociological and Cultural Studies contributions, meanwhile, have long focused on media’s relationship to social imaginaries, especially understandings of collectivity and shared ideals around and within places. Critical scholarship also positions news coverage of places, such as “foreign lands” and “those people” – as representing ideological values and power assigned to a location.

In Digital Journalism Studies, though, there has been less emphasis on the processes, practices, strategies, and tactics that influence how digital spaces become places of meaning. Digital news spaces are cultural spaces as well, related to issues of power,

agency, contestation, belonging, and relationships across physical-digital geographies. In establishing placeification, therefore, we see value in exploring both the “becoming” and the “being” in making of online news experiences where we stress the significance of examining both our “routes” and our “roots” (Dovey 2010, p. 8) that play a role in helping digital news “places” to evolve.

Just how do digital news spaces become places?

We propose there are six dimensions of placeification that provide insight into how hardware, software, and virtual spaces become complex place-environments for news. These dimensions do not necessarily operate chronologically; in fact, they can occur simultaneously. Ultimately, through the transformation of space to place, they point to the need to explore not only journalistic practice but the interactions among audiences with digital news that reveal how they attach to media platforms, how the relationships develop and how users (and producers) can be both instinctively connected and yet be coerced into generating a sense of place in online news spaces. As audiences and journalists are introduced to a consistent adoption of technology and of virtual places, they become immersed in environments of new habits, practices, emotional expressions, interactions, and movements. Users of digital news places operate in ways that – in the words of Morley (2002) – “parallel” physical space. In this way, the digital news place becomes a “home” with a “sense of belonging” often because it projects life from some physical reality (where people live, work and have strong physiological, emotional and social connections) to the digital. Such elements of journalism’s space- and place-based influence on user experience has been identified in work on locative media and spatial and time-shifted audio (i.e. Starkey 2016).

Through placeification, journalists and audiences are seen as not only projecting this parallelism but adopting online roles that shape the formation of digital news territories, a point we shall discuss shortly. Examples include rules of comments sections and rejection if one fails to re-subscribe to pass a paywall. Yet, while these projections operate as social mechanisms to extend order – even a sense of community – they can also lead to the banishment and marginalization of others. Placeification realizes both sides of the coin in this respect and argues that as digital spaces become places, critical perspectives are key to understanding issues of power inherent in the (re)creation of journalistic landscapes.

Dimension 1: Spatial (and emotional) immersion

The “dislocation” of news has been discussed as being the shifting of power from news media to digital platform companies in the move to digital news spaces (Ekström & Westlund, 2019). We argue the move of the news to online environments can influence – even heighten – the individual’s physical and emotional connections to coverage and communities identified in the news. While audiences may instinctively connect to news sites that resonate and serve geographic areas where they live and work, placeification also recognizes an opportunity for journalists to present immersive experiences to affect audience’s sense of place in the virtual. Approaches such as “spatial journalism” (Schmitz Weiss 2015) are certainly helpful here in understanding social and physical influences of

journalism and demarcations of space through apps and storytelling. Placeification is equally – if not more – interested in the affective and emotional connections to the digital, physical, and imaginary. We move beyond conventional approaches that consider audience interactions with immersive or longform digital journalism as connections to scenes and characters of a story (de Certeau, 1984).

Virtual reality journalism, for example, creates a sense of a “distant presence” (Toursel & Useille, 2019) in terms of how users interact with the ideological imaginaries of “somewhere else,” as in conventional place-making. VR journalism, scholarship suggests, relies on emotional components of immersive storytelling, contributing to what Milk (2015) refers to as an “empathy machine” where the user experiences narratives constructed by the journalist through which meanings come into being. Other immersive media, such as on BBC Radio 3 in the UK, applies autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) – a physical sensation of tingling of the scalp and neck associated with euphoric response to visual and audio stimuli of storytelling. Such “slow radio” that elicits physical and emotional reactions from environments such as a farm or zoo, and even the whispered reading of the UK’s Brexit agreement with the EU which the radio station has aired, turns both the medium and the narrative into a place of heightened temporal closeness to the subjects and spaces (or places) where news is told and the means by which it is experienced. We do not argue that one must wear a headset to experience this aspect of placeification; the movement to a mobile app or website in which one is immersed in story and the spatial landscape of links, infographics, push notifications, and podcasts represent a meaningful shift in the emotive and spatial experience of digital news that in many ways may be similar to the experience of sitting for a television news show or reading a morning print newspaper.

Dimension 2: Temporal fluctuation

Advances in news mobility – the ability of journalists to capture and distribute news from vast geographies and the ability of the user who is always moving to access online information – presents an additional temporal dynamic to the news experience in the digital age (Zelizer 2018). Much of the work on this aspect of mobility, location, and journalism, has focused on the production of news; however, there is increasing need to consider the increasing influence of the digital on the user’s sense of time (i.e. Fortunati & O’Sullivan, 2020). For example, we must consider how stories of the past, present, and future come together in digital environments and influence users’ interpretations of temporality. Placeification, then, is as much about the “when” and the “where” in terms of how people interact and develop attachment to places of news. The shake-up of routines – of pausing for a morning newspaper or evening television bulletin to the pace of experiencing “news on the go” – enables audiences to engineer moments in time and space to connect to “places” via digital platforms. Not only do these features allow audiences to travel geographies through multimedia but to move temporally past and forward, allowing one to establish or reinforce a connection to place through its history. For example, the importance of generating accessible online news archives within a news site that also simultaneously provides links to breaking news warrants much deeper attention in Digital Journalism Studies.

Increasing issues of mobility, meanwhile, highlight the changing nature of “homogeneous empty time” (the constructed importance of time measured by clocks and calendars) and its relationship to the news versus the importance of “autonomous temporality” – having control over how one chooses to use one’s own discretionary time (Goodin et al. 2008). News production is so often considered through a lens of modernity that time is short, fast, always lost and rarely gained. Short sentences, emojis, texts, and tweets represent a topography of digital landscapes that set expectations and experiences for the news user. At the same time, the constant news cycle institutes a temporal structure within which journalists deliver news and users are expected to consume it. Placeification demands an examination of these temporal influences. It also suggests the need to slow the tempo within online news environments in ways that encourage audiences to develop a sense of routine, habit, comfort, and familiarity that can ultimately foster one’s sense of place.

Dimension 3: Materiality

The physical dimensions of the virtual world remain influential to one’s experience online. That is especially true in the transformation of digital news spaces to places of meaning. News users have long been connected to the pages (and ink) of a newspaper or flier, the sight of telegraph and telephone poles that connect(ed) them to information, cell towers, and other communication infrastructure, not to mention the radio and television (O’Sullivan et al. 2017). Corporatization and consumption of media material – mobile phones, wearables, Wi-Fi hubs, and computers – create the very physical spaces within which digital journalism appears. Placeification calls for exploration of digital news products as not being (or becoming) of themselves and of their own innovation but as a response to technological advancements where news can position itself as present, legitimate, and useful.

Placeification too, demands an appreciation of “hard things,” such as news buildings and mobile devices, “soft things,” such as interviews and data, and “the products of news,” the content (Usher 2018). Still, devices are a physical manifestation of ideas and experiences had and hoped for – a collection of photos, email, and instant messages to be sent, read, or remembered (Broersma 2018). News today can be brought to a person through algorithms and search. Perhaps even unintentionally, users stop by a digital news site through a tweet or mistype. Placeification helps to complicate the meanings of materiality in Digital Journalism Studies by identifying the symbiotic (or even parasitic) role of journalism in users’ virtual experiences. Users are still directed through their viewing of content and conflict, storylines and sources, ownership and authorship, despite the ability to choose an interactive platform that provides elements of user independence in her navigation (Gutsche and Hess 2019).

Dimension 4: Brand territorialness

Through placeification, one also adopts an understanding of symbolic battle lines being drawn by news outlets over their perceived legitimacy to serve, define, patrol, or defend and protect their own interests and that of a defined digital space. As

argued elsewhere (author info provided), 1) notions of space, place, and territory should be studied as a necessary trichotomy in Journalism Studies, and 2) territorial practices only gain power when we ascribe meaning to places other people lay claim to. On a global scale, for example, digital news territories are becoming more clearly defined. The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requires that businesses with websites in the EU seek a user's permission to monitor the geographic location from where they have accessed the website and to plant cookies to collect the user's online movements and interests; news corporations must also comply with this regulation. Since the regulations took effect in 2017, thousands of websites from outside the UK – including hundreds of news websites throughout the US, including the *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune* – do not comply (even in 2020), effectively blocking global audiences and territorializing the Web – and the news.

The response of news organizations not to comply with GDPR highlights, in another way, corporate and geographic walls and boundaries that can be erected around digital spaces by media and political authorities that affect the ability for people to engage with sites that parallel their connection to other “senses of place” that, in this transient world, can be located at great geographic distances from where we may be physically located. To be sure, GDPR is also a source of concern about data ownership by private and public institutions in terms of journalistic access to information, but it is also a case by which placeification helps examine processes of news organizations in a digital age to open or close access to sites that hold social and cultural meaning to individuals. More importantly, the idea of territorialities – either that of the corporate or identity brand that begins and ends with the boundaries of access via paywalls, search, or context, or content – reveals how digital spaces become places surrounding notions of power, which we present in the next dimension.

Dimension 5: Power dynamics

Placeification addresses the adoption of roles, norms, values, and interactions of digital places that are first presented to audiences as either altruistic or with autonomy, separated and established spaces of a public sphere absent of the brick-and-mortar journalistic and social institutions. Twitter, for example, emerged in 2006 as a social networking platform amid mass publicity and institutional adoption by news and entertainment organizations, politicians, and business. Individuals took to the platform for its constructed normalized state, its celebrated status, and its adoption by institutions that used the platform increasingly amid public events and crisis, including mass political events and elections. Yet, research has clearly stated social media has continued, if not expanded, a journalistic commitment to an “information elite” (Robinson and Wang 2018) where digital and journalistic echo chambers operate amid an imagined environment of open-ness and transparency of the digital world.

But just as Twitter is not the bane of our digital existence, placeification is not focused on demonizing the digital. Instead, it is interested in identifying the social and cultural elements of control within digital news places that operate amid rules and regulations of website comment sections, what has been described as a common paternalistic presentation within data journalism (Appelgren 2018), and the guise of a

digital democracy that operates with “likes,” “shares,” “follows,” and widespread journalistic adoption. At the same time, however, “places” of digital journalism are reliant on corporatized platforms of data collection that not only assist in funding the news but in shaping the “where” and “how” journalists cover particular topics, places, and people. Of course, dominant ideologies and social pressures have long influenced journalistic decision-making, though these issues of control tend to be allayed by scholarship on the flash, flair, and “freedom” of new digital technologies (Gutsche 2017),

Dimension 6: Personalization and community-building

Given the history of journalism adoptions of technology – at least from the position of corporations, elite journalists, and technologists – placeification suggests new news spaces will become places through a focus on establishing a connection to both the individual and their sense of community and belonging. It has been argued, for example, that news media adopt news personalization techniques to increase long-term audience loyalty and engagement to a product (Bodo 2019). News platforms personalize the importance of content and sections for a particular use and audience, generating a strong sense of connection and community between the user, the content, and the product. Additionally, increased use by journalists of “professional” images and language to identify themselves, sometimes separately from their organizational brands (at least in terms of visuals) on social media (Lough, Molyneux, and Holton 2018), represents another form of personalization and the structuring of community, which is important to placeification.

Digital news spaces have also been established under the promise of extending digital communities and networks surrounding journalism that also interacts with local and global issues and meaning. The notion of community is a powerful idea that has always been synonymous with “places” of meaning – and for meeting – in both physical and digital environments. Forming a sense of collectivity, of social cohesion, has been a key journalistic function across societies. In the digital world, there is perhaps no better exemplar of the power of community in the digital environment than Facebook’s deliberate strategy to build territory in digital spaces with its terms of “community,” “friends,” “likes,” and providing an accessible platform for conversation, networking, and discussion. Placeification, then, is also concerned with analyzing what definitions of community supersede another in terms of what a news place becomes. Placeification examines both the power and potential for “community” but is especially concerned with how digital spaces, places, and “communities” are defined, defended, and become domineering.

Conclusion & approaches for future research

Digital news spaces are always in flux, from redesigns and the introduction of multimedia elements to real-time interactions with reporters across platforms and immersive and longform digital products. Yet, where and how digital journalism is accessed will remain spatial. Even in the wildest imaginations of technoscience and journalistic delivery, users will “go” somewhere for their news. And from retinal platforms to

mobile hologram news anchors “behind a desk” somewhere afar, users will continue to compartmentalize their lives into news moments and spaces and places. Placeification prompts a recalibration between understandings of time, mobility, power, and technologies in the transformation of digital news spaces into places. The concept relies on critical interpretations of online geographies and constructs a paradigm for understanding developments at the often-overlooked intersection of where one is situated in physical reality and the becoming of place in digital spaces. It points to exploring the motivations of both the journalist and the news user and the wider forces that shape practices around place. Placeification calls for approaches that favor the power of context (not all users share the same “sense of place”) and the subtleties of everyday life that shape news media’s connection to (and desired creation of) place. Ethnographic and anthropological approaches are of particular value to placeification. That said, how technology (from photography to VR) is deployed to create and reinforce geographies of (digital) journalism is also important but requires a far more critical lens that placeification demands.

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ORCID

Robert E. Gutsche, Jr.  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6132-3493>

Kristy Hess  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3027-7492>

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