

# The Concept of Hybridity in Journalism Studies

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## Abstract

This paper considers the use of the concept of hybridity in journalism studies, arguing that the concept of hybridity has served an important role in reorienting the field in the face of important processes of social change, but that as a “sensitizing concept” in the sense that Herbert Blumer used the term, it requires critical reflection and more careful specification of its various uses. In the first sections, we map three principal contexts in which the concept has been invoked: one focusing on new media and the blurring of professional boundaries it produces; one focusing on global flows of journalism culture, and a third which treats hybridity not as a novel but as quotidian and rooted in the structural context of the practice of journalism in general. The second part of the paper focuses on issues and challenges in the use of the concept of hybridity. We consider the tendency for hybridity to become a catch-all phrase that substitutes for more specific analysis, and the problem of treating novel phenomena as derivative forms of familiar ones. We then move to critique “presentism” in the discussion of hybridity and the distortions that result from drawing dichotomies between hybrid and “pure” forms, making the argument for taking seriously the idea that hybridity is universal. In the final section, we propose the idea of the hybridity cycle as a way of thinking about stability and change in journalism studies.

## Keywords

hybridity, journalism, media systems, journalism cultures, professional roles

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The concept of hybridity has become increasingly central in the social sciences in recent decades, and is widely used across many contexts in journalism studies. Its increasing popularity is rooted in two interlinked elements of the contemporary social and cultural context, which draw our attention to processes of both change and exchange. One is globalization, the intensification of global exchange through trade, migration, and cultural flows. The second is the revolution in communication technology and infrastructure, rooted in digitalization and new technologies, that has—together with related changes in regulatory and economic structures—transformed journalism and the media. In this context, the concept of hybridity has been seen by scholars as “a particularly rich site for the analysis of forms and processes of experimentation, innovation, deviation and transition, where traditional categories and classifications are interrogated, expanded, recombined or subverted” (Mast et al. 2017: 4–5). The concept of hybridity refers to a combination of “unlike” elements produced by processes of mixing, borrowing and appropriation. The “hybrid turn” in journalism studies has foregrounded the heterogeneity of journalistic practices, genres actors and institutions, the blurring of previously-established boundaries, and the processes of borrowing, appropriation and innovation that structure this heterogeneity.

The concept of hybridity has been highly fruitful for thinking through many aspects of the journalistic and media field in which we carry out research today and for reorienting our conceptual apparatus in a period of change and diversification, moving away from an emphasis in earlier literatures on the development of stabilized institutions and professional norms. At the same time, many scholars have fretted over the vagueness of the term. It is, as Kraidy (2005: 3) puts it, “a concept whose definition is maddeningly elastic, whose analytical value is easily questionable, and whose ideological implications are hotly contested.” Hybridity is a good example of what sociologist Blumer (1954: 7) called a “sensitizing concept.” It lacks “a clear definition [of the class to which it refers] in terms of attributes or fixed bench marks” but “gives the user a general sense of reference in approaching empirical instances.” Most concepts of social science, Blumer argues, are of this character, given the context-bound nature of the phenomena social scientists study. We don’t need to apologize for using sensitizing concepts, and they can be refined through research to produce fruitful social theory. “The great vice,” however, “and the enormously widespread vice, in the use of sensitizing concepts is to take them for granted” (Blumer 1954: 9); and it is therefore crucial to reflect carefully on the different ways in which we use sensitizing concepts, the specific contexts to which they apply, and what they can and cannot illuminate.

In this article, we try to carry out the kind of reflection Blumer calls for, mapping the different contexts in which the concept of hybridity has been used in journalism studies and discussing some key issues that arise in its use. In the first sections, we distinguish among three approaches which invoke the concept of hybridity in distinct ways: one focusing on new media and their disruption of familiar norms and institutions of journalism; one focusing on geographical flows of journalism culture; and one which treats hybridity as something quotidian rather than novel, characteristic of the practice of journalism in general. We then go on to discuss some key challenges to the use of

the concept of hybridity. We consider the tendency for hybridity to become an all-purpose buzz phrase that substitutes for more specific analysis, as when we claim that a particular analysis validates the “hybridity hypothesis,” without going on to theorize the particular forms of hybridity involved. We consider the issue of reduction—of whether conceptualizing phenomena as “hybrid” means representing them as derivative of other, more familiar forms, and detracts from the task of conceptualizing them on their own terms.

Finally, in the last two sections, we consider the question of whether hybridity should be seen as something novel or universal. Theorists of hybridity commonly observe that all cultures and all social practices are ultimately hybrid. But the literature routinely relies on the contrast between emerging hybrid forms and “pure” or “homogeneous” ones that supposedly existed in the past. We make the case for taking seriously the universality of hybridity, freeing the concept from “presentism” and looking historically and comparatively at the different forms of hybridity in the journalistic field. Once we take seriously the universality of hybridity, it becomes clear that there is little value simply in contrasting hybridity with the straw person of “binaries that no longer hold.” Instead, we need to theorize particular forms of hybridity in detail. In the final section of this article, in an effort to “go beyond hybridity” to “ask how continuity is constructed, structured and maintained” (Witschge et al. 2019: 656) we introduce the concept of the “hybridity cycle,” as a way of thinking about how forms of journalism emerge as hybrids, become stabilized and thought of as “pure” forms, and then enter into new processes of hybridization.

Our purpose in this article is neither to advocate for nor to debunk the concept of hybridity, but simply to clarify it. We do not intend to propose a particular understanding of hybridity or approach to analyzing it as the correct one. This is not the nature of a sensitizing concept, and we do not believe a theory of hybridity in general makes sense. The concept is used in many different ways in the field, and this is fine. Our goal is to advocate for clarity and specificity, for scholars to make clear in what context they are using the term, what specific kinds of claims they want to make about processes of borrowing, appropriation, and combination, and what specific contributions derive from using the concept of hybridity in that context. It is to this end that we present here a wide-ranging review of different ways the concept has been used in journalism studies, the relation of those uses to scholarship in other fields, and also their relation to other, often older literatures in the field that do not foreground the concept of hybridity but seem similarly to offer explanations for heterogeneity and combination in the phenomena we study.

## **The Concept of Hybridity and Its Uses**

The concept of hybridity originated in the domain of biology and horticulture, where it refers to a new plant or animal form that results from the mating or breeding of two unlike forms. It thus implies something “heterogeneous in origin or composition” (Stross 1999: 254). Hybridity has to do with combination. As a sensitizing concept,

therefore, it generally points us to some kind of combination that violates our preexisting categories, our sense of where the boundaries lie between one thing and another, and motivates us to ask where this combination came from and why it was adopted. The concept of hybridity is often used in the context of a critique, as Kraidy (2005: 7) puts it, citing Jesús Martín-Barbero, of “dualistic thinking and linear logic,” forcing us to recognize that boundaries or distinctions we had assumed to be clear no longer are, or perhaps never were.

Most uses of the concept of hybridity in journalism studies can be seen as falling within three broad approaches—outlined in more detail in the following sections—reflecting three ways of thinking about the origins or foundations of hybridity. The literature on new media, the “hybrid media system,” and related concepts focuses on change over *time* in the technological and institutional context of journalism. The literature on hybrid cultures and the interplay of local and global journalism cultures focuses on *space* and geographical flow and exchange. These two literatures, both of which see hybridity as resulting from broad contemporary processes of social change, can be contrasted with a third, which sees it as quotidian and common to journalism across time and space, rooted in the *structural context* of the practice of journalism. The three-fold distinction among these literatures is a simplification, of course, since the different bodies of literature are interrelated and the three sources of hybridity are interconnected. The literature on global cultural flows, for example, has a central focus on flows across space, but also an important focus on temporal processes of modernization, colonization, and decolonization. But the distinction nevertheless seems helpful for thinking through the social and analytical contexts in which we situate hybridity.

### ***Blurred Professional Boundaries, Networked Media, and “the Hybrid Media System”***

The first stream of research, which focuses on the multiplication of actors and genres involved in the production of news and the blurring of boundaries among them, can be divided into two phases. The first began with the effort to understand the changes in the production of news driven by the expansion of commercial television. Deregulation and liberalization of broadcast markets, multiplication of channels, and the introduction of commercial broadcasting where it had previously been nonexistent or marginal produced an explosion of what came to be known as “infotainment”—a hybrid of news and entertainment. Cultural borrowing and appropriation took place in multiple directions in response to commercial pressures and expanded airtime, with producers of entertainment television drawing on journalistic forms to create new genres like reality shows often focused on police and crime, and broadcast journalists in turn borrowing from these and other entertainment forms. A large body of literature debated the origins, forms, and consequences of this period of innovation in broadcasting (e.g., Baym 2010, 2017; Brants 1998; Hallin 2000; Williams and Delli Carpini 2011).

The second wave of research has focused on the rise of networked media and the challenge they pose to the role of legacy mass media. The work in this tradition that most centrally foregrounds the concept of hybridity is Chadwick's (2013) *The Hybrid Media System*. Chadwick wrote at a time when it was common to speculate that the rise of networked media, by enabling anyone to produce and circulate news, would render legacy, "mainstream" mass media increasingly irrelevant. He argued against this idea, contending that professional journalists and legacy media, particularly television, remained central to contemporary media systems. This finding about television has been underscored by other researchers (e.g., Marchetti and Ceccobelli 2016), and is particularly important to keep in mind in less-studied media systems in the global South, where internet penetration remains limited. The hybrid media system, then, was a system in which newer networked media and legacy mass media coexisted, interacted, and interpenetrated, and Chadwick went on to examine their relationships in the production of political information. By now there is a large and vibrant literature invoking the notion of a hybrid media system and examining such phenomena as the creation of new news genres to target market niches (Bødker 2017; Ruotsalainen et al. 2019); "produsage," "audience" activity and understandings of news (Edgerly and Vraga 2019, 2020; Papacharissi 2015); and the uses of social media by journalists (Gulyas 2017; Hermida 2013; Ottovordemgentschenfelde 2017).

A number of other scholars have developed arguments parallel in important ways on the transition to a "networked" media system, the rise of what Hermida (2013) calls "ambient journalism," and the blurring of boundaries between actors, practices, and genres, including, among the most notable, Anderson (2013), Papacharissi (2015), Carlson and Lewis (2015), and Williams and Delli-Carpini (2011). These literatures don't necessarily foreground the term hybridity in the way Chadwick does—a point to which we will return—though they frequently make reference to Chadwick's concept and invoke the term hybridity, as when Singer (2015: 32) discusses the "hybrid logic of adaptability and openness" that characterizes entrepreneurial journalism.

In general, these literatures have produced a profound change in the sociology of news from seeing news as produced by organizations, institutions, or a profession with clear boundaries, to seeing it as produced by networks of heterogeneous actors, including, in some cases non-human actors like algorithms. Diakopoulos (2019), for example, draws on Latour's concept of a hybrid network, one of a number of specific elaborations of hybridity in other social sciences imported into journalism studies.

### *Globalization, Decolonization, and Hybrid Culture*

Beyond journalism studies, the most developed body of literature devoted to hybridity is no doubt the literature in post-colonial studies and related fields, focusing on the interplay of global and local cultures. This literature is concerned with global cultural flows and the kinds of cultural mixtures that result from them. Scholars who study, and often are based in the global South have been central to its development, and they have articulated a critique of earlier, linear, dichotomizing approaches to understanding

cultural flows (e.g., Bhabha 1994; García Canclini 1989), including both modernization theory and the media imperialism perspective, which took a different stance on global cultural flows but shared with modernization theory the tendency to see the “West” as active and the “South” as passive. Central to the hybridization of culture perspective is the idea that people actively appropriate global cultural forms and combine them with their own, preexisting forms to create new ones. As a sensitizing concept, then, the concept of cultural hybridity has drawn our attention to the agency of local actors in the process of globalization, typically focusing on “subordinate” populations, and has often functioned to affirm the worth of their cultural practices.

Within the field of communication, this perspective has a strong presence in the study of popular culture, migration and diasporic media, and international communication (Kraidy 2005). It has less presence in journalism studies, but it does have some, and it clearly has important relevance given the extent of transnational influences in journalism. Many studies have documented a strong global diffusion of news values, role conceptions, and production processes across the world (e.g., Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Shoemaker and Cohen 2006). At the same time, it is clear that global culture and practices are not simply imported unchanged into distinct local contexts; instead, they are adapted to specific conditions and conceptions of the media’s role within existing news systems. Steele (2018), for example, looks at the way Islamic culture and global conceptions of journalism are combined in Indonesia and Malaysia. “The goal of Muslim journalists to expose corruption among political elites may be the same as that of Western watchdog journalism,” she writes, “but the pathway there is different. The path is not a halfway point to the ‘real’ way of doing journalism; it is instead how many Muslim professionals understand and explain their work.” Parallel arguments have been made by Albuquerque (2005), Albuquerque and Gagliardi (2011), Zirugo (2021), and Umejei, (2019).

Traditionally, as Waisbord (2013: 229) argues, “the discussion of professional journalism was set up in dichotomous terms: Journalism is either a unified profession with common values or a divided occupation. Global journalistic cultures are moving toward convergence or they remain essentially different.” The concept of hybridity allows us to move away from those dichotomies to theorize the specific forms in which global and local journalistic cultures are combined.

### *Structure, Practice, and Quotidian Hybridity of Journalistic Cultures*

The literatures described above contextualize hybridity in relation to large historical processes of social change. Other literatures suggest that hybridity is something quotidian in journalistic cultures, rooted in the basic practices of news production and in the structural contexts within which journalists produce their work. Van den Bulck et al. (2017), for example, draw on literature on hybridity in genre studies to discuss celebrity journalism as a hybrid form, combining elements of entertainment with elements common to other news genres. It is a form of infotainment, of course, so it can be seen in relation to the commercialization trend discussed above. As the authors point

out, however, celebrity journalism has a history that long precedes the shifts in media economics of the 1980s–90s. Hybridity, here, can be understood in terms of the practice of borrowing and intertextual reference that is part of cultural production in general but also rooted in the specific institutional and cultural contexts in which celebrity news is produced, with celebrity journalists inserted both into a world of entertainment, inhabited by their sources and readers, and into news organizations and a news profession whose routines of factual reporting and conventions of public service they combine with the norms of fiction and entertainment-world gossip.

One body of research that develops this perspective on hybridity systematically is that associated with the study of journalistic roles and role performance in the news (Hallin and Mellado 2018; Márquez-Ramírez et al. 2020; Mellado et al. 2017a, 2017b; Mellado 2020). The Journalistic Role Performance Project (JRP) theorizes and operationalizes a set of basic journalistic roles—the interventionist, watchdog, loyal-facilitator, service, infotainment, and civic roles—in media practice. The authors invoke the concept of hybridity in presenting the complexity of their results (Mellado 2020), which show that at the level of journalism cultures, all different roles are present across a wide range of societal contexts, while at the micro level, the different roles tend to co-occur—even roles that might be thought to be incompatible, like the infotainment and watchdog roles. The JRP literature invokes research on global diffusion of journalistic culture in discussing cross-country differences and similarities. But its primary framework for understanding hybridity has to do with the idea that the performance of journalistic roles is in general “situational,” “historical,” and “fluid” (Mellado 2020). Rather than following directly abstract ideals of what journalism should be, journalists produce news in particular organizational and societal contexts which are often complex and shifting. At the aggregate level, therefore, the output of a particular news organization or a whole media system will reflect the wide range of contexts in which journalists are operating. At the micro level, a journalist writing any given story is often affected by multiple constraints and considerations—editorial policies, market pressures and audience metrics, peer expectations, conceptions of target audiences, ongoing relations with sources, etc., which are reflected in complex patterns of role performance. We can understand these patterns of performance as “hybrid” in reference to more abstract conceptions of distinct journalistic norms.

The JRP project highlights the concept of hybridity, but builds on a long tradition of scholarship that, without invoking that term, similarly stresses the complexity and dynamism of news organizations and journalistic practices, such as Shoemaker and Reese’s (2014) classic work on the multiple levels of influence that shape journalistic practice, or Entman’s (2004) on of the situational character of relations between news media and political actors. Bourdieuan field theory literature (Benson and Neveu 2005) is another strong example of an approach which conceptualizes journalism as inherently heterogeneous: the journalistic field is conceived as composed by actors with varying power positions and relations to other social fields—the economic and the political, particularly—who compete for power within the field.

The contrast between this third tradition in the study of hybridity, which sees it not as something novel, not as a disruption of old patterns which were non-hybrid, but as normal and characteristic of journalism in general raises important questions which we take up in the second part of this paper.

## **Challenges to the Concept of Hybridity**

The concept of hybridity has clearly helped scholars in journalism studies think through central issues in the field, particularly issues related to complexity and change. The key theorists of hybridity, nevertheless, have consistently warned about ambiguities and pitfalls, and we focus on some of these issues in the sections that follow. Witschge et al. (2019), in an article on the “hybrid turn,” warn that the way forward cannot be to “denote everything complex as hybrid.” This is clearly one of the greatest dangers of the term, that it becomes too general to do real conceptual work. One of the early articles reporting the results of the first wave of the Journalistic Role Performance project, referenced above, might serve as an illustration. Framed as a comparative analysis of journalism cultures, it presents itself as a test of the “hybridization thesis in journalistic cultures.” The results confirm the “mix of traits” which for reasons explained in the general description of the JRP perspective above we would expect to find. But one wonders whether the absence of meaningful patterns across countries may reflect a problem of data that are aggregated over too many different contexts and the limitations of large-N research in which results cannot be analyzed in detail and in context, with “hybridity” serving as a “catch-all” concept (Witschge et al. 2019: 652) that substitutes for a more substantive interpretation. It doesn’t get us far in comparative analysis to simply say that all journalism cultures or media systems are hybrid. As the authors have emphasized in later publications, to contest pre-established assumptions about the practices that prevail in different political, economic, and geographic spaces, “journalistic role performance cannot be fully understood outside of a meaningful context” (Mellado 2020: 4), which makes crucial “explaining the combinations of traits that connect journalists’ ideals and practices, how the co-occurrence of different roles generate specific types of hybridizations, and how different journalistic traditions and the historical context can explain variations in journalistic cultures in such a diverse world” (Mellado 2020: 14).

Another issue has to do with whether by conceptualizing phenomena as “hybrid” we end up assimilating them to existing frameworks and fail to develop new theory to conceptualize them in their own right. This issue has been discussed, for example, in the literature in comparative politics on “hybrid regimes,” a well-developed body of theory which conceptualizes regimes that combine elements of authoritarianism and democracy and has been usefully imported into comparative analysis of media systems (Toepfl 2013; Voltmer et al. 2021). There has been an important debate in that field about whether the literature is too reliant on existing conceptual frameworks, assuming, for example, that phenomena like elections, as they exist in hybrid regimes, are basically like elections in democratic



regimes, but imperfect or restricted, when they may actually be something entirely different (Morganbesser 2014).

Similar issues have been raised about the use of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) typology to analyze media systems beyond the scope of their analysis, as for example by understanding Latin American or East European media systems as combining elements of their Liberal and Polarized pluralist models (Albuquerque 2012; Mancini 2015). This is not an arbitrary move, as there are patterns of influence and historically rooted structural similarities that connect these media systems, as shown for example in the literature on the transplant of Western professional routines into Central and Eastern European journalism following the acquisition by Western media companies of many Eastern news outlets (Dobek-Ostrowska and Glowacki 2015). Still, while conceptualizing media systems or journalism cultures in other parts of the world as hybrids of previously conceptualized Western ones may be a useful first step, it is not the same as developing new theory to understand them on their own terms.

### *The Universality of Hybridity*

The most important theorists of hybridity stress that it is neither new, nor specific to certain societies or contexts. Kraidy (59) quotes Edward Said as writing, "all cultures are involved in one another, none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic." Chadwick (2013) includes a chapter titled "All Media Systems Have Been Hybrid." Yet the buzz around the concept comes largely from the idea that in focusing on hybridity we are dealing with cutting-edge phenomena and also contributing to the de-Westernization of media studies, so these qualifications are often quickly forgotten, and hybrid phenomena in the present period are contrasted with fixed or pure forms which supposedly exist in another time or place. Deuze and Witschge (2020: 20) write that "journalism as a profession has enjoyed a long and stable development in most countries around the world," and contrast the "coherence and consensus" of past systems and past conceptualizations to the "complexity and hybridity (21)" of the present. There is certain irony here in the fact that, while the literature on hybridity emphasizes the need to set aside "dualisms" which have supposedly characterized journalism studies, it often relies heavily on the dualism of the hybrid versus the fixed or homogeneous.

In this section, we make the case for foregrounding the universality of hybridity as essential to conceptualizing it in a more sophisticated way, and in the following section we go on to introduce the idea of a "hybridity cycle" as a way of thinking about change and stability in social forms.

Media systems and journalism cultures have always been hybrid in part because the processes of change and exchange that inspire the current wave of interest in hybridity have always been present. Technological change has always disrupted media markets and produced new journalistic genres. The diffusion of news paradigms and their interaction with preexisting local journalism cultures is also a longstanding phenomenon documented by a substantial literature. Høyer and Pöttker (2005), for example,

detail the influence of the U.S. commercial popular press in Scandinavia and Central Europe, as does Calvi (2019) in relation to the development of the distinctive Latin American hybrid tradition of the “*crónica*.” The transmedia flows of the networked media system of today are also nothing unprecedented. Freije (2020), for example, in a study of media and scandal in Mexico during the 1960s–80s (in the context of a media system that combined patterns of collusion and control by the dominant party with journalistic activism and scandal politics), describes complex “assemblages”—to borrow a term from Chadwick’s analysis—of elite print journalists interacting with, and sometimes crossing between, more popular media forms like radio, tell-all memoirs and comic books circulated in the city streets.

Media systems are also always characterized by complex ecologies of sectors and actors and by multiple logics. The three models of Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) analysis of Western systems, for example, are often treated in discussions of hybridity as “pure” types, but hybridity is in fact pervasive in their discussion (see also Hallin and Mancini 2017). Their Polarized Pluralist model is characterized by blurred boundaries between the worlds of politics and media, and by a lack of consensus on professional norms. Their Democratic Corporatist model is defined in part by the coexistence of commercial and party press, and characterized by a process of change over time in which “catch-all” commercial newspapers displaced those rooted in ideology, faith and socioeconomic interests. Their Liberal model is characterized by the simultaneous centrality of commercialism and professionalism, and they discuss the two-sided nature of the relation of U.S. journalism to the state, where the libertarian tradition of the first Amendment combined in the post-World War II period with a strong integration of journalists into the governing process. All are characterized by the existence of multiple media sectors with differing structural positions and journalistic practices, as for example with the contrasting journalistic cultures of the tabloid press, broadsheet press, and broadcasting in Britain.

The communist media system has also been seen as a pure type, but recent scholarship has shown communist systems to be much more complex. Accounts of socialist television (Marinos 2016; Mihelj and Huxtable 2018) show that it began with a strong emphasis on the idea of the media as a political mobilizer of the masses, although this was combined with the role of giving workers access to quality culture (also found in West European public service broadcasting). Later, as forms of legitimation changed and the idea of “harmonious consumption” became popular, a new view that television should provide entertainment to workers as individuals became more prominent and combined with earlier forms. In journalism, the dominant idea of the news media as a mouthpiece of the party coexisted with an idea of journalism as a mechanism of “control by public opinion” and a defender of ordinary people in the name of socialist ideals (Roudakova 2017). Journalists and news organizations negotiated these different role conceptions in complex ways.

If we shift to the level of news organizations and journalistic practices, hybridity is again ubiquitous. News organizations across many societies and historical periods have combined political, cultural, or religious logics with commercial and professional logics. Chakravarty and Roy (2015), for example, show how new commercial

media in India combined commercial logics with political logics connected with the competition between old and news commercial elites. News organizations have also commonly had multiple target audiences, which they reached through varied content and techniques. Accounts of the emerging mass press sound much like accounts of hybridity in digital media culture in the way they stress the breaking of boundaries among topics, genres, social classes, etc. Calvi (2019: 161) writes that the early twentieth-century Argentinian newspaper *Crítica*, was “a strange amalgam of solid factual reporting and writing, narrativization and sometimes fictionalization of the news, the manufacture of pseudo-events, and participatory journalism, all primarily focused on human interest but with tremendous resonance in the political world.”

The literature on hybridity is characterized, it seems fair to say, by a strong degree of “presentism,” that, as Witschge et al. (2019: 654) observe, “may suggest a historical ‘purity’ that never existed.” This presentism, we would argue, leads to missed opportunities both to build on existing literature on journalism history and on change in media systems and journalism cultures, and to reinvigorate journalism history with insights from the current period of change. Once we move toward acknowledging the universality of hybridity and complexity and begin to think of the hybrid phenomena we are studying in historical and comparative terms, we are forced to be more specific, to go beyond contrasting hybridity with homogeneity, and to specify what kind of hybridity we are analyzing in a particular context (Mellado 2020).

Shifting to a historical perspective might also suggest that it is misleading to characterize the current period, again in ironically homogenizing terms, as one of “increasing hybridization”: that there may also be processes of *de*-hybridization going on, as earlier forms of hybridity are lost. One important process underlying transformations of the current period, for example, is the unbundling of media products produced by digitalization. Bundling was fundamental to the structure of media during the mass media era, and produced important forms of hybridity: the “omnibus” media (Sjøvaag 2015) of that period mixed many news genres, both hard and soft, and addressed diverse audiences. As media outlets are now unbundled and audiences fragmented, individual news outlets may become in important ways more homogeneous in the kinds of journalism they practice. This suggests the importance of keeping levels of analysis in mind: that is, a more hybrid system at the aggregate level, with diverse kinds of media targeted to distinct audiences, may involve less hybridity in certain ways at the level of individual media institutions.

### *Stability, Change, and the Hybridity Cycle*

If hybridity is a universal fact of journalism and media systems, it might be tempting to conclude that the current popularity of the concept, tied to the image of a new age of fluidity and blurred boundaries, is basically hype. We do not want to advocate this view, however. Even if hybridity is universal, it is no doubt true that cultural and institutional forms do become stabilized in certain contexts, with clearer boundaries between roles, actors, and logics, and destabilized in other contexts, leading to increased borrowing, appropriation, innovation, and co-occurrences. In this final

section, we would like to introduce a framework that may help to make sense of the dialectic between stability and change and take us beyond the dubious dichotomy of hybrid versus pure or homogeneous.

Stross (1999) makes reference to the concept of a “hybridity cycle” in which forms which emerge as hybrids may become stabilized, eventually coming to be seen as “pure” forms out of which new hybrids may be made. This could take place purely at the level of heuristics, as certain forms come to be extensively conceptualized and seen as “classic” forms, mainly because they are thoroughly familiar to us, which we then use to conceptualize other forms as “hybrid.” But Stross, making reference to the formation and stabilization of new musical genres, argues that forms that emerge initially as hybrids can also become stabilized in reality, as rules and routines develop around them.<sup>1</sup> The form of commercial television news that prevailed in the United States before the explosion of new forms of infotainment in the 1990s, for example, was definitely considered hybrid in its early days. It made use of dominant conventions borrowed from print journalism, but mixed them with conventions that worked on television: it personalized both the journalists and the news subjects; visual elements played central role in news judgments; and it eventually developed a unified narrative structure very different from the forms of a newspaper. As an evolving hybrid, it was considered of dubious legitimacy at first. But it adopted standardized norms and forms of training, worked to legitimize itself internally and externally through such means as the establishment of prizes and the celebration of exemplary practitioners and accomplishments, grew in prestige and power, and became a familiar form ripe for imitation and appropriation.

It is probably correct to say that journalism in much of the West in the “high modernist” period (Hallin 1992) was stabilized by professionalization and by forms of regulation that established barriers between industries or between the commercial and the journalistic jurisdiction. There may have been periods of relative stability also around different journalistic models—Indian journalism when the Congress Party was dominant, and before the commercialization of broadcasting, perhaps, or Communist journalism in Russia and neighboring countries. Relative stability does not mean that hybridity disappeared in these systems, however. In the United States, for example, the “separation of church and state” that was part of the development of professional ethics erected boundaries separating news production, editorial line, and advertising—although influence continued to circulate in more subtle ways between these. What this did was not to *eliminate* hybridity, however, but only to *stabilize* it, to make it possible for the different logics that characterized the news organization to *coexist* over the long run. Hybridity was baked into the practices of the news organization at all levels, and the stabilization of internal boundaries was part of the process by which a hybrid form was able to legitimate itself and to function without constant tension between the different actors and logics that produced it. The American newspaper remained as a kind of boundary object (Star and Griesemer 1989), which could be simultaneously an advertising-driven business enterprise, a professionalized institution that presented itself as a public service, and source of political influence.

New forms emerging in the current period are of course likely to undergo similar patterns of stabilization, as Singer (2005) for example argues about the “normalization” of j-blogging. The concept of the hybridity cycle reminds us that hybridity and “purity” are relative. It is a way of thinking about the “becoming” of journalism (Deuze and Witschge 2020) that helps us to keep in mind the universality of hybridity while at the same time drawing attention to historical variation in the stability and boundedness of performances and institutions, and encourages us to conceptualize the mechanisms that produce both change and stability.

## Conclusion

The term “hybridity” is “hot” in journalism studies today. It has become so in the context of a widespread perception that journalism has entered a period of crisis and transition, in which established practices and institutions are disrupted, and innovation, borrowing and appropriation, and boundary crossing are common. A number of literatures invoking the concept of hybridity have emerged and have made major contributions to the understanding of emerging forms of complexity. At the same time, many who have used the term hybridity have expressed anxiety about its vagueness, and the very proliferation of uses raises questions about whether its use may be becoming less, rather than more clear. In this article, departing from Herbert Blumer’s discussion of “sensitizing concepts” in social science, we have endeavored to give an overview of the variety of uses of the concept of hybridity in journalism studies and to point to some key issues that need to be confronted if we want to move toward conceptual clarity in its use.

In the first sections, we proposed a framework for distinguishing among the principal research trends on hybridity in journalism studies, literatures seeing hybridity as rooted in change over time, flows across space, or structural contexts of journalism. The first is the literature that focuses on the rise of new media, the multiplication of actors and disruption of boundaries that results, the coexistence and interaction of old and new media, and the shift from production of news within professionalized news organization to its production within heterogeneous networks. The second is the literature centered around globalization, developed most strongly in cultural and postcolonial studies but with important application to journalism studies, which looks at the interaction of local and global cultural practices. The third current encompasses various literatures which treat hybridity not as something novel resulting from specific contemporary processes of change, but as rooted in the “nature of news production itself” (Mellado et al. 2017b: 962).

In the second part of the article, we look at some of the key challenges that confront the field in using the concept of hybridity productively. At the most general level, the concern has been raised about hybridity becoming a catch-all phrase that does little real conceptual work. It is essential to specify the context in which we are using the term, the specific research traditions we are drawing on, the kinds of claims we want to make by calling a phenomenon hybrid, and the particular form of hybridity we want to analyze. It is important also to specify the level of analysis—whether we talking

about a hybrid genre or hybrid practices, hybrid institutions, hybrid journalistic cultures, or hybrid media systems, and to be clear about what kind of evidence is relevant to analyzing hybridity at each level. The term “hybridity” is often used more or less interchangeably with “complexity” or sometimes “heterogeneity.” The phrase “complexity and hybridity” is extremely common, particularly in the literatures on new media and change and innovation in journalism. It is worth reflecting on why we would use the term “hybridity” rather than simply saying complexity or heterogeneity. Probably hybridity makes the most sense when we want to make reference to the origin of a new form in some particular process of borrowing, appropriation or influence, or to some particular combination of practices or logics which seems not to make sense and to call out for explanation. It is also worth distinguishing between cases where we invoke the concept of hybridity because we encounter a phenomenon that doesn’t fit our existing scholarly categories—where calling a phenomenon “hybrid” is the same as calling it a “mixed case”—and those where we intend to claim that the phenomenon is hybrid in reality, to make a claim that it arose by borrowing or combining social practices. The latter could be called “strong hybridity,” and when we encounter mixed cases it is no doubt worth considering whether we should go forward to analyze them as strongly hybrid, revise our categories, or simply acknowledge them as mixed.

A second issue has to do with the problem of reduction. The concept of hybridity is often celebrated for directing scholarly attention to social forms that do not fit dominant conceptual frameworks, and invoked as a contribution to the project of de-westernizing media studies. When we conceptualize a phenomenon as a hybrid, however, we are typically starting from established frameworks developed to understand familiar phenomena, and understanding the new or unstudied form as a “hybrid” of these. This inevitable practice of scholarship can produce productive first steps at conceptualization, but it raises the danger that we will end up understanding novel phenomena as derivative, modified, or imperfect forms of familiar ones and fail to theorize them in their own right.

In the final sections, we turned to an issue suggested by contrast from the first two currents in the study of hybridity, which emphasize contemporary processes of social change, and the third, which sees it as quotidian and rooted in the nature of journalism. Theorists of hybridity routinely note that all cultures, all social systems, are hybrid. But there is a strong tendency—ironically given the emphasis on avoiding dichotomous thinking—to forget this qualification and contrast contemporary hybrid phenomena with “fixed notions” or stable homogeneous forms that supposedly existed in the past or sometimes, in the literature on global flows, assumed to characterize the “West” as opposed to the South. This seems to us to seriously distort journalism history and to substitute ideological constructions for the much more complex and diverse structures and cultures analyzed in decades of journalism research.

We argue here for taking seriously the universality of hybridity. The kinds of phenomena we are trying to understand in journalism today—disruptions related to technological change, transnational cultural flows, the formation of new genres, conflicts over boundaries, and competition among actors seeking to control the flow of information—none of these is new. All have long histories; it makes sense to consider the

parallels between what we see today and the way processes of hybridization have previously taken place and to think of conceptualizing them in more general terms. At the same time, it makes sense to read back from the strong focus of contemporary literature on hybridization and complexity to reexamine “legacy” institutions and early generations of scholarship, to foreground the ways in which we can see them as hybrid, complex, and heterogeneous.

This does not mean, of course, that the idea of the contemporary period as one of particularly intense disruption and innovation is inaccurate, or that there aren't variations in the stability of institutional forms or the strength of boundaries. In the final section of this article, we introduced the idea of the hybridity cycle as a way of thinking in more fluid and historical ways about change and stability. In general, social forms emerge through processes of borrowing and appropriation, in which new actors enter an existing social ecology and compete with the existing actors, or an outside social field, begins to impinge on an existing one to force changes in its practices. If they are successful and persist, these hybrid forms frequently become institutionalized and stabilized, and come to be seen as established coherent forms. Later, and depending on historical, time- and space-bounded contexts, the process may start again: other actors may borrow from them, for example, or they may be forced by to innovate and borrow other practices or work with other actors, and new hybrid forms may arise. If we keep this kind of process in mind, we can think about periods of both stability and change without losing sight of the hybridity that exists in all social and cultural forms.


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### Note

1. The use of the term “cycle” is not meant to imply a set of changes that occurs automatically or with temporal regularity, just a common pattern whose dynamics we can analyze.

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