

INTRODUCTION

CONTEMPORARY UPDATES TO JOURNALISM THEORIES AND CONCEPTS:

an imminent need



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The first quarter of the 21st century has come with myriad challenges – challenges to the sustainability and viability of the planet itself, as well as disruptions to a centuries-old social order and consensus. These circumstances also confront journalism as a social institution, where social roles, epistemological orientations, economic foundations, and technological affordances have been in simultaneous flux. These challenges are not easily resolved and require further reflection.

This scenario has also disrupted journalism studies as an academic field, with scholars recognizing the last 25 years as a period of international consolidation. Carlson et al. (2018), for example, identify this period as the fifth historical phase of journalism studies, when socio-technical developments have initiated a digital age. During this period, journalism studies became institutionalized through the creation and consolidation of journals, associations, and university programs.

Brazil, too, is a part of this story, where journalism research

gained strength at the turn of the millenium with the establishment of the Brazilian Association of Journalism Researchers (SBPJor), the creation of events and graduate programs, and the development of specific lines of research within universities. This was accompanied, of course, by the publication of specialized journals, such as Brazilian Journalism Research, which has devoted itself to the international exchange of Brazilian research over the last two decades.

However, while the first quarter of this century was a particularly important time for the institutionalization of journalism studies, Carlson et al. (2018) also noted that the field's growing strength coincided with the decline of traditional journalism and vexing questions about journalism's legitimacy and sustainability as a social practice and business model. It is true that this context creates a unique opportunity to observe the field of journalism studies in the face of this paradox (Carlson et al., 2018).

Not by chance, the theories and related concepts of journalism have gone through a historical period that has challenged their limits in empirical, normative, epistemological and even ontological terms (McBride & Rosenstiel, 2013; Mellado et al., 2020; Waisbord, 2017). Thus, the scenario of uncertainty, reconsideration, reconstruction and resignification of theories and concepts that help explain contemporary journalistic practice is directly related to the disruption journalism has experienced in recent decades, whether as a social institution (Vos, 2019b, 2022), field (Benson & Neveu, 2005), profession (Hanitzsch et al., 2019), a language (Schudson, 2011; Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001) or a form of knowledge of concrete reality (Pontes, 2017).

Some of the structural transformations predicted at the turn of the millennium came to be, while others did not. It can certainly be said, however, that new challenges arrived loaded with multiple and heightened threats, although not unexpected. Thus, what started as optimism about the democratic potential of user-generated content (Castells, 2012; Delarbre, 2009) became complicated by widespread mis- and disinformation and by patterns of news avoidance (Carlson et al., 2021; Pickard, 2019; Westlund & Hermida, 2021; Ekström et al., 2019; Silva, 2022). Consider also the rise of artificial intelligence, once confined to science fiction films ranging from Fritz Lang's classic *Metropolis* (1927) to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* (1999). These dilemmas have quickly become part of the world of journalism, touching on ethical and

technical issues and raising questions about authorship, workforce replacement, and the crisis of truth and verisimilitude, which has led to potential disinformation strategies.

Journalism in the 21st century: disruptions and conceptual updates

Journalism has faced many transformative disruptions in recent decades, such as the emergence of economic and cultural globalization since the 1990s (Reese, 2010; Callahan, 2003; Bennett et al., 2004); the financial collapse of journalism's business models, resulting in job precarity and a shrinking workforce (Waisbord, 2019); technological advances culminating in digitization (Pavlik, 2016; Canavilhas, 2012; Mielkniczuk & Barbosa, 2005) and subsequently in the flattening of socio-technical networks (Hermida, 2012; Hanusch & Nölleke, 2018; Primo & Zago, 2014), algorithmization (Lewis et al., 2019; Wölker & Powell, 2021) and artificial intelligence (Broussard et al., 2019; Marconi, 2020; Peña Fernández et al., 2023); political polarization motivated and instrumentalized by the disruptive logic of disinformation (Carlson et al., 2021; Pickard, 2019; Westlund & Hermida, 2021; Ekström et al., 2019; Silva, 2022); impunity for symbolic and physical attacks on journalists (Kim & Shin, 2022); the largest health crisis in world history resulting from the covid-19 pandemic and its humanitarian, psychological, political, and economic consequences (Pontes et al., 2021; Papadopoulou & Maniou, 2024; Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022), as well as the subsequent waves of scientific denialism (Kalichman, 2009; Miskolci, 2023; Godulla et al., 2024); and finally, the crisis of the idea of expertise itself in various social institutions, including journalism (Eyal, 2019; Vos & Thomas, 2018; Zimdars & McLeod, 2020).

This context, however, does not negate the accumulated wisdom of decades of theorizing about journalism, nor the relevance of new studies on the theoretical foundations of the field. On the contrary, in contexts of crises and structural transformations (Deuze & Witschge, 2018; Waisbord, 2017), journalism is faced with the question of its own social necessity as a foundation of democracy. Meanwhile, old dilemmas have regained relevance and new tensions have emerged, challenging concepts once stabilized in the set of theoretical

formulations to historically explain journalism. As an example, persistent debates about the efficacy of journalistic objectivity (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; Schudson, 1978; Gans, 1980; Vos & Finneman, 2017) are being reopened through the examination of emergent epistemologies that challenge rationalist, Enlightenment foundations (Moraes, 2022; Harbers & Broersma, 2014; Steensen, 2017).

Another important example is the classic gatekeeping theory originally developed by David Manning White (1950) and based on the studies of Kurt Lewin (1947a; 1947b). Even in a contemporary scenario of profound changes in journalism, a significant part of the basic elements of the theory – such as Lewin’s (1947a; 1947b) notions of forces and channels – have not necessarily lost their theoretical validity and vitality (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Heinderyckx, 2017). On the other hand, the scope of dynamics that the theory is able to explain has changed significantly. In this context, there has been a proliferation of new concepts that try to make sense of the theory’s contemporary application, including secondary gatekeeping (Singer, 2014; Wallace, 2018), conversational gatekeeping (Salonen et al., 2023), algorithmic gatekeeping (Møller, 2022; Van Dalen, 2023; Cardoso, 2023), gatwatching (Bruns, 2005, 2018; Canavilhas, 2011), and gatebouncing (Vos, 2019a), among others.

Special issue: key contributions

It is against this backdrop that the special issue “*Contemporary updates to journalism theories and concepts*” emerged, as part of the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of Brazilian Journalism Research. The issue brings together eight articles from Brazil, Mexico, Spain and Portugal that explore themes related to the contemporary reconfiguration of journalism. The order of the articles listed in the table of contents follows a line of reasoning that engages with the proposal of the special issue itself. The list of contributions begins with key conceptual updates. These discussions cover processes such as choices of sources, news consumption, and news selection, among others. The discussions then move on to broader topics that substantially impact contemporary journalistic practices. These issues include the ideological dynamics that create tension within the field of journalism and the growing violence against journalists and the press, which has plagued the profession in the first quarter of this century.

Amaral (2026) analyzes changes in the profile of sources, as well as the dynamics between journalists and sources of information leaks, across five episodes: The Pentagon Papers, Cablegate, the Snowden case, the Panama Papers, and Vaza Jato. The study reveals that new information and communication technologies play a pivotal role in transforming the characteristics of leak sources and their interactions. Ferreira, Valiati and Mesquita (2025) propose a theoretical and methodological framework for understanding incidental news consumption on social media, highlighting three domains: algorithm, human action, and platform structure. In turn, Piccinin, Paulino and Carneiro dos Santos (2025) address some of the aforementioned aspects of gatekeeping theory. Based on applied research, their study reflects on changes in the initial stage of journalistic production – specifically, the conception and scripting of stories – resulting from human-machine collaboration and the use of virtual assistants in editorial planning.

Passos (2026) offers a critical (re)interpretation of journalism as a field formed by a single interpretive community, emphasizing the epistemic singularities of the literary journalism subfield. Kikuti (2026) contributes to the debate by interpreting the contemporary crisis of journalism through the lens of feminist epistemology, which is inherently anti-capitalist and committed to situated knowledge. Roque and Patricio (2026) make a theoretical and methodological contribution to the study of journalistic initiatives that are connected to progressive social groups. Based on a literature review, the authors present a typology of five ideal-typical models: journalistic arrangements, alternative journalism, community journalism, independent journalism, and periphery journalism.

Similarly, Villagrán Sánchez and López Pan (2026) develop a theoretical framework to study the sociological boundaries of journalism through the lens of ideology. Their study tries to answer how ideological processes foster cohesion within the journalistic field, legitimize journalism's cultural and cognitive role, and risk distorting self-representations to resist change. Finally, González Macías, Hernández Julián and Olivera Pérez (2026) address another contemporary issue facing the field of journalism: the increasing violence against journalists. The authors propose a theoretical and conceptual discussion of four key aspects to understanding this specific form of aggression: its origins, a typology, impact, and the responses of journalists who experience it.

Toward a new framework: the future of journalism concepts

As these articles highlight, there are many lenses through which one can examine journalism's disruption. Indeed, rethinking, retheorizing, or reconceptualizing journalism is now an essential intellectual and practical obligation. When a longstanding phenomenon is no longer valid, accurate, or useful, there is little choice other than to forge ahead in new directions. Thus, in addition to the course changes outlined in this special issue, we put forward other topics for future consideration.

How might journalism research traditions, such as framing, newsworthiness, gatekeeping, the spiral of silence, and agenda setting, among others, be challenged – and even reformulated or reinvented – in light of technological, economic, and cultural changes in the contemporary context? How can some of the key concepts of journalism research, such as the notions of audience, sources, channels, as well as the selection, production, and distribution of journalistic messages, be rearticulated in the face of deepening economic and cultural globalization, technological advances (culminating in the rise of socio-technical networks, algorithmization, and artificial intelligence), and the disruptive logic of disinformation? And how are the normative aspects of theoretical formulations about journalism, including notions of freedom of expression, professional ethics and professionalism, objectivity and journalistic authority, and the role of journalistic practice as a “Fourth Estate”, challenged by these trends?

In this context, the experience itself of organizing this special issue makes us aware of just how much more work is inevitably left to do. The half life of a journalism theory will likely continue to get shorter for the foreseeable future, which means that journalism scholars must always be probing at the limits of our received theories – rethinking what can and cannot be explained by familiar frameworks – and contemplating new theories that address the exigencies exposed by shifting developments and discoveries.

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DATA AVAILABILITY: The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.the article.