



# Becoming entrepreneurial: Crisis, ethics and marketization in the field of travel journalism



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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes emerging entrepreneurial practices of travel journalists in the USA as a qualitative case study of the marketization of fields of cultural production. Today, the journalistic field is undergoing a radical transformation of practice and organization collectively framed as crisis. As a result, formerly solid lines separating business and editorial departments, print and online publishing spaces, professional journalists and amateur content are blurring. Drawing on interviewing and discourse analysis, this article analyzes how travel journalists react to these changes and the threats posed to their economic subsistence by folding publications, mass-layoffs and declining pay for freelancers. Situated at the intersection of the Sociology of Culture and Economic Sociology, this research shows how new opportunity structures significantly change the meaning of journalistic practice; how travel journalists today generate income and resources through entrepreneurial practices that have been previously deemed unethical. They do so by bridging the existing boundaries to publishing, marketing and travel industry. This article argues that travel journalists instrumentalize crisis narratives to justify shifting professional ethics as means of economic production, while they simultaneously maintain an order of prestige and create closure to outside challengers based on these ethics.

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## 1. Introduction

The journalistic field is undergoing a radical transformation of practice and organization. Formerly solid lines separating business and editorial departments of media outlets, print and online publishing spaces, professional journalists and amateur content, producers and audience are blurring and disappearing (Schudson, 2011). Today, cutting edge multi-media companies create lucrative business models connecting commercial branding and ‘credible,’ quality journalism, while former beacons of journalistic ethics remodel their editorial calendars to retain audiences and advertisement dollars. These emerging modes of production and monetization cross boundaries that used to be definitive for journalistic autonomy. For many scholars, this ongoing marketization presents one of the largest threats to the persistence of journalism as an institution of cultural and civic production (Bourdieu, 1999; Schudson, 2005); while others argue for the maintenance of the journalistic field through professional ethics despite a transforming economic and technological environment (Alexander, 2015).

Sociologists, despite their expertise in the analysis of organizational change, as Eric Klinenberg (2005) prominently critiqued, have surprisingly neglected the empirical study of journalism and media organizations at the turn toward the 21st

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century. Only recently has sociological interest in the processes of media production reemerged (Anderson, 2013; Boczkowski, 2010; Christin, 2014; Usher, 2014), building on the classic studies of organizational sociology in newsroom production (Breed, 1955; Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Tuchman, 1980). This article shifts the analysis from the level of media organizations directly to the journalists. Whether employed as staff editors or freelancers, journalists are the daily actors of the current transformation. This article therefore explores crucial questions for the analysis of the processes of marketization in the journalistic field: How do journalists negotiate the demands of economic valuation against the journalistic ethics of production? How do they justify their practices within a changing professional environment? How do they maintain journalistic autonomy?

As a case study of the specific segment of travel journalism in the United States, this article draws on interviews and discourse analysis with editors, freelance journalists, bloggers, publishers and marketing professionals to analyze these shifting boundaries of professional ethics and journalistic practice. Travel journalists as part of the so-called ‘soft’ or lifestyle segment of journalistic production have been traditionally close to the neighboring fields of travel industry and marketing. This closeness to the market pole of the journalistic field makes them an especially suitable case for the study of the interaction between marketization and journalistic ethics.

The media system of the USA presents a primary case for a market driven model of journalistic publishing (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and it stands at the forefront of the ongoing digitalization of journalistic production and consumption.<sup>1</sup> The external forces of economic and technological change that travel journalists face are exemplary for the journalistic field in the USA. Within a few years, whole print sections and editorial desks were cut. While the jobs and the demand for articles disappeared with the vanishing print space, online publishing expanded as a platform for free content produced by both professionals and amateurs. Travel journalists as producers therefore were confronted with a dual threat to their subsistence: While contractual employment became the exception, their products simultaneously devalued in the market.

As this article argues, travel journalists use the friction these challenges produce to engage in entrepreneurial practices (Stark, 2009) that connect journalism with publishing, marketing and branding, calling into question the autonomy of the field. Travel journalists instrumentalize crisis narratives<sup>2</sup> as opportunity to justify this *entrepreneurial spirit* within the boundaries of professional ethics. While enabling entrepreneurial practices as form of marketization of journalistic credibility, they simultaneously maintain an order of prestige and create closure to outside challengers.

Situated at the intersection of the Sociology of Culture and Economic Sociology, this article shows how this marketization process is the transformation of the “moral background” (Abend, 2014) of journalistic ethics. The complex relations of these competing meaning-making and boundary-drawing processes do not simply blur lines between formerly separate fields, but produce a radical transformation of the practices – and of journalistic ethics – themselves. These processes and their relation to autonomy are exemplary to understand the ongoing marketization of journalism and other professional fields of cultural production in society.

## 2. The marketization of the journalistic field

The media and its institutional power to control the processes of meaning production in society occupy a prominent place within social theory. It is theorized as a crucial sphere in the struggle between participation and domination (Dewey, 1954; Castells, 2007; Habermas, 1989; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978; Hallin, 1989); or for the circulation of images producing national co-presence (Anderson, 1991), for cultural globalization (Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1993), and for social reality at large (Luhmann, 2000). Yet all these theories treat the media as an empirical black box. To close this gap, some scholars analyze the current technological transformation of journalism (Boczkowski, 2005; Klinenberg, 2007; Zelizer, 2009), and a growing number of ethnographies explore the impact of digitalization on the organizational processes, structures and practices of the newsroom (Anderson, 2013; Boczkowski, 2010; Christin, 2014; Paterson & Domingo, 2008; Usher, 2014). This article contributes to this empirical research by putting the journalist as actor in the journalistic field into the analytical foreground.

For many sociologists field theory<sup>3</sup> presents the most suitable approach to the study of media and journalism (Benson, 2006; Benson & Neveu, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Bourdieu emphasized the significance of the journalistic field due to its “powerful hold” on other fields such as science and the political (Bourdieu, 2005: 41, also Benson, 1999; Couldry, 2003). Central for Bourdieu’s approach to the journalistic field as field of cultural production is the concept of *autonomy* (Bourdieu, 1984, 1993, 1996),<sup>4</sup> the ability “to say who is in and who is out” (Bourdieu, 2005: 38). This autonomy is threatened by the restructuring of news production under market principles, i.e. through the process of marketization (Bourdieu, 1999) or the journalist’s *double dependency* between economic and political constraints (Champagne, 2005). This normative

<sup>1</sup> In the USA 16,200 editorial positions were cut in print newsrooms from 2003 to 2012. Commercial magazines erased 38,000 positions (2008–2013). While smaller in scale, the growth of editorial positions in digital natives has been exponential, producing 5000 jobs in 468 new outlets until 2013. Further the USA was the first media market in which online consumption exceeded print (PEW, 2013; PEW, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> I use *crisis narratives* instead of *crisis* throughout this article to focus on its performative function in discursively framing practices and ethics. This does not mean that I deny the reality of the claims of job-loss, economic uncertainty and unsustainability made by the interviewees.

<sup>3</sup> See Martin (2003) for a review of field analysis in general and Savage and Silva (2013) for a review of field theory in Cultural Sociology.

<sup>4</sup> Other studies of fields of cultural production reach from film (Baumann, 2007), food (Johnston & Baumann, 2009), literature (Griswold, 1987), to sports (Allen & Parsons, 2006).

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