Article

Intermediaries between Journalism and Arts: Shared Concerns, Work Processes and Strategies Outlining an Emergent Practice

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Abstract: Innovation, creativity, and interdisciplinary collaboration in journalism are generally viewed as necessary goods, given the profound challenges of the profession, but institutionalised repertoires and routines tend to keep radical transformation at bay. Change in journalism therefore tends to rely on intermediaries, operating both within and outside of the profession, to facilitate innovation. This article explores the shared concerns of one such community of intermediaries working at the boundary between journalism and the arts. Through a series of in-depth interviews, this study documents key issues, how they solve problems, and how this shapes the practice of artistic journalism. These intermediaries create, facilitate, and promote an interdisciplinary practice of rigorously researched journalism and impact-focused storytelling using art-inspired methods. The key issues found in this study include the effort going into vocabulary alignment, managing expectations on what counts as professionalism, dealing with ‘uncertainty’ as a structural feature of the work, and dealing with occupational value clashes, such as regarding autonomy and rigour. The findings suggest these practitioners and intermediaries between journalism and the arts feel they shape the contours of an emergent practice.

Keywords: artistic journalism; interdisciplinarity; boundary work; autonomy; impact; immersion; imagination; creative labour

1. Introduction

Journalist Jack Herrera (Herrera 2021) finished a news report on refugees crossing the Mexican American border. Yet he felt something amiss, like his work was unable to convey some complex story elements. For example, what drove these people to undertake their dangerous journey north? Back in the US, Herrera visited San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where he saw the photos of the landscape art project Crossing of the Rio Bravo by the artist Minerva Cuevas (2010): a painted bridge across the Rio Bravo between the US and Mexico. According to Herrera, the artist grabbed exactly what he could not express with what he considered ‘traditional’ journalism. ‘If my work, as a journalist, often felt like a process of extraction (identifying a story, mining its details, and leaving with them), Cuevas’s work felt like a process of distillation, bringing herself to a place of compassion and understanding in order to create (c) Where the press tends to make complicated truths simple, Cuevas is inclined toward abstraction and uncertainty’ (Herrera 2021, para. 5).

What Herrera seemingly experienced at the museum was the flowing together of two disciplines, one nourished in journalism and the other in the arts. Two disciplines that, in terms of forms, values, and practices, have so much to offer one another that they inspired boundary expansions of both disciplines (Cramerotti 2009), contributing to the emergence of artistic journalism as a field (Postema and Deuze 2020).

According to Postema and Deuze, journalism and arts have been bedfellows since the earliest forms of news work, but interdisciplinary collaboration seems to have intensified over the last decades. The paper at hand focuses on how this confluence of journalism and arts in part is created, facilitated, and promoted by ‘intermediaries’ who aim to bring
these two professional worlds closer together in terms of values and practices. This paper explores the narratives of some of these relatively new bridge-builders. All interviewed intermediaries have designated jobs at organisations that accommodate dedicated support programmes for interdisciplinary artistic journalism collaboration. They all work in support of individual artist-journalists or teams of collaborating artists and journalists, creating media productions. Furthermore, many of these creative professionals seem (international) collaboration-minded, stimulating cross-disciplinary work between journalism and arts all over the world.

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the challenges, opportunities, and key issues arising in this intermediary work. This paper aspires to contribute to debates about what journalism becomes, asking the following: what key issues do intermediaries between journalism and the arts encounter? This article accentuates the shared concerns and how problems are approached by intermediaries to move forward art-inspired news work. In what follows, I will first briefly highlight and compare some boundary work challenges and institutional repertoires that inspire or hinder interdisciplinary collaboration. Then, after a methodological section, an analysis of in-depth interviews aims to comprehend what intermediaries between arts and journalism try to accomplish and what key issues they encounter on the arts and journalism continuum (Postema and Deuze 2020). This paper concludes by drawing some of these issues as—inevitably dynamic—outlines of what these intermediaries experience as an emergent professional field.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Artistic Journalism between Institutional Boundary Work and Liquid Practice

Conceptually, pinpointing the artist-journalist touches on journalism’s longstanding and well-established sociological perspectives of institutional boundary work (Carlson and Lewis 2015) versus journalism as ‘liquid’ practice (Deuze 2008). The study at hand positions artistic journalism, in whatever contested or negotiated shape, between these two scholarly strands. The ‘liquid’ strand consists of a more or less coherent theoretical thought school of scholars that observe journalism roughly as de-institutionalised (Anderson 2016; Deuze 2008; Deuze and Witschge 2018; Heinrich 2012; Hermida 2010), emphasising the continuous dynamics of temporal constellations of venues, locations, and individuals that produce news work. In this ecosystem (Anderson 2016), forms, values, and practices seem constantly (re)negotiated, challenging the theory that journalism has a core. The ‘boundary work’ strand harbours the school of thought that observes journalism as a practice of professionals who guard a journalistic institution (Eldridge 2019; Reese 2022; Vos 2019), taught as craft through handbooks, educational institutions, and in newsrooms, and practiced by self-identified journalists associated with reputed journalistic brands and freelancers, along with peripheral actors. This strand of scholarly research is dominated by studies of ‘the professional cultures of privileged full-time news reporters’ (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch 2019, p. 13), with freelance journalism practices coming in second. In fact, any deviating journalism (Loosen et al. 2022) is acknowledged as peripheral practices whose belonging to core journalism is being described in terms of boundary work (Carlson and Lewis 2015; Schudson and Anderson 2009). Following Gieryn (1983), boundary work scholars tend to emphasise journalism as a set of discursive practices that journalists perform to draw clear lines around their field to delimit themselves as autonomous institutions, maintain authority, and separate themselves from others. From that perspective, collaborative practices with other professional fields are observed as ‘influences’, and these collaborators are observed as ‘interlopers’ (Eldridge 2014) or ‘in-betweeners’ of journalism (Ahva 2017).

This study wrests from the first scholarly strand the position that artistic journalism takes place in shape-shifting professional constellations that do not per se self-define as journalism and are news work practices that are in a ‘permanent process of becoming’ (Deuze and Witschge 2018, p. 177). This study takes from the second strand of scholars that, to define news work, some criteria must apply. For that reason, inspired by Shapiro (2014), the study follows Postema and Deuze’s (2020, p. 1316) definition, stating that
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(work at the continuum of) artistic journalism ‘is involved in an independent pursuit of accurate information about current or recent events and its original and deliberate aesthetic presentation in any sensory form, for public edification and emotional resonance’.

This paper is interested in how intermediaries between journalism and arts shape this artistic journalism in their practice. In what follows, I will first elaborate on the widespread scholarly perspective suggesting that, in collaboration between journalists and other fields, journalism is dominant or in the lead. I take the position that the power balance in artistic journalism practices can shift, vary, and overall be dynamic. Then, I will elaborate on the specific role of intermediaries in pioneering fields like artistic journalism.

2.2. Beyond Journalism’s Power Balance in Collaboration

Along with news work’s precariousness (Chadha and Steiner 2021), an increased openness towards (citizen) collaboration has begun to be part of journalism. Tailing inevitable reorganisations of legacy news media structures, flocks of non-journalistic actors appeared, such as Gawker, Reddit, FiveThirtyEight, or Bellingcat (Carlson and Usher 2015; Eldridge 2017; Müller and Wiik 2023). These were welcomed differently. For example, since the Panama Papers, ‘collaboration’ has become the magic word for investigative journalism (Lewis 2016). Along with an increase in transnational cooperation between journalists, a range of studies followed how collaborations were negotiated (Alfter and Cândea 2019; Heft 2021; Sambrook et al. 2018). Konow-Lund (2019, p. 103) analysed how, in investigative journalism, working with non-journalism professionals led to a new situation: after an initial phase of re-establishing ‘rules between the new and the old’, a practice emerged that organised its knowledge generation as a constituent of journalism.

Other scholarly work also suggests that attempts to reach out beyond journalism’s supposed occupational boundaries seem inevitably marked by a power balance in favour of well-established notions of what journalism is (or should be). For example, Borger et al. point out that frontrunners in ‘participatory journalism’—journalists working together with audiences (Deuze et al. 2007)—uphold clashing repertoires, such as condemning journalism’s ‘traditional and paternalistic culture of exclusion’ (Borger et al. 2013b, p. 31) whilst defending the (exclusionary) value of the profession. Scholars in participatory journalism research also connect a range of normative dimensions to ‘what “counts” as journalism’ (Borger et al. 2013a, p. 129). Some academics evaluate participation in terms of exclusivity, with the journalist or newsroom as primus inter pares and others as ‘atypical producers’ (Hanusch and Banjac 2019), ‘interlopers’ (Eldridge 2014), or at best ‘in-betweener’ (Ahva 2017) of journalism. Such discourses suggest that in any interdisciplinary work involving a journalist, a power balance in favour of journalism is a requirement. This seems also to be the case with ‘pioneer journalism’, defined by Hepp and Loosen (2021, p. 578) as a particular group of professionals who incorporate new organizational forms and experimental practice in pursuit of redefining the field and its structural foundations’. These pioneers ‘act as intermediaries’ (Hepp and Loosen 2021, p. 582) between journalism and other fields. Such frameworks of ‘peripheral actors in the journalism field’ (Hanusch and Löhmann 2022, p. 7), albeit applicable in many ways, presuppose an asymmetrical exploration of journalism into an outside world.

The article at hand prefers the view that journalism is a ‘dynamic object of study’ (Deuze and Witschge 2018, p. 177) where ‘actors interacting with the journalistic process bring in the rules of their own world, and journalistic actors are themselves caught between these different logics’. (Witschge et al. 2018, p. 657). Applying these dynamics to the power balance means that any collaborator in a journalistic role can be leading, neutral—among equals—or subservient in interdisciplinary work. Rather than a world of workers surrounding a core (of ‘real’ journalists), artistic journalism is viewed here as a world with numerous criss-crossing actors enabling art-driven news work.

Additionally, this view allows, including artistic journalism, practices that have been going on for so long that these can hardly be defined as ‘peripheral’. For example, music as a vehicle of information and news has been part of Africa’s news distribution network for
as long as people can remember (Eyre 2001). In Zimbabwe, what counts as journalism is mostly government-regulated. Kruger (2022) therefore argues that journalism in the Global South requires an approach beyond institutions and individuals who associate themselves with professional journalism. He suggests that journalism should be understood ‘as a practice that takes many forms’ (p. 36) and ‘serve the public interest in reliable information and civic discussion’ (p. 20). The Zimbabwean media platform earGROUND, has been included in this research. earGROUND supports musicians writing about current affairs issues and reaches millions of young Zimbabweans living both in cities, remote areas of the country, and abroad with current-affairs-driven music about Zimbabwe. Without ignoring inevitable interdisciplinary power struggles, the approach of artistic journalism as a dynamic process empowered by many actors enables considering news work that takes place beyond journalism (and its normative dominance).

2.3. Defining Intermediaries between Journalism and the Arts

This study’s intermediaries’ interdisciplinary work is situated on a continuum between arts—meaning the artistic genres as synthesised by Gaut and Lopes (2013) and journalism (Postema and Deuze 2020). On this continuum, any kind of news work can be pinpointed between the extremes of journalism and the arts and evaluated in terms of its forms, values, and practices. Following this approach beyond dichotomies, intermediaries between arts and journalism are studied with a ‘cooperative frame of mind’ (Sennett 2012). For example, Marisa Mazria Katz, initiator of the Creative Times Reports, reflected on the five-year project at closure in 2017, stating, ‘(…) my daily task was to elevate the voices of artists whose work upended traditional media takes while bringing clarity to some of the world’s most challenging issues’. (Katz 2017, para. 8). Her work included connecting internationally renowned artists, such as Ai Wei Wei and Abramović, to media like The Guardian and The New York Times. How intermediaries from around the world deal with both the journalism and art worlds, big and small, and in what ways they foster a dialogical space to reflect upon any institutional repertoires they encounter—that is part of this analysis.

‘Intermediaries’ expand on what Keith Negus refers to as ‘cultural intermediaries’ who work primarily ‘in the space between production and consumption’ (Negus 2002, p. 501), with a ‘cultural’ focus on what happens in-between creative industry professionals and consumers. Indeed, the intermediaries in the study at hand describe parts of their work as ‘curatorial’—selecting and organising work for audiences. A substantial part of their work also takes place in-between journalistic and artistic professionals. This study accounts for what intermediaries between (the production and consumption of) journalism and the arts experience as key issues in their work and how they deal with these concerns. Ultimately, the way problems are approached distinguishes one profession from the other (Schön 1983). When interdisciplinary teams ritualise new creative activities around problems (Sennett 2012), that, in turn, shapes the contour of a merged practice or rising field.

3. Materials and Methods

The data collected for this study include artistic journalism publications, written documents, project documentation, and in-depth interviews with twelve informants whose roles can be described as intermediaries between journalism and the arts. All informants were approached based on their organisation’s explicit purpose to develop collaboration between news workers and artists while operating outside what they refer to as ‘mainstream’ media. Publications and project documentation have been analysed in light of how interviewees framed their arguments.

The thematical research approach of the study is inspired by the Grounded Theory, as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The approach implies that theoretical claims will be made. Although some cautious hints towards future theorisation have been drawn up in the final section, these bear elements of concept explication (Reese 2021) rather than theorisation. In this way, the study feels more at home with the flexibility of a thematical research approach (Braun and Clarke 2006), claiming to have found critical themes in the
intersectional work process that are unpacked as further-to-be-explored conceptual issues rather than as a presentation of a theory.

Slightly deviating from the thematical research approach is a part in the analysis where the key issue of ‘dealing with uncertainty regarding outcomes and assessment criteria of the work’ is illustrated with a practical-focused analysis of how ‘impact’ is strategized. In this section, specific target audiences are mapped, which felt important to understand and illustrate why intermediaries, artists, and journalists apparently think that collaborating might increase their impact.

This study involves a line-by-line open coding sequence, identifying topics and issues discussed by the participants (Corbin and Strauss 1990), followed by an axial coding phase, which raises these topics and issues to tentative categories (Charmaz 2006) of key issues and shared concerns. Following Charmaz, documents, field notes, and personal memos were categorised instead of coded line-by-line to discourage an intermingling of self-generated data and the participant’s words. The goal is to allow the full range of views to be explored rather than reducing them to a single concept or model. Data-led analysis has been performed inductively, developing themes ‘bottom-up’ from the data (Terry et al. 2017) with iterations between the literature and data (Glaser 1978) and accepting that the interview data are a construct of the interviewer and interviewee and the results a personal interpretation and defining of the data (Charmaz and Belgrave 2012).

Profile of Sample

Interviews were held between September 2021 and November 2022 with professional intermediaries between artists and journalists in Austria/Japan, Canada, Italy/Iraq, the Netherlands, Peru, Poland, Turkey, the UK, the US, and Zimbabwe (Table 1). Interviews were conducted, recorded digitally, and transcribed. Interviewees were found using snowball sampling, asking interviewees if they knew other innovative or like-minded organisations. Their intermediary roles are part of their designated jobs at organisations that have dedicated programmes for supporting interdisciplinary artistic journalism collaboration. The (sub)organisations that these informants work for can be seen as pioneering (Hepp and Loosen 2021), as most were launched between 2015 and 2022, with the exception of Teatro di Nascosto, which has existed since 1999. The interview with Teatro di Nascosto’s director, Annet Henneman, took place face-to-face in Utrecht in 2019. Artistic journalism genres have been organised for decades (Postema and Deuze 2020); however, these have mostly been evaluated as ‘peripheral,’ circling around journalism, such as literary journalism (Bak and Reynolds 2011), photojournalism (Hill and Schwartz 2015), or news design (Barnhurst and Nerone 2001). The study’s sample was chosen to understand how relative newcomers position themselves between arts and journalism and what key themes they identify.

All participants are purposely intermediate between news work and the arts. All have in common that they internationally scout for and collaborate with artist-journalists and reach audiences beyond their national borders. They all feel that they contribute in some way to journalism and news work, but how they work and what they deem important vary. For example, the music platform earGround sees a role in ‘news distribution’ through music to remote Zimbabwean areas. The ‘artistic journalism’ project of Ars Electronica in Austria emphasises ‘educating’ citizens and decision-makers in thinking ‘in unexpected ways’ about current affairs through exhibitions. Others are motivated by exploring new ways of storytelling or finding new audiences, such as El Surti in Paraguay, which publishes daily visual journalism on their socials (Facebook and Instagram), for which designers collaborate with journalists.

The methodology approaches data in such a way that analysis of one sample leads to the next sample—up to a point of saturation of themes found in the data. Respondent 3 is a journalist who collaborated with artists on several projects in Istanbul. This interview took place last, additionally confirming a ‘saturation of categories’ found during the analysis. All respondents, except for Respondents 1 to 3, preferred to be identified in this paper.
Table 1. List of respondents.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Country</th>
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<td>Respondent 1</td>
<td>Organisation 1</td>
<td>The US</td>
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<td>Respondent 2</td>
<td>Organisation 1</td>
<td>The US</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 3</td>
<td>Organisation 2</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
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<td>Jazmín Acuña</td>
<td>El Surti</td>
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<td>Jakub Górnicki</td>
<td>Outriders</td>
<td>Poland</td>
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<td>Annet Henneman</td>
<td>Teatro di Nascosto</td>
<td>Italy/Iraq</td>
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<td>Siddharta (Sidd) Joag</td>
<td>ArtsEverywhere</td>
<td>Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>Justin Kiersky</td>
<td>ArtsEverywhere</td>
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<tr>
<td>Robin Kwong</td>
<td>Contemporary Narrative Lab</td>
<td>The UK</td>
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<td>Plot Mhako</td>
<td>earGROUND</td>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hideaki Ogawa</td>
<td>Ars Electronica</td>
<td>Austria/Japan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jake Charles Rees</td>
<td>Centre for Investigative Journalism</td>
<td>The UK</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The interview data have been triangulated with a second dataset of observations of arts and journalism collaborative workshop events organised by ACED, including Hyperjournalism in 2018, Breaking News in 2018, and Design Newsroom in 2022, and their series of podcasts portraying intersectional frontrunners (Van Veelen n.d.).

4. Results

In this section, the findings of the inductive analysis are presented. First, how intermediaries frame their arguments bears characteristics of a demarcation process around an ‘emergent’ field. Second, we delve deeper into the collaboration-related key issues that the intermediaries highlighted, each illustrated by shared concerns that simultaneously enable and constrain their practice.

4.1. Features of a Demarcation Process

Overall, the interviewees feel that their intermediary work contributes to an emergent field. ‘[At our organisation] we all share the sense that this is like a new field that’s bubbling up’, informant 2 remarks. Interviewees say they draw from, collaborate with, and inspire ‘traditional’ art world and journalism world organisations, such as galleries and museums and digital-turned news media. At the same time, they continuously reflect on what does and does not belong. For example, Robin (CNL) says that during the Home Care project, they kept asking themselves, ‘how is what [the artist] is doing different from what a well-funded, digitally savvy audience engagement team in a news organization might do’.

- Some interviewees express a sense of vagrancy:

  I’ve been in the art world for a long time. And being in the journalism world, intermittently and then more in the recent past, I don’t really like either world and I don’t really like getting stuck in a world. (Sidd, ArtsEverywhere)

Such role-conflicting experiences have constituted both the arts (Lena and Lindemann 2014) and journalism (Eldridge 2017). Sidd and his team at ArtsEverywhere initiated a coalescence of both worlds, a practice they started referring to as ‘artistic journalism’. Intermediaries indeed feel they provide a non-binary ‘home’ for practitioners whose work is both connected with and exists outside of either discipline.

We work with a lot of artists who don’t necessarily have homes elsewhere. They don’t have gallery representation and big museum shows. They don’t have that kind of like representation and communities. (Informant 2)
In addition to expulsion from other disciplines, intermediaries also expand their practice. The articulation with professional legitimacy and what should belong comes with ‘flag plants’, as Jake Charles (ICIJ) notes: ‘claims to the genesis of the field and lots of creations of new terms like ‘aesthetic journalism’, ‘art as evidence’, [or] ‘evidentiary realism’\(^1\). What all these practices seem to bind is a commitment to holding powers to account, exposing misconduct, wrongdoing, and injustice, maintaining high editorial and artistic standards, and creating an audience experience that elicits empathy. Together, they might shape the contours of a ‘truth practice’ beyond the creative industries. Indeed, some of our informants say their artist-journalists collaborate with legal and human rights workers, NGOs, technologists, and anthropologists. Sidd (ArtsEverywhere) captures the spirit of this practice concerning what happens specifically between journalism and the arts, saying the following:

> ‘I’d like to not think of it as anything that’s particularly structured around any set of protocols or any fixed process, but mixing incisive storytelling, that is journalistically rigorous, and has real artistic merit’.\(^2\)

These reflections seem to contain at least some elements of demarcation around artistic journalism as a field or practice. Not all the time or in all situations of collaboration, intermediaries account for some sequential work processes, with, for example, the journalist conducting the reporting first and the artist using this as data to create the final work. In this ‘multidisciplinary’ approach, ‘disciplines remain separate, retain their original identity, and are not questioned (Klein 2017, p. 23). However, overall intermediaries refer to an ‘interdisciplinary’ blending of praxis, in which they learn constantly, transform how they work, and, in some cases, find the artist-journalist combined in oneself. This ‘mutual learning and a recursive approach to integration’ (Klein 2017, p. 30) indicates ‘transdisciplinarity’. It is in this transformation between interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity that some ‘demarcation processes’ (Newman 2006, p. 174) take place, drawing new borders through the expansion and exclusion (Gieryn 1983) of practitioners and practices (Carlson and Lewis 2015). And although a ‘protection of autonomy’—Gieryn’s (1983) third boundary work element—is still heavily contested, as the next section will show, the idea of a ‘home’ with a new name, where belonging is negotiated and reflected upon, suggests that practitioners do value some kind of professional distinction. The key issues highlighted in the following section and raised by the informants bear further features of demarcation.

4.2. Key Issues

The three key issues that the intermediaries highlight as crucial to interdisciplinary collaboration are as follows: (1) Aligning normative concepts that practitioners bring along from their disciplines. This can be illustrated by analysing how ‘autonomy’ as a shared value is constantly negotiated. (2) Dealing with uncertainty regarding outcomes and assessment criteria for the work. This is illustrated by analysing how ‘impact’, as a shared value and a desired outcome, is strategized. These two issues are reflected in the broader third issue: (3) Dealing with expectations regarding creative labour work processes. This is illustrated by analysing how ‘rigour’, as a shared value, enables and constrains problem-solving approaches.

1. Concept alignment and the shared concern ‘autonomy’.

During the collaborative arts and journalism events in the Netherlands, I observed that much time went into explaining taken-for-granted occupational concepts. For example, at the Designalism Newsroom project in 2022, artists collaborated with Dutch reporters and editors. In one work group’s ideation session, confusion among the participating artists arose concerning the newsroom word ‘scrolly’ (scrollable dynamic news story). The group later reflected on this moment as pivotal for understanding that they probably would encounter many more crafting terminologies requiring explanation to make collaboration work. The intermediaries pointed at a variety of tools to organise how participating professionals negotiate forms and practices, including collaborating on writing a manifesto.
beforehand, participating in workshops and (digital) meetings, and appointing interdisciplinary teams to shared tasks. What is more complicated is an alignment of internalised professional norms that influence role performance (Hanitzsch and Örnebring 2019). One shared concern that most intermediaries point to is how ‘autonomy’ is perceived, and this is analysed here, illustrating the complexity of normative occupational alignment.

The professional value of autonomy is, in all its ambiguity, ‘institutionalised as a binding and necessary feature’ for artists (Banks 2010) and journalists (Scholl and Weischenberg 1999) alike. Autonomy has been characterised by notions such as sovereignty, individuality, liberty, freedom of expression, will and choice, and freedom from obligations (Dworkin 2015). Artists, journalists, and artist-journalists might all refer to autonomy but mean something different. One US-based informant, working with artists on articles to be published by major international news outlets, observed that ‘A lot of artists will push back on the way in which language had to be changed in order for it to work for newspapers’. This deviated from her experiences with journalists:

“They take edits with a lot more stride. We were like, cut this paragraph, you don’t need this. They don’t take it as a personal affront, whereas artists are just like: I don’t think you understand what I’m trying to do with this. And I’m like, I don’t think you understand that it doesn’t read well’. (Informant 1)

In the same vein, Justin (ArtsEverywhere) remarks that a work can be of a high artistic standard, and ‘the autonomy of the artist, we have to respect. Whether or not we publish, that is a different question’. The conceptual tension is well illustrated by how artist-journalists deal with titling. ‘They saw it as their art’, informant 1 recalls.

‘The huge problem was a lot of the editors would take the pieces that the artist would write and would make their titles really attention grabbing. And the artist would freak out. We had to have conversations with every artist and say, look, we will do our best to advocate for you. But they are within their right to title the pieces’. (Informant 1)

Artists indeed see titles as constituents of the artwork (Levinson 1985), contributing to the aesthetic space (Franklin et al. 1993), and lifting the audience’s aesthetic experience and understanding of the work (Russell 2003). For a journalist, headline edits are expected (Leung and Strumpf 2022). For an artist, changing the title might touch the core of her experience of autonomy as an expression of her sovereignty.

Challenging journalism’s conception of autonomy as ‘freedom from obligation’ to external forces (McDevitt 2003) are projects in collaboration with partners that have a commercial or political agenda. For example, Ars Electronica collaborates with tech companies that share their newly developed technologies to be scrutinised, hacked, and reconstructed by collaborating artist-journalists with the goal of deeper understanding the implications of how these new technologies influence current and future affairs. Such collaboration might conflict with how journalists feel about their independence.

2. Dealing with uncertainty regarding outcomes and the shared concern of being impactful for specific audiences.

This section presents how intermediaries deal with uncertainty regarding outcomes by developing a mix of target group strategies. Intermediaries are in the process of selling work that they do not yet have the results of; they need to convince editors, gallery owners, curators, event organisers, and audiences that their projects are worth investing their money, space, and time in. Yet, ‘how do you asses and communicate the value in that work? (...) I think that’s a really difficult conversation’, says Jake Charles (CIJ). In addition, all organisations are supported by private investors and foundations: funders that demand reports validating a project’s impact. This returning priority ‘positions us to constantly be trying to demonstrate to [the funder] the impact and potential of the work that we’re doing’, says Respondent 2. Accordingly, all intermediaries share the concern of how the work reverberates, as encapsulated in Jakub’s (Outriders) words: ‘The impact of the story will be our success’.
Having ‘impact’ is frequently mentioned during the interviews. This complex mathematical term on how physical bodies collide (Goldsmith 2001) has been adopted by communication and media practitioners and scholars alike to express the extent to which media affect communities and individuals. Scholars in both journalism and the arts have been discussing what impact means. In journalism, the digitalisation of news publications drew attention to impact as measurable in terms of views, clicks, shares, likes, and responses in a much more detailed and pressing way than audience ratings did before (Carlson 2018). A second ‘orientation towards impact’ has been noted by Konieczna and Powers (2017, p. 1553), who found that funders’ conditions included impact reporting. According to Scott et al. (2017), this contributed to journalists targeting specific audiences that would increase impact, such as policymakers and other stakeholders in positions of power. In the arts, commercialisation largely determines how the art world today is organised (Stallabrass 2022) and draws attention to art as measurable in terms of its economic impact (Reeves 2002; Seaman 2020). At the same time, the societal impact of the arts was described as a common good worth fighting for (Zuidervaart 2010). Especially the socially engaged arts (Bourriaud 1998; Helguera 2011), which are evaluated in terms of their participatory, dialogical, and community-driven nature (Galloway 2009; Guetzkow 2002; Milner 2002). Impact, in short, is an increasingly significant yet multifaceted expectation of artistic-journalistic work, with commercial, cultural, and social dimensions.

The study at hand found that the organisations in this study contribute to all three dimensions. Commercially, all provide paid work for professionals. However, most deliberately move away from a commercial discourse—with the notable exception of earGROUND—which, according to Plot, is seen by young Zimbabwean musicians as a way out of poverty. He says that earGROUND actively campaigns for copyright protection, re-channelling revenues and royalties to artists, and aims to be a disruptive force in the Zimbabwean music scene. All intermediaries identify their practice as social and cultural impact-oriented. The size of the audience can vary per production and move from a huge following of millions of users (earGROUND, el Surti) to a smaller scale of an affected community (such as the Contemporary Narrative Lab project ‘Home Care’). The study identifies five major target groups that intermediaries distinguish between: broad international audiences; decision-makers; affected communities; professionals and the industry; and aesthetic admirers. These are targeted using a variety of strategies.

Focus on broad international audiences. By publishing in major outlets. The Eyebeam Centre for the Future of Journalism connects socially engaged artists to news outlets such as The New York Times and The Guardian. Architect-researcher Alison Killing was funded for her work with Buzzfeed reporters, for which she employed her special knowledge to geolocate prison camps in Xinjian. The articles reached a worldwide audience and won a Pulitzer Prize (Pulitzer 2021).

Focus on decision-makers. Ars Electronica supported Bjørn Karmann and Tore Knudsen, whose ‘project Alias’ (Hinterleitner 2019) consisted of a ‘man-in-the-middle’ device on top of a Google Home Smart Device. At the user’s command, Alias functions as a scrambler for Google’s microphone receiver. According to interviewee Hideaki Ogawa (Ars Electronica), the device was presented at a European Union meeting, making the problem of surveillance tangible for political leaders.

Focus on affected communities. Contemporary Narrative Lab (CNL) collaborated with the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and the interactive theatre group Coney. They decided that the publications ‘were going to be very much involving and about and for people affected by this issue’, says Robin. The team found that this choice really reverberated in the community, especially during the small group discussions that the team had organised during the final (online) event.

Focus on professional peers. For example, Outriders in Poland is primarily a news platform. At the same time, some publications went through intensive, innovative processes. Former editor-in-chief Jakub Górnicki initiated the platform ‘Mixer’ as a database for case
studies on how the journalistic artwork was crafted, including lessons learned and insights into work processes.

Focus on aesthetic admirers (of a specific art genre). For example, El Surti’s strategy is to create a large support base on Instagram and Facebook alongside their online platform. They aim to generate more impact with visual journalism and draw a large and young Instagram audience to enjoy and share their witty illustrations and memes (Figure 1) and read the news.

In practice, organisations use intentional and impromptu combinations of target audiences and strategies. For example, EarGround has a large following of aesthetic admirers, most of whom are also affected by the news, which is why the platform organises socially engaged podcasts on a variety of social platforms, in addition to music. Ars Electronica and CNL both say that they ideally invite both decision-makers and those affected to attend the highly participatory event. CNL further follows up on its activities with reports for the industry in collaboration with City University London.

3. Aligning creative labour processes with ‘rigour’ as a shared concern.

The findings thus far have addressed how autonomy is experienced as a shared concern that needs normative alignment and how a focus on ‘impact’ is expected to deal with uncertainty regarding outcomes. These shared concerns are, in practice, constituents of a broader issue concerning how creative labour processes are aligned between professionals who follow patterns of routines along with relationships with other professionals. These routines and subsequent work rhythms shape how problems are solved and, thus, how the practice distinguishes itself professionally. The next section analyses how intermediaries negotiate mutual agreement on how the artistic...
journalism workflow addresses problems; their shared concern can be defined by working with ‘rigour’.

4.3. Rigour

Intermediaries say they expect artist-journalists (or teams of artists and journalists) to work with rigour: the quality of being careful and thorough. The interviews and observations during life events suggest that rigour applies to two main values: being factual and being meaningful. Rigour, in a factual sense, implies that the labour contains a reconstruction of reality through the verification of facts and sources. Rigour, in a meaningful sense, implies a reconstruction of reality through the interpretation of how reality is experienced. For example, for their series Curse of Geography (ArtsEverywhere 2020), the team of artist-journalists working for ArtsEverywhere employs rigorous investigative journalism methods, researching documents, interviewing stakeholders, and visiting sites. The publications are articles in literary journalism-style reportage, along with multimedia visualisations and artwork (Figure 2), created by artists who are involved in the research.

This seems like a crucial observation because how things happened (factual) and how people feel about what happened (meaningful) can require vastly different problem-solving approaches. In other words, what counts as being careful and thorough in an artistic journalism practice can have multiple connotations.

Three occupational expectations have been highlighted here because they were mentioned by several interviewees and observed during life events. (1) Working with rigour means that the professionals are expected to immerse themselves and thoroughly grasp a crafting process or current affairs subject. (2) Rigour requires being imaginative, moving
Rigour: Immersion

The term ‘immersion’ refers to artist-journalists who delve deep and ‘immerse’ themselves in the data. The goal of such scrutinisation can be to improve crafting processes or gain a thorough understanding of current affairs issues. For example, the research for Outriders’ interactive publication Favela vs. COVID-19 (2021) included ‘one week of reporting, and then two months of drawing, cutting and coding’, says Jakub. In this specific case, the most time was spent on a methodical development of new non-linear storytelling formats and a deep understanding of the underlying technology. At Outriders, such innovations in the crafting process are constituents of their artist-journalist workshop.

Immersion for a thorough understanding of current affairs issues implies engagement with materials through forensic and aesthetic research (Fuller and Weizman 2021) or with human beings through ethnographic research in a social cultural context (Conover 2016). For example, Hideaki’s research team at Ars Electronica aims to understand, in depth, what technology means for future and current affairs, for which they immerse themselves in the technology, to ‘understand what the black box consists of (. . .). In terms of security technology DNA, robotics or AI: artists are creating ‘critical thinking’ by questioning how is a dataset created’, says Hideaki. According to him, the difference with journalism is that reporters would ask the makers about the ethical questions of a technology, whereas artist-journalists ask these questions of the technology—the material itself. This process is also made tangible for audiences, such as, for example, in Dataspace (Ars Electronica 2022), a 3D projection, letting the audience experience the news publication and data in an immersive physical and social way (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Dataspace: Global Impact of Russia’s War on Ukraine (Ars Electronica 2022). Videostill. Courtesy of Ars Electronica.

An example of social cultural immersion is the work of journalistic theatre maker Annet (Teatro di Nascosto), whose research involves living for months with families in Middle Eastern conflict areas to fully ‘embody’ (Francoeur 2021) their cultural and emotional language in response to current affairs (Postema 2023).

Overall, it seems that intermediaries encourage artistic journalism professionals to immerse themselves in ‘no holds barred’, not rashly, but with the purpose of engaging with
an open mind, being thorough, and entering areas otherwise impossible to understand intimately. Some intermediaries emphasise how this deep engagement with data deviates from journalism because immersion leads to ‘asking atypical questions’, as one interviewee says. This reverberates with another expectation regarding working with rigour, which is ‘imagination’.

2. Rigour: Imagination

Intermediaries look for qualities (both as skills and methods) that can be categorised as ‘imaginative’. Imagination, as found in this study, consists of surprise, wonder, and hope. One respondent says that through imagination, ‘artists can upend the way we think’. Another adds, ‘they have the ability not only to imagine and propose an alternative but build that alternative’. They ‘introduce these creative energies’, says another, ‘look for news ways (…) and overcome a point or create a new awareness’. One respondent appreciates the ‘really weird way of working that allows them to have really dynamic responses to problems’. Regarding the output, one respondent mentions the ‘unexpected’, and another mentions the ‘unusual perspective’. For example, funded by ArtsEverywhere, the American Choreographer Michael Spencer Philips (Figure 4), created Site-Specific Dances (Philips 2022).

![Figure 4. Site-Specific Dances—Megaflora by choreographer Michael Spencer Philips (Philips 2022). Photo Emma Kazaryan. Courtesy of ArtsEverywhere.](image-url)

Justin (ArtsEverywhere) says these dances address regional current affairs issues. Philips collaborates with local dancers on performances at geographical sites based on current affairs issues in relation to these sites, for which they first conduct research and interview stakeholders. The outdoor dances draw attention to news work from the perspective of embodiment (Francoeur 2021). Another respondent reflected on an artist and journalist collaboration project, saying that the journalist was surprised that their interviewees ‘actually had all of these other stories that I never got to hear, because I was never asking those sorts of questions’. This suggests that imagination can lead to unexpected viewpoints, unusual research methods, and a greater sense of empathy with the subjects of a story—all of which can empower the rigour of a publication.

Today, imagination is described as a necessary ‘functional skill’ to respond to news world changes (Kunelius and Ruusunoksa 2008, p. 673) as a method safeguarding jour-
nalism’s cultural relevance (Adam 2006) and as an elevator of journalistic narrative form (Underwood 2013). What the artistic-journalism practice seems to add to these scholarly perspectives is that imagination has the potential to add conceptual depths to the process of verification and investigation. Particularly because unconventional questions are asked about data, an artistic journalistic reconstruction can honour the complexity of, and multiple perspectives on, what happened in real life.


Intermediaries indicate that they look for professionals who understand a sense of ‘urgency’. Urgency is driven by two values that can create tensions during execution. The first value can be characterised as immediacy-driven (people need to know the facts now). ‘Some news stories become obsolete very soon. And what can happen is that [the artist-journalists] have done a piece of visual work that is no longer so relevant in the news and at the time’, says Jazmin (El Surti). News work is and always has been immediacy-driven (Deuze 2005; Usher 2016), with the pressing task of informing citizens in time. The second value can be characterised as social-bonding-driven (people need to share their feelings and responses to current affairs now). ‘A lot of what artists do, is about understanding the world as we are experiencing it and communicating the emotional resonances of these things’, argues Jake Charles (CIJ). Claire Bishop (2005) observed socially engaged arts, specifically, as being driven by the pressing task of strengthening social bonds in society.

In artistic journalism work, urgency thus can be immediacy- and social-bonding-driven. CNL’s project on home care during the pandemic aptly illustrates the difference. Initially, the artistic journalism team’s idea was to work together towards a single publishing event. However, during the research phase, they discovered that huge numbers of COVID-19 victims died in home care situations. The journalistic partner, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, recognised the news relevance, and the project group decided to publish a breaking news report immediately (Gayle et al. 2021).

’It required a lot of adaptability and changing of plans, because the original concept was that [the reporter] and [the artist] would spend ten weeks together, and then at the end we try to put on a big performance of some sort (…) So it ended up being a two-stage phase. They produced two things instead of one’. (Robin, CNL)

The news publication was followed up with a panel discussion with experts. The second publication occurred two weeks later as an online theatrical performance, including small group discussions. For the first publication, the team followed an ‘editorial logic’ (Miège 1987) of producing news for a reader on time, driven by immediacy (Deuze 2005). For the second publication, the team followed an ‘live entertainment logic’ (Miège 1987) of drawing the public to the (online) live performances, panel discussions, and small group discussions, driven by social bonding (Bishop 2005).

What this analysis of urgency suggests for the creative labour process is that for immediacy-driven news reporting, ‘rigour’ reaches a point of saturation when the verified factual data show patterns of news significance. For social-bonding-driven news reporting, ‘rigour’ reaches a point of saturation when professionals feel that they empathically understand what happened to the affected community. A merging of immediacy and social-bonding-driven news chains resonates with what [author] refers to as ‘news sharing as communion’, with artist-journalists facilitating the safe space to process news facts in a meaningful way and respond to current affairs together through empathising, sharing, and dialogue.

4.4. Rigour as Shared Concern

This section examined how intermediaries and artist-journalists handle expectations in the creative labour process. It showed that rigour is a shared concern, and work rhythms and routines are influenced by immersion, imagination, and urgency. Artist-journalists are expected to immerse themselves in the crafting process and the current affairs subject, implicating an intimate relationship with what they create and investigate. The approach is
expected to provide a fruitful ground for working with imagination and asking unconventional questions about data. The immersion seems to stop when the work is considered thorough enough for publication. For a factual reconstruction of reality, such data saturation could mean that facts and sources are thoroughly verified. For a meaningful reconstruction of reality, saturation could mean that the artist-journalist emphatically feels the multiple emotional responses to current affairs.

Although urgently necessary in times of fake news (Tandoc et al. 2018), separating distinguished facts from mixed affective feelings is highly complex. Such far-reaching engagement with data, subjects, and affected communities and individuals in journalism is radically rejected (Schudson 2001) or at least frowned upon (Rijssemus 2014). In other words, rigour in the artistic journalism labour process has the potential to elevate the quality of the work in both factual and meaningful ways, while, at the same time, rigour poses some normative and practical dilemmas that require solutions before moving the work process forward constructively.

5. Conclusions

Aspiring to contribute to debates on artistic journalism and how this kind of work is organised in practice (Postema and Deuze 2020), the paper asked the following: What key issues do intermediaries between journalism and the arts encounter? What the interviewed intermediaries do, and say they do (Bruni et al. 2005) provides only a limited account of what happens in the dynamic space between artistic and journalistic practices. With this limitation in mind, the key issues that the intermediaries highlighted as crucial to interdisciplinary collaboration are as follows: (1) an alignment of normative occupational concepts; and (2) dealing with uncertain work process outcomes. These are reflected in (3), a broader key issue of dealing with expectations regarding the creative work process.

First, an alignment of normative occupational concepts, exemplified through the exploration of autonomy, reveals the multifaceted nature of this taken-for-granted value. At the macro level, autonomy as ‘freedom of expression’ seems to be a mutual feature that is challenged by precarious conditions, ranging from government censorship and legislation to economic incentives. On the mezzo level, the artist-journalist’s autonomy serves as an expression of individuality and sovereignty, cultivating her ‘aesthetic space’ and adhering to an occupational ideology of independence. On the micro level, autonomy undergoes constant renegotiation, shaping the artist-journalist’s professional identity. In the dynamic realm of the creative industries, normative occupational concepts like autonomy might always be contested and negotiated, given the precarious nature of the field.

Second, to illustrate how professionals navigate uncertain outcomes, this study shed light on the reciprocal expectation of ‘impact’. Artists and journalists mutually anticipate each other’s work to enhance impact. Artistic journalism organisations exhibit an impact-oriented approach, driven by various factors: funding requirements, individual socially engaged motivations, and new possibilities to work in relational ways, improve audience engagement, and measure impact.

Further, the professional field seems to target five distinct audience groups: global audiences; decision-makers; affected communities; professional peers; and aesthetic admirers. Artist-journalists employ a blend of strategies to engage these audiences. One challenge seems to arise from the variety of needs and expectations of these audiences, resulting sometimes in simultaneous processes of connecting with and providing solace to affected communities and individuals, urging action from those in power, sharing knowledge and seeking recognition from peers, and appreciating the aesthetic delights cherished by admirers.

Third, intermediaries prioritise dealing with the occupational expectations of the creative labour process. They seem to share the value of rigour in verifying facts and interpreting how reality is experienced in a meaningful way. They expect artist-journalists to immerse themselves in the crafting process and the current affairs subject and to showcase imagination and innovative problem-solving with the purpose of revealing hidden facts
and deeper meanings and honouring the complexity of a case. And they expect them to work with a sense of urgency, providing timely and accurate information while also nurturing emotional responses to foster social cohesion.

What this all suggests is that by establishing clear and mutual normative expectations per artistic journalism project, intermediaries and artist-journalists can ensure a cohesive and effective approach, ultimately enhancing the quality and impact of their contributions. At the same time, the demand for quality, timely results, and the competitive environment—some of the intermediaries deal with thousands of applicants who want to publish their artistic journalism work with them—also points at an emerging practice that is like all creative labour (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011): precarious in nature.

The overall sense that intermediaries and collaborating practitioners share is that they are constituents of an emerging field where belonging is negotiated and reflected upon. In light of understanding today’s work in the creative industry as ‘liquid’, any boundaries of such a field might remain porous and elastic. In that light, broadly acknowledged ‘core’ artistic journalism feels unlikely, while at the same time, ongoing (self-)reflections on the journalistic merits of art-driven work seem adamant.

As a final note, one could argue that journalism, overall, is becoming a more aesthetic-driven practice. For example, Kristensen (2022) found that cultural journalists and the artistic journalism genre of literary journalists have become less distinct in their shared preference for aesthetics, storytelling, and employing a distinct voice. What this means is that although intermediaries feel like they are part of a new movement, they can be frontrunners of a journalism that is, in general, aestheticizing.

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Notes

1 For example, Fuller and Weizman (2021) wrote an elaborate field description of what they call ‘Investigative Aesthetics’, focussing on forensic research; ACED in the Netherlands launched ‘Designalism’ (Eekelen 2021), accentuating journalism and design.

2 ‘Rigour’ is mentioned by several intermediaries and is considered by practitioners as defining element for journalism’s constructed (Zelizer 1993) and ideological (Deuze 2005) ‘boundaries around their professional jurisdiction’ (Lewis 2012, p. 844). ‘Artistic merit’ similarly refers to intersubjectively (Budd 2014) evaluated properties that legitimise a work as being artistic.

3 The problem is more complicated and might deserve further exploration, but not here. For context: in journalism, descriptive titles are preferred for a fast grasp of the content. In arts, ‘elaborative’ titles are preferred as these increase aesthetic understanding (Leder et al. 2006). In both journalism (Richmond 2008; Leung and Strumpf 2022) and arts (Park et al. 2022) alike, economic incentives play a role in choosing (or changing) a title.

4 In 2022 Jakub launched The Mixer, as knowledge centre accommodating the innovative and creative process of Outriders. The team follows a design thinking approach as method.

5 Including, to a large extent, the work of cultural journalists which according to Kristensen (2022) bears aesthetic and distinctive characteristics similar to that of the artistic journalism genre of literary journalism.

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