

Encyclopedia of Journalism

Precision Journalism

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Book Title: Encyclopedia of Journalism
Chapter Title: "Precision Journalism"
Pub. Date: 2009
Access Date: January 23, 2019
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.
City: Thousand Oaks
Print ISBN: 9780761929574
Online ISBN: 9781412972048
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412972048.n304
Print pages: 1101-1102

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Precision journalism is the application of social and behavioral science research methods to the practice of journalism. The term was coined by Everette E. Dennis for a “Seminar in the New Journalism” that he taught in the winter of 1971 at the University of Oregon. The concept was explicated by one of his students, Neil Felgenhauer, in a term paper that became a chapter in a book based on the seminar's work.

Most of the “new journalism” that inspired the seminar was the creation of talented writers such as Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, and Norman Mailer, who used fiction techniques to construct powerful narratives about real people and events. The class discussion contrasted their work with precision journalism. “In essence, all the other new journalists push reporting toward art. Precision journalists push it toward science,” said Dennis and William L. Rivers in a 1974 report.

Within the field of investigative reporting, there is also a contrast of method. Some follow paper trails, and a subset uses scientific method in the analysis. Others base their investigations on anonymous sources whose motivation, as well as identity, is veiled or not revealed at all. The work of the former can be verified because its methods are transparent and replicable. Like a scientist, a precision journalist describes the data collection and the methodology in sufficient detail that another investigator could retrace the steps and arrive at the same conclusions. Precision journalists can also build confidence by posting their data in university archives for secondary analysis.

The genesis of precision journalism can be traced to the first public opinion polls that used scientific sampling instead of casual person-on-the-street interviewing. Dr. George Gallup based a newspaper column on national polls and scored a coup by using more rigorous methods and getting a better result than the more famous *Literary Digest* poll, which failed to predict the outcome of the presidential election of 1936. However, Gallup and other national pollsters did not adopt probability sampling, a basic tool of modern social science, until after their own error in calling the 1948 election for Thomas E. Dewey instead of Harry S. Truman.

Other pioneers in the use of precision journalism were the broadcast networks striving to be first to announce the winner in presidential elections. In 1960, CBS used a computer-driven statistical model based on the timing of the results. It captured the Republican and Democratic standings at given points in time and compared them to their standings at the same times in the 1956 election. The initial extrapolation proved flawed, however, because Kansas had adopted a faster method of vote counting. The resulting Republican bias produced an early and erroneous call for Richard Nixon. Later network projections were based on geographic sampling and proved more reliable.

The civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s created further demand for new reporting techniques. Standard journalism was drawn to the loudest and most visible spokespersons for their respective movements and tended to overgeneral-ize from them. *Newsweek* magazine recognized this problem when it commissioned Louis Harris to do special polls among black Americans to detect a broader spectrum of attitudes.

When Detroit blacks rioted in the summer of 1967, Knight Newspapers detached Philip Meyer from its Washington Bureau to help the *Detroit Free Press* cover the story. Meyer stayed to design and direct a survey of the stricken neighborhoods that could assess black grievances and the root causes of the riot, using techniques he had learned as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University in the previous academic year. The stories that resulted were one of several factors in the awarding of the 1968 Pulitzer Prize for general local reporting to the staff of the *Free Press*.

Knight management assigned Meyer to return to Detroit for a one-year follow-up of the condition of the riot area residents and to do a separate survey in a major black community that had not rioted. The chosen target was Miami, which had been the site of Florida's first public school desegregation nine years before. While that survey was being analyzed, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and, Meyer returned to his same Miami respondents for a before-and-after assessment of the effect of King's death on the civil rights movement. The conventional wisdom, that King's philosophy of nonviolent protest would die with him, was contradicted. The size of the pro-violence minority was unchanged, and support for King's position actually grew after his death.

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Meyer wrote two versions of that story: one was published in *The Miami Herald* and the other in an academic journal, *Public Opinion Quarterly*.

In 1969, the Russell Sage Foundation engaged Meyer to take a leave of absence from Knight Newspapers and direct a project to prepare a handbook for journalists with the working title, "The Applications of Social and Behavioral Science Methodology to the Practice of Journalism." The project was completed in 1970, and the decision to use Dennis's term *precision journalism* for the title was made jointly by Meyer and John Gallman, director of Indiana University Press, who accepted the work for publication in 1973.

Because precision journalism usually involves large-scale data collection and analysis requiring the use of computers, it is sometimes confused with computer-assisted reporting, including Internet searching. But computers are neither necessary nor sufficient to define precision journalism. Much journalistic work with computers involves simple searching and sorting operations that do not involve scientific generalization. It also overlaps with public opinion polling, which is sometimes scientific and sometimes not.

The range of precision journalism is as broad as its underlying methodology. It has included content analysis of public records, survey research—especially of newsworthy subsets of the population, such as the 1967 Detroit rioters—field experiments, and making statistical inference from observation of events that form natural experiments. Although precision journalism was considered routine for major new organizations by the twenly-first century, its introduction was met with mixed reviews.

For example, the two-year delay in publication of Meyer's *Precision Journalism* was caused by skepticism among a number of publishers, including its original sponsor, the Russell Sage Foundation, that there would be a market for it. The concept of a journalist practicing the scientific method was too alien. Even the use of computers was suspect. The low-cost personal computer was still years away, and the necessary statistical work had to be done at mainframe computer centers where time was expensive and the machines were hard to program. (Meyer used the Harvard Data-Text system, a higher-level language for the IBM 7090 that anticipated SPSS, today's popular statistical package for both mainframe and personal computers.)

When, in 1972, Meyer guided Donald Barlett and James Steele through their analysis of court records in Philadelphia to produce evidence of racial bias in the criminal justice system, the resulting series was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Barlett was later told that the use of a computer was the reason for its rejection. It seemed to the judges that reporters who used a machine to do statistical analysis were taking an unfair advantage over their peers.

The National Science Foundation helped improve the acceptance of precision journalism by sponsoring two three-week training programs conducted for mid-career journalists at Northwestern University in 1974 and 1975. Reporters from *TheNew York Times* and *The Washington Post* participated and followed up with related projects at their papers that helped introduce precision journalism to the mainstream. Later, the National Institute for Computer Assisted Reporting (NICAR) began including precision journalism concepts in its training.

It would take another decade, however, for the first precision journalism project to win a Pulitzer Prize. It happened in 1989 when Bill Dedman of the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* won the prize for investigative reporting with his series, "The Color of Money," about racial bias in lending practices. The data came from federal records, and the data analysis was coordinated by Dwight Morris, assistant managing editor for special projects. Since then, precision journalism projects have become commonplace among Pulitzer winners, including the 2007 public service prize to *The Wall Street Journal* "for its creative and comprehensive probe into backdated stock options for business executives that triggered investigations, the ouster of top officials and widespread change in corporate America."

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http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412972048.n304
See also

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- Reporters, Print
- Social Movements and Journalism
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Further Readings

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