

**Mariam Kourabi**

Hello everyone, my name is Mariam Kourabi from the JRP Canada team. Welcome to the third episode in our new series of research updates. We're going to revisit some of the research shared at last year's *Between Ideals and Practices* conference to see how it has evolved since May of 2023. Joining me today is Dr. Nicole Blanchett, who was the principal investigator of the Canadian JRP team and the lead organizer of the conference. She's also an associate professor in the School of Journalism at TMU. We'll be talking about two publications that came out following the conference on journalistic roles, as well as getting journalists to participate in academic research.

**Mariam Kourabi**

Dr. Nicole Blanchett, it's a pleasure to have you here today. Can you tell me a little bit about how some of the work has evolved since the conference?

**Nicole Blanchett**

So there were a couple of papers, that we presented at the conference that were published, one of, one of them I actually, I think actually came out the day after the conference finished, and the other one was published a little while after that. So the first, paper was talking about the challenges of getting journalists to participate in academic research, which when it comes to journalistic role performance, is critical because without the input of the journalist, it's very difficult to unpack that whole idea of this is what journalists sort of see their roles as being. This is, you know, what they perceive they are doing. But then when we do a content analysis, we can actually look at how those roles are present in the journalism that they create. So being able to, um, sort of, again, unpack this idea of, The narrated ideals of, you know, what they think they're doing and what they feel is important and the journalism that's actually produced, um, is quite important because there are differences when we analyze, um, what journalists prioritize and the types of journalism that we see most often. So in terms of how it's progressed since the conference,. When we presented the paper at the conference, there was sort of a, yeah, you know, everyone was in agreement about the challenges of, again, trying to get journalists to participate, and I think There's not really a good news story here in that, um, this has evolved in more people acknowledging, um, or evolved, I should say, rather, in more people acknowledging how difficult it is to get participants. I'm involved in another research project, *Worlds of Journalism Study*, which again involves trying to recruit journalists. And around the world for people involved in that project, again, significant issues. So, I think as academic researchers, we clearly have to ask ourselves, what can we do to change this if we want to maintain, um, any kind of validity in findings, uh, for the research that we're doing when it comes to journalistic roles.

**Mariam Kourabi**

Let's talk about that paper a little bit. It's titled, is it us or them? Um, I think off the bat I want to know why is it important to involve journalists in shaping research methodologies and having them in research?

**Nicole Blanchett**

Well, I think what we discovered, was that the way this paper started was actually people complaining to me about the survey that we were trying to get them to do. So, and one of the things I talk about in the paper is rather than kind of get my back up about it, And, um, be like, oh, you know, this is a beautiful methodology, why would anyone complain about it? I was really curious to find out what they didn't like. Um, and part of it, I think, is that when someone is answering a survey, particularly journalists who are generally, you know, very concerned about context and all these types of things, there was a feeling that the survey didn't allow them to properly answer. That they sort of had to pick options, that they didn't feel fully represented their work or their feelings on something. So that was quite interesting to me, um, and some of these people who didn't want to do a survey, you know, spoke with me for an hour. So it wasn't necessarily, even though they're extremely busy people, that they didn't want to participate. It was that they really felt the tool being used, um, did not suffice in terms of allowing them, uh, space. to answer fully. So, um, which got me thinking, hmm, you know, what can we do to make this better, or how could we approach this a bit differently, and led down to this path of, well, um, you know, and other researchers have found this, or sort of been building on this as well, the idea that sort of consulting with journalists and other participants in research projects before you're actually giving them the tool and talking about, you know, what might be the best way to, um, approach this or how do you, like, what do you think about these questions, that type of thing might lead to better participation. But there are a lot of challenges, including also not just the journalists, but, um, having organizations who are dealing with a lot of political polarization and criticism of media. Not necessarily wanting their journalists to take part because they're afraid of whatever information might come out of it, how it might be used against them. So there are all kinds of complex issues that, um, if anything are just getting worse.

### **Mariam Kourabi**

With survey completion, there was a really interesting stat that 44 percent of journalists that started the survey didn't end up finishing the survey. And to me, that was a very interesting finding. Can you tell me a little bit more about that and why do we see that disadvantage when it comes to completion rate of surveys? Because at that point, journalists have gone to the survey. Somehow through their email or some of the other ways that you've described in the research. They've opened it, started to solve it, but not actually end up finishing and going through it. Why is that from the research?

### **Nicole Blanchett**

Well, basically it took too long, would be one of the reasons, um, and then the other would be that they just didn't like the questions. So those were sort of the two things that we found, um, in our research. But the issue is that, um, you know, there's all kinds of evidence to show a survey should be You know, 10 minutes, um, or less that, or 10 minutes or fewer that, um, you have to keep them focused. But if you're trying to, you know, get information on something that's quite complex, it's pretty difficult to jam all of that into a survey, um, that only takes 10 minutes. And that's one of the things with the journalistic role performance methodology is that you have to ask enough questions in, you know, certain ways so that you can actually have enough data. That is useful and that you can do something with. So that's not something, um, you know, as we move into the third wave of the project, that's going to be happening soon. There is a

discussion for some countries involved, um, that they're not, um, necessarily going to do the survey component of it just because it was so challenging, and the effort to get the answers, um, didn't really amount to enough surveys to make it worth their while. So, again, it's, um, it's very challenging to do This type of work. It's very valuable work, but it's very challenging. And especially, I think, with surveys as well. Again, if people are picking the best answer, in my mind, surveys are a great tool. Content analysis is a great tool. But having the interview component as well is pretty critical because it gives a lot of, again, you triangulate all these things. It contextualizes things a lot better. It gives you a much clearer understanding how journalists do feel about their jobs and what they do and the journalism that they create. Context. And that's a very important word and a concern that some of the journalists directly communicated to you.

### **Mariam Kourabi**

I thought it was extremely insightful to include those communications directly on the research. What can we learn, um, about those concerns of context? Because I feel like it's applied to a little bit more than just how do you ask a survey question, but it also applies to interview questions. Um, How did you assess that component of lack of context or I guess dealing with a context issue?

### **Nicole Blanchett**

So I think what was clear in the discussion with journalists about the survey was that they wanted, you know, to be able to expand on the answer. So to have some ability to a bit of a comment section or something to that effect. Where they could, if they had chosen something, but maybe it didn't quite, you know, fit their exact idea of what the answer would be, that they had the, the opportunity to expand on it a little bit. So this, in theory, is Um, is great in terms of perhaps boosting participation, but then also adds a whole element of analysis that complicates on the research end, um, how you're going to deal with all of this information. The interviews, again, though, allow for this level of context, too. So there was one journalist who I spoke with who originally was not going to do the survey. We had a great conversation. Some of the issues that they had with the survey, uh, actually were resolved later on in the survey. Some questions, they were like, why isn't this question in there? And it's like, it is in there, you just have to actually get to that point. So, uh, they ended up doing the survey, and they ended up doing, you know, a very valuable interview. So, again, I think, Back to the, what do we do about the problem, it's really the building relationships, I think, being open to the criticism, uh, being open to the critique and the feedback so that you can change practice in some ways where you can. For us, in terms of the survey, the ship had already sailed, the survey was out, so we couldn't adjust it at that point, but it did provide a great opportunity to explore this a little bit further through the paper.

### **Mariam Kourabi**

Tell me a little bit about the recruitment process, because I thought it was interesting to see how, like you mentioned, some companies were like completely against the idea of engaging in this. Perhaps it was a different experience with getting in contact with freelancers. How was that experience of get almost the point of contact?

**Nicole Blanchett**

Yeah, it was different depending on, um. On each circumstance, and I'm not going to name different groups or anything or organizations just because of the, um, identification of the data in the study, but, um, There were definitely media organizations who did not want us and said straight out, we do not want you talking to our journalists. We got in touch with journalists, basically, because we were doing the content analysis, we were able to form a list of journalists who were, you know, participating in our study through the work that they had created. Um, and then journalists generally have a publicly accessible email address, and we just emailed them.

With our, um, you know, research ethics board approved, um, email saying, Hey, this is our in consent form. Would you be willing to participate in the study? So we had to send out multiple waves of this to try and, um, get people to connect. Um, we did find, you know, once a few people had done it, that often there would be, um, you know, more pickup on the survey in a particular newsroom and we would get, uh, much better results. Um, we were very open to, again, answering any questions. People sometimes would email back and, you know, either address an issue or have just some questions about the survey itself that we would, uh, you know, manage as they came in. But yeah, it was really, it was really just about, again, we could see who the journalists were because we had the content analysis that we were doing, reaching out to them however we might be able to, in some cases as well, phoning newsrooms, uh, for the French surveys, a lot of those were actually done by phone versus online, so, uh, yeah, it was just, just keep, you know, it's just like when you're reporting as a journalist and you're trying to find a source. You know, you just keep going at it and, um, being polite and persistent and knowing that what you're doing is important because it is so critical to have the journalistic voice and to have the viewpoint of the journalist when we're talking about journalism work.

**Mariam Kourabi**

And that seeps in perfectly into my next question of what is the significance of addressing these challenges for the future of journalism research?

**Nicole Blanchett**

Well, in my mind. You just need the journalists to really understand what's happening in a newsroom, and it's a bit different. There are, I mean, a lot more researchers who are studying journalism who've actually worked in newsrooms, uh, in the past few years. So, I think at the conference, um, a really high percentage of the researchers who were talking about journalism used to work in newsrooms. And I think that also makes a difference because you have a much, um, better understanding of how these organizations work, of the pressures that journalists, uh, might feel, um, how they might respond to an invitation to participate in research. I often say I would have been a horrible participant when I was in the newsroom if someone had approached me and asked for, uh, some of my time. You know, there are a lot more people who get what it's like to be in a newsroom, to be working in situations where you are so pressed for time and don't have enough resources, and then to have somebody come in and say, Hey, let's, let's do some theoretical discussions about, you know, what it means to work in journalism. Yeah, it's that understanding, even though you've, and even though, you know, I have worked in a

newsroom and I go to newsrooms quite frequently still, it's not the same as being in that environment, and things have changed a lot, and they are continually changing with the advent of new technologies, um, again, fewer resources, all these things that are happening, so it's so important to have the viewpoint of people who are actually doing the work, making the editorial decisions, dealing with these challenges, rather than just assuming, looking from the outside, oh, this must be why they made the decision.

### **Mariam Kourabi**

Because there's really no way of knowing why decisions are being made or how certain things impact newsroom practice until you're talking to the journalists who work in those newsrooms. Newsroom practice, these decisions are a little bit more examined in the next JRP study of Catch, Engage, Retain, which highlights how Canadian journalists are adapting to a changing media landscape, I would describe it. We hear often the term audience data. They're using algorithms to catch us. This is the sort of news that they want from us. Tell me a little bit about the science of using data points to measure the effectiveness of journalistic work and that is what we're doing basically with the journalistic role performance project.

### **Nicole Blanchett**

It's using a number of data points to not necessarily measure the effectiveness, but just the presence of certain types of journalistic rules, uh, in the work that is produced. It is, I guess the difference from the research point of view is again, you're gathering this data, you're analyzing it, you're looking for trends, that type of thing, whereas the way and what we talk about in that Catch and Gage paper is that for journalists working in newsrooms now, there is just this influx of data related to the audience that does have an impact on editorial decisions. You know, at a variety of levels, so, um, it's not necessarily that, you know, every reporter is thinking as they're writing a story, how is this going to impact, you know, the views or things like that. However, there are, you know, audience engagement specialists who are thinking about things like, well, what if you make your headline this, and these are the words that we're seeing trending and, and different things. Um, in terms of even who sees the content and how they're going to see it that are controlled by automation and algorithms and in some cases AI. So there are all of these different pieces of audience data that are creeping into different aspects of journalistic work. What we were really looking at in the journalistic role performance study in terms of the data is how is it actually impacting? Some of the roles one of them You know, it's an easy one to think about is infotainment and that's, you know, creating more engaging, um, content that people will pay attention to and that they will look at and read and absorb, uh, and this idea of using infotainment in a way to educate people, like this combination of infotainment and civic reporting, for example, that was evident in the interviews when people were talking about how they were developing their story ideas and what kind of things were impacting newsroom decisions. So it was that combination of, again, the interviews with the data that really, um, allowed us to get a different level of understanding about how audience data was impacting journalistic rules.

### **Mariam Kourabi**

And how do journalists perceive the importance of audience data, because their work is so dependent on it nowadays?

**Nicole Blanchett**

I think that a lot of journalists' narration of how important it is may not actually align with how important it is. So I think people are much more aware and it's much more acceptable to acknowledge that yes, we're looking at audience data and yes, we're trying to figure out ways to engage people. And yes, we're using, you know, AI and automation and things like that to figure out what people are going to see on a homepage or what's coming to them, you know, when they open up a page and all that kind of thing, where they're going to see in social media. But, um, most journalists I have spoken with still, I think, again, maybe to undervalue a little bit the, like how much the audience data impacts process overall, because it impacts it at so many different levels as well. So again, although an individual reporter may not be thinking Specifically about what they need to do in their day to day. I think at some points, like while they're writing a story, at some points they are thinking about it. And we were seeing, um, instances of reporters being told through the interviews and JRP, well these types of stories are getting a lot of traction, or, um, you know, this is really moving on social media. You know, what can we do with this story, that type of thing, and also, um, things that would definitely, you know, a few years ago be completely outside the norm of journalistic standards in terms of, you know, having links embedded in content that if someone who's reading it clicks on that, um, the news organization gets money. So things are definitely changing. The world of journalism is, uh, is a fast moving place right now. Yeah, it's almost like there's that internal conflict of I don't need the data points because I've got to figure it out. But the data points do mean a lot and they do speak a lot and it's important to consider them when approaching stories.

**Mariam Kourabi**

You briefly touched on some of the roles that are examined and discussed, um, and the discussion portion of the research goes really heavily into the different Subsections of the rules. Can you tell me about them a little bit more and how these rules are performed in Canadian media?

**Nicole Blanchett**

The civic role is a good example, so civic reporting is basically reporting that, um, impacts people's lives in terms of politics and decisions that are made in their community or at the national level or whatever it might be that might have an impact on their life. So your civic life as a citizen in the country. Um, so one aspect of that is the education. Um, part of civic reporting, as I discussed earlier, that a lot of, um, journalists identified as being quite important to them. So this education role in Canada was talked about a lot, was, um, measured a lot in the actual content analysis. So for us, we could see that this is a role, the educating of the public, was something that Canadian journalists felt very important about. And we saw that, and we've seen it in other studies that have been coming out recently, not even JRP ones. So this is something, again, that as we launch into the third wave, we can kind of see. Because the other interesting thing about the data that we collected, Was that it was the height of the covid pandemic as well. So, um, there was a certain element of, are we seeing, you know, is this going to be the same in the next wave, because there was such a unique circumstance happening and people needed information, critical information, um, related to the government and their communities and all

kinds of, you know, health issues and things like that. So will this trend persist when we look at reporting outside of this very specific time frame? There's also the, um, the news you can use element as well in Canadian reporting that we saw, uh, significant. amount of, again, and whether because this was in such a unique time where there was, people needed news they could use during this real crisis, um, time period with the pandemic in terms of employment benefits, again, you know, what masks work well, all these types of different things. so there were, There were such specific issues that were happening, it's going to be really interesting again to see how many of the patterns or, um, the level of presence of certain types of reporting, how much we're continuing to see that as we look at the next data collection period is in 2026. Uh, so it's going to be, uh, quite interesting to see what is going to, um, What's going to persist and what's not as things change and we're in a bit more of a, you know, a normalized period, um, because I was even like just looking at the paper, there were so many stories on hand sanitizer and recommendations about, um, what types to use and whether or not they prevent, um, transmission of COVID and all these types of things. Um, so it's, yeah, it's quite interesting. Another thing that was. Interesting about Canadian reporting, like we did have a quite a high level of infotainment in Canadian reporting, which includes, you know, things like emotions and sensationalism, um, and that type of thing, but we didn't have a lot of, even though we had high levels of infotainment, we didn't have a lot of, um, of the sensationalized type of reporting, so it's kind of, Interesting that, um, you have an idea in your head, for example, infotainment means it's, you know, exaggerated and, um, and sensationalized reporting, but that might not actually be everything that it involves. So, for example, in Canadian reporting, there was quite a bit of emotions, um, which is considered part of the packaging sub, uh, sub dimension of, um, the infotainment role. And obviously, there were some pretty sad stories happening around the time of COVID. So, just because a story has an emotional element to it. It doesn't necessarily mean that it's an intentional infotainment tool. It can just be this is, um, you know, this is valid for, for the story. Um, so yeah, I think part of what came out in all the analysis of the sub roles as well, is that again, different tools can be used for different things. We can combine, um, you know, this educator role and the civic, um, and the civic role with the, Um, so, I think that, um, Um, A big part of what came out of the analysis for all of the, uh, Canadian content of JRP was that these are, these can be hybrid roles that are used quite differently, that one type of reporting isn't, you know, infotainment reporting isn't bad, and, um, other reporting types aren't necessarily good, it's how they're used. Again, it's this back to the context, it's the context of the reporting and the context of the role that really matters.

### **Mariam Kourabi**

And these roles fluctuate, um, social context and what is going on in the world, um, is a huge driver of what role is, is the dominant one at that current age. What other roles did the JRP data find out that also pushed how those roles fluctuated or changed?

### **Nicole Blanchett**

I was going to say, I don't know that, um, Until we do the next analysis of the next wave, I don't know that we can actually talk too much about fluctuating and changing. But I, I think, um, because I think, you know, again, we don't have the data to kind of look back and be like, was education really important to reporters before we did this study? Um, but I think that there's

definitely been a rise in infotainment reporting, for example, just because of the way things move around on the web. So that's something where we can kind of say, you know, the, uh, There's a lot of research to show things that are more emotional, um, often untrue, will fly around quicker on social media and online. So newsrooms have been adapting in some ways to, again, to try to make content more engaging, to try to get people to, um, look at the news and packaging news in different ways. You can, but how, you know, how different is that from, um, from news previously? It's hard to tell because we don't have the Canadian content analysis to know that. So this next wave of JRP will hopefully help us unpack that a little bit in terms of fluctuation and change. But then we're going to have to deal with the issue of there was a pandemic. So if there are big differences, are there big differences because we were in the height of a pandemic? Or are there big differences because reporting has changed. So, um, basically we just have to keep repeating JRP studies for, you know, the next hundred years or so to figure out, uh, hopefully no, no pandemic happens in the next hundred years. So those studies can be a little bit more consistent, but there's always going to be something different too. So I think that the thing is as well with this level of analysis is that you're able to, um, Separate the variables and kind of take a look at different aspects of the reporting too. So, with, um, this past wave of JRP, we did have a COVID, um, marker on stories. So, we could kind of see, you know, stories without COVID, stories that did deal with COVID, are there differences, in reporting and that types of things. So, there are ways, you know, to unpack it a little bit, but, um, That's, again, context is king with research, with reporting, and with everything else, so it's just really important to be careful when we're doing the examination of this type of analysis to acknowledge, you know, to acknowledge the limitations, to really try to do a deep dive, to link, um, the content analysis back to specific examples when we're kind of sharing the data so that we can be clear in what we're talking about. it's a huge undertaking and a lot of careful analysis required, but so much information and insight available about what is actually in reporting, what we're actually seeing in the content analysis versus Um, what people think is in reporting, because one of the things overall that wasn't really dealt with as much in this, um, paper, because we were focusing on audience oriented roles, um, for the Catch and Engage paper, but, you know, there's a lot, watchdog reporting, um, this idea of being a watchdog is very important in terms of, um, how journalists see their role, but there is very limited, um, reporting That is, you know, true watchdog reporting in reporting around the world compared to all the other types of reporting that we see. Um, so sometimes things that there's great importance placed on doesn't necessarily appear as often in terms of the actual, uh, measured role as other types of roles.

### **Mariam Kourabi**

There's so much data that is already being studied, has already been studied. There's more for you to study. How are you gearing up for the third wave and the data collection, which is set to start in 2026?

### **Nicole Blanchett**

So we're just starting to think about it at this point because we've really, um, you know, some of these papers from the last wave have just been coming out in the past year. So as we look ahead, um, We're thinking about, from the Canadian perspective, again, are we going to see



differences because of the time frame? How are we going to, um, collect our data? You know, what are the resources that we need to have in place to do this? Are we going to use the same media organizations that we did last time? Which, generally, I think we will because, again, it'll be good in terms of being able to compare, um, what we had from last time. We're also going to be trying to explore if we can use some AI methods to help us do, um, certainly some of the data collection, uh, for the website of things and, and maybe some components of analysis. Um, it's very tricky though, because the analysis that you're doing with JRP. So there's one, um, variable qualifying adjectives, for example, but it actually has to be a qualifying adjective that's used in a way. Um, really shapes context in the story. So the example I always use as one of the first papers we did had epic snowmen in the title. So if it's an epic snowman, and that's like the focus of your story, then that qualifying adjective actually really has weight. Whereas if it's something like a blue car hit a you know, hit a pole, the fact that car is blue doesn't really, um, impact the context or, you know, sort of that idea of a qualifying adjective that gives some type of, uh, uh, judgment, not necessarily a judgment, but description of thing that has value in the story. So how do you separate that out? There's so many things, even, um, tone of voice if you're coding a broadcast story. So someone could be speaking really quickly and loudly, but if they're reporting live from somewhere where there's lots going on, it would make sense they were doing that. How does some, you know, how do you get, um, AI to distinguish between someone doing that in a way that would be considered natural or doing it in a way where You know, the anchor is kind of talking in a way with that's not necessary to do that..so yes, it'll be interesting to see where we can go with it. I'm not sure, um, if there is a way, I don't think there's a way to fully do the analysis, but I'm wondering if there's a way to do certain components, like for example, expert voices or, um, or official sources, because we also document what types of sources there are. So maybe, There are ways if a title is used or something like that, but I think there's always going to have to be a human element to it because just to verify, um, that the, the information is contextualized properly by the AI, I think is going to be very complex. So we'll start with the data collection part of it and see how far we get with any type of analysis.

**Mariam Kourabi**

Extremely fascinating ideas. I think huge teasers that,, now will have us sitting very patiently for the next round of published work. Dr. Nicole Blanchett, thank you so much for joining me for such an informative chat. I really appreciate it.

**Nicole Blanchett**

No problem. Happy to be here.