

ACTION RESEARCH

Collaborative research for the improvement of digital journalism practice

The combination of technological, organizational, and societal change constitutes a highly dynamic and complex research setting for Digital Journalism Studies, calling for process-oriented and inclusive research perspectives. At the same time, journalistic organizations have to generate sustainable innovativeness and creativity to remain relevant in these times of change. Action research offers a framework for research collaborations between scholars and practitioners, generating holistic and solution-oriented outcomes of value for science and practice. With the clear intention to induce change, action research starts with the reflection on practice with a view to improving it. This article argues for more action research in Digital Journalism Studies, elaborating on the opportunities for science and practice. A current action research project in Switzerland is introduced and evaluated to give an impression of this research culture. The remaining challenges derived from experiences in this project are also discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The internet, social media in particular, and the related transformation of user behavior brought far-reaching change to journalism. Technological innovations induce simultaneous technological and social change processes, creating a complex environment for journalism practice and research. Journalists are confronted with evolving role concepts (Grubenmann, Meckel, and Fieseler 2014), additional skill requirements (Deuze 1999), new forms of teamwork (Lichfield 2012), and more service-oriented versions of journalism (Artwick 2013; Haik 2013). In turn, publishers and media organizations confronted with a changeable media ecosystem (Doctor 2015) find themselves in need of new, sustainable business models (Pavlik 2013). To overcome these challenges, journalistic organizations have to generate sustainable innovativeness (Pavlik 2013) and creativity. How can Journalism Studies support practitioners' pursuit of self-determined digital adaptation? How should we construct our research designs to foster problem-focused and solution-oriented outcomes? How can we give our research a holistic and long-term perspective in order to cope with a complex research environment? To answer these research questions, we introduce action research as a research culture that fosters closer collaboration between practitioners and scholars in

order to overcome digital challenges in journalism. Action research is a framework for generating resolution-oriented (Stringer 1996, 10), local knowledge (Guba 1996, x) that science and practice value. As a methodology, action research offers a “participatory and collaborative” research approach and the reflection of practice “with a view to improving it” (McNiff and Whitehead 2006, 32).

To illustrate our arguments for more action research in Journalism Studies, we present our research collaboration with the editorial team of the Swiss daily newspaper “Neue Zürcher Zeitung”. The research questions guiding the project were: Why are this newspaper’s journalists reluctant to become involved in the development of digital forms of news coverage? How can the editorial management and the involved scholars foster the implementation of digital journalism in the newsroom? Our examination of journalists’ attitudes and reservations showed their need for (protected) opportunities, separate from their daily business and time pressure, to deal with emerging forms of digital journalism. Based on the generated insights, we jointly developed the Innovation Ateliers concept. The ateliers provided the journalists and editorial team members with the opportunity to step back from their daily business and reflect on the industry trends and implications of these for the papers’ digital news coverage. Journalists developed with our support brand-specific examples of digital storytelling. By presenting this action research application in the field of Digital Journalism Studies and evaluating its potentials for science and practice, we endeavor to foster the discussion and application of this methodological approach to the study of digital journalism practices in the research community.

In a first section of this paper, we introduce action research as a research culture by presenting the basic principles guiding the approach. In a second prefatory part, we elaborate on the potentials of Digital Journalism Studies and its practice. We subsequently present the abovementioned action research project in Switzerland and discuss this study and its outcomes in the light of our arguments in the introduction. In a concluding section, we reflect on the remaining challenges for the further application of action research to study journalism’s digital future.

ACTION RESEARCH AS A RESEARCH CULTURE

Different researchers (depending on their discipline, the project at hand, their related values and attitudes) call action research a “remarkably inclusive methodology” (Cunningham 2014, 3), a “research culture” (Tacchi, Slater, and Hearn 2003, 4), a “collaborative approach” (Stringer, 1996, 15), or simply a “tool” (Appelgren and Nygren, 2014, 396) for inquiry. The motivation in these perspectives to induce change for “personal and social improvement” (McNiff and Whitehead 2006, 14) by taking “systematic *action*” (Stringer, 1996, 15; italics in original) unifies them. In action research projects, members of communities become researchers – with or without the support of scholars, who act as enablers by contributing professional know-how and, in some cases, integrating their research questions. As a methodology that includes “a whole range of approaches and practices, each grounded in different traditions,” it helps these researchers investigate their environment and gain knowledge about the problems confronting them (Reason and

reflection alternate in a process which is often messy, haphazard, and experimental (McNiff and Whitehead 2006; Atkinson 2006; Schön 1983; Ladkin 2004). Research processes are complex and ever-changing, necessitating taking one step at a time in order to find a way forward (McNiff and Whitehead 2006). Deviant opinions can hinder this process, but they introduce new perspectives to finding a solution (Bergold and Thomas 2012).

The introduced principles give us a first idea how practitioners might profit from this problem-focused and solution-oriented research approach in order to identify and develop their practice's required adaptations to digital challenges. The introduced principles help scholars develop a holistic, inclusive research perspective in a complex research environment. In the following section, we elaborate on these arguments.

ACTION RESEARCH FOR DIGITAL JOURNALISM STUDIES AND PRACTICE

Journalists and publishers find themselves in a “rapidly evolving [environment with] ever greater pressures and dilemmas” (Niblock 2007, 20). The Internet's triumphant progress throughout society has triggered change processes in all social systems, with the media and communication system as one of the most affected industries. Legacy media are still struggling with the development of new, sustainable business models and innovative news offers to fight their demise (Knee, Greendwald, and Seave 2009; Lievrouw and Livingstone 2004; Pavlik 2013; Carbin 2014). For journalists, the ongoing transformations in a profession formerly characterized by its outstanding status, mass communication monopoly, and solid work conditions create a challenging environment that leads to role stress, identity conflicts, and overwork (Grubenmann, Meckel, and Fieseler 2013). In this increasingly digital and highly dynamic context characterized by “mind-blowing uncertainty” (Domingo, Masip, and Costera Meijer 2015, 55) and instability, we argue for action research as an investigation approach with potential for practitioners' need for orientation (Ekdale et al. 2014) and innovativeness (Pavlik 2013), on the one hand, and for Journalism Studies in order to conduct research into vigorous and “complex meeting places where our human reality [...] intersects with behavioral and technical systems” (Bradbury-Huang 2014, 666), on the other.

Innovativeness in Journalism Practice

In his paper on the future of journalism, Pavlik defines innovation as “the key to the viability of news media in the digital age” (2013, 190). To ensure long-term success, research, or “systematically gathered information designed to build knowledge,” should guide innovation (187). We propose action research as a framework for *collaborative* research between media organizations and scholars in order to develop problem-focused and resolution-oriented outcomes fostering innovativeness in digital journalism. Action research serves these researchers as a framework to *reflect on developments and practice*, to *control their action*, and *improve their practice* from within. In collaborations with different Swiss editorial teams, we recognized that most journalists lack time and cognitive resources to truly engage in the industry developments, as they are fully occupied with news' content dimension. To be engaged in these kinds of questions on a meta-level, journalists need avenues of thought that allow them to step back and reflect on their practice. In action research projects, scholars can provide such avenues of thought as

enablers and to support practitioners' self-reflection. As a framework, action research supports the systematic modification of practice by reflecting on it in a *conceptualizing* and *controlled* manner (Fendt and Kaminska-Labbé 2011). In these days of ever-evolving change, with insecurity hindering improvements to journalism practice (Ekdale et al. 2014), the systematic analysis of ongoing developments can support practitioners' sense making and provide orientation by establishing understanding. However, research should not stop at reflecting on practice and systematic inquiry. Action research becomes a constructive process when the involved stakeholders create solutions to pending problems by combining their diverse knowledge and experience. Based on a collaborative, constructive approach, action research can be defined as a design science aimed at developing "solutions to real-life problems [by producing] artefacts that are innovative, novel to the world, and are for some reason preferred over existing ones" (Fendt and Kaminska-Labbé 2011, 224). Based on these characteristics, action research has the potential to bring scholars and practitioners together to focus on extant and future problems, thus improving their industry's innovativeness.

Digital Journalism Studies in a Complex Environment

Beside its mentioned capabilities in terms of journalism practice, action research also has the potential to strengthen digital Journalism Studies as a discrete academic discipline by bringing theory and practice closer together. For this purpose, academics have to further align their research activities with the daily life of practitioners and their needs, thus bridging an identified relevance gap (e.g. Niblock 2007; Harcup 2011). Sarah Niblock states that there is "tension between [the] theoretical approaches [and] everyday practice" (2007, 23) in the field of Journalism Studies due to scholars' tendency to approach the research field with an outsider's limited perspective and focusing on journalistic output, while leaving a "range of territories" (28) (i.e., processes and decision making) uncharted. She further criticizes academics who tend to view the "news-making environment as somehow constant, seamless and unified," while news organizations see themselves as confronted with the challenge to adapt to rapid technological and social changes (23). To overcome this "clear gap in the current study of journalism" (28), we have to overcome the principles of distance and objectivity that characterize formal research processes (Stringer 1996) and bring theory and practice closer together by orienting research to problematic situations in practice.

To reach this goal, researchers need appropriate tools to conduct research in a complex environment and need to consider the "contexts and constraints" that practitioners face in their daily work (Niblock 2007, 23). Digital Journalism Studies are situated at the intersection of technological, social, strategic, and political dimensions providing a highly complex research environment. Information systems initiatives, as well as the introduction and maintenance of modern information and communication technologies in newsrooms, are dynamic and developmental processes requiring flexible and process-oriented research designs. Static, one-shot, positivist research with a limited focus on change processes' technical dimensions does not meet the complexity of this research setting (McDonagh 2014a; McDonagh 2014b). Research needs to understand that digital journalism is not just a matter of ongoing technological change, but is simultaneously organizational change – a notion which has led to a constructivist-turn in Digital Journalism Studies (Boczkowski 2004; Weiss and Domingo 2010) and induced a wave of ethnographic studies over the past few

years (Steensen 2011; Paterson and Domingo 2008). Action research follows this argumentation, but goes further by proposing a holistic, inclusive research culture that integrates different stakeholders and their perspective. It applies a process- and outcome-oriented perspective that is therefore also a long-term perspective. Together with the above-mentioned potentials to help practitioners systematically reflect on their practice and improve it from within, action research is a valuable framework for contributing to journalism's digital future – in science and in practice.

A COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT

In the following, we present our research collaboration with the editorial team of the Swiss daily newspaper “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” conducted between January 2013 and July 2014. After introducing the project, we evaluate its process and generated outcomes, providing arguments for more action research in Digital Journalism Studies and listing the principles characterizing this research culture.

In February 2013, myself and two research colleagues (Miriam Meckel and Christian Fieseler) from the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland had the chance (based on an existing business acquaintance) to meet Markus Spillmann, at that time the editor-in-chief of the “Neue Zürcher Zeitung”, for an informal talk about his worries regarding “losing” some of his journalists during the newspaper's ongoing convergence process. When we wanted to know more about his worries, he complained about his colleagues' lack of motivation and creative ideas when he announced his ambition to produce the first multimedia stories. As an editorial management member, he felt pressured to keep up with the international state-of-the-art digital news coverage, but simultaneously felt that his team did not back him. He asked us for support to identify the journalists' reservations and help the team gain ground in digital journalism. Interested in the research topic and the practice-oriented setting, we agreed to the collaboration, recognizing an opportunity for an interesting case study. Given this history, the research partner defined the participants and the research question for the case study. The research questions, which focused on local, case-specific insights, was: Why are this newspaper's journalists reluctant to become involved in the development of digital forms of news coverage? How can the editorial management and the involved scholars foster the examination and implementation of digital journalism in the newsroom? As scholars, we became participants in the research project due to our industry knowledge of the field of digital journalism and to contribute our methodological and analytical competences.

The Research Process

This action research project's starting point was the problematic situation of our practice partner. The collaboration goal was twofold: In a first step, we needed to identify the reasons for the journalists' reluctance to participate in the development of digital journalism projects. In a second step, we wanted to find a way to foster the examination of digital journalism and to determine what motivates journalists to implement their own digital projects. For our practice partner, the results of the second step had absolute priority. For us as scholars, the first element was a valuable opportunity to contribute to the emerging

(scientific) research stream on convergence processes in journalistic organizations. Stimulated by the ongoing examination of the research context at hand, we expanded the research question to the following: How does journalists' professional identity influence their readiness to change? This adaptation added important theoretical objectives to the research project that drove the learning in this newsroom study.

To conceptualize and organize our research, a project team was chosen comprising four scholars (with Eliane Bucher as an additional member), two members of the editorial management, one journalist, and two members of the newsroom's lab-team (responsible for the exploration of potentials in the field digital journalism). To learn more about journalists' attitudes and considerations, we decided to interview the editorial team members and discuss their perception of the convergence process. The editor-in-chief in particular helped the researchers compile a list of interview partners. A total of 34 of the 200-member editorial team were interviewed. Male and female journalists, journalists of different ages, and with different attitudes towards convergence and digital journalism were chosen for the talks. Two of the involved scholars (Stephanie Grubenmann and Eliane Bucher) and a student assistant (Lea Im Obersteg), who are experienced in qualitative interviewing, conducted all the interviews. The interviews have been transcribed and analyzed by all the involved scholars. At this point, the importance of the theoretical framework guiding the study became apparent. Even though the practitioners were not interested in the study's theoretical dimensions, it helped us as scholars to generate a far more detailed analysis of the interview data.

Conceptualization Based on Research Findings

After the insights from our research had been gathered, we discussed them with the project team. We identified several issues that hindered the convergence process and influenced the journalists' attitudes. We learned a great deal about the challenges in journalists' daily work due to the existing structures and conservative processes, and realized the significance of the cultural and leadership issues. These insights were of medium-term relevance for the editorial management, who would integrate them into future strategic decisions. Beside this, we drew implications for the second step of our project: The journalists had stressed the desire for hands-on experience with digital journalism in a protected environment separate from their daily business and time pressure. The differences between the journalists' experience with digital journalism, as described by the editor-in-chief at the beginning of the project, became apparent. Recognizing an opportunity to collaborate with scholars, the journalists identified specific areas in which they wished to benefit from insights based on international empirical studies and our industry knowledge. An important insight was the journalists' need for an explicit digital editorial strategy – a strategic issue that the editorial management had already postponed for months. The lack of editorial orientation seemed to constitute a basic challenge in the journalists' daily work. In these times of change, the journalists felt extremely uncertain about the paper's future and their personal situation. We realized that they not only needed an area — a kind of playground area — where they could examine digital journalism, but also an opportunity to discuss burning issues in an adequate context.

The gained insights gave us answers to our first research question by helping the project team to better understand the journalists' attitudes and corresponding behavior. This was the starting point to deal with our project's second goal – the 'action' part of the collaboration: We developed a workshop concept which would provide the journalists with an opportunity to examine digital journalism and discuss pressing issues with their colleagues and the editorial management team – which were both opportunities that the journalists lacked in their daily work. Even though the lack of a digital editorial strategy was identified as one of the most urgent issues concerning the journalists' daily work, the editorial management team refused to implement one immediately. They argued that they would need more time for such an important task. When we insisted that this issue had to be approached, they agreed on the possibility of integrating the journalists in the development process: They would not only analyze existing examples of digital journalism, but would be allowed to develop brand-specific applications. This would make them reflect on the potentials of the digital storytelling they encountered that were in line with the newspaper's brand and would provide them with opportunities to influence the digital editorial strategy inductively. The conception and execution of the workshop concept was our (temporary) answer to the second research question. However, since the project team presented these workshops without afterwards systematically analyzing their effect on the journalists' attitudes and behavior, a concluding statement about their quantitative outcomes is difficult. We will return to this aspect in the discussion part of the paper, after having briefly described the implementation of the workshop concept.

The Implementation: Innovation Ateliers

The workshop format was called "Innovation Ateliers." Over a nine-month timeframe, eight ateliers were presented. In each atelier, the project team collaborated with between 12 and 14 journalists. All the journalists (even the correspondents) were invited to participate. More than 100 (out of 200) journalists participated in an atelier. The number of atelier presentations was increased until every interested journalist had had the opportunity to participate.

Each atelier lasted two days and consisted of three elements: In a first part, we presented an analysis of the current developments in the industry and introduced an international collection of state-of-the-art digital journalism. In the second part of the atelier, the journalists were divided into groups of three to four people to develop creative concepts for digital news coverage of a preliminary chosen atelier topic (e.g., foreigners in Switzerland), taking different digital journalism trends into consideration. The groups developed their concepts over two half-days by interacting with the project team members, who constructively challenged the emerging ideas. In a final session, each group presented its concept, which the participants then assessed. To complete the final session, the atelier allowed discussion and self-reflection: A short viewpoint that we had prepared, as well as the editor-in-chief's strategic outlook stimulated the discussion and self-reflection when the attendees were invited to ask questions. This opportunity was extensively used in each atelier, leading to lively discussions each time.

To link the atelier with journalists' daily work and to engage as many team members as possible, we also organized a digital poll after each atelier to determine which of the four

developed concepts should be realized. After the first atelier, the editor-in-chief presented the idea of realizing the most popular concept of each atelier: He was excited about the quality and creativity of the developed ideas and wished to show his commitment. The editor-in-chief's decision thus intensified the developed projects' influence on the emerging digital editorial strategy. Several other minor adaptations were the result of the ongoing and intensive discussions with the participants and between the project team members. After the last atelier in June 2014, the project team members met for an intensive debriefing of the overall experience, the project outcomes and other implications.

DISCUSSION

In this section, we move from the project's research questions to this article's research objectives: How can Journalism Studies support practitioners' pursuit of self-determined digital adaptation? How can we give our research a holistic and long-term perspective in order to cope with a complex research environment? To find answers to these questions, we discuss the project by referring to the advantages of action research for Digital Journalism Studies and journalism practice outlined in the first part of the article.

Evaluation from Practitioners' Point of View

To evaluate the research collaboration from the practitioners' point of view, we consider the formal and informal feedback talks with the journalists after their participation in an atelier (which different project team members conducted), the project team's feedback sessions after every atelier, and the project team's debriefing after the last atelier.

Opportunity for reflection. The journalists perceived it as a very valuable opportunity to break out of their daily business, take a step back, and reflect on the changes in the industry and their influence on their newsroom practice. The journalists probably benefited most from the examination of international best practices and the meta-level discussions with colleagues from different departments. We were surprised that most of the participants had not examined leading international examples of digital journalism and trends before their participation in an atelier. Most of the journalists seemed to lack the resources and/or the motivation to follow these developments as part of their daily work. This conclusion led to the integration of avenues of thought, in the form of break-out sessions during lunchtime, into the newsroom's weekly routines as a project implication.

The workshop (and 'action') part of the project was more akin to further education than research, and we acted more as consultants than as researchers (we signed a non-disclosure agreement as important strategic issues were the topic of some discussions). We provided space for the journalists to reflect on their practice and acted as enablers and supporters. In principle, it would have been possible to present the ateliers without our participation, but this would have resulted in a different outcome: The participants benefited from our outsider perspective, our industry knowledge, and the discussion with us.

Systematic improvement. What began as an issue of newsroom culture (the editor-in-chief's worries) developed into a collective reflection on the newspaper's digital news coverage and resulted in its systematic, collaborative improvement. A deliberate decision was taken to not leave the formation of practical knowledge in this important area of activity

to chance, but to control its development. This decision was the result of the project's inclusive nature and is an example of emerging knowledge production over the course of the project. By involving journalists in the development of brand-specific digital storytelling and by contributing to the formation of the digital editorial strategy, the project process contributed to the organizational change and in turn made an important contribution to the newsroom culture. The journalists more than appreciated the opportunity to contribute to important questions regarding the newspaper practice and strategy.

Induce change. The starting point for the project was the clear intention to induce change – to go further than just describing and evaluating the current state. Even though the initiative for the project came from the editor-in-chief, what had to be changed and the direction in which this had to occur was the result of social knowledge construction (in cycles of observing, reflecting, planning, and acting) and, consequently, was an image of the editorial team's development. However, to measure the emerging knowledge production, or to capture the effects on journalists' practice would have been a difficult task. The project probably affected the cultural dimension most. The project team also refrained from measuring the quantitative effects on journalists' attitudes. This lack of a systematic evaluation of the ateliers' outcomes might be interpreted as contrary to the objective to improve practice in a *controlled* manner. However, their personal perception of the change was important for the practitioners – and distinguishable. In action research, we often find that “the process by which the project is undertaken is [...] as important, if not more important, than the ‘result’” (Ladkin 2004, 538).

Even though just about half of the editorial team participated in an atelier, the project and its implications affected the whole team. Nevertheless, the following question is still relevant: Did the project reach its objectives of being inclusive and participative if only half of the editorial team and, for example, an interactive designer were involved in the ‘action’ part? Certain values and principles are essential in the action research culture. However, certain researchers maintain that “[a]ction research is an aspiration, rather than a possibility” if one considers that action research theory assumes an ideal world (anonymous researcher (Peter) cited in Ladkin 2004, 547). Mostly, however, action researchers face a highly complex world rather than an ideal one. Researchers have to cope with never achieving a perfect action research process in the sense of considering all the principles fully. But they can make the best of a given opportunity to contribute to the “bettering of, or deeper understanding of, a situation” by respecting the local realities and action research's basic principles as a framework for their research activities (Ladkin 2004, 538).

Evaluation from an Academic Point of View

We evaluate the research collaboration from an academic point of view by considering the internal feedback session from the involved researchers, an internal debriefing after the project, and personal reflections during and after the project.

Holistic inquiry. A change process such as the convergence process in a newsroom constitutes a complex research setting at the intersection of the technological, social, political, and strategic dimensions combining technological and organizational change challenges. Researching such processes only delivers a snapshot, even if the research project endeavors to obtain an inclusive and long-term perspective such as the study at hand.

However, it was the close collaboration with the involved practitioners, in the explicit sense of *working together* and not just having a joint project, that led to a deeper and holistic understanding of these journalists' situation in a changeable environment. In the course of the project, we were confronted with a variety of data: formal and informal talks, interviews, different types of artifacts generated in the ateliers (such as drawings, sketches, and written concepts), passive observation, and active discussions. Owing to different stakeholders' involvement, a variety of perspectives also characterized the data. All of the data allowed us to dive deeply into the journalists' life to explore their current issues and identify those on the horizon. However, we had to learn to deal with this amount and variety of data. In the project at hand, we missed several opportunities to systematically collect data, which appeared unexpectedly, or because we only realized the (scientific) value of a situation in hindsight. For us, an important lesson from the project was that, in action research, scholars have to anticipate and be prepared (their cognitive state and their equipment) for such unexpected opportunities. However, research is not only about systematic data collection, because interesting talks and observation can serve as a valuable inspiration and/or trigger insights. But we have to accept that, in action research, scholars surrender some of the control that they normally try to maximize in more formal research. Action research projects are often messy and haphazard, which makes anticipatory planning and anticipating unexpected valuable occasions for data collection and conscious analysis (beside the planned ones) indispensable.

Action research literature (e.g., McNiff and Whitehead 2006) stresses the potential, even the responsibility, for scholars *and* practitioners to contribute to "the creation of theory from cycles of action and reflection," which is sometimes called action science (Ladkin 2004, 537). In the project at hand, we added a theoretical dimension to the project's first research question, resulting in more elaborated insights into the interview analysis and a theoretical contribution to the scientific community in the form of two conference papers (Grubenmann, Meckel, and Fieseler 2014; Grubenmann 2015) and one journal paper (Grubenmann and Meckel, forthcoming). This process illustrates that practitioners and the scientific community can benefit from action research projects. However, as mentioned above, we also missed a more systematic data collection and analysis opportunity in the second part of the project.

Relevance gap. The project offered us a very stimulating environment. Having an academic background and 'one foot in practice' meant we had a valuable position from which to reflect on digital journalism practices and gain inspiration and knowledge for future research projects – not all of which will be realized as action research. The research objective to investigate cross-departmental teamwork in newsrooms as an innovative working format to cover "wicked problems" (Lichfield 2012) resulted from our experiences in the ateliers. The explorative study will be realized in the spring of 2015 with the same research partner to investigate first experiments with cross-departmental newswork. And although this study will not comprise any 'action,' it is still of interest for the editorial management team already concerned with the next convergence issues. If we consider action research as a research culture (Tacchi, Slater, and Hearn 2003) or orientation (Reason and McArdle 2004) characterizing a closer co-existence between science and journalism practice, the two areas can provide each other with valuable stimulation: Scholars can gain

insights and inspiration for their theorizing and practitioners can profit from more practice-oriented and problem-focused research outcomes.

CONCLUSION AND REMAINING CHALLENGES

In our argumentation, we introduce action research as a research frame for holistic inquiry dealing with highly dynamic and complex research settings – as in Digital Journalism Studies that lie at the intersection of technological, social, strategic, and political dimensions. It was the intensive examination of the involved stakeholders' situation that helped us to gain a (first) idea of the existing challenges, the related drivers, and the correlations. The developed approach may deliver a local, but only partial and temporary solution to some of the variety of existing (and persisting) challenges with which these journalists (and others) have to deal in digital journalism. It would be overconfident to assume that we can develop ultimate solutions, because digital transformation is developing very fast. Whenever we believe we have found a way of dealing with an issue and have improved our praxis, the next challenge is already looming on the horizon. The fast pace of change requires us to closely align our research objectives to practitioners' needs in order to generate problem-focused research outcomes. The principles on which action research is based help us design and realize flexible and adaptive research projects by centering practitioners' situation – which may even change during longer collaborations. Despite, or because of, this flexibility, action research projects generate sustainable contributions for solving practitioners' problems.

The introduced project made it possible to not just contribute to solving practitioners' problems, but also contribute to the scientific community. However, the presented approach is only one example of a research collaboration design. Others are possible, valid, and necessary. There is no such thing as *perfect* action research (Ladkin 2004). In every new project, the involved researchers have to find their own ways of aligning the participating and concerned stakeholders' interests. Further, researchers cannot fully respect all the presented principles in every stage of a research project, but their priorities have to be transparent and consciously determined. This is a learning process, which the researchers (practitioners and scholars) in the presented project had to learn. There are a few remaining challenges that researchers have to consider when studying journalism's digital future in action research projects.

The Search for a Reliable Partner

In action research, the project stakeholders share their "diverse knowledge and experience" to develop solutions for the local challenges (Stringer 1996, 10). Different stakeholders gain the right to be integrated into such research through their personal involvement and/or by contributing their expert knowledge that is indispensable for solving the problem. Bergold and Thomas point to the difficulties with identifying the concerned stakeholders and criticize the lack of systematic procedures (2012). Identifying such stakeholders is a complicated matter that most handbooks simply ignore in the relevant chapter. As a temporary alternative, Bergold and Thomas refer to examples of rather pragmatic strategies (2012). In addition, not all of the identified stakeholders can become involved in research projects, or are willing to do so. Practitioners also have to decide if they

do have a problem and require the support of scholars and, if so, which institution's scholars will meet their needs. If they cannot rely on established contacts, it can be a difficult task to identify and evaluate the relevant academic research institutions. Scholars face similar problems if they are looking for suitable research partners among practitioners – especially if they require a financial contribution to fund their research activities. However, successful projects can turn into trustworthy networks, which make new collaborations easier.

The Complexity of Action Research Projects

Digital Journalism Studies, which lie at the intersection of technological, social, strategic, and political dimensions, have to consider and integrate a variety of different perspectives. In our project, we recognized that even the integration of the three concerned stakeholder groups (journalists from different departments, members of the editorial management, and scholars) leads to resource and time-intensive research activities. Although it would have been very valuable to include interactive designers' or users' perspectives in the process to guarantee a holistic treatment, this would have exceeded the participants' capacity. In our project we thus decided to prioritize complexity reduction rather than a holistic examination. We believe that the complexity and dimension of inclusive action research projects are a fundamental challenge for the realization of this kind of research. Tanja Aitamurto (2013) integrates journalists' and users' perspectives in her study of co-creation in magazine journalism, while Appelgren and Nygren (2014) collaborate with seven media companies to learn more about data-driven journalism. Nevertheless, neither publication informs us about the challenges of handling such projects as a research facilitator. We argue for the further integration of process-related experiences into journal publications on action research projects to foster learning cycles and the development of adapted forms that take the field's specific peculiarities into consideration. What do we have to consider when integrating journalists' and users' interests in a research topic? How can we downgrade, or fragment, complex research issues? Researchers have to learn from each other how to cope most efficiently with these kinds of issues that action research raises.

Appropriate Quality Dimensions

"If an action research project does not *make a difference*, in a very specific way, for practitioners and/or their clients, then it has failed to achieve its objectives" (Stringer 1996, 11; italics in original).(Stringer 1996)(Stringer 1996)(Stringer 1996)(Stringer 1996) With this intention to induce change, action research harms traditional research standards of objectivity and validity. Researchers do not just change, but also *direct*, research outcomes with their purposeful intervention. To respect the basic principles of action research, we have to develop appropriate dimensions to evaluate the quality of such projects. Hilary Bradbury-Huang offers seven "choice points" as a starting point for further quality discussions (2014, 667): relevance of the research objectives, the partnership and participation, the contribution to practice knowledge and/or theory, the actionability, reflexivity, and relevance beyond the immediate context. Herr and Anderson (2005) complement this list by postulating catalytic validity, process validity, and dialogic validity. Our discussion can build on this groundwork. However, to gain a further understanding of

appropriate standards, we have to increase action research's visibility in the community and foster academic publications, even if the quality discussion has not been concluded as yet.

Scholars as Insiders and Outsiders

Another challenge when discussing the objectivity and validity in, and the quality of, action research projects is the issue of going native: The close collaboration with practitioners, the focus on local problems and solutions, and the alignment of scientific and the practitioners' research objectives make going native even more likely than in other forms of qualitative inquiry. Can research partners be too close? Or does the quality of action research outcomes increase the closer scholars and practitioners are? In our project, we certainly developed a more intense relationship with our project partner than we had experienced in other research projects. In action research, scholars do not just research the participants, but also collaborate with the practitioners, thus sharing their research objectives. However, our participation in the project probably generated the most value by contributing an outsider perspective. The editorial team wanted our *critical* analysis and feedback. They *expected* us to stay as impartial as possible. We did, of course, want to learn as much as possible about our project partner and often adopted the practitioners' perspective to provide local solutions. Self- and group reflection, as well as ongoing theorizing, specifically helped us gain valuable distance during the collaboration. We believe that the main challenge for scholars involved in action research projects is the requirement to simultaneously be an insider and an outsider.

The greater the number of action research projects realized and published, the faster scholars will learn to deal with such and similar issues. The extant action research publications in the field of Journalism Studies (Appelgren and Nygren 2014; Aitamurto 2013; Cochrane et al. 2013) shows the openness of this research community to innovative approaches and attests to the connectivity between Journalism Studies and practice. It further shows that reflection on adequate forms of action research and quality dimensions for this field of research are already in progress. The field of Digital Journalism Studies in particular, a complex research environment at the intersection of technological, social, strategic, and political dimensions, holds considerable potential to invest further resources to leverage these efforts and contribute to journalism's digital future.

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