

Journalism Startups as Networks in Transition: The Case of *The Hoser*

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ABSTRACT

Toronto has been a centre for media covering international, Canadian as well as local news, but often important stories were left out—voices of people who have made the metropolitan area multicultural and vibrant. The challenges they faced in the increasingly divided city—between the haves and the have-nots—were largely ignored. It was a recognition of this gap that brought together a group of recent journalism graduates in the fall of 2021 to establish a journalistic startup: *The Hoser* with a “focus on local GTA [Greater Toronto Area] news with a progressive approach.” The question this article will explore is the extent to which technologies enabled the emergence of *The Hoser* and the weight of other considerations, including an interest in pursuing a more participatory and more democratic form of journalism than that offered by mainstream media organizations. Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT) offers an approach that enables journalism researchers to trace the diversity of actors—human and nonhuman—and actants, and the ways in which they come together to practice the production and circulation of stories. Some scholars have employed ANT to explore how digitization has impacted newsrooms. Others have examined “big data” and journalism. Interestingly, there are few studies adapting ANT to better understand the emergence and practices of online journalism outlets. This gap focuses the research on *The Hoser*, exploring insights ANT may provide.

Keywords: journalistic startup, mainstream media organizations, actor network theory (ANT), technology, *The Hoser*

RÉSUMÉ

Les startups du journalisme comme réseaux en transition : Le cas de *The Hoser*

Toronto a longtemps été un foyer pour les médias couvrant l’actualité internationale, canadienne et locale. Cependant des histoires importantes ont souvent été laissées de côté—les voix de ceux qui ont rendu la région métropolitaine multiculturelle et vibrante. Les défis qu’ils ont dû relever dans une ville de plus en plus divisée entre les privilégiés et les marginaux ont été largement ignorés. C’est en reconnaissant cette lacune qu’un groupe de jeunes diplômés en journalisme s’est réuni à l’automne 2021 pour créer un projet journalistique : *The Hoser*, qui se concentre sur l’actualité locale de la région du Grand Toronto avec une approche progressiste. La question que cet article explorera est de savoir dans quelle mesure les technologies ont permis l’émergence de *The Hoser* et le poids d’autres considérations, notamment l’intérêt pour la poursuite d’une forme de journalisme plus participative et plus démocratique que celle offerte par les organisations médiatiques traditionnelles. La théorie des réseaux d’acteurs (TRA) de Bruno Latour offre une approche qui permet aux chercheurs en journalisme de retracer la diversité des acteurs - humains et non humains - et les façons dont ils se réunissent pour pratiquer la production et la circulation des histoires. Certains chercheurs ont utilisé la TRA pour étudier l’impact de la numérisation sur les salles de rédaction. D’autres ont examiné les «big data» et le journalisme. Il est intéressant de noter qu’il existe peu d’études adaptant la TRA pour mieux comprendre l’émergence et les pratiques des points de vente de journalisme en ligne. Cette lacune met l’accent sur la recherche sur *The Hoser*, en explorant les perspectives que la TRA peut apporter.

Mots-clés : startup journalistique, organisations médiatiques grand public, théorie des réseaux d’acteurs (TRA), technologie, *The Hoser*

INTRODUCTION

On March 29, 2021, an article titled “Parkdale Tenants Rally Against Goliath Landlords” was posted on *The Hoser*, a new journalism startup based in Toronto. It told the story of residents of a rental apartment building in Parkdale who feared eviction after protesting against management’s (and the owners’) neglect of the property (Carranco, 2021). This article was the first to be published by the startup with its focus on the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and its suburbs. After six months of planning, organizing and raising money, *The Hoser*, the brainchild of two young journalists, went “live.” The story represented what they wanted its journalism to reflect: “a brand new independent digital media outlet that will focus on local GTA news with a progressive approach” (*The Hoser*, Mandate, n.d.).

For years, Toronto has been a centre for mainstream media organizations that covered international, Canadian, as well as local news, but important stories were often left out. These were stories emerging out of community organizations and local neighborhoods, the voices of people who were mostly left unheard, but who have made the metropolitan area multicultural and vibrant. At the same time, the challenges these residents faced in the increasingly divided city—between the haves and the have-nots—were largely ignored by the mainstream media. It was a recognition of this gap that brought together a group of recent journalism graduates in the fall of 2020 to establish a fact-based journalism startup providing coverage of the city and its environs. Unlike other media enterprises that emerged around the same time in the GTA—whether community-based newspapers or issue-specific magazines—with a similar progressive mandate, the founders of *The Hoser*

chose not to adopt a mainstream journalistic model but rather to experiment with what is still considered a relatively new idea: an online journalism startup.¹

The journalists affiliated with *The Hoser* shared a journalistic background as well as a common sense of mission. The question this paper explores is: how did they establish a network that involved actors, technologies and work practices? Put differently, what was involved in *The Hoser* becoming a news and current affairs startup and how has the journalism been done? Technology, I show, does not only impact the initiatives and the practices of the journalists but is an integral part of the processes unfolding within the emerging network. This idea may not seem groundbreaking, but often the intersection between technology and social considerations is given less attention than it deserves, especially in journalistic startups.

Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT) offers an approach that enables researchers to trace the diversity of actors—human and nonhuman—and actants interacting with one another and the ways in which they come together to produce journalistic content (Latour 2007; Block & Tenson, 2012). A number of journalism scholars have employed ANT in exploring how digitization has impacted the newsroom (Lewis & Westlund, 2015). Others have used the approach to examine the use of “big data” in journalism practices (Wu, Tandoc & Salmon, 2019). Interestingly, there have been few studies adapting ANT to better understand the emergence of and early practices shaping independent online journalistic outlets such as *The Hoser*. This creates a space for my focus on the Toronto-based startup and permits assessing insights the approach may offer.

While technology made the proliferation of digital media outlets possible, the crisis in mainstream media organizations meant that

¹ Among the progressive media outlets that emerged in recent years is the *West End Phoenix*, which is more of a west end Toronto-based hard-copy newspaper with journalists, writers and artists participating in its production. Another local initiative is *The Local*, an investigative long-form online magazine that has focused much of its attention on public health during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Hoser*’s mandate is not community-based nor issue-specific; it aims to address general concerns of GTA residents that are often overlooked.

new forms of organizing coverage would most likely have emerged in one way or another. Blogs and social media outlets such as Twitter may be considered by some as new online forms of journalistic expression.² But journalism startups are distinct in that they challenge the authority and position of mainstream media organizations—not necessarily the core of their journalism—charting new territory by expanding the scope, relevance and understanding of journalism (Deuze & Witschge, 2020). Technology has been intrinsic to each and every step taken by journalists (and others involved) in making news and current affairs happen and, accordingly, it blends into everyday routines. This perspective is not new. From its early days, journalism and technology were intertwined, starting with the printed word, to radio facilities, to television cameras, to editing suites, to computers. At the same time, journalism has also been guided by principles that govern its practices and, until recently, have remained fairly stable.³ Journalism startups aim at maintaining the integrity of what journalism entails—its core values—and, at the same time, their practices and discourses seek to challenge traditional concepts of the profession. Whether technologically or ideologically innovative, journalistic startups tend to further the societal role attributed to journalism. Indeed, it is during the current highly uncertain, precarious and challenging media environment that these independent digital outlets have emerged.

Much of the journalism literature considers the current crisis in the profession, with some focused on the role of technology. In the first part of this article, I review recent scholarship that emphasizes the problems within the news media as a journalism issue, with less attention given to technological considerations. For others,

the blending of digital media technologies with the production of content—convergence—is a primary focus of research with scrutiny given to the changing relationship between journalists and audience members. For still others, journalism startups are examined as a possible alternative mode of journalistic practice. I then discuss how Latour’s ANT approach has been accommodated by journalism scholars who consider technologies as actors and part of network practices that are the *modus operandi* of mainstream newsrooms. Journalism startups and their practices are mostly overlooked by these scholars, however. As a result, I follow their footsteps in considering journalism as a creation of hybrid collectives—human and non-human—to frame my exploration of one such startup, *The Hoser*, and to systematically analyze the actors involved in the production of its first article.⁴ I then give the stage—so to speak—to the founders of *The Hoser*, to offer an assessment of whether ANT as an approach enables an understanding of the early beginnings of their journalistic enterprise. This initiative may be considered one modest step in furthering the practice of grounded theory. Finally, I evaluate what ANT offers when studying digital media outlets, and suggest its shortcomings in neglecting broader socio-economic context.

LITERATURE REVIEW: TECHNOLOGY AND JOURNALISM

The history of journalism is tied to the evolution of technology. But, until recently, journalism scholars have mostly foregrounded the human component in the intricate interrelationship between the two fields

² For most journalism scholars, the vast majority of blogging does not qualify as journalism. If journalism is, broadly speaking, the imparting of verifiable facts to an audience, then most blogs fall well short of meeting that standard. Many blogs focus on narrow subject matter of interest to a select but circumscribed niche. And the blogs that do contain *bona fide* news are often derivative, posting links to other blogs and, in many cases, print journalism. In fact, some would argue that journalism is focused on facts, while blogs more often than not contain the opinion of the writer. Similarly while Twitter is used by journalists, their tweets, like those of other users, are not generally considered journalism.

³ See, for example, the excellent study of Canadian journalism by Callison & Young (2020).

⁴ I will be relying on my ongoing conversations with the founders of *The Hoser*. One of the reasons I chose to focus on this particular startup is that I was a witness to the conversations, dilemmas and decisions of the founders from the beginning. While there were various discussions about journalistic options, the decision they made was to establish a non-profit journalism start-up.

or, at best, afforded technology a supporting role in the practice of journalism. A possible reason for this oversight is the crisis in journalism that has been going on for at least the past three decades. While the crisis is related to technological shifts, including the Internet, digitization, and datafication, questions about journalistic norms and values such as objectivity and representation often took precedence in academic circles.⁵ At the same time, the loss in ad revenue, the growing appetite for real-time mobile news, and the challenge of engaging an always-on, perpetually distracted audience—which have exerted significant pressure on the viability of mainstream news organizations—also gained interest among journalism scholars.⁶ In addition, attention has been directed to new forms of journalistic organization—ranging from semi-professional blogs to news and current affairs startups—that have entered the journalism ecosystem.⁷ These platforms have been considered an expression of, as well as a reaction to, changes in media production and distribution patterns, and they are often considered with technology as a backdrop.

This is the context in which Mosco (2019) has written a “big picture” analysis of the social impacts of new technologies. He proposes a somewhat technologically determinist thesis: we’ve reached the point whereby tech giants like Google and Facebook are having a profound impact on key elements of public life (e.g., public opinion and politics) and have left journalism a limited space, only to play a marginal role in society. From his perspective, journalism failed to take advantage of the emerging digital world, missing opportunity after opportunity, until the power of the information technology companies became so entrenched as to make it nearly impossible to have any impact. Briefly, then, Mosco separates the world of technology from the world of information in the form of journalism, and that includes the extent to which journalists interact with online search engines and social media, and in what ways, to do their jobs.

Zelizer (2019) is as concerned about technology but for different reasons. She is troubled by technological discourse gaining too much prominence, when there is an urgent need to rethink and reevaluate journalism as an institution with a set of practices and ethics codes that are resistant to change. She argues that thinking about journalism only through recent technological advances—the digital world—misses the substance of what journalism is. Accordingly, journalists have always used technology to reach their public and digital technology is merely another means. This is not to take away from its contribution, but by focusing on technologies there is a risk of neglecting important issues about continuity and how change can take place. In other words, technology is, at least to some extent, taken for granted, and the questions to address are within what I would call the “journalistic ecosystem.”

There are those who look more closely at the impact technology has on journalism. Singer (2009; 2011), for example, focused on the convergence of different media platforms and technology. In *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, a chapter by Singer and Quandt (2009) provides a thorough summary of the various convergence perspectives taken by journalism scholars. One perspective focuses on the changing role of journalists who now are expected to deliver items on various platforms (i.e., TV, radio and online); a second direction that research has taken is the impact of convergence on content—has the quality of the journalism changed since online platforms require a faster turnaround of updates?—and the third approach is directed to issues surrounding user-generated content, or the audience as participants of journalistic production. Singer has been particularly interested in this last area of research. Separately, she also suggests that when discussing convergence and journalism outlets, there are winners and losers. Print journalism and especially those outlets producing high quality content will likely not survive, while TV and radio will do well because both have core strengths that

⁵ Excellent critiques of journalistic practices, journalistic teaching, and journalism studies include Callison and Young (2020) and Zelizer (2017).

⁶ For a good analysis of the specifics, including the failing business model of commercial media and the precariousness of labor in the mainstream media, see Waisbord (2019).

⁷ See, for example, Deuze and Witschg (2020). The authors spent five years exploring the range of emerging online journalistic platforms around the world, their journalism, and the motivations of journalists working in this environment.

ally with those of the Internet (Singer, 2009). While recognizing that technology has always played a major role for journalism from the source (e.g., telegraph, telephone, email) to the transmission method (printed press, radio, television), with the digitization of society that began in earnest toward the end of the 20th century, and the digitization of journalism, the daily practices as well as the norms of journalists have been reconsidered. That is, the daily journalistic tasks have become both easier and harder (Singer, 2011). For one, the tools of the profession have become smaller and simpler, offering unparalleled physical mobility and opportunities to report on diverse platforms. At the same time, the shifting relationship between those inside and outside the newsroom—journalists and the audience—has resulted in the expectation of more participation in news production of the latter. Indeed, Singer (2011) refers to the novelty of this give and take of the interactive medium as a network where issues of control and interpersonal relationships have made the authority of journalists more complex and, from her perspective, a priority to investigate. But what are the implications of prioritizing human-based networks over human-non-human networks? Networks created by social actors, technologies, and other objects or facilitators established for the purpose of the production of journalism are as much a priority and need to be considered as well. That same logic should apply to mainstream media organizations and emerging journalistic startups that solely exist as online platforms.

A somewhat more dynamic position with respect to technology and media platforms is taken by Usher (2017), in her study of 18 startups in the U.S. and Europe that emerged and established themselves with relatively large capital investments as for-profit enterprises. The purpose of her research is to assess the similarities and differences between these startups and mainstream news organizations. Her findings

suggest that even though the digital platforms use technological innovations such as algorithms and other news personalization efforts to increase audiences, as well as give technical staff somewhat equal status to journalists, so far “the rules of the game” are still to “help orient the public” (p. 1128). That means the focus is on original journalistic content that makes journalism interesting and easy to consume by the audience. As Usher puts it, news startups “respect the fundamental integrity of the field’s underlying doxa” (p. 1125). But she indicates that it is not clear if journalists will be needed to select the news stories in the future. In other words, technological solutions may be the key to identifying what is journalistically valid reportage. Here, the author offers the possibility that journalism and technology can be conceptualized as interacting rather than as exclusive domains.⁸

But what makes journalism startups different from other forms of online expression such as blogs or tweets, for example? Deuze and Witschge (2020) offer important insights into the dynamic nature of this novel form of journalism based on a comprehensive study of dozens of different types of these startups around the world. Most importantly, they argue that journalism startups are distinct insofar as their practitioners “deliberately operate next to or outside of legacy media institutions—and ... consider themselves journalists” (p. 108). As well, the overwhelming tendency of the journalists is to be committed to social change and improving the lives of communities. The authors also maintain that these producers of journalistic content are entrepreneurs, of sorts, in that they are stepping into unfamiliar territory and breaking new ground, unlike the mainstream that is associated with routines and conventions, bound by tradition.⁹ They have made a proactive decision to enter a new journalistic environment, trying out new ideas with respect to technology, content, authority and professional boundaries.

⁸ Garcia-Orosa, Lopez-Garcia and Vázquez-Herrero (2020) also attempt to reveal the bridge between technology and journalistic practices. Their study of six news startups that have been operating in different countries in Europe indicates that the digital outlets responded to the needs of their particular audiences by incorporating them into the process of production of news (e.g., as sources) as well as responders to initiatives (e.g., public meetings and town halls). They identify digital technologies as the way in which the audience has been identified.

⁹ Entrepreneurship does not refer here to any priority given to an economic model or financial gain. While Deuze and Witschge (2020) argue that economic interests linger in the background, the focus for journalism startups seem to be much more on ideological motives, related to serving the public or striving for quality ideals of journalism.

In other words, journalism startups tend to take leeway to play with what is possible in journalism—experimenting and stretching its limits.

To summarize the literature review, the tendency to give a partial account of the relationship between the process of doing journalism and technology risks not addressing the totality of what journalistic practices entail. There is, by and large, a recognition that journalism today would be different without digital technologies and, in fact, the discipline would probably not exist as scholars now know it. But the literature still does not consider technology as important as other actors involved in the process of journalistic production. Indeed, in the digitally-connected world, changes do not only happen within journalism as a discipline, but also around it, and there is a need to address overlapping and interacting aspects of technology with different journalistic practices including those of emerging journalism startups. In the following section, I will explore how Latour's ANT can help reveal the actors and networks involved in ascending journalism startups such as *The Hoser*, and what resources they mobilize to shape something they call journalism.

TRACING ACTORS, ACTANTS AND NETWORKS: ANT AND JOURNALISM

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) came together, according to Latour (2007), because traditional social scientists and in particular sociologists have “simply confused what they should explain with explanation” (p. 8). Instead of seeing “society” as a domain of reality already in existence, and the context within which everything is framed, ANT breaks down this collective term into its component parts, arguing that “society” should be viewed as made up of specific social ties that are associated with the existence of specific social and other forces. It traces associations between heterogeneous

elements—human and nonhuman actors—that may be assembled in new ways. In short, an actor is whatever makes a difference in an action or a series of ongoing actions—it is what is made to act by many others: “it is an association between entities which are in no way recognizable as being social in the ordinary manner, except during the brief moment when they are reshuffled together” (p. 65).

As an approach, ANT thrives “in situations where innovations proliferate, where group boundaries are uncertain, and when the range of entities to be taken into account fluctuates” (p. 11). In these instances, because of the inclusion of new actors and interactions, Latour (2007) argues that social scientists should not use preconceived categories to describe the social but instead allow actors themselves to define and explain their realities. Here there are no prescribed pathways, nor must actors refer to human agents or be seen as fixed entities. As Latour (2007) puts it: “Your task is no longer to impose some order, to limit the range of acceptable entities, to teach actors what they are...You have to follow the actors themselves” (pp. 11-12).

Over the past decade, ANT has found a niche among journalism scholars. Perhaps one of the reasons is that in the studies of technology and journalism, especially with recent digital innovations, the approach can be particularly insightful due to its reimagining of the social. One could see the merit of the argument that within the field of journalism lines are blurring between individuals, the work environment (institutional or not), and technology, and that should encourage researchers to study what Latour (1993) calls “hybrid actors” because these are becoming increasingly characteristic of the discipline's multimedia environment.¹⁰ As well, by following all the actors and documenting their actual contributions instead of focusing on issues surrounding truth, objectivity, and ideology in the journalistic discipline, one can offer insight into what journalism *is*, rather than what it should be.

Among the proponents of ANT and its usefulness for the study of journalism are

¹⁰ One of the key ideas of Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) is the development of the notion of “hybrid.” He proposes that modern western society distinguishes between culture, nature, and discourse by pointing out that this demarcation presupposes a certain ordering of things, but this is an illusion. At the same time as the moderns are drawing distinctions, they are also doing the opposite: creating and maintaining hybrids.

Primo and Zago (2015). From their perspective, journalism is produced through both human and nonhuman actors, conceived of as “actants:” material objects that work as networks and in associations. Rather than viewed as accessories or intermediaries through which humans can act, technology is considered as being capable of acting alongside human actors as co-creators of journalism, playing transformative roles as mediators capable of altering meanings as they participate in the processes of news creation, distribution, and consumption. The way Primo and Zago (2015) put it, “Journalism is a creation of hybrid collectives” (p. 43). Consequently, there is no pure social situation, nor is there essentially a technical one.

They propose that journalism, especially as practiced by mainstream news organizations, be recognized as a “momentary process that takes place while specific associations are maintained,” and acts to trace what these associations or assemblages are (p. 42). For example, algorithms are capable of releasing human journalists to pursue more analytical, investigative stories, as well as alter news consumption habits based on the way the algorithms curate the news, pointing toward their transformative roles in journalism (Primo & Zago, 2015). Or, another example, a news item can include various actors— human and non-human—that are associated in a complex network, from the satellite truck, to the IT person operating the truck, to the reporter, to the notepad, to the laptop, to a handheld video camera operator. What is required from the researcher is to uncover the associations between the human and technological actors. In other words, looking at journalism through an ANT lens means that intrinsically it does not exist. Rather, “journalism happens. Journalism becomes” (Primo & Zago, 2015, p. 42).

Plesner (2009), another proponent of ANT, adds an important point suggesting that when different actors reach an agreement, indicating a successful “translation” (p. 613), where a common definition is reached, the journalistic process becomes predictable, with minimal fluctuations.

This is the stage of normalization, the point when technological use in newsrooms is so seamlessly executed and normalized that it finally becomes invisible to the process.

Domingo, Masip, and Meijer (2015) add to this approach by proposing a way to overcome the disciplinary divide between analysis of journalism norms, news production, and consumption of mainstream news. They use the term “news network” to explore “how journalism as a practice is (re)configured” using ANT (p. 56).¹¹ They call on researchers to trace the production of journalism by considering the “practices and discourses that people perform to produce, circulate and use news” while accounting for “professional ideals, symbolic constructions and material artifacts” (p. 56). Because ANT does not require researchers to define what journalism is in the first place, it allows them to discover “what counts as journalism [from] the output of [their] empirical enquiries” (p. 60). The value of ANT, therefore, is not necessarily to build a theoretical framework that can predict journalism practice in the digital age, but to help researchers obtain empirical accounts of how journalism in newsrooms—virtual or not—is actually evolving. When researchers share their results with each other as well as with the “actors” taking part in the research, that is when “the mosaic of the journalisms that are being practiced today” emerges (p. 63).

An integral part of that mosaic is tracing how technological actants interact with other actants, human or nonhuman, to “enable others to do something, force them to do it, or stop them from doing it” (Domingo, Masip & Meijer, 2015, p. 58). Here, though, relations among actants that create a journalism network are not based on *a priori* expectations or predictable positions. Rather, the focus on connections between actants through their interactions is a practice pursued in order to understand how journalists become what they are and why they do what they do. As of now, studies involving ANT as a framework have identified email, search engines, and the phone as actants in journalists’ work practice, and have further identified daily routines, skills, creativity, speed,

¹¹ Employing the concept of “news network” encourages the researcher to consider actors outside of the newsroom. Political organizations, commercial companies and activist movements among others are becoming increasingly organized in such a way that they also produce and distribute information to news organizations and others outside mainstream media.

and Internet use as part of news work.¹² Indeed, the role of the Internet for journalists in information-gathering, fact-checking, source-finding, story idea generation, news distribution, and increasing audience reach and engagement, saves actors time and effort in their day-to-day work. In the end, according to Domingo, Masip, and Costera Meijer (2015), the usefulness of the ANT approach is that it “invites the researcher to humbly reconsider the importance and the meaning of journalism and news in the wider context of everyday life to understand how news practices *order* or *anchor* other practices” (p. 61).

THE RESEARCH QUESTION AND THE METHODOLOGY

Latour (2007) has argued that ANT is not a theory in the traditional sense of the word but rather a guide about how to avoid imposing scientific paradigms or logic onto whatever “object” researchers are studying. In this, ANT is not bound to a specific methodology, even if it often appears to be associated with ethnographies. That is because putting the emphasis on practices and not on institutions can deconstruct what an institution consists of, how it does what it does, and why it performs in the ways it does.

The proponents of ANT in the journalism field call for a two-prong methodological approach to the study of mainstream news organizations in the digital age. The first is to deconstruct pre-existing categories that have been used to describe journalism, making the analytical distinction between anything that has to do with technology and journalistic practices. The second is the focus on momentary practices to trace the interaction between actors—human and nonhuman—to uncover the makeup of journalism practice. So far, however, scholars have been mainly engaged with and focus on journalism as it is practiced in mainstream news organizations.

The task ahead is putting a puzzle together of what journalism looks like in the digital age where journalistic startups such as *The Hoser* are proliferating, and ANT provides tools that help with the conceptualization and research into what

is actually going on when such an initiative unfolds and is being built. A journalist, a newsroom—often a virtual one—a group of activists, and objectivity are all elements to be considered in the analysis as much as objects such as computers, cameras, the Internet, online search engines, or social media. This does not mean that objects—whether material or not—have intentionality, but that all entities involved in a course of action can influence it. For example, cell phones do not have the intention of making journalists behave in a certain way, but they are actants in a network and, as such, if they break down or there is no service, they exert certain power on the decision-making process of the journalist trying to collect information for a story. Employing these methodological tools are the means by which I will trace the early beginning of *The Hoser*: namely, to follow the actants and trace the network-building associations during one course of action—the production process of the inaugural journalistic item for a journalism startup. By exploring the network(s) created by the journalistic practices of the actors—human and nonhuman—constituting *The Hoser*, and their negotiations with other networks to produce a seamless journalistic product, this article attempts to shed light on the way ANT helps us gain an understanding of the distinctive qualities of journalism startups.

With this in mind, my research question remains: how did journalists come together to establish *The Hoser*, or what could be called a “network” involving social and technological actors that enabled work practices that resulted in production of an online journalistic product? While ANT often involves a mix of ethnography-based techniques such as observation, in-depth interviews and, occasionally, an analysis of content produced during the particular moment in time, this study relies on a series of ongoing conversations with the two founders of the journalistic startup: from their planning, to implementation, to what and who they brought along with them on the new initiative, to uploading their first online edition. Our interactions were not static researcher-subject interviews, but active two-way conversations when they were trying out ideas and formats with respect to how to get their

¹² An interesting study that focuses on the changing role of journalists vis-a-vis “big data” such as AI technologies is Wu, Tandoc, and Salmon (2019).

journalistic project off the ground. The process of producing the inaugural article was also shared with me. I also relied on information published on *The Hoser*. Tracing the coming together of the journalists to create a network is an important part of the research since it allows us to reveal the initial stages of decision-making regarding the work they hoped to do and how they would do it. Following the process of journalism-making in its multidimensional trajectories captures the contributions of the actants involved: the journalists, video camera, audio-recorder, laptop (search engines and email), as well as witnesses, social media platforms, and activists. The “picture” that emerges is of a non-profit news and current affairs startup engaged through different resources with its community and, with that, this case study adds another layer of possible research to the ANT approach toward journalism.

To assess whether my empirical question, the theoretical approach, and the study make sense or, as more traditional social scientists would put it, whether the analysis is valid, I asked *The Hoser’s* founders to review and contribute to the paper in its final stages. They were primarily asked to reflect on questions surrounding the usefulness of ANT in illuminating their experiences in the early beginnings of organizing their journalism startup and the efforts to write and upload the first article. The reasons behind this decision are twofold: first, inviting the founders to join in the study as co-authors permits the paper to be grounded in the reality of those engaged in journalistic activities and avoids the likelihood of a false narrative, and to reiterate the idea of Domingo, Masip, and Meijer (2015), that actor involvement in the study is when “the mosaic of the journalisms that are being practiced today” emerges (p. 63). Secondly, rather than engaging in a theoretical discussion about the merits of ANT, our shared knowledge discovers the value of the theory (in this case ANT) from what one would call the data, systematically obtained and analyzed—that is, a form of grounded theory.

¹³ Carranco, for example, co-authored a groundbreaking story on the extreme right wing in Canada published in a national newspaper. Taghabon was a blogger and wrote for progressive outlets, including RankandFile.ca and socialist.ca.

¹⁴ Carranco was the associate producer on the last documentary I directed/produced at *The Fifth Estate*, on antifa and the fight against the extreme right wing in Canada. I worked as a director/producer at the program from 2001-2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1666637379685>

¹⁵ Looking back, this decision was most likely influenced by the pandemic restrictions whereby people were strongly discouraged by public health officials from face-to-face meetings of any kind beyond immediate family or friends.

THE HOSER

THE ACTORS AND CREATION OF THE NETWORK

Early in the fall of 2020, the two founders of what would eventually become *The Hoser*, Shannon Carranco and Kevin Taghabon, began talking about the possibility of creating a journalistic startup. They were friends but not in touch very often until Carranco moved to Toronto from Montreal a few months earlier, after completing her journalism degree at Concordia University. It was over half a year into the pandemic when they met over video conference calls. During her studies, Carranco had written a few investigative articles for mainstream news organizations, such as *The Globe & Mail*, and Taghabon, who had just graduated from the journalism program at Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU), was a freelancer writing for progressive news outlets and trying to make ends meet.¹³ Throughout her last year at university, Carranco also was an intern at CBC and then worked on a short-term contract at *The Fifth Estate* as an associate producer.¹⁴ Between the two of them, Carranco and Taghabon knew quite a few early career journalists and also had contacts with various labour and community-based organizations in the GTA.

While the pandemic restricted any in-person meetings, the two founders were not necessarily bothered. That is because when they reached the decision to establish a journalism startup, the plan was to establish a virtual “newsroom,” where they would hold online story meetings, editorial sessions, and feedback forums with other journalists who wrote for the startup. As well, they supported the idea that engagements with other stakeholders, including background interviews, interviewees for stories, and audience interaction initiatives would also be held online.¹⁵ In other words, from the initial conceptualization of *The Hoser*, it was practiced as a human-nonhuman

enterprise. In fact, it was a technological tool facilitating interactions among the journalists, their sources, and those reacting to their stories.

Before the pandemic, Carranco was thinking about applying for positions at CBC radio and TV. By the time she moved to Toronto, however, at the height of a government-imposed pandemic lockdown, during which businesses were shuttered, non-essential workers were advised to stay home, and the economy ground to a halt, she was already considering venturing out of mainstream media organizations and trying something new: a virtual digitally-based journalism startup. When she and Taghabon connected, Carranco had already done preliminary research on media outlets, including those focused on Toronto, and had reached the conclusion that whatever journalism she engaged in, the city and its suburbs would be a good focus for her talents and interests. Moreover, with communities in Metropolitan Toronto shut down due to COVID-19, she felt such an enterprise would help keep people connected, especially if the journalistic platform focused on immediate concerns of local communities. Like Taghabon, she wanted to focus on progressive causes—labour, racialized people and poverty in the GTA—and to engage with younger audiences from the communities the articles were written about. The fact that there was a gap in coverage of these issues in the mainstream news outlets, as well as in what was considered the alternatives, provided the critical element in their decision to establish a journalism startup with a focus on local social-issue stories.¹⁶ Hence, the process of creating a digital journalism outlet was pursued by social actors who were interested in innovative ways to reach new and young readers by focusing on *their* issues on platforms widely accessible to *them*, such as Twitter and Facebook, more often than not on their phones.

Since I am applying ANT to identify relevant human-nonhuman actors in what would become *The Hoser's* “virtual newsroom,” the question is: what role did technology play for the journalists—social actors—and how did their

interactions contribute to the emerging start up? The founders shared a belief in the advantages of online publishing in terms of cost efficiency. More importantly, their motivation was based on openness to the notion that technologies were a superior way to do what they were committed to doing: gather information, produce, create, and disseminate their stories. It was clear to Carranco, as she put it, that all phases of journalistic production at *The Hoser* required work with an almost exclusively digital mindset. As well, while there was an expectation that journalists would have human contacts within the communities they were writing about, information, leads, and sources would mostly be found online, often on social media. Moreover, stories to be published in the future would be written, edited, and produced in multimedia formats (combining various technological media that enabled text, pictures, infographics and video). In addition, technologies would enable readers to leave comments on *The Hoser* site and share user-generated content. This perspective of technological actants was also integral to social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook that were considered essential for recirculation by readers—their young readership. As a result, technology is an enabler—an actant—a collaborator with social actors making possible the journalistic practices of a new online media outlet. It is considered a mediator in the production process of *The Hoser*.

Not surprisingly, technology facilitated the implementation of the business model of the new journalism startup. In February 2021, the founders initiated a pre-launch crowdsourcing online campaign—what they called a soft launch. They also reached out to family, friends, friends of friends, and “cold called” prominent members of various communities in and around Toronto. While they relied on cell phones as one way of communicating, their laptops served better as they proceeded with an expansive email campaign that proved to be integral to this effort. According to Carranco, they received numerous surprising contributions from unexpected sources and were

¹⁶ Historically, *Now Magazine*, a weekly newspaper, was one of the only progressive news alternatives to that focused mainly on the City of Toronto. It lost its allure in recent years and, eventually, was shut down. Other community newspapers surfaced, including *West End Phoenix*, which was less about journalism and more about arts and letters. Another more issue-focused magazine is *The Local*, which flourished during the pandemic with its focus on public health in the GTA.

able to raise enough money to keep them going until the “hard launch.”¹⁷ Aside from hiring a graphic artist to design the site, *The Hoser* initially was a do-it-yourself operation where setting up and maintaining the site was, in fact, the free labour of the founders.

There are other important human actors who became a part of the emerging network. A six-member board of directors was constituted, to fulfill the requirements of registering as a non-profit organization. There was some overlap between board members and journalists; Carranco and Taghabon filled both roles, and board member Zaid Noorsumar also wrote stories for the publication. In the early days, there were three additional freelance journalists contributing content, growing to over a dozen freelancers by December 2022. Most decisions were made by consensus.

ANT considers actor-networks as a useful way of understanding social groups as a net of relationships where each member (an actor or actant) has a contingent position that can change over time depending on the equilibrium of power, strategies and the definition of the network that different members have. At least in the early stages of the development of *The Hoser*, there had been agreement on digital technologies as central to the role of the journalistic production process. Maybe that is due to the fact that the board as well as the journalists—actors and actants—are fairly young and hence consider digital technologies as second nature since they mostly grew up with them, almost as a second skin.

What did the board of directors and the journalists bring to the network and how do they contribute to its practices? Carranco maintains that while the progressive mandate of the journalistic startup attracted members, there were other reasons for their participation. Banding together, setting up shop (albeit virtually) with a group, potentially working on projects with other members of the team—these all offered solutions to the social isolation of the freelance journalists, which most of them were. This may be considered as a side effect but Carranco insisted that it allowed people to share ideas and contacts, and to broaden their interests as journalists (personal

communication). In brief, the journalistic network that formed the infrastructure of *The Hoser* reveals a cast of freelancers and others—board members—who shared an interest in content production, circulation, and use by specific audiences.

Journalism startups like the one considered here are not unique in the priority given to the *practical utility* of the network for journalists with “a mission.” In their study of numerous journalism startups across the globe, Deuze and Witschge (2020) found that the journalists were committed both personally and professionally to their specific digital setup, which facilitated “making journalism content that matters, whether on a small scale informing individuals, or a societal level, responding to and affecting public issues” (p. xi). In a separate study of the Italian media movement of pirate TV channels, Renzi (2020) describes the importance of such assemblages, albeit for different purposes, including:

the ability to create a space for new ideas and practices to emerge and provide the infrastructure where different components of the activist assemblage could define themselves and their relation to each other autonomously. The space of relations and the infrastructure to foster them are both crucial elements in the emergence and recomposition of political formations. (p. 94)

At the same time, the social actors engaged with *The Hoser* were linked with other networks as well, mostly complementary to and supportive of their work with the emerging journalism startup. That is because an integral part of the network was the extensive connections that linked the board of directors and the journalists with various other social groups and organizations. For example, in addition to reporting for mainstream outlets like CBC, Noorsumar wrote for Pakistani media outlets and the pro-labour website RankandFile.ca, and previously worked as a CUPE union communicator focused on the healthcare sector, which includes a high percentage of racialized employees (*The Hoser*, Team, n.d.; Noorsumar, 2021). According to Carranco, it is precisely with people like Noorsumar that *The Hoser* could bring

¹⁷They raised over \$2,000 CD by early March 2021. The “hard launch” fundraising campaign started in April with the goal of gaining 1,000 subscriptions by June 2021. The cost was \$3 dollars per month. (All currency is in Canadian dollars).

stories from and to communities that until that point did not have much of a voice in the mainstream media (personal communication).

So far, ANT helps reveal the scope of the emerging network of actors—human and nonhuman—and their interactions in what constituted *The Hoser*. The question is: how does the approach help capture journalistic practices at work? An account of the process surrounding the production of the first article of the emerging journalism startup provides some insight.

ACTOR-NETWORK IN PRACTICE

In preparation for the soft launch of *The Hoser* in March 2021, Carranco and her colleagues decided it would be a good opportunity to post the first article on their site. But before deciding on the story, there were fundamental issues to deal with. Trying to find the balance between what they learned at journalism school and their experience of “objective” mainstream media reportage with the media activism some were familiar with from outlets such as *rabble.ca*—all were a part of the challenge of creating “the voice” for the new outlet. At the same time, the journalists faced a variety of conundrums on issues such as inclusion and diversity of voices as well as distinctions between political activists and/or journalists. These dilemmas were tied to the way journalists interacted with the nonhuman actor—technology: should they take notes, use a phone to record interviews, or maybe employ professional gear such as a camera and digital recorder. Inevitably, as we will see, these tools of the trade became a seamless part of doing journalism. While identifying the technological tools is not new, foregrounding them in the journalism-making process is what ANT calls for. What remains to discuss here is the matter of the subject for *The Hoser*’s inaugural article and how the various forces at play come together, the challenges and how they were overcome.

The story about the Parkdale tenants was relatively easy to come by for Carranco, who lived in Parkdale herself since moving to Toronto from Montreal. Carranco knew there were many rentals in the neighbourhood, many of them high-rise apartment buildings. She chose to live there

because it was more affordable than other parts of the city but also because demographically, Parkdale is mixed in terms of income and cultural diversity. Once living in the neighborhood, she encountered numerous people who were going through tough times because of the pandemic. Whether frontline workers, or people losing their jobs, or renters concerned about eviction, she knew there was a story to tell—it simply needed an outlet. Then in early March 2021 when the final plans for *The Hoser* were coming together, during one of the daily video meetings, she raised the idea of writing about the situation in her neighborhood, shared with her colleagues the story she hoped to tell, and gained their approval. It was precisely the type of journalism the social actors signed up for.

By that point, she had connected virtually with activists from a community-based group called Parkdale Organize, who told her about the main issues they were concerned with, including new landlords buying more and more of the highrise apartment buildings, followed by their neglect of maintenance. They also told her that the expectation was that the existing renters would eventually leave and then the landlords would be able to raise the rent. One such apartment building had renters who were fighting back against the company and the community organization was supporting them. This emerging relationship between Carranco and Parkdale Organize was key to the development of a network where human actors soon began maintaining a relationship through interactions with nonhuman actors via text and email, technologies that facilitated the journalist’s ability to “get the story” for the inaugural edition of *The Hoser*.

Among the community organizers Carranco met online was a resident of the aforementioned rental building. He introduced her to other residents who told her their stories: economic hardship and the company’s refusal to negotiate over rent during the pandemic, power and water disruptions, a rodent problem, and letters sent to management. Most of her interactions with the residents were by phone. During the pandemic, mobile technologies became even more important for journalists like Carranco who, despite living in the same neighborhood, could not meet the residents face-to-face. She also did online research, searching for more information on the

THE HOSER AND ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY (ANT): AN ASSESSMENT FROM WITHIN

Commentary by
Shannon Carranco and Kevin Taghabon

largest landlords in the Parkdale area, Starlight Investments. On their website she found enough background material for her narrative—in her mind, it would be a story of David and Goliath, the little guys taking on a large corporation. All in all, Carranco now had most of her story.

Carranco began writing her article close to a week before it was uploaded on March 29, 2021, knowing the story would be framed around a rally residents of the said apartment building were organizing for Saturday, March 27. She used her cell phone for photos and for audio-recording interviews. She decided it would be best to be inconspicuous at the protest as well, and bringing a videographer along would cost money. In the end, for Carranco—the social actor—technology became an extension of her body, enabling her to get the final touches she needed for her story. The story was vetted in the virtual newsroom, and she also shared a copy with me before it was posted.

As far as ANT as a methodological approach is concerned, what interests us here is that it allows us to deconstruct the process of becoming *The Hoser* and, in particular, the production process of its inaugural article. We can agnostically incorporate any actors—human and nonhuman—as they interact with others, even previously known ones. Rather than *a priori* defining how different actors involved in this particular startup belong to one category or another when they set up and practice their journalism, as ANT proposes, this article shows how they organized and formed a network that enabled the production of a journalistic product. That product is the consequence of interactions with other actors and other networks. The network constructed through tracing the relationships is not literally a web of nodes like the Internet. It does not exist as a physical and stable object or layout—even though a visual representation in graphic form or mapping may be considered by some to be useful to highlight some of the actors' multiple relationships. But here ANT is considered as an intellectual construct that is operationalized as a means for studying a dynamic and shifting social phenomenon.

As the founders of *The Hoser*, it is apparent to us that Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is an illuminating tool that allows us to reflect on and codify the foundational relationships that constitute the journalism startup. The actors (human and nonhuman) involved throughout the process of its foundation and early journalistic production are numerous. Still, the most visible of these are the technological connectors (telephones, social media, and the Internet) and ourselves as co-founders, as well as our broader collaborators among the board of directors, and other community networks. For example, in addition to those Tamar has discussed in this paper, we should not overlook the significance of Kevin's entrenchment in Toronto's existing social movements, including those advocating for workers' rights and climate justice online and in person (e.g., photographing protests). These pre-existing networks and associations facilitated and were necessary for forming early connections to people (through technology) for *The Hoser's* foundation.

The technological connectors Tamar described allowed us to connect with sources online using social media or email, conduct interviews on Zoom, record these interviews, run the audio through an online transcriber, write the text of these articles and edit them online using Google Docs, publish the final product on our website, and notify their readers of the new article via social media or their weekly newsletter. Tamar uses an example of *The Hoser's* first published article, where Shannon was able to connect with a community organization online, gather investigative information via Starlight Investments' website, and conduct interviews with sources on the phone. Ultimately, as Tamar suggests, Shannon would not have been able to write and publish this article without the

help of these technological connectors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The mandate of *The Hoser*—to create an independent, local journalistic outlet in the GTA focused on the general issues, with an orientation toward working class and marginalized people—is a consequence of the human actors’ own knowledge and goals. But even those relationships warrant interrogation. For example, Zaid—a board member identified earlier in this article—was a freelance labour reporter who met Kevin at labour-related community events, and both of them wrote for RankandFile.ca (an independent Canadian labour news site) before Kevin brought him on board *The Hoser*. To be sure, they shared political and professional criticisms about existing media outlets and labour issues. Specifically, their relationship was informed by their familiarity with mainstream Canadian media (e.g., *The Globe and Mail*, CBC News, and *National Post*) and alternative media (e.g., *Rank and File*, *National Observer*, and *Ricochet*). As a matter of fact, their connections would not have been possible without access to the Internet, as well as their shared experiences at the tail end of a three-decades-long crisis in the journalistic media, largely facilitated by this same actor—the Internet. This last point does not suggest intentionality of the mainstream media with respect to hostility to new and emerging journalists. In fact, we would argue this is structural, perhaps even a class issue. Indeed, there are not enough jobs for young, new reporters and, as a result, they look to independent media or pursue more stable employment in spaces like professional communications. In some cases, as the emergence of *The Hoser* attests, the creation of a new journalism startup becomes a goal for new and younger journalists to pursue.

As Tamar indicated earlier in this paper, the professional affinity that we, Shannon and Kevin, as the founders of *The Hoser*, had was apparent as far back as 2019, when we both were producing journalism, albeit at different scales, and each one of us found an appreciation for the other’s work. However, without the medium of the Internet, and specifically email and the re-publication of hard copy stories from mainstream media onto the Internet and our social media platforms, we would not have understood the potential of shared goals.

Without expanding too deeply, suffice to say

that the pandemic made a “virtual newsroom” a necessity, since it was impossible to have a physical workplace with a certainty of safety. In this climate, we were forced to communicate and collaborate through nonhuman actors—in this case, technology. Emails, Signal and SMS messages were instrumental in the foundation of our journalistic project. They are also limiters of sorts, as the culture that develops without an office or a team space was not replicable. In this sense, the physical newsroom may be considered an absent actor, and the relationships between that space and human as well as nonhuman actors working in the mainstream journalism environment should be considered in contrast to those of *The Hoser’s* experiences.

To conclude, the ANT approach employed in this paper has allowed us to reflect on the early beginnings of *The Hoser*, and think about the extent to which platforms like the Internet, email, video conferencing, and social media were integrated into our experience when starting an independent journalism startup during the pandemic. There is no doubt we would not have been able to establish *The Hoser* in 2020 without this technology.

ASSESSING ANT AND JOURNALISM STARTUPS

This paper aimed to explore the applicability of Latour’s ANT to the analysis of emerging journalistic startups and their practices, using *The Hoser* as a case study. My research does not suggest that this example applies to the experiences of all newly-established digital media platforms, but it does provide insight into how one may begin to interpret journalism startups as spaces of hybrid accommodation and learning within what Primo and Zago (2015) call “sociotechnical collectives” (p. 48) that allow journalism to emerge.

The founders and I have shown how—to some extent—humans and nonhumans constitute a hybrid “sociotechnical collective” within *The Hoser*. I use the qualifier “to some extent,” since we have provided a picture—a snapshot—of an early moment in the “lifespan” of the journalism startup. Indeed, it is a series of interconnections of

actors, of their networks, and of their associations, that allowed their journalism to be enacted. One can suggest, then, that it is not journalists alone who control journalism as they think or as they wish. The importance of an ANT perspective is that it broadens the observation field, letting us see better what we might have had difficulties identifying and exploring. By way of summary of the strengths of the approach, I would like the reader to think of an intellectual exercise whereby some actors and their interactions are deleted and ask: would journalism still exist? For example, as soon as an Internet connection breaks down, several interactions among actors as well as networks cease to exist. Journalists would have difficulties communicating with each other, information would be challenging to come by, journalists, their stories, and their audiences would be separated, factual images from online sites to accompany journalistic stories would be unavailable and, most likely, this list is only partial. What becomes clear: with the absence of the Internet, the multiplicity of silent digital or nonhuman actors suddenly becomes noticed (Primo & Zago, 2015, p. 48).

As an integral part of the assessment of ANT, one must also point to what seems lacking in the approach, especially when it comes to journalistic startups.¹⁸ As the case of *The Hoser* has shown, it allows for precarious observations of the here and now. But what about more general patterns of the social, the economic, or the political? Can we make any generalizations, identify broader patterns, historical or contextual? The environment that generated *The Hoser* is human and technical but also shaped by economic and political decisions. It is also impacted by mainstream media organizations and other journalism startups.

One way to deal with some of these concerns is to recognize the challenges of dealing with multiplicities and a fluid reality and then attempt to achieve a balance between the focus of the specific investigation and acknowledging that multiple different realities can exist without letting these differences mask the complexity of relationships. In brief, ultimately a choice needs to be made between which context to study and which part to focus on (without neglecting the whole picture), as

one cannot possibly capture everything.

Conceptually, one option is to consider networks as consisting of several sub-networks. For example, what are the relationships among different journalism startups in Canada? Take the case of *The Discourse*, based in Vancouver; it has a similar mandate to *The Hoser* (*The Discourse*, 10 Principles, n.d.). One could investigate the growth of each one of these startups beyond what I have attempted here with *The Hoser* and then examine how the existing networks align with others and how they are positioned in relation to larger networks (e.g. the historical, cultural, political environment).

In adopting ANT, one should also be aware of the potential methodological pitfalls. A key question is which actors should be followed, which ones should be foregrounded, and which ones should be excluded. While in the case of the emerging journalistic startup *The Hoser*, the cutoff point of human and nonhuman actors was fairly straightforward, and the networks materializing had clear boundaries; this might not have been the case if I kept following the actors as they became more established in their routines or if their associations were disrupted. Perhaps the way out of this conundrum is to continuously be on guard and be prepared to allow invisible actors to become visible and vice versa.

In sum, a critical assessment of ANT reveals certain shortcomings that impact the kind of revelations possible when examining a journalism startup such as *The Hoser*. Nevertheless as an approach with methodological implications, it permits the study of a social phenomenon that goes beyond a human-centred perspective. It allows us to get a glimpse into how things get done within an emerging digital platform like *The Hoser*. Most likely, it can also help our understanding of the dynamics of such startups once they become more settled, forming ties to like-minded entities, and their additional complexities arising from shifting alliances, as well as other unforeseen changes.

¹⁸ ANT has had its fair share of critics. Some scholars (not necessarily journalism scholars) have nevertheless been very constructive suggesting different ways of overcoming some of its shortcomings. For example, see: Jackson (2015) and Couldry (2020).



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