Surveying journalists in the "New Normal": Considerations and recommendations

Logan Molyneuxⓘ
Temple University, USA

Rodrigo Zamithⓘ
University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA

Abstract

As journalism undergoes widespread changes, it finds itself in a 'new normal'. Research seeking to understand these changes by surveying journalists faces new methodological hurdles that span different stages of the survey process. This article identifies the key contemporary challenges when it comes to sampling, instrument design, and distribution. Best research practices in identifying a target population, sampling, selecting or developing measures, and maximizing the likelihood of participation are presented and discussed. Advice is also offered to help peer reviewers identify common shortcomings in surveys of journalists and encourage authors to engage with the limitations of their work.

Scholars have long taken an interest in studying journalists to better understand their attitudes and behaviors, from how they construe core journalistic values (Culbertson, 1981) to the way they enact journalistic roles as gatekeepers (Chang and Lee, 1992) to

Corresponding author:
Logan Molyneux, Klein College of Media and Communication, Temple University, 305 Annenberg Hall, 2020 N. 13th St., Philadelphia, PA 19122, USA.
Email: logan@temple.edu

how they self-brand on social media (Molyneux et al., 2019). While ethnography and in-depth interviewing are staples for understanding newswork, surveys remain useful because of their ability to produce generalizable findings and to statistically examine relationships among variables (Fowler, 2013). Indeed, the significant social, economic, and technological changes within the industry – and society more broadly – in recent years have required scholars to reassess existing theories and measure attitudes and behaviors toward new phenomena (Sherwood and O'Donnell, 2018; Zamith and Braun, 2019), often by using surveys. This, combined with increasing research productivity expectations in the academy (Griffin et al., 2018), and the maturation of journalism studies as a subfield (Carlson et al., 2018) have arguably resulted in more surveys of journalists than ever before.

An increased appetite for surveys of journalists comes at a time of profound tumult in the industry. Journalists today face precarious working conditions as many news organizations struggle to cope with new economic realities, and labor insecurity becomes the norm (Örnebring, 2018). They continue to adjust to increasing workloads as newsrooms shrink and job duties are redefined to include more tasks and interaction with technologies that did not exist at the turn of the century (Zamith and Braun, 2019). Journalists in the United States – and elsewhere in many cases – also face growing animosity and distrust of their work (Carlson, 2018) and must increasingly worry about being targeted by media sting campaigns, from the likes of Project Veritas to phishing campaigns by state actors (Goss, 2018). Moreover, the contestation over who is a journalist is as lively as ever as the boundaries of journalism become more porous and the space becomes more fragmented (Carlson and Lewis, 2015). Indeed, a comprehensive catalog of newsworkers is increasingly hard to come by, especially as membership in professional organizations like the Society of Professional Journalists declines (Society of Professional Journalists, 2017) and non-traditional organizations enter journalistic spaces (Tandoc, 2018). This litany of changes reflects a 'new normal' in journalism (Örnebring, 2018: 109).

These developments introduce a crucial challenge for mass communication researchers: In the 'new normal', how can surveyors identify representative samples of journalists and collect from them reliable data that can lead to knowledge production? The surveys at the forefront of the field, such as the cross-national Worlds of Journalism project, have responded to these challenges in impressive fashion, though while having to wrestle with 'atrociously large managerial complexity' (Hanitzsch et al., 2019: 65). Even within single-country contexts, gold-standard works such as the recurring American Journalist surveys done by Weaver and colleagues (Weaver et al., 1986, 2007; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996; Willnat et al., 2017) have proven to be very resource-intensive. However, there is also a substantial and growing body of work that has navigated the challenges of the 'new normal' with highly constrained resources, employing a range of survey practices as a result. While such variation can be enriching, it sometimes needlessly limits a study by failing to anticipate pitfalls and may also restrict comparisons with other works, which in turn has implications for knowledge production. This points to a need for a conversation within journalism studies and mass communication more broadly about where surveys of journalists should begin, how they might be carried out, and what knowledge can be developed through them. Beyond these challenges, scholars

must remain mindful of growing critiques by media practitioners of a disconnect between journalism research and practice (Barkho, 2017).

This article engages with the key challenges for conducting surveys of journalists today with the goal of providing recommendations on best practices for scholars and the peer reviewers who evaluate the research. While its insights should be applicable to the entire range of surveys of journalists, this article keys on typical endeavors found in the journalism studies literature – that is, the surveys conducted by researchers with ordinary resource constraints. Altogether, it contributes to journalism and mass communication scholarship by adapting general survey techniques and guidance developed in other fields to surveys of journalists specifically. As these surveys become a regular part of journalism studies, this article is an attempt to draw consensus around best practices and reasonable standards within a maturing field of study.

Why survey?

Like ethnography, interviews, and focus groups, surveys typically gather data from people (as opposed to media content or archival documents). Surveys, however, differ from those people-centered methods in aim, scale, and analysis. Unlike the aforementioned methods, surveys typically have two unique aims: to make generalizable inferences about a population, and/or to systematically evaluate relationships among theoretical constructs (Fowler, 2013). This is done by surveying a sample of the target population and using inferential statistics on data from that sample to apply the results to the target population within a calculable degree of certainty. Cross-sectional survey designs are used to provide a snapshot of population characteristics and panel designs are used to establish ordered effects (e.g. impacts of declining media trust over time). Experimental designs may also be embedded in a survey, allowing researchers to make causal inferences (Otto and Glogger, 2020).

Surveys also differ from other methods in terms of scale. Surveys generally seek responses from hundreds if not thousands of subjects. Because of their breadth, however, surveys cannot achieve the level of depth common in interviews or ethnography. Researchers usually cannot follow up with respondents to ensure their questions are interpreted as intended or quickly adjust the line of questioning to explore unexpected responses. However, surveys lend themselves to a range of analytical techniques, from simple descriptive statistics to complex modeling. Such techniques allow researchers to identify and better isolate explanatory or predictive variables. In short, surveys are important explanatory tools and can offer systematic comparisons among subgroups and across boundaries. They are particularly well-suited for questions that rely on scaling and statistical inference to achieve understanding of generalizability and relationships among variables.

Surveys are typically limited to self-reports from the respondents. Consequently, surveys of journalists most often explore journalists' perceptions of themselves, their work, and their surroundings. Recently, surveys have been used to examine special coverage situations (Dahmen et al., 2018; Fawzi, 2018), journalistic identity and roles (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2020; Sherwood and O'Donnell, 2018), media convergence (Menke et al., 2018), job satisfaction (Liu and Lo, 2018; Ternes et al., 2018), social learning (Zamith

et al., 2019), and sexism and gender (Finneman and Jenkins, 2018). Such work makes important contributions to journalism studies and mass communication by illuminating contemporary actors and activities, and their relationships to audiences and emerging actants.

Given the increasing use of surveys within journalism studies, it is important to establish standards for investigators and peer reviewers in this field. Surveys are routinely used in other communication-related disciplines, including political communication and health communication, as well as in other social science fields. Standards and best practices for dealing with field-specific challenges have been established in many of those fields (Pasek and Krosnick, 2010). While journalism studies has borrowed many of these standards, surveying journalists presents some unique challenges that bear examination and, to the extent possible, shared standards in confronting them. At this point, however, surveys of journalists vary widely in approach and rigor, raising important questions about validity and generalizability. This requires critical reflection on the different steps for conducting a survey with an eye to the question: What adaptations are necessary and acceptable when surveying this specialized group?

Challenges for modern surveys of journalists

While surveys of many different occupational groups present challenges, journalists are especially difficult to survey. Researchers face obstacles including journalism's ill-defined boundaries (Belair-Gagnon and Holton, 2018; Carlson and Lewis, 2015), precarious working conditions that result in occupational transience (Örnebring, 2018), temporal pressures that reduce availability (Molyneux, 2014; Usher, 2018), and professional values that make them skeptical of others and of academic research (Barkho, 2017; Deuze, 2005). Some of these characteristics are not by themselves unique to journalists (e.g. other busy professionals may also have trouble finding time for a survey) but this constellation of characteristics is particular to journalists. Indeed, even prominent surveyors like Weaver (2008) recognized these difficulties and called for expanding the definition of who is a journalist while identifying basic challenges like the fact that journalists are more 'in the habit of asking questions rather than answering them' (p. 106). As such, surveys of journalists face particular challenges and benefit from some field-specific adaptations to improve generalizability, ensure data quality, and maximize reach. This section highlights the challenges associated with surveying journalists as they apply to three key phases of the survey process, as outlined by Fowler (2013): sampling, design, and distribution.

Sampling

The sampling phase requires the investigator to identify the target population, construct a sampling frame that includes all members of this population, and draw a sample of subjects from or perform a census of that sampling frame (Fowler, 2013). Conducting a survey of journalists is fraught from the start because it is quite difficult to delineate who is a journalist (Weaver, 2008). Scholars have written extensively about the porous boundaries of journalism (Carlson and Lewis, 2015), a challenge accentuated by new

technologies that continually make it easier for anyone to become a journalistic actor (Zamith and Braun, 2019). It can thus be challenging to conceptualize the target population in surveys of journalists and separate them from other media and non-media professionals by particular characteristics, skills, values, or methods.

Even after resolving that conceptual challenge, researchers face an operational one: constructing a sampling frame based on measured attributes that encompass the members of the target population. Few countries require journalists to be licensed or registered in any way (Aldridge and Evetts, 2003), and even those that do often develop important unofficial or clandestine channels of news and information (see Howard et al., 2011). Moreover, it can be even harder to capture freelance journalists and journalists working for non-traditional or digital-native organizations – actors who are increasing in numbers and influence (Belair-Gagnon and Holton, 2018) but are often excluded from survey research. Put differently, even if researchers aptly conceptualize their journalistic population of interest, it remains operationally difficult to reach members of that population.

Researchers typically adopt one of two approaches to construct their sampling frame of journalists. The first approach is to rely on an existing list of members of the target population assembled by non-researchers, such as a national press club or association (e.g. Ihlebæk and Larsson, 2018; Krumsvik, 2018), a commercial media listings database like Cision (e.g. Örnebring and Mellado, 2018), or a non-governmental organization or special interest group (e.g. Fawzi, 2018). There are multiple benefits to this approach. First, a great deal of time is saved because researchers do not have to assemble the contact list themselves. Second, researchers can sometimes partner with the organization when distributing the survey, increasing visibility and trust and, consequently, response rates. Third, those lists are usually more comprehensive than the ones generated by academic investigators. Indeed, in countries where membership in associations or unions is strong, researchers may be well-served by simply relying on such a list – provided they accept the limitations of its generalizability.

However, there are significant drawbacks to that approach. First, researchers have little control over who is included in the database, creating eligibility problems as either a significant portion of the target population is excluded or a significant number of non-members are included. Second, the precarious and fluid nature of journalism jobs in the contemporary media environment (Örnebring, 2018) results in such lists becoming quickly outdated as journalists switch or lose their jobs. For example, when one of the authors attempted to survey a random sample of journalists just 6 months after obtaining a list from Cision, a premier media listings database provider, the undeliverable rate exceeded 15 percent. Third, commercial providers like Cision typically use a mix of programmatic methods (e.g. web scraping) and manual methods (e.g. calling organizations) to cull and maintain their database of media contacts. Consequently, they often sweep up problematic actors. For example, when one of the authors reviewed a Cision-derived listing of political journalists who used Twitter, it was found that about 10 percent of the sample could be classified as bots or disinformation-linked actors.

The second approach is for investigators to create their own list of eligible contacts. Investigators may use this approach if they lack access to a third-party list, are unimpressed with those lists, or if they have specialized needs. Due to resource and time

limitations, investigators sometimes opt to narrowly define the target population to make the construction of the sampling frame feasible. This is done by focusing on a particular segment of the media industry (e.g. daily newspapers with circulations above 10,000), certain job roles or titles (e.g. sports reporters), or select media enterprises (e.g. the ten most-visited online outlets). The investigator then adopts an eligibility approach by systematically seeking out as many eligible participants as possible. This may involve calling or visiting each news organization in the target population (e.g. Menke et al., 2018) or programmatically crawling their online staff listings to obtain contact information (e.g. Dahmen et al., 2018). Because it is typically easier to identify organizations than individuals, researchers will often first draw a sample of organizations and then seek all contacts within those organizations (Liu and Lo, 2018).

The key benefit of that approach is that it allows for greater quality control throughout the process of constructing the sampling frame, yielding fewer false positives and negatives. However, it has significant drawbacks. It is not only time-consuming but can result in either a very incomplete sampling frame or one that is too narrow to be theoretically useful – both conditions that adversely impact the generalizability of the research.

Once the sampling frame is constructed, the investigator must then either perform a census or draw a sample. A census is a highly desirable strategy in theory because it removes sampling error from the data. Moreover, the low costs associated with electronic survey distribution make attempting a census feasible and often seemingly appealing because of the potentially high number of respondents. However, a census can be practically disadvantageous because it is difficult to evaluate the quality of the contact list if it is large.

When an investigator opts to draw a sample, a randomized probability sample is the highest standard. Under this approach, the investigator estimates an appropriate sample size given the size of the population and desired confidence level and interval parameters. The investigator then randomly selects that number of subjects from the sampling frame, such that each individual has an equal chance of being selected, and tries to maximize the response rate. Because samples are usually a fraction of the size of the sampling frame, it is easier to manually evaluate their quality and remove problematic members (e.g. bots or improperly categorized individuals). Furthermore, it may be easier to increase participation by using multiple and/or personalized modes of recruitment given the smaller number of invited respondents (as in Willnat et al., 2017, where every member of the sample received a personal phone call encouraging participation).

Instrument design

The heterogeneity of journalism (Carlson and Lewis, 2015) and the relatively young state of the field of journalism studies (Carlson et al., 2018) create challenges for designing a valid and comprehensive survey instrument. These obstacles include question applicability and complexity, a lack of well-tested measures and scales, and lax standards for pretesting.

According to Deuze (2008) 'uncertainty, flux, change, conflict, and revolution are the permanent conditions of everyday life' (p. 851) for the institution of journalism. Within this uncertain environment are a range of actors and activities that were not long ago

considered marginal to journalism but are increasingly becoming central to it (Belair-Gagnon and Holton, 2018; Lewis and Zamith, 2017). Designing survey questions that apply across job roles and platforms is thus highly challenging. Even a question about interactions with sources – a relatively stable aspect of journalism – might clearly apply to reporters and writers but be difficult for editors and producers to answer. A question about engagement with audience analytics may seem applicable to a range of newsworkers, yet audience-specific specializations have emerged, and many newsrooms offer varying levels of access to such analytics (Zamith, 2018; Zamith et al., 2019). The exceptional range of possibilities forces researchers to strike a balance between designing an instrument that is too narrow to be practically significant or so broad as to be inapplicable to a substantial proportion of respondents.

Unlike other fields, journalism studies has not yet established consistently used measures and scales (the measurement of a single concept through multiple related items) for common concepts. While there are some relatively stable and widely used sets of measures for concepts like journalistic role conceptions and epistemological and ethical orientations (for instance, see Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) and Hanitzsch et al. (2019), for two alternative operationalizations), the field has comparably few methodologists and instead borrows liberally from related disciplines like sociology. The downside of this is that many key concepts within journalism studies have received sparse attention (Waisbord, 2015). For example, commonly referenced concepts such as objectivity, transparency, editorial capital, news judgment, and newsworthiness do not have generally accepted survey measures attached to them. Consequently, studies that aim to measure similar phenomena may use different measures, which may account for divergences in research findings and present challenges to cross-study comparisons – thus impairing theory-building (Shoemaker et al., 2004).

In lieu of well-tested measures and scales, researchers often opt to develop their own. However, authors routinely under-report – if not under-examine – important information about the pretesting of newly created measures and scales, including their evaluations of the impacts of item wording and ordering. The choice of words and phrases in a question is critical to ensuring that respondents are able to interpret questions in similar ways, and even small differences in wording can exert major impacts on a study's results (Clayman and Loeb, 2018). Within journalism, certain terminology (e.g. objectivity, truth/lies, newsworthy) may be viewed as particularly charged – even as it may be perceived neutrally by a general population – or trigger social desirability biases, and thus yield unintended (and potentially inaccurate) responses. In addition, the ordering of questions and response items can introduce contrast and assimilation effects wherein a respondent's evaluative judgments are impacted by the content that immediately precedes or follows a question (Bless and Schwarz, 2010). There is little literature on these impacts within the context of journalism studies, raising questions about even widely used measures and scales.

Distribution

A third challenge to surveying journalists is getting them to participate. In addition to the aforementioned transience that affects sampling, journalists today face greater temporal

pressures and information overload, are constrained by restrictive company policies, and remain adherent to an occupational ideology that hampers survey participation.

Journalists are busy professionals and face increasing pressures to do more in less time. Scholars have found that journalists feel pressure to be working nearly all of the time (Molyneux, 2014) and to stay attuned to multiple information channels (Usher, 2018). Consequently, survey participation may be treated as a low priority. Even if a journalist would be a willing participant, it can be difficult for a phone call to catch them at their desk or for a survey recruitment email to stand out in a crowded inbox. Messages may therefore either be left unseen or get picked up by aggressive mail filters and filed in less-visible folders.

News organizations have also been increasingly targeted by media sting campaigns, including from the likes of Project Veritas, and phishing campaigns by state actors (Goss, 2018). Consequently, they have established guidelines governing their reporters' ability to provide information to any third party, including surveyors. For example, the authors have received responses from journalists at prominent, high-profile news organizations stating that newsroom employees were explicitly prohibited from responding to surveys – a trend that appears to be accelerating. Even when journalists are not expressly forbidden from participating, many feel they must check with a supervisor before proceeding, which creates another barrier to participation. These barriers may introduce systematic biases in terms of who is able to participate in a survey (see Fowler, 2013).

Journalism is characterized by an occupational ideology that promotes skepticism (Deuze, 2005) and devalues academic research (Barkho, 2017). Journalists are trained to treat new information with a critical eye and question the origin and motivations of the communications they receive (Reich, 2011). Journalists may thus be reluctant to not only click on a personalized link from a stranger but also submit sometimes highly personal information. As professionals trained in exposing information intended to be private (Deuze, 2005), they may put little stock in researchers' guarantees of privacy.

In recognition of these challenges, researchers will often offer incentives for participation, such as gift cards or a prize drawing (see Fowler, 2013). However, the occupational ideology of journalism also emphasizes visible independence (Deuze, 2005). Journalists may therefore worry that they would violate a professional or newsroom code of ethics just by participating in an incentivized survey. Even when there is no perceived ethical qualm, journalists may perceive incentives as being indicative of familiar internet scams. These suspicions may dissuade journalists with particular attitudes from participating, thereby introducing systematic participation biases.

Best practices for researchers

This litany of challenges makes it uniquely difficult for researchers to conduct broad, valid, and generalizable surveys of journalists. While there is no silver bullet that can resolve the identified issues with sampling, instrument design, and distribution, there are best practices that researchers can follow in order to either mitigate the substantive impacts of those issues or meaningfully engage with them. The recommendations here are produced in part by the authors' own experience administering several surveys of working journalists. This experience is supplemented by several conversations with

other contemporary researchers who survey journalists as well as an examination of the research methods published in dozens of papers that rely on surveys of journalists. Thus, the recommendations provided here are the product of years of trial and error and have been vetted in consultation with other researchers and the literature they've produced.

Sampling

Clarify target population, sampling frame, and sample. Researchers seeking generalizability should first carefully identify the target population in relation to the study's objectives. Narrowly defining the population (e.g. specifying multiple selection criteria) may make it easier to construct a comprehensive sampling frame and relevant survey instrument. Broadly defining the population (e.g. as 'Finnish journalists') positions the study to be more widely applicable. Then, researchers must generate as their sampling frame the best possible approximation of the target population. This can be particularly challenging and is context-dependent, and it is advisable to narrow the population if the approximation is weak. Researchers should also understand the analytical implications of their sampling decisions. Oft-reported parameters from inferential tests (e.g. *p* values) can be meaningless when applied to an attempted census as there is rarely a super-population being generalized to. Moreover, one must consider whether nonresponse can be treated as random error as there are often systematic factors behind it (e.g. psychographic predispositions).

Contextualize the sample. In describing how a sample was drawn, explain precisely who it might leave out or inadvertently include. For example, a study that draws from a sampling frame derived from a professional union's membership list requires researchers to make clear the omission of non-union members and discuss the substantive implications of that choice. Moreover, they should take care to state in the manuscript the attributes (e.g. demographics and psychographics) that may be over- and under-sampled compared with the target population.

Clean the list. Ensure the population list is accurate and 'clean'. For example, even a list drawn from popular media listings databases like Cision contain a lot of irrelevant, outdated, and miscategorized entries, as well as duplicate and 'general information' entries. Cleaning such lists may involve using automated or semi-automated methods to remove entries that lack key data points (e.g. email addresses); are linked to general-purpose email addresses (e.g. info@organization.com); or are listings for departments rather than individuals (e.g. first name 'Sports' and last name 'Desk').[1] Sometimes, a time-consuming manual review is ultimately necessary in order to remove irrelevant or junk entries.

Compare results. Evaluate the quality of the response sample at the conclusion of data collection. This involves comparing attributes of the response sample to what is known about the sampling frame – such as demographic and attitudinal attributes – and to other surveys of the same population. This helps identify any evident sampling or response biases and is especially important if the response rate is low. Though imperfect, such approximations can increase confidence that non-response or improper sampling is *less*

Table 1. Example of a comparison of key characteristics in an obtained sample and the sampling frame from which it was drawn. The comparison suggests the respondents do not differ significantly from the population. Figures are from a survey of North American journalists conducted in 2018.

	Population (in Cision) (N = 109,843)	Respondents (N = 642)
Job Title		
Editor	41.9	46.2
Reporter/Writer	22.2	24.6
Blogger	6.5	6.9
Freelance Journalist	1.5	4.5
Medium		
Newspaper	20.5	24.1
Online	20.4	25.8
Magazine	14.7	15.1
Television	13.6	8.3
Blog	8.8	10.2
State		
New York	13.8	13.2
California	9.6	10.8
District of Columbia	3.6	4.5
Country		
US	88.0	90.0
Canada	11.9	10.0

of an issue (Dillman, 2000; Rivers, 2007). For guidance on how to present such comparisons, see Tables 1 and 2.

Instrument design

Replicate and re-use. Where appropriate, researchers should seek to use existing measures and scales in order to increase confidence in their instrument and to enable cross-study comparisons. Social scientists are not only typically willing to share their questionnaires but arguably have an ethical obligation to do so in order to be methodologically transparent. More broadly, it would be beneficial to develop and contribute to repositories of concept measures and survey instruments, as is already done in other fields (e.g. the Measurement Instrument Database for the Social Sciences). At minimum, researchers should take advantage of existing avenues for publishing supplemental research materials (e.g. on journals' existing platforms or self-hosting).

Optimize survey flow. Well-tested measures and scales may not yet exist for particular phenomena or may require updating, especially if researchers are interested in emerging phenomena. In such cases, researchers should be mindful of their target population when designing and adapting measures and scales, taking care to ensure that all members in the

Table 2. Example of a comparison between a survey of North American journalists conducted in 2018 with a survey of American journalists in Willnat et al. (2017), conducted in 2013. Question wordings and response options were slightly different, but the comparison is still valuable.

	Willnat et al. (N = 1,080)	Comparison sample (N = 642)	Notes
Male	62.5%	55%	The percentage of male
Female	37.5%	45%	journalists has declined steadily from 80% in 1971
Median years of experience	21	19	Average of comparison sample: 20.3
Education			
Some HS	0	0.2	
HS graduate	0.6	1.1	The 2018 survey didn't include
Some college	7.3	9.3	an option for 'some grad
College graduate	60.3	61.2	school', so responses are likely
Some grad school	11.3	–	split between 'college' and
Graduate degree	20.5	28.2	'graduate' degrees.
Views of social media			
Overall positive	71.5	59.2	Likely reflects a shift in social
Neutral	21.4	21.3	media outlook after 2016, but
Negative	7.1	17.9	the neutral figure is the same.

sample are capable of answering the questions and feel the questions are generally applicable to them. In addition, among general populations, 20 minutes is typically seen as the upper limit of survey length (Revilla and Ochoa, 2017). However, journalists participating in pretests for different surveys conducted by the authors said that a survey of such length was far too long, and many dropped out after about 10 minutes. Longer questionnaires are certainly possible – for instance, Weaver (2008) describes 50-minute telephone interviews. However, such propositions are risky and it is advisable to develop the most parsimonious instrument possible. Indeed, while Hanitzsch et al. (2019) don't specify a time limit, they endeavored to keep their questionnaire brief. In order to optimize survey flow and reduce duration, researchers should first ensure all questions include an option for 'not applicable' so that respondents can feel comfortable skipping questions. However, too many such responses may signal to the respondent that they may not be an intended recipient of the survey. Thus, researchers should make use of filter questions and display logic to reduce the likelihood a respondent will be shown inapplicable questions.

Pretest among journalists. Once the questionnaire is completed – and especially when measures have been introduced or modified – pretesting it among members of the target population is key. During pretesting, it is helpful to include a means for respondents to send feedback directly to the researchers, in addition to their answers to the questionnaire. This may be accomplished by including open-ended questions within the

pretesting questionnaire that gauge attitudes toward specific questions or the overall experience. Researchers may also wish to experiment with question wording and ordering at this stage to increase confidence in their instrument.

Distribution

No single distribution method is guaranteed to yield more and better responses. One of the strengths of Weaver et al.'s (1986, 1996, 2007, 2017) surveys that helped them reach a large percentage of respondents was their use of multiple methods (e.g. personalized letters, postcards, emails, telephone calls), repetition (e.g. multiple phone calls), and tracking of sampled journalists in case they switched jobs (Weaver, 2008). Such an approach is ideal but the majority of recent scholarship, partly due to resource constraints, relies on online surveys distributed via e-mail. The following suggestions are thus offered with that dominant approach in mind.

Send from a recognizable domain. The origin of a recruitment message is one of the first things respondents notice and is a critical cue in evaluating a message's trustworthiness. If possible, emails should be sent from an email address associated with an academic (e.g. .edu) or non-profit (e.g. .org) institution that can be associated with the author. Qualtrics, one of the most popular services for conducting surveys, provides powerful mass-mailing capabilities that often permits replacing its own no-reply@qualtrics.com address with a specified institutional address. Journalists contacted for participation in a series of surveys conducted by the authors in 2018 repeatedly said they were confused by, and skeptical of, recruitment emails originating from domains not clearly related to the author's institutional affiliation.

Use a brief, targeted subject line. Another immediately observed cue is the recruitment message's subject line. Journalists tend to respond most to short subject lines that pose a relevant question (e.g. 'How do you use social media in your work?') or state the purpose of the study (e.g. 'Share your thoughts on anonymous sources'). Subject lines longer than 10 words are likely to be cut off and not read in full. In addition, general subject lines (e.g. 'Invitation to participate in a survey') are less likely to stand out in a crowded inbox and yield a response.

Write a skimmable survey invitation. The body of a recruitment message is most effective when it is brief yet contains the following elements: a personalized address (e.g. 'Hi Mary',); a brief introduction of the sender; a very brief description of the project and its contribution to the practice of journalism; an invitation to participate in the survey with clear indications about the amount of time the survey should take and any incentives being offered; separate links to begin the survey and opt-out from it; a description of the confidentiality of responses; and a signature with contact information for the sender and lead researcher. In all, an effective invitation for a journalist should take no longer than a minute to skim and contain highly visible survey links. See Appendix A

Offer an optional incentive. Although a powerful motivator in many contexts, the kind of incentive offered appears to have limited effects on journalists, many of whom are used to refusing gifts and enticements based on their desire to remain visibly independent. The authors have not observed discernable differences in response rates when offering one large prize or multiple smaller prizes. Moreover, other researchers have found that even offering guaranteed payment is insufficient for ensuring a high response rate (as in Bell et al. (2017), wherein every participant received $15 yet the response rate was just 1.5%). However, even surveys of journalists that offered no incentives have occasionally attained response rates in line with their incentive-supported counterparts (e.g. Molyneux, 2014). If an incentive is offered, it is best to make it opt-in rather than opt-out to reduce journalists' ethical concerns. When given the choice to participate in a prize drawing, multiple journalists in a recent survey told the authors that they would rather have the option to donate the prize to a non-profit organization associated with journalism.

Send multiple reminders. Reminder messages are crucial to ensuring a high response rate and surveys benefit from sending multiple reminder emails over a period as long as a month. Experience shows that journalists' participation occurs almost exclusively within 24 hours of a recruitment email being sent. As such, it is unwise to wait under the assumption that journalists have added the survey to their to-do list. Often, they will be a willing participant if reminded at a different time, when they are either less busy or have a less-crowded inbox. Each reminder should include clear links to participate and to opt out of future mailings.

Vary mailing times. Because most journalists today operate under a continuous deadline, researchers are best served by sending messages at a variety of times to maximize the likelihood that one of them will fit into a journalist's routine or downtime. Moreover, many journalists work a five-day workweek but are held accountable for seven days' worth of news coverage. This renders Mondays and Fridays inopportune times for participating in a survey. It is often beneficial to send at least one recruitment email in the middle of the week and another during the weekend.

Vary senders. It is helpful to vary the sender with each recruitment message in order to maximize the likelihood that the source will appeal to the potential participant. While the researcher will typically send the initial email, reminders can be especially fruitful when they come from a well-known industry figure, respected professional group, or a prominent academic (see Appendix B). Having such a person notify a potential participant that a survey invitation is forthcoming can increase response rates and even the perceived gender of the sender can influence response rates, with female senders receiving slightly more responses (see also Keusch, 2012).

Recommendations for reviewers

Peer reviewers play a crucial gatekeeping role by assessing the value of a study and providing actionable feedback to authors that can enhance the quality of research. As such,

there are important questions that reviewers should keep in mind as they evaluate surveys of journalists. While some of the recommendations are universal best practices, they are anchored here to contemporary surveys of journalists and with recognition of the aforementioned challenges and typical resource constraints faced by researchers.

First, does the sampling frame reasonably approximate the target population? If not, who might be left out or be wrongly included? Is that appropriately contextualized? The sampling frame is a choice that researchers make, and this choice must be made explicit and accountable because it determines the extent of the study's generalizability. If the sampling frame is not a reasonable approximation of the target population, reviewers should challenge the author to recontextualize the study and its results to fit the population that was actually measured, or require the author to explain and defend the sampling frame they chose.

Second, did the author attempt a census or draw a sample? If a sample was drawn, how was it selected? Reviewers should be cautious about the use of inferential statistics if the author attempted a census. Unless the author can make a compelling argument that the non-response is random and thus yields the equivalent of a random sample of the population, such statistics may yield meaningless parameters due to violations of core statistical assumptions. If a sample was drawn, the author should be asked to specify whether it is both random and representative (e.g. stratified to be proportional to known population characteristics), if that is their objective. Researchers who choose to weight their responses to make up for under- and over-sampling should be expected to note the limitations of such procedures (see Watson et al., 2015).

Third, what proportion of the sampling frame was reached? What was the survey's response rate? Is the response sample makeup consistent with what is known about the target population? While it was previously common to have survey response rates in excess of 50 percent (Chang and Lee, 1992; Dennis and McCartney, 1979; Rippey, 1981; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1986, 1996), it is now sometimes difficult for surveys of journalists to exceed single digits, especially in large Western countries (e.g. Bell et al., 2017; Molyneux et al., 2019; Örnebring & Mellado, 2018). While it can be argued that such a low response rate invalidates the findings due to the possibility of systematic non-response bias, there are mitigating factors to consider. If the researchers are able to demonstrate that the respondent sample isn't likely to differ systematically from the target population, a low response rate may be acceptable (see Dillman, 2000; Rivers, 2007). Thus, reviewers should not rely on the response rate as a decisive heuristic but rather challenge authors to provide evidence or compelling arguments that their response sample is substantively similar to known population characteristics across different attributes.

Fourth, was the survey instrument developed based on existing literature? If existing measures are available, were they altered? Was the survey pretested, especially on working journalists, before distribution? When authors develop new measures, reviewers should think critically about their validity and connection to existing theory. While the instrument design presumably cannot be altered once the study has reached peer review, reviewers can encourage authors to defend their design choices and/or discuss any limitations resulting from their design choices. Also, there are post-hoc evaluations of

measure validity (including factor analysis, scale reliability measures, and comparison to estimates from other studies) that reviewers can request of authors where appropriate.

In considering these questions, it is important that the reviewer balance the potential contribution of the research against its methodological shortcomings. Indeed, if they are to reject out of hand all imperfect surveys, the field will be left with very few surveys of journalists and consequently miss out on important knowledge. At the same time, lowering standards because such surveys are hard to conduct risks treating unreliable findings as scientific insight. Ultimately, reviewers should focus not on infallibility but on adherence to the best practices described in this article, as they are likely to yield research that is sufficiently methodologically sound to contribute useful knowledge in the face of growing challenges. Reviewers should remain cognizant of the space limitations of some academic products (e.g. journal articles and book chapters), and sometimes recommend that authors produce methodological supplements referenced within the reviewed piece.

Conclusion

Journalism has undergone tremendous change in recent years and its 'new normal' (Örnebring, 2018, p. 109) presents significant challenges to surveys of journalists across the stages of sampling, instrument design, and distribution. Even as the method is further complicated, it remains valuable for producing large-scale and generalizable knowledge about who journalists are, the beliefs and attitudes they hold, the practices they employ, and how such qualities intersect amid rapid social, economic, and technological changes within the field. While we strongly support gold-standard endeavors like the American Journalist (Weaver et al., 1986, 2007; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996; Willnat et al., 2017) and Worlds of Journalism (Hanitzsch et al., 2019) surveys and encourage large-scale collaborative efforts, it is important to recognize that such endeavors are not the norm and often benefit from privileges not afforded to many scholars.

Thus, while it may be impossible to overcome all the unique challenges facing surveys of journalists, researchers can adhere to best practices that ensure a comprehensive and high-quality sampling frame; appropriately contextualized findings; reliable measures and scales; robust and tested new measures; instruments suitable for the target; and thoughtfully and ethically employed content cues, logistical choices, and incentive structures to increase the likelihood of participation. Reviewers, meanwhile, should be cognizant of the challenges faced by researchers who aim to survey journalists and subsequently be attuned to researchers' adherence to best practices. Rather than demanding infallibility, reviewers should expect researchers to adequately engage with contemporary challenges, offer compelling justifications for their decisions, and clearly note the implications of their choices and the limitations of their work. By adopting this frame of mind, researchers and reviewers both can ensure that surveys of journalists continue to produce valuable knowledge.

ORCID iDs

Logan Molyneux [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7382-3065
Rodrigo Zamith [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8114-1734

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. In one of the authors' recent experiences, performing simple steps like these resulted in the removal of thousands of irrelevant entries from the Cision database.

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Author biographies

Logan Molyneux (PhD, University of Texas) is an assistant professor of journalism at Temple University. His research interests include the intersection of journalism and technology, particularly how journalists use mobile and social media.

Rodrigo Zamith (PhD, University of Minnesota) is an associate professor of journalism at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. His research focuses on the reconfiguration of journalism in a changing media environment and the development of digital research methods.