Interpretive journalism: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings

Susana Salgado
Foundation for Science and Technology, Portugal

Jesper Strömbäck
Mid Sweden University, Sweden

Abstract
The overall purpose of this article is to review theory and research on interpretive journalism, one of the key concepts in research on the style and character of news journalism. While it is often claimed that news journalism over recent decades has changed from being predominantly descriptive to becoming increasingly interpretive, our review suggests that there is a lack of systematic research in this area. The literature is furthermore characterized by different conceptualizations and operationalizations of interpretive journalism, as well as by different normative assumptions. Taken together, this suggests not only insufficient conceptual clarity, but also problems related to the comparability and cumulativity of findings. To remedy this, and based on our review of how interpretive journalism has been conceptualized and operationalized, this article suggests how interpretive journalism should be conceptualized and operationalized in order to increase conceptual clarity, comparability across studies, and ultimately research cumulativity.

Keywords
interpretive journalism, journalism of opinion, journalistic objectivity, political news journalism

Corresponding author:
Jesper Strömbäck, Department of Media and Communication, Mid Sweden University, 851 70 Sundsvall, Sweden
Email: jesper.stromback@miun.se
Introduction

According to many observers, the rise of a more interpretive style of journalism is one of the most significant changes over recent decades. Djerf-Pierre and Weibull (2008: 209), for example, characterize the rise of interpretive journalism as ‘the most significant change in political journalism’, while Patterson (1993: 67) notes, ‘Today, facts and interpretation are freely intermixed in election reporting. Interpretation provides the theme, and the facts illustrate it. The theme is primary; the facts are secondary.’

The notion that journalism has become more interpretive is so pervasive that frequently it is taken for granted without being systematically investigated. Hence, the extent to which assertions of a more interpretive style of journalism are empirically supported is not clear. In addition, a cursory reading of the literature reveals different conceptualizations and operationalizations of interpretive journalism. This suggests not only insufficient conceptual clarity, but also problems related to the comparability of findings.

Against this background, the purpose of this article is twofold: first, to review how interpretive journalism has been conceptualized and operationalized, and to identify some key findings; second, to suggest how interpretive journalism should be conceptualized and operationalized to increase conceptual clarity and comparability across studies. The review focuses on studies based on quantitative content analysis, focusing on the period since the 1960s.

In the first four sections of this article, we review different conceptualizations and operationalizations of interpretive journalism together with some key findings of the most relevant studies. Based on this review, in the following sections we suggest a synthesis and how interpretive journalism should be conceptualized. We also propose how interpretive journalism should be operationalized in studies based on quantitative content analysis to increase conceptual clarity as well as comparability across studies.

Different theoretical and conceptual approaches

The concept of interpretive journalism is both important and complex. It is important since it is often alleged that journalism has become more interpretive, which, if true, would signify changes in both journalism and in the relationship between journalists and the sources and events they cover. It is also complex as it touches on a range of epistemological and ontological questions, as there are different journalistic styles, norms and values in different countries, and as journalism has changed over time (Benson and Hallin, 2007; Weaver and Willnat, 2012). Journalism may, for example, follow an objective, an impartial, a literary, or a partisan approach.

Still, while a review of the literature shows that there are different conceptualizations of interpretive journalism, virtually all conceive interpretive journalism as somehow opposed to or going beyond descriptive, fact-based journalism, and some emphasize a shift of emphasis related to the five Ws of journalism: What, Where, When, Who and Why. Generally speaking, interpretive journalism is conceptualized as entailing a greater emphasis on the ‘meaning’ of news beyond the facts and statements of sources, and a
greater emphasis on the Why of the five Ws (Patterson, 1993). It is characterized by a disbelief in the notion that it is possible to separate facts from values (Schudson, 1978). One critic of interpretive journalism is Patterson (1980, 1993, 2000a). According to his conceptualization, interpretive journalism is journalism driven by themes, where facts are used mainly to illustrate the theme chosen by the journalist. This conceptualization should be understood within the larger context of the relationship between journalists and their sources. A journalism that focuses on the What, When, Where, and Who allows sources to set the news agenda and news frames, reducing journalists to carriers and amplifiers of sources’ messages. In contrast:

The interpretive style empowers journalists by giving them more control over the news message. […] The descriptive style places the journalist in the role of an observer. The interpretive style requires the journalist to act also as an analyst. The journalist is thus positioned to give shape to the news in a way the descriptive style does not allow. (Patterson, 2000a: 250)

This is significant, as the rise of interpretive journalism has been linked to increasing media negativity or cynicism towards politicians (Djerf-Pierre and Weibull, 2008; Farnsworth and Lichter, 2011; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001), and to an increasing focus on the framing of politics as a strategic game (Patterson, 1993, 2000a).

Benson and Hallin (2007), on the other hand, distinguish between four main journalistic functions: reporting current facts or statements, giving background information, giving interpretation, and giving opinion. To them, ‘interpretation is a kind of empirical discourse, but goes beyond current facts, setting or historical context to speculate on such things as significance, outcomes and motives’, while ‘giving opinion’ refers to journalists’ ‘exercise of judgment, either normative (what is good or bad) or empirical (what is true or false)’ (2007: 32).

Djerf-Pierre and Weibull have offered a third conceptualization of interpretive journalism. According to them:

Interpretive journalism is characterized by four entwined features: critical expertise, speculation, advocacy, and meta-journalism. Journalists appear as experts in studio interviews, or as commentators interpreting political reality to their audience. Taking on the role of ombudsmen of the public, journalists advocate the presumed interests and needs of the public/audience. (2008: 209)

This conceptualization also stresses the critical component of interpretive journalism, and the greater journalistic control over news content.

The same holds true for how Barnhurst and colleagues have conceptualized interpretive reporting as part of the ‘new long journalism’ (Barnhurst, 2003; Barnhurst and Mutz, 1997; Steele and Barnhurst, 1996). In their view, the decline of event-centered reporting and the rise of interpretive news are two sides of the same coin: ‘Across differences in study context, time frame, and medium, closely related terms describe the shift from descriptive to analytical journalism, from event-centered to interpretive reporting, or from episodic to thematic coverage’ (Barnhurst and Mutz, 1997: 28). Related to this and other conceptualizations is a greater emphasis on the journalistic voice, which may include overt commentary, accompanied by, for example, shorter sound bites by politicians.
However, in contrast to other scholars, Barnhurst and Mutz do not conceptualize interpretive journalism as opposed to a focus on What, When, Where, and Who. While they note that interpretive journalism places greater emphasis on Why than descriptive journalism, they also note that journalism may be interpretive in how it deals with What, Where, and Who (1997: 29–30).

This brief review suggests that the concept of interpretive journalism is complex and that there are several, albeit overlapping, conceptualizations. In many cases, most notably in Patterson’s analysis (1993), interpretive journalism carries negative connotations. From our perspective, interpretive journalism should, however, be considered a non-normative concept. If interpretive journalism focuses on journalistic interpretations and analyses of current events, including overt commentary, these interpretations and analyses can be well informed as well as uninformed, critical as well as uncritical, and providing context as well as distractions. This is, however, not a matter of interpretive journalism as a concept. It is an empirical not a conceptual matter. Normative assessments should hence be kept apart from the conceptualization of interpretive journalism.

**Conceptual and empirical definitions**

One of the influential scholars who have empirically investigated the concept of interpretive journalism is Patterson (1993, 1996). According to him, facts and interpretations have become increasingly intermingled in contemporary journalism. His study of how election campaigns were covered by the *New York Times* shows that the share of predominantly interpretive news stories increased tenfold between 1960 and 1992. In his study, news stories were coded as interpretive if they mainly focused on Why instead of What (Patterson, 1993: 81–3). The same holds true of a follow-up study on the coverage of the US Congress (Patterson, 1996).

Simultaneously, other scholars were also working on this subject but using different terminology and empirical approaches. In *Seeing the Newspaper*, Barnhurst (1994) suggests the concept of ‘new long journalism’ to describe trends and changes in newspapers’ content. The new long journalism hypothesis suggests that newspaper stories have become longer, that the emphasis in reporting has moved from event-centered coverage to interpretive news analysis, and that the tone of reports has become more negative.

In a follow-up study on the journalism of opinion in US presidential campaigns, Steele and Barnhurst also work mainly with the concepts of the ‘new long journalism’ and the ‘journalism of opinion’ (1996). The goal of this study was to provide a frame of descriptive statistics on the role of journalists in political coverage and to investigate whether the more journalist-centered newscasts serve to enhance the journalists’ own prestige, influence and authority. The results show that by different measures, journalists expanded their presence (1996: 189), and that network news has adopted a more conversational tone (1996: 197). In order to provide context to this argument, Steele and Barnhurst cite studies which describe speakers in a discussion as dominant if they exhibit certain behaviors such as faster pace of communication, longer and more proficient talks, or speaking more often, and claim (1996: 197) that journalists exhibit precisely these traits.
In another study, Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) investigated trends in reporting using samples of news stories about crime, jobs and accidents. These results showed that what used to be the main goal of journalism, ‘the report of events and their novelty to the hearer’, gradually gave place to more analytical and interpretive reporting. These scholars also conceptualized the new long journalism and interpretive reporting in relation – albeit not opposed – to the five Ws of journalism:

In general, we expected to find a greater emphasis on news analysis and the ‘Why’ part of the traditional five Ws formula. ‘Where’ might incorporate a broader context or broader range of locales than would event-centered coverage; ‘When’ might show greater emphasis on times other than the present; ‘What’ might schedule a larger number of events in single stories; and ‘Who’ might deemphasize individuals, so that people become identified less often by name and more often by demography or group affiliation.

In the European context, there are also several empirical studies on the concept of interpretive journalism. De Vreese (2001), for example, investigated how Dutch public television covered the 1998 national election and the 1999 European election. The framework for this study was based on the concepts of sacerdotal vs pragmatic and agenda-sending vs agenda-setting. With respect to sacerdotal and pragmatic approaches the distinction was first made by Blumler and Gurevitch (1975), and refers to the inherent importance attributed to politics by the media. The purpose of distinguishing ‘agenda-sending’ from ‘agenda-setting’ was to determine the weight the journalist attached to the campaign agendas:

Agenda-sending refers to the conviction that the role of newsmakers is to send and cover the agendas of the political parties whereas agenda-setting refers to newsmakers’ attempt to set their own agenda, based on audience preferences, editorial policies and in house expertise. The agenda-setting notion of newsmakers is that they play an active role in setting the campaign agenda by turning to themes and issues, which are not already on the established political agenda. (1975: 160–1)

Interpretive journalism was thus conceptualized as journalism driven by the journalists rather than their sources.

A more explicit focus on journalistic style can be found in a series of cross-national studies conducted by Strömbäck and colleagues (Strömbäck and Aalberg, 2008; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006; Strömbäck and Luengo, 2008; Strömbäck and Shehata, 2007). In these studies, the ‘dominant journalistic style’ was investigated, building on the distinction between a mainly descriptive and a mainly interpretive journalistic style. In these studies, the journalistic style was conceptualized as descriptive when the news story mainly told what had happened in a rather straightforward style, and as mainly interpretive when the journalist analyzed, evaluated or explained a situation while also describing it. Strömbäck (2008) made use of the same conceptualization in a study comparing Swedish election news between 1998 and 2006, in which he also investigated the prominence of so-called news analyses, that is, commentary pieces written by journalists with some kind of label (such as ‘analysis’) that signals a more subjective approach. Interpretive journalism is conceptualized as a greater journalistic control over the news,
a greater focus on explanations and analyses by, and the voice of, journalists, and as going beyond a descriptive style of journalism.

In another comparative study, Benson and Hallin (2007) investigated the extent to which journalists in US and French elite press in the 1960s and 1990s were ‘giving interpretation and giving opinion’, as opposed to reporting facts or giving background information. Interpretive journalism was conceptualized as going ‘beyond current facts, setting or historical context to speculate on such things as significance, outcomes and motives’. Giving opinion was conceptualized as journalists’ ‘exercise of judgment, either normative (what is good or bad) or empirical (what is true or false)’ (2007: 32).

Wilke and Reinemann (2001; see also Reinemann and Wilke, 2007) investigated trends in campaign coverage in Germany between 1949 and 1998. As part of this study, they investigated whether there was ‘a tendency towards a more interpretive character of coverage’ (2001: 293). Conceptually, they link interpretive journalism with the degree to which the news coverage is mediated and journalist centered (2001: 295). More specifically, an interpretive journalistic style was conceptualized as a journalistic style focused more on the journalists and their analyses and opinions, and less on the candidates and their statements. This is similar to a study of Semetko and Schoenbach (2003) that focused on the coverage of German elections between 1990 and 2002 in the newspaper Bild.

Aside from the studies above, there are others that refer to an interpretive journalistic style, and some that investigate it but without providing a clear conceptualization of what entails an interpretive journalistic style. There are also studies using similar indicators as those reviewed above – for example, the length of politicians’ sound bites – without linking it conceptually to interpretive journalism (Farisworth and Lichter, 2011; Hallin, 1992). As the main focus of these studies is not on interpretive journalism per se, or as they do not provide clear conceptualizations of interpretive journalism, we have left them out.

To sum up: although there are differences related to, for example, whether interpretive journalism is conceptualized as opposed to or just related to the five Ws of journalism, there are also similarities in how interpretive journalism has been conceptualized. In most cases interpretive journalism is conceptualized as opposed to or going beyond descriptive, fact-based or source-driven journalism; entailing greater journalistic control over news content and a more prominent journalistic voice, which may include overt commentary by journalists; entailing a stronger emphasis on the theme chosen by the journalist; and as entailing a focus on the meaning and Why of news rather than on the Who, What, Where and When.

Despite these conceptual similarities, the breadth and depth of the conceptualizations and the choice of empirical indicators differ across studies. In the next section, we analyze how interpretive journalism has been operationalized in more detail.

**Operationalizations of interpretive journalism**

When reviewing how interpretive journalism has been operationalized, one key distinction is between content and format-related operationalizations. Most studies focus on the content and characteristics of news, but there are some that also include format-related measures.
To study the journalistic style Patterson (2000b: 26), for example, distinguishes between a descriptive and an interpretive/analytical/evaluative style, coded as either the one or the other. The descriptive style is defined as ‘tells “what” happened in a rather straightforward, descriptive way’, while the interpretive/analytical/evaluative style is defined as ‘analyzes, evaluates, or explains a situation while also describing parts of it’. In this study the content rather than the format is at the center.

With the goal of illustrating how the new long journalism trend manifested itself in newspaper content, Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) investigated the specific components of the new long journalism. For each story, coders answered several questions about individual actors or groups in the text, the number of events reported, when these events took place and where the events happened. They also identified whether the story reported any information about background context, implications, interpretations, or recommendations, and whether the story reported any causes, general problems, collective social issues, or themes. On a 10-point scale, they rated the emphasis from highly specific, event-centered coverage (1) to very general news analysis (10). This is highly similar to the approach taken by Barnhurst (2003) in his study of how US public radio covered elections between 1980 and 2000, and in both cases the operationalizations target the content rather than the format of news.

Focusing on the idea that distinct types of journalistic discourse establish different kinds of relationships between press and citizenry, and considering that the political voice of the journalist increases in prominence from the lowest to the highest category (opinion), Benson and Hallin (2007) coded each paragraph according to its primary function: reporting current facts or statements, giving background information, giving interpretation, or giving opinion. Their sample included articles on domestic politics in US and French elite press, randomly selected from editions from the mid 1960s and from the mid 1990s.

A different type of approach was taken by De Vreese in his investigation on how Dutch public broadcasting (2001) covered the 1998 national and the 1999 European elections. The analysis was based on newsroom observation, interviews and content analysis of election news coverage. The indicator most directly related to the journalistic style, and investigated through content analysis, was whether stories were adapted from the campaigns’ agendas, originated from the campaigns’ agendas but with a significant and identifiable spin by NOS Journaal, or initiated purely by NOS Journaal.

Strömbäck and colleagues used content analysis to compare how major newspapers covered national elections in countries such as Sweden on the one hand, and Britain, Norway, Spain and the USA on the other. The operationalization of interpretive journalism was consistent across these studies, and determined based on the dominant journalistic style. The content was thus decisive, not the format. Briefly, coders were instructed to code descriptive if the news story tells what happened in a straightforward way, and interpretive if ‘analyzes, evaluates, or explains a situation while also describing aspects of it’. The journalistic use of overt commentary and value-laden terms was used as indicators of an interpretive style. Lengauer et al. (2007; Plasser and Lengauer, 2009) followed a similar approach, distinguishing between a mainly interpretive and a mainly descriptive journalistic style, although they also used the intermediate category ‘ambivalent’. The same operationalization was used in research on Swedish election news
in addition to a variable measuring the format of the news story, distinguishing between ‘straight news’ and ‘news analysis’. The operationalization of ‘news analysis’ was ‘news stories that the media explicitly give a label that sends the signal to readers/listeners that journalistic interpretations are to be expected. In broadcast news, that includes segments where one journalist interviews another journalist.’

Also considering both content and format in their operationalization, Wilke and Reinemann’s study (2001) covered the media coverage of German national elections between 1949 and 1998. Operationally, the indicators used to analyze whether campaign coverage had become more interpretive and whether de-authentication had taken place were: format (hard news, opinion, feature, other); and length of the statements of the candidates (in lines). Similarly, Semetko and Schoenbach (2003) used two operational indicators relevant with respect to interpretive journalism in their study of how the Bild covered German elections between 1990 and 2002: the type of news story (commentary or non-commentary); and the way political actors were evaluated (positively or negatively), with a particular focus on negative evaluations.

Salgado (2007, 2010) adopted a different approach to investigate how interpretive the election coverage is in Portugal. Besides coding news according to the format, she also coded news stories according to whether they were predominantly retrospective or prospective. In cases where they were coded as predominantly prospective, focusing on future possibilities or interpretations about the future or the consequences of events or facts, this was taken as an indicator of interpretive journalism.

Partly following Hallin’s framework (1992) and focused on the content, Steele and Barnhurst (1996) used several operational indicators of the ‘new long journalism’ and interpretive journalism. More specifically, they investigated: How long did each journalist’s speech go on? How often did journalists speak in each report? How much time in total did journalists spend talking in each report? To understand if more journalistic presence translated into more influence in their political reporting, the authors classified the journalists’ sound bites in different communication tasks. The purpose of this was to classify not what facts or content were discussed but how journalists spoke. The results showed the highest rate of activity in ‘giving opinion’ for each year with the second most frequent incidence being ‘giving information’. Steele and Barnhurst (1996) also measured the dynamic tendencies of speakers. With the objective of determining who controls the report, they compared the relative contribution of two tasks: giving and asking for information. These indexes showed a clear pattern: journalists’ increased control over the news, and in giving opinions and expressing judgments, while asking fewer questions in the process of reporting on elections.

This review of how interpretive journalism has been operationalized shows that different operationalizations have been used. Some use only a few variables as indicators of interpretive journalism, while others use several variables. Some make use of direct measures, while others make use of indirect measures. Some measure the journalistic style on the basis of the dominant journalistic style, while others do not. And while most focus on the content of news, some focus on the format or combine content and format-related operationalizations. This should be kept in mind when the findings across studies are assessed.
**Key findings: The rise of interpretive journalism?**

Most of the empirical studies about interpretive journalism that were reviewed for this article found at least some evidence of an increasingly prominent and interpretive role of journalists in the news coverage, not only with respect to election or political news, but also with respect to current affairs coverage. Most authors link interpretive journalism with other trends in journalistic coverage and, in some cases, present explanations on how this form of journalism has other implications, such as less neutral and more negative coverage.

One of the most prominent critics of the trend towards interpretive journalism is Patterson (1980, 1993, 2000a). His research shows that the share of news stories on the *New York Times*’ front pages that are predominantly interpretive as opposed to descriptive increased from 8 percent in 1960 to 80 percent in 1992. The consequence of this rise of interpretive journalism, he claims, is that news stories have become increasingly negative, less focused on issues, and more focused on the political game and strategies (1993: 240).

Steele and Barnhurst (1996) also discuss the divergent opinions on whether journalists ought to be transmitting their judgments. Aside from these normative discussions, comparing data from 1968 and 1988, they found that ‘when journalists spoke at the end of a report, they gave factual information much less often, instead making judgments about the election events grew to almost 90 percent of these final remarks. Journalists made their opinions the last word, the final say’ (1996: 22). Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) also showed that reporting moved in the general direction of analysis and interpretation. More specifically, their results show that over time, newspaper stories grew longer, with more interpretation, less focus on particular geographic locales and more focus on broader regions, and with a stronger focus on thematic summaries of events and statements at the expense of episodic stories on particular events or statements by sources. Similar results were found in Barnhurst’s study of National Public Radio (2003: 21):

> While political reports grew longer, following the trend at newspapers, sound bites shrank, following the trend for television. Citizens spoke more often but also more briefly and emotionally and had less to say about politics than about other matters. Politicians took a double hit, speaking less often and in shorter sound bites. […] The packaging and pacing of speech imply a fundamental change in the professional role of journalists, who put themselves forward as interpreters of the political world.

> Journalists are ‘makers of meaning’, and not mere ‘mechanics of event transmission’. They also tended to act more often as expert sources, interpreting politics by looking at the politicians’ hidden agendas and by engaging in a critique of policies.

Benson and Hallin (2007) confirmed that, during the 1990s, the French press offered both more interpretation (12%) and opinion (5.9%) than the US press (5.4% and 0.7%, respectively). Comparing the 1960s and the 1990s, they also found that the French press became slightly less interpretive and opinionated (19.8% to 17.9%) while the US press became slightly more so (4.7% to 6.1%).

In the European context, De Vreese (2001) showed that election news in the *NOS Journaal* in 1998 was more analytical and had a more pronounced journalistic spin on election stories compared to earlier elections. The time devoted to politicians decreased
while the time devoted to journalistic commentary increased, with the journalistic role as a commentator more prominent than before. Wilke and Reinemann (2001) also found a trend towards more interpretive news coverage in their study of German election news between 1949 and 1991. The dominance of hard news decreased significantly over time while opinion and interpreting formats became more and more important. The share of hard news, which accounted for more than 80 percent of all articles between 1949 and 1961, fell below 60 percent in the 1990s. On the other hand, the share of opinion-related and interpreting formats represented about one in 10 articles during the first elections, but doubled in 1965 and remained at that level in the following elections. In a follow-up study, Reinemann and Wilke (2007: 108) confirmed that these trends continued in the 2002 and 2005 German elections. Not least, the introduction of televised debates caused changes in the character of media coverage about the German chancellor candidates: the number of evaluative statements exploded and the criteria by which the candidates were evaluated changed, increasing the level of personalization.

Also in the German context, Semetko and Schoenbach (2003) showed that the number of commentary journalistic pieces increased over time, further confirming a trend towards more interpretive journalism. Their results also suggest that this trend contributed to an increased volume of news stories that contained negative evaluations of political actors.

Turning to the studies by Strömbäck and colleagues, most of these focus on comparisons across countries and not across time. While they do not show whether or not interpretive journalism has become more common, they suggest that there are differences across countries (Strömbäck and Aalberg, 2008; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006; Strömbäck and Luengo, 2008; Strömbäck and Shehata, 2007). Research comparing television news in the USA, Germany, Austria and Italy similarly found differences across countries (Plasser and Lengauer, 2009). Studies on interpretive journalism in Sweden has shown that close to 10 percent of all news stories are explicit ‘news analyses’ while around 40 percent of all stories are predominantly interpretive. However, during the last 10 years there does not appear to be any trend towards more interpretive journalism (Strömbäck, 2008). The same appears to hold true for Austria (Lengauer et al., 2007).

In the Portuguese case, finally, Salgado (2007, 2010) found that approximately 20 percent of all election news stories in daily newspapers were prospective – that is, dealt with interpretations of future possibilities or consequences of current events or facts.

Taken together, this review suggests that (a) there are different although overlapping conceptualizations of interpretive journalism, (b) several different operationalizations of interpretive journalism have been used, (c) but that despite this, most studies show that interpretive journalism has become more – or is – common, (d) although there are differences across countries.

However, the review also suggests that it is difficult to compare the results, not least because different operationalizations have been used. Often, the exact variables and coding instructions are not provided, making it even more difficult to compare the studies and results. From the perspective of conceptual clarity as well as research comparability and cumulativity, this is problematic. The next sections thus suggest how interpretive journalism should be conceptualized to increase conceptual clarity, and operationalized to increase comparability and cumulativity.
Towards conceptual clarity

To be meaningful, any concept should ideally have precise boundaries, delineating it from other, related concepts. To the extent possible, ambiguities should be avoided. The conceptual definition should furthermore be grounded in established scholarly understandings, and in cases where similar terms are used in everyday life, resonate with popular understandings. In addition, the concepts as such should not be normative. What is and what should be are two separate questions, and should not be conflated in how the concepts are defined.

As shown by this review, most scholars conceive interpretive journalism as opposed to or going beyond descriptive and fact-based journalism. Descriptive journalism is conceived as focusing mainly on What, Where, When and Who, and on verifiable facts. In contrast, interpretive journalism focuses mainly on the Why, and on the meaning or context of verifiable facts. However, the other Ws can also be the subject of an interpretive angle, as happens with When and What in cases of speculation about the future or the past.

In a sense, interpretive journalism aims to find out the truth behind the verifiable facts. One reason for this is the disbelief in value-free facts or in the notion that facts speak for themselves. Another reason is that descriptive journalism lends the objects of news reports the power to define what the news is about. For journalists believing that journalism should function as a critical watchdog of those in power, this is anathema. While journalists frequently cannot overtly question what political news sources say, without being perceived of being biased, they can decide on the thematic framework within which the actions and words of political news sources are placed, and analyze the meaning of the What, Where, When and Who. They can explain and evaluate what the news is about by contextualizing the news and by linking different events or statements to each other within a specific, thematic framework. A third reason is that facts may need context to carry meaning, and interpretive journalism can provide such context.

How, then, should interpretive journalism be conceptualized? Based on this review and as a synthesis of how it has been conceptualized in previous research, we propose the following definition of interpretive journalism:

Interpretive journalism is opposed to or going beyond descriptive, fact-focused and source-driven journalism. On the story-level of analysis, interpretive journalism is characterized by a prominent journalistic voice; and by journalistic explanations, evaluations, contextualizations, or speculations going beyond verifiable facts or statements by sources. It may, but does not have to, also be characterized by a theme chosen by the journalist, use of value-laden terms, or overt commentary.

When interpretive journalism includes the use of value-laden terms or overt commentary it comes very close to what Benson and Hallin (2007: 32) conceptualize as ‘journalism of opinion’, where the journalist explicitly makes use of his or her own judgment in relation to what is good or bad, true or false. This suggests that is important to acknowledge that there are different types of interpretive journalism. While in some cases, a public service orientation guides the journalistic work, in others the journalist’s personal style is more accentuated, or the news story is based on a more speculative approach.
Hence, it may be possible to identify different kinds of interpretive journalism such as ‘public service or public responsibility journalism’, ‘commentary journalism’, or ‘critical and adversarial journalism’. As the assessment of different kinds of interpretive journalism may vary, this is another argument why it is important that the concept per se is not normative.

**Towards increasing comparability and cumulativity**

Based on the conceptualization of interpretive journalism as suggested, the question is how to operationalize the concept. Before providing our answer to this question, three caveats should be noted. First, our suggested operationalizations are developed for quantitative content analyses. Second, the unit of analysis is conceived of as full news stories. Third, the operationalizations should work for both print and broadcast media.

As in all quantitative content analyses, it is important that the operationalizations increase the likelihood of high intercoder reliability. The operationalizations should therefore, to the extent possible, target the manifest content. Second, the operationalizations should be as unambiguous as possible. Third, to increase the overall reliability and validity of the findings, multiple indicators are preferable.

The most obvious indicator of whether the journalistic style is interpretive or descriptive refers to the format of the news story, where several scholars make a distinction between categories such as hard or straight news, commentary, opinion or news analysis, and feature. Since the terminologies may vary both across media and across countries, to capture the share of news stories that explicitly signal the presence of interpretive journalism, we suggest the following variable: (1) Does the news story through labeling explicitly signal to audiences that they can expect interpretive journalism?

Considering that a descriptive news story tells what happened and an interpretive news story contains journalistic explanations, contextualizations, evaluations, or speculations, we also suggest a variable addressing the overall salience or amount of journalistic interpretation or explanation: (2) What is the overall amount of journalistic interpretations and explanations: a) Primary amount; b) Secondary amount; c) Peripheral amount; d) No amount?

The downside with variables such as this is that it may be difficult to distinguish between different amounts of journalistic interpretation and explanation, and hence to achieve strong intercoder reliability. To supplement this variable and to address the fact that there might be different forms of interpretive journalism, we suggest a set of variables coded on a present-absent basis, which could then be used to construct an additive index of interpretive journalism: (3) Does the news story include journalistic explanations or interpretations of the reasons behind events or actions? (4) Does the news story include journalistic speculations about future consequences of events? (5) Does the news story include a journalistic contextualization of events or actions? (6) Does the journalist include overt commentary when covering events and actions?

Reviewing previous research, perhaps one of the most important indicators of interpretive journalism is the prominence of the journalistic voice – or, conversely, the lack of prominence of politicians’ voices. Thus, several studies investigate the length of politicians’ sound bites, inferring that the decreasing length of these sound bites suggests more interpretive journalism (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2011; Hallin, 1992). Other studies target
journalists’ sound bites directly (Steele and Barnhurst, 1996). The advantage of such variables is not only that they have strong conceptual linkages, but also that they often yield high intercoder reliability. The downside is that they need to be adjusted for content analyses of print media. A better approach that would work for both print and broadcast media would be to measure the share of the news story taken by the spoken or written words of the journalist, excluding statements from sources. Hence, to measure the prominence of the journalistic voice, we suggest the variable: (7) What is the share of the news story taken by journalists’ words?

In Table 1, we summarize the variables we suggest should be used to investigate the extent to which journalism is interpretive. For details and coding instructions please see the Appendix.

These seven variables may not cover all facets of interpretive journalism, and other variables are certainly conceivable. Nevertheless, we believe they cover the conceptually most important aspects of interpretive journalism, and that, taken together, studies using these operationalizations should yield both valid and reliable results regarding the extent to which news journalism is, or has become, interpretive.

**Discussion**

Although there may be many who are critical towards journalism practice, there is rather wide consensus that one of journalism’s most important democratic functions is to provide people with the kind of information they need to be free and self-governing (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007). The consensus quickly breaks down, however, as soon as the discussion focuses on what, exactly, constitutes the kind of information that people need. For those who defend interpretive journalism, the answer may be that people need analytical and contextualized information – information that makes it easier for people to make sense of facts and what is happening. For those who are critical towards

---

**Table 1. Variables for measuring the extent to which journalism is interpretive**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Does the news story through labeling explicitly signal to audiences that they may expect interpretive journalism?</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What is the overall amount of journalistic interpretations and explanations?</td>
<td>Primary/Secondary/Peripheral/No amount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Does the news story include journalistic explanations or interpretations of the reasons behind events or actions?</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Does the news story include journalistic speculations about future consequences of events?</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Does the news story include a journalistic contextualization of events or actions?</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Does the journalist include overt commentary when covering events and actions?</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What is the share of the news story taken by journalists’ words?</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
interpretive journalism, the answer is rather that people need information unfiltered by journalists – information that comes as directly as possible from the original sources.

Having different perspectives on the desirability of interpretive journalism is of course legitimate. At the same time, what is and what should be are two different issues that should always be kept separate.

To this end, this article has suggested not only a non-normative conceptualization of interpretive journalism, but also variables that can be used to investigate the extent to which news journalism is interpretive. We hope that these will appeal to scholars interested in investigating interpretive journalism, thereby yielding results that are more comparable across studies and hence increasing research cumulativity.

In addition, our hope is that these will free interpretive journalism from any normative connotations and thereby help to open up new research that does not assume but that empirically investigates the extent to which there are correlations between interpretive journalism on the one hand, and other features of journalism such as the framing of politics, or the effects on audiences, on the other. It may very well be a fact that interpretive journalism is linked to particular ways of framing politics or to media negativity, to take just two examples, or that interpretive journalism has adverse effects on people’s political attitudes. It may also be the case that interpretive journalism is linked to more in-depth coverage of issues and that it contributes positively to people’s political attitudes. There might also be differences between interpretive journalism in different media or in different countries in terms of analytical styles, linkages with other features of journalism, and effects on audiences.

These are important questions to investigate, but they can only be investigated if the concept of interpretive journalism is non-normative and decoupled from other concepts.

References


Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coding instructions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Does the news story through labeling explicitly signal to audiences that they may expect interpretive journalism?</td>
<td>This variable has two codes: 0 = no, 1 = yes. Coders should type 0 if the news story does not have any labels or visual markers signaling to readers that they may expect interpretive journalism, and/or if the news story does not include any segments where the news anchor interviews a journalist or news commentator or senior correspondent for the news program; and 1 if the news story is presented as ‘news analysis’, ‘analysis’, ‘commentary’ or other functionally equivalent labels or visual markers signaling that readers may expect interpretive journalism, and/or if the news story includes as segment where the news anchor interviews a journalist, news commentator or senior correspondent working for the news program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) What is the overall amount of journalistic interpretations and explanations?</td>
<td>This variable addresses the level of salience or amount of journalistic interpretation within the news story and has four codes: 0 = No journalistic interpretations 1 = Peripheral amount of journalistic interpretations 2 = Secondary amount of journalistic interpretations 3 = Primary amount of journalistic interpretations. ‘Journalistic explanations or interpretations’ refer to explanations and interpretations put forward by the journalist without explicit support from verifiable facts or statements by news sources. Primary amount is meant to classify news stories in which interpretation is the main purpose; in other words, if the news story is mainly focused on journalists’ interpretations or explanations, including their statements and/or opinions. Secondary amount refers to those news stories where a balance between facts/events and journalists’ interpretations and explanations is provided. Statements and/or opinions are provided as an illustration of a fact/idea; Peripheral amount suggests that there is mainly a description and a small portion of journalists’ interpretation or explanations is included. If there are no journalistic interpretations, coders should type 0.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
### Variable Coding instructions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coding instructions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(3) Does the news story include journalistic explanations or interpretations of the reasons behind events or actions?</td>
<td>This variable has two codes: 0 = no, 1 = yes. 'Journalistic explanations or interpretations' refer to explanations and interpretations put forward by the journalist without explicit support from verifiable facts or statements by news sources. The coder should type 0 if the news story does not include any explanations or interpretations targeting the reasons behind events or actions by the journalist covering the story, and 1 if the news story includes at least one explanation or interpretation of the reasons behind events or actions by the journalist covering the story. Particular attention should be paid to whether the journalist in the news story attempts to provide an answer to why something has happened or why a social or political actor has acted or said what he or she did or said, that is, retrospective speculations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Does the news story include journalistic speculations about future consequences of events?</td>
<td>This variable has two codes: 0 = no, 1 = yes. The coder should type 0 if the news story does not include any journalistic speculations about future consequences of events or actions; and 1 if the news story includes at least one speculation by the journalist about future consequences of events or happenings. Any speculation by a journalist about things that may happen in the future as a consequence of something should be counted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Does the news story include a journalistic contextualization of events or actions?</td>
<td>This variable has two codes: 0 = no, 1 = yes. The coder should type 0 if the news story does not include any attempts by the journalist to add context to events or actions covered in a news story; and 1 if the news story includes at least one attempt by the journalist to add context to the event or action that is covered in a news story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Does the journalist include overt commentary when covering events and actions?</td>
<td>This variable has two codes: 0 = no, 1 = yes. The coder should type 0 if the news story does not include any overt commentary from the journalist covering a story; and 1 if the news story includes at least one overt commentary, including clearly value-laden terms, from the journalist covering the story. Value-laden terms refer to terms that are clearly subjective or carry connotations that cannot be considered neutral. Overt commentary refers to expressions of opinions by the journalist, for example, whether something is good or bad, true or false, without support from verifiable facts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Variable Coding instructions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coding instructions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(7) What is the share of the news story taken by journalists’ words?</td>
<td>Coders should measure the share of the news story taken by journalists’ words. For broadcast media, the share of the news story taken by journalists’ words is measured by speaking time taken by journalists – the sum of journalists’ sound bites divided by the total length of the news story. For print media, the share of the news story taken by journalists’ words is measured by the number of words taken by journalists – the sum of all words written by the journalist – thus excluding any quotes from sources – divided by the total number of words in the news story.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Biographical notes

**Susana Salgado** is Professor of Strategic and Political Communication and Post-Doctoral Researcher in Media and Democracy at the Foundation for Science and Technology, Portugal.

**Jesper Strömbäck** is Professor in Media and Communication, and Professor and Chair in Journalism, at Mid Sweden University. He is also Research Director at the Centre for Political Communication Research at Mid Sweden University.