Re-imagining the quantitative-qualitative relationship through colouring and anchoring

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Abstract
Across journalism, numbers and non-numbers are used in conjunction with each other in the process of storytelling. When literature within journalism studies examines this relationship, it tends to focus on how numbers contextualise the specific anecdote or how numbers provide scale to individual accounts. Both explanations rest on a specific-general paradigm that underpins much of the way academics research and theorise the topic. In this article, I reconceptualise the relationship between the quantitative and the qualitative through two metaphors that emerged during my interviews with journalists regarding their coverage of humanitarian crises. In doing so, I set my study within the long history of using metaphors in journalism studies. First, I point to the metaphor of colouring to outline how we can reimagine storytelling as the combination of data that provides form and shape and the personal that colours this structure. Second, I explore the metaphor of anchoring to appreciate the journalistic practice of connecting subjective personal accounts with the ontological solidity of data. I conclude by highlighting the differences between these two metaphors and the specific-general paradigm, whilst also pointing to the ramifications of my article for journalism studies and mediated ethics.

Keywords
Journalism, numbers, storytelling, metaphors, representation

When putting together a news story, journalists use a range of quantitative and qualitative descriptions of the phenomenon they are looking to describe to their audience. On
one end of the spectrum, data journalists use large datasets to tell complex number-driven stories that quantitatively represent the ‘thing’ being described in terms of absolute numbers, data visualisations, percentages, ratios or fractions. At the other end, reporters use detailed personal stories about individuals to convey the feelings, emotions and experiences of the ‘thing’ in question. For most of those working in the news industry, however, the practice of storytelling involves combining numbers and narratives. Given that this relationship is so central to journalism, how does the current literature within journalism studies approach, research and theorise it? To unravel this question, let us turn to examples from the literature.

The recent work by Cushion et al. (2017) on the use of statistics in the UK news media positions numbers as something that help journalists contextualise stories by placing specific moments, often referring to the ‘unusual and dramatic’, within statistical averages, norms and predictions. In doing so, the reporter can arrive at the ‘social reality’ of the phenomena in question. In their article, they argue that this act of contextualisation is often lacking in the work of journalists.

While it may be possible (and indeed important) to use forms of storytelling that inform as well as entertain, there are instances where the desire to entertain (to tell a good story) may end up so disregarding statistical patterns that they end up misinforming our view of the world. (Cushion et al., 2017: 1213–1214)

Such a notion that the specific event or experience can be understood as normal or abnormal through reference to numbers underpins much of the literature within journalism studies. It is worth untangling the nature of this relationship further. Implicit in such an explanation is what we can call the specific-general binary. This norm asserts that individual experience can be related to the statistical mass through a process of equivalence and amalgamation: a set of similar individual experiences, such as people becoming homeless after a hurricane, can be accumulated into a quantitative expression, such as 100,000 people have been left homeless, which encapsulates the sum total of all those individual experiences (Van Leeuwen, 2008). It is this logic of equivalence between individual experiences and their amalgamation into a set of experiences that allows someone to judge whether a journalist has interrogated the abnormality of specific occurrence. Essentially, they can ask: how representative is this individual story?

But this specific-general paradigm is not just evident in the contextualisation of the unusual or unexpected, it also governs the way academics within journalism studies interrogate the severity or scale of an event. In his story of civilian casualties due to drone attacks in Pakistan from 2004 to 2015, Ahmad (2016) argues that figures of civilian deaths produced by official sources was much lower than the actual number of people who had died. The low numbers of deaths reported meant that the news media gave less coverage and attention to the topic (Ahmad, 2016: 20). In his approach, Ahmad creates an equivalence between individual people killed by drones – at the exclusion of other groups, such as those dying from different causes – and amalgamates these individual units into a statistical mass.

The emphasis in Ahmad’s work, however, is not on the way this statistical mass contextualises the specific experience. Instead, it points to how this statistical mass
fails to convey the true significance of drone strikes due to the undercounting of the number of those killed. In other words, the effects of drones would be considered more important if the true scale of people being killed was known. Such a logic highlights the intersection of the specific-general binary and human life, as observed across the literature on journalism

In our society, the majority rules, not just in contexts in which formal democratic procedures are used to arrive at decisions, but also and especially in others, through mechanisms such as opinion polls, surveys, marketing research, etc. (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 37)

But the relationship between the numbers of those suffering and media attention is far from linear. In fact, literature has consistently pointed towards the way news structures will assign more importance to 10 deaths in an economically, culturally and political proximate country compared to 10 deaths in another context (Franks, 2006; Joye, 2009). Such findings highlight the limitations of only approaching the quantitative-qualitative relationship within the specific-general. As Peters (2001) explains ‘narrative and data mark the two poles of modern social description’, but these two descriptors are not necessarily diametrically opposed

Novels draw on social facts to make social fictions; statistics constitute social facts (Hacking, 1990). . .most stories summarise characters and events; most statistics reveal subtle relations we would not have noticed otherwise. . .there are better and worse stories, just as there are better and worse statistical analyses’ (Peters, 2001: 440)

Tuchman’s (1976) article Telling Stories takes a similar approach to this binary within a news media context. She explains that ‘being a reporter who deals in facts and being a story-teller who produced tales are not antithetical activities’ (Tuchman, 1976: 96). In this view, the reporting of numbers (facts) should not stand in opposition to the subjective personal experience (tales). To enter into this discussion, this article focuses on the use of numbers and non-numbers by journalists covering humanitarian crises. This genre of reporting is considered particularly important in exploring the quantitative-qualitative divide given its focus on covering emergencies through a combination of statistics on suffering with harrowing personal accounts. The article uses 16 interviews conducted in 2019 with journalists from five UK-based news outlets to reimagine the relationship between numbers and non-numbers through two metaphors that emerged during these discussions. Using metaphors to help understand and untangle journalistic norms, practice and values is common within journalistic discourse and work within journalism studies.

Journalism and metaphors

In Barbie Zelizer’s (2017) book What Journalism Could Be, she opens her narrative with twelve metaphors for journalism. These include journalism as a sixth sense, journalism as a container, journalism as a story and journalism as a child (Zelizer, 2017: 11–19). It is often through these metaphors that those studying the news media come to understand
what journalism *does, should do and could function as*. But these metaphors also structure the way journalists discuss themselves, their colleagues and their profession – what Gravengaard (2012) calls ‘the metaphors journalists live by.’

Perhaps the most commonly adopted normative metaphor is the ‘marketplace of ideas’, first coined by Holmes and Brandeis in the early 20th century in the USA. This phrase has come to encapsulate the drive by news outlets to function as the medium for a multiplicity of voices to engage in discussions, debates and resolutions. For Kogen (2015: 5), this metaphorical conception of the media covers ‘the cause of the problem; how it is currently being, or could be, addressed; if there are actor addressing the problem; or if there are actors that are thwarting a solution from occurring.’

From its inception, the concept has been firmly rooted in journalism and journalism studies. For example, Baggini (2002) adopts this logic when discussing the role of ‘truth’ in the news media when arguing that journalists lay out multiple truths to be discussed and dissected by the public. Yet, as with all normative discussions, this metaphorical idealism has faced strong criticism. Herbert Marcuse (1969) denounced the egalitarian premise of this position, arguing strongly that the *ideas* in the marketplace were put forward by elites. Therefore, this marketplace consisted of the internal jousting of elite consciousness rather than the general population. Rooted in this broad critique, some within journalism studies have also rejected such an approach to the news media. They position the marketplace of ideas as the liberal fascination with pluralism that elides the complicated practicalities of such a system and fails to account for the way power functions (Curran and Park, 2000).

To step away from metaphors-as-normative-positions, we can observe the way metaphors have been used to conceptualise news structures and practices. The earliest, and perhaps most iconic, is Tuchman’s (1978) *news net* – a conceptual explanation of how certain stories become ‘news’ and others do not. She argues that the news net is structured by the bureaucracy and procedural nature of journalism, allowing certain stories to pass through the net and others to be caught. This means the conversation often centres on how the form, shape and size of the news net, and where it is deployed, is determined by a number of structural factors. These include geographical areas deemed more interesting than others, the way news beats often centre around particular locations (e.g. the crime beat at the court house), how topic specialisation dictates the collection of stories that fit into certain themes, economic pressures in content production, quixotic regularity of daily reporting, the different genres of hard news and the quotas for stories (Allan, 1999; Tuchman, 1978).

Taken as a whole, the news net offers a spatial reimagining of the relationship between journalism and the world about which it reports. The occurrence of events, places and people are set within the ‘sea’ of the world, into which the news media place a net that actively targets some happenings over others, whilst also being configured in a particular manner that reflects organisational, bureaucratic and sociologically structures. In taking such an approach, we can view the news net as distinctly structuralist. Whilst useful, this type of metaphor can fall prey to the presumption that the world is static, stable, organised and knowable. We can turn to metaphorical explanations that lean on a distinctly post-structuralist conception of journalism as a useful counterpoint.
To understand journalistic practice, process and structure, Anderson (2016) advocates for the conceptualisation of a rhizomatic configuration. He explains that this first emerged in the work of Fuller (2005) in *Media Ecologies*. Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1980: 21), this conception of the news is summarised by Anderson (2016: 416–417)

*The newer approach to media ecology sees no meaningful distinction between the natural and technological work, imagines different media forms as primarily material in nature and historically contingent, imagines movement in space to be one of diffusion and the exercise of power rather than balance, and does not consider the human to be at the center of any sort of media system, natural, material, or otherwise.*

In the contemporary digital news context, Anderson advocates for the adoption of the rhizomatic approach by researchers. He does warn, however, that this should not be done through increasingly popular big-data focussed projects as this ‘gives many of the studies of journalism a structuralist and technology-driven tinge.’ Instead, he pushes a research agenda that utilises ethnographic or other qualitative methods that examine how ‘rhizomatic processes play out on the ground’ (Anderson, 2016: 420).

**Method**

My approach to journalism and metaphors has elements of both the normative, procedural and holistic focuses above, yet adopts more of a post-structuralist explanation than a structuralist one. This is not because I set out to map post-structural concepts onto my empirical work. Rather, it is because the metaphors that emerged from my 16 interviews with journalists covering humanitarian crises pointed towards less structured notions of the qualitative-quantitative split. The interviews used in this analysis formed part of a larger research project that examined the way five digital news media outlets (The Guardian, The Mirror, The Telegraph, The Mail and BBC News Online) covered seven humanitarian crises (Manus Island refugee crisis, Hurricane Irma, NHS winter crisis, La Puebla quake, Rohingya refugee crisis, South Sudan Famine and Yemen conflict) from 2017. This involved the development of a 978 article corpus, from which reporters were selected if they authored at least one article. The interviews with the journalists were conducted between May and July in 2019.

Each of the five news outlets were represented by at least one reporter, with The Guardian (n=6) most represented and The Mirror (n=1) and The Daily Mail (n=1) the least. All but one of the crises (La Puebla quake) were covered in the interviews, with The NHS winter crisis covered the most (n=6), followed by the famine in South Sudan (n=4). Interviews were conducted face-to-face if the journalist was based in the UK (n=7) and online if they were not (n=9). All interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 1 hour and 40 minutes. For all of these discussions, I elected to conduct a semi-structured interview, using an article they authored as a prompt for discussion. This allowed for me to guide the conversation along certain themes yet base the discussion in a piece of work the journalist was familiar with. Such an approach is similar to ‘reconstruction interviews’ (Reich and Barnoy, 2016). Unlike these interviews, however, my approach was
not aimed at systematically reconstructing how journalists constructed the news piece in question (Barnoy and Reich, 2019). In fact, the aim of using these prompts was not to uncover processes of production per se. Instead, the interviews were used as a way to ground the conversation in the familiarity of the text so the journalists felt more comfortable in expressing their perceptions of how they used numbers in their work.

Whilst I conducted the interviews, I soon reached a level of saturation: the same themes, ideas and tropes emerged repeatedly after a relatively small number of interviews. This can partly be explained by the specificity of my interviews: journalists’ use of numbers was one relatively small aspect of their reporting and, as will be highlighted in the findings, there was a considerable degree of consensus about how these numbers were used. This consensus explains the relatively small number ($n=16$) of interviews used for this research.

Given that the relationship between individual qualitative accounts of suffering and quantitative descriptions of emergencies is the fabric of humanitarian journalism, these discussions were considered particularly important empirical data to explore the way journalists adopted numbers and non-numbers in storytelling. From these interviews emerged three metaphorical conceptions of the relationship between the quantitative and the qualitative. The first is rooted in the specific-general binary discussed in the opening section, referred to here as ‘zoom in, zoom out’. The second and third provide a more adventurous re-imagining of this relationship through the metaphors of anchoring and colouring.

The way journalists used these metaphors in discussions is thought through using some of the literature already outlined above, as well as specific journalism studies and non-journalism studies work on anchoring and colouring. In doing so, the article outlines two distinct ways to reimagine the qualitative-quantitative paradigm. It is not the intention of this study, however, to provide metaphors that are representative of other news media cultures, instead it provides a specific focus on how journalists writing about humanitarian crises for UK-based news outlets think through this act of storytelling. To begin, it will be useful to concern ourselves with the way journalists expressed the specific-general paradigm, articulated here as the act of zooming in and zooming out.

**Zoom in, zoom out: The specific-general binary**

*It’s kind of like to zoom out, and then zoom back in and zoom out (…) so the implicit understanding is that, like, the individual story, is one of a million or 200,000 stories, or whatever, which are all similar. (J13, 2019)*

*You’ve got a real close up. I think of it like being a director. You’ve got a real close up shot with this individual who, who is in a really sharp relief, who you’re really giving a lot of details about. And then you pan out to the million. (J15, 2019)*

The two extracts above provide an explanation of the quantitative-qualitative relationship that rests explicitly on the specific-general paradigm as outlined in the introduction. They position numbers and non-numbers as negotiations of perspective. Qualitative information allows journalists to ‘zoom in’ on the details of the individual, whereas quantitative information means the reporter can ‘zoom out’ to see how that individual is set within a number of other individuals. In many ways, this conceptualisation of perspective provides
an explanation of contextualisation (Cushion et al., 2017) and scale (Ahmad, 2016) through the lens of representation. It provides a useful metaphor through which we can appreciate the need to place the specific within a context and how this context often means referring to the total number of those having that experience. Whilst this explanation is important, it does not provide a metaphor that helps us to fundamentally reconceptualise the relationship between numbers and non-numbers. To do so, we can turn to an alternative explanation put forward by journalists to describe how they tell stories.

**Colour: Telling news stories through data and personal accounts**

*Anecdotes are great colour, but data is as vital to tell a story (J6, 2019)*

*The government has estimated blah blah blah, a rights group has estimated, or another group have said that that is probably conservative and then you kind of illustrate, yes you add some of the colour from quotes of survivors, people on the ground. (J5, 2019)*

The metaphor of colour in journalism, as articulated above, can be traced back to the late 19th century. In this context, colour was often associated with embellishment, fakery and sensationalism. Tucher (2017: 196) quotes an article from 1887 in a trade journal called *The Writer*

*By drawing on their imaginations or using adroit sleight-of-hand to supply stories with colorful details that they had not managed to note on the spot, that they hadn’t arrived in time to observe, or that simply made the story more vivid.*

As outlined above, colour was often placed in opposition to factual reporting. In 1902, an article in *The New York Times* argued that the reading public ‘not only demands that it shall be supplied promptly and fully, but the news must be accurate and absolutely without bias or colouring’ (Creech and Roessner, 2019: 272). In contemporary journalistic discourse, ‘colour’ is somewhat disassociated from inaccurate reporting. In fact, colour has now become an essential part of journalism itself. As Meijer (2010: 328) explains, ‘the news must have something extra to offer on an issue, such as local colour, more depth or other insights.’ As one editor at AT5Nieuws explained to Meijer (2010: 333), ‘we should avoid making white news. We need to add some colour.’ Traditionally, acquiring colour almost always meant leaving the office and spending time with a source. But the rise of social media has increasingly allowed journalists to add colour to stories through user-generated content (Hahn, 2013; Lee-Wright et al., 2012: 124). Whether somatic or digital, colour in its contemporary form is about the personal. The association of colour with the personal can be observed during my interviews

*You need the life stories on the ground to give that real human face to stats that seem kind of colourless. (J4, 2019)*

*I always put in little colourful details about people. The smells, what it feels like to be there. (J9, 2019)*
But I think what, what works best certainly in the early months of, of the Rohingya crisis was just the powerful stories that were coming out from individuals, I think that had much more of an impact, than a cold figure or cold statistics. (J10, 2019)

But as these extracts highlight, there was also an understanding of quantitative information as lacking colour (reflected implicitly in the idea of coldness). This points towards the focus on shading that emerged from the discussions: the dull and colourless by-the-facts reporting compared to the vibrant spectrum of colour provided by personal accounts.

This approach to numbers and the personal is not just a discourse within journalism and journalism studies, it can be observed in art theory too. Batchelor (2000: 23) argues that black and white represents a Western analytics, a cold and rational masculinity, whereas colour is delegated to ‘the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological.’ But through a focus on this binary, the process of being coloured and doing the colouring is lost. In seeing the facts as something that can be coloured and personal testimony colouring, we can imagine the quantitative as colourless (black and white) lines, borders and structure and the qualitative as pigment, texture and tone. As one interviewee put it below, it is about ‘the relationship between the two’

If you say the number “1.8 million people are displaced” you know that’s a stat that is repeated often, to a certain extent it starts to lose any meaning and anecdotes can bring that to life. But stats can do what individual anecdotal experiences can’t do, which is broaden out in a different way. There is a relationship between the two.” (J4, 2019)

At this point, we can turn to the writings of the Cezanne, the famous impressionist painter, from the start of the 20th century. Specifically, his letter to Emile Bernard in 1904

Lines parallel to the horizon give breadth. . . lines perpendicular to the horizon give depth. But nature for us [men] is more depth than surface, when the need to introduce our light vibrations, represented by reds and yellows, a sufficient amount of blueness to give the feel of air. (Cézanne, 2001: 29)

This works as a great analogy for the journalist’s practice of marrying the quantitative and the qualitative. It helps us explore a distinction between form and colour within the same space of the painting. The way the quantitative and the personal intersect in this space is hinted at through the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1980) when they argue that figuration needed to be replaced by colour to deterritorialise the face, the site of symbolic power. In their view, colour seems to work as the antithesis to a hegemonic power, as represented by figuration, through an embrace of the indistinguishability afforded through formless colour. As Deleuze (2003: 187) put it later: ‘it is through colour that you become imperceptible.’ Whereas Deleuze and Guatarri reject figuration in favour of colour, it seems that journalists embrace both the form that the quantitative brings and the colour of the personal

That’s what the UNHCR produces, reports about numbers and people, but like, it’s bereft of individuals, you don’t really get the sense of like, why it matters ( . . . ) If you’re doing long form
magazine stuff then maybe its slightly different. But I mean, yeah, I think you obviously want both [numbers and personal stories]. But if it’s a number, there’s no, there’s no face if there’s no numbers, like the face doesn’t matter if there’s no numbers to back it up. (J13, 2019)

In other words, a news piece cannot just black and white shapes, outlines and demarcations, as it would take the form of a bland press release or news wire. But it also cannot be a sort of abstracted expressionism where colour is only shaped by other colour, as it would only ever be a magazine piece that lacked a wider resonance. The proper news piece operates somewhere in this middle ground that necessitates form and colour to be a legitimately ‘news’ form of storytelling. Colour is needed to conjure mood, inspire feelings and create affect but data is also necessary to map the contours, provide figuration and style. As another interviewee put it

*If you’ve got a particularly difficult statistical thing or it’s not something that will interest people or make sense then you absolutely need that colour or case study to bring it to light really.* (J16, 2019)

The importance of colour seems particularly important in humanitarian crisis reporting, where journalists rely on personal testimonies to create a compelling and visceral painting. Research from psychology has emphasised the importance of colour for the audience too. Paul Slovic (2007) found that an appeal using an identifiable victim would elicit 2 ½ times more donations than one based on a statistic. It seems that if journalists are aiming towards a normative goal of eliciting empathy or political action, the colour provided by the personal may be more consequential than the form provided by data. In fact, an over-emphasis upon figuration may even be detrimental to this goal. Kogut and Ritov (2005) demonstrated that an appeal using just an image of one victim would receive double the amount of donations compared to an appeal that used a visual of eight victims.

That being said, it is important to not essentialise the nature of the quantitative being coloured and the personal doing the colouring. The personal account does not contain within it a pre-configured set of colours that must be applied in a particular way, as much as data does not always take the same shape and form each time it is used. Instead, the emphasis of this metaphor is the point of intersection: meaning that the personal has the potential to colour other quantitative forms in different ways and the quantitative can alter its form when it is being coloured by other personal accounts. How, then, can this metaphor of colour be used to breakdown the specific-general paradigm within which much of the thinking about the qualitative and quantitative take place?

The specific-general approach to numbers and the personal as a painting would construct a type of mosaic, where the individual story would be repeated a sufficient amount of times to create a larger image that was a carbon copy of the individual set of images used to make it. In other words, the story of an individual would be one of millions of identical stories that, when brought together into a statistical mass, would treat the individual story as representative of all experience. The overriding logics of this process is accumulation, aggregation and replication as opposed to the colouring metaphor that emphasises fluidity, combination and individuality. To put it another way, in the
specific-general paradigm, there is a potentially infinite replication of personal testimony that constructs a quantitative whole yet with the colour metaphor there is a finite object constructed through the intersection of the anecdotal and numbers that can, in their separation and reattachment, create an infinite number of potentialities. If colouring is primarily concerned with representation, the next metaphor focuses on ontology and news procedures.

Anchor: Fixing the personal to ontological solidity

*I think, I mean, I think the nice thing about using numbers is to anchor it.* (J13, 2019)

*It does anchor it if you have, you know, a figure of 2 million.* (J10, 2019)

The term anchoring, as referred to in the two extracts above, or its closely connected peg, pin and hook, are metaphors used widely in journalism literature. As Zelizer and Allan (2010: 53) explain, ‘the lead – or opening paragraph – usually provides a summary or abstract of the hard account’s essential peg or hook, which projects, in turn, the story in a particular direction or news angle.’ These pegs or hooks, upon which journalists attach their stories, have been interpreted in multiple ways: some refer to the capacity of sources to provide news pegs (Colby and Cook, 1991); others refer to specific events (Lazaroui, 2008; Traquina, 2004); other literature points towards broader news hooks, such as the ‘wide cultural context’ (Andberg et al., 2012) or ‘the big picture story’ (Sambandan, 2005).

Using peg, pin, hook or anchor in relation to data and non-data is less prevalent in the literature. Some use the concept in a definitional sense. Megan Knight (2015) characterises data journalism as ‘a story whose primary source or “peg” is numeric (rather than anecdotal).’ This definition has been subsequently adopted by some literature on data journalism (Veglis and Bratsas, 2017). But a more conceptual account of quantitative storytelling and anchoring can be found in C.W. Anderson’s Apostles of Certainty when he points towards Meyer’s (1973) Precision Journalism. For interpretive journalism, Meyer (1973: 8) argued that the journalist needed an anchor point, a ‘position of some kind’. The best way this could be achieved was through social science, that necessitated ‘intensive, systematic fact-finding efforts’ (Anderson, 2018: 114–115). Reflecting on this relationship between data, journalism and anchoring, Anderson (2018: 2) writes

*The databases themselves are, in turn, grounded in online semantic structures that lend data a form of immaterial solidity. These developments mark a further transformation of both journalistic objective and the tools available to journalists to tell stories in new ways.*

Here, Anderson touches upon the ontologically significant nature of the ‘anchoring’ metaphor within journalism. Instead of emphasising the way news anchors allow for certain stories to be told, this focus on data as knowledge allows us to appreciate how quantitative information functions within journalism. How, then, can we flesh out our understanding of anchoring and data within journalism? Well, we can return to the words of Meyer as cited by Anderson (2018). Meyer (1973: 8) argues that old fashioned reporting ‘needed no anchor, it merely bobbed along the surface of the news like a Ping-Pong ball.
floating down a mountain stream.’ Let us re-imagine Meyer’s explanation in the context of my interviews.

We can take the specific, personal anecdote as the boat that floats along the water – having a direction of travel yet also at the whim of the currents, the winds and the tides. To be rooted to a particular place, the boat must anchor itself to a landmass – a dataset – that provides solidity and security. The act of anchoring gives the boat security of place-ness, whilst revitalising a land mass with notions of something beyond its shores. Such a metaphorical account can be observed below

_I think anchoring is probably the best word for it. It provides something that’s solid, and you can sort of say, Okay, well, this is why, a statistic can sort of boil a situation down to a quantifiable thing. (J7, 2019)_

The quantitative seems to provide ontological rootedness and solidity to the unmoored personal experience, a necessary interlocutor for both aspects of the story to be explained. The usefulness of this metaphor can be extended further when we consider the extract below in these terms

_It’s [a number] a very good way to be able to have an excuse to talk about the story. I think the attitude, at least this is my attitude, is thank god we’ve got that statistic. But its not really about the statistic, it’s about the personal stories. But it’s an excuse to anchor that story and to make it relevant again. So much of the time you are frustrated you know because there is not that attention or that interest but statistics provide that re-examining of that story (J7, 2019)_

Only particular points of this landmass – such as ports – can be anchored to by the boat. Whilst only certain boats are allowed in certain ports. Once a boat is anchored to land, it can stay attached or it can, after a time, heave away and once again return to the sea. In doing so, it loses its sense of solidity and the land mass is opened up for another boat to dock. The same port can be accessed by another suitable boat and the same boat can access other suitable ports. In this way, journalist’s use of numbers and non-numbers is a constant process of joining, separating, re-joining, separating, and so on. It is only through the docking of the boat to the port, however, that the personal account can be told in the news media.

So, if we were to return to the extract above we could say this journalist operates a boat (a personal story) that is constantly waiting to dock at a port (quantitative information) yet it is only with the opening of a new port (or the creation of a new number) that they can do so. In other words, new quantitative openings allow for existing qualitative stories to be told. In part, the logic of this explanation is rooted in the non-quantitative focus of this journalist. A data journalist, on the other hand, could play an active part in opening up places for the personal to dock – allowing for more stories to be told.

As with the specific-general paradigm and the colour metaphor, anchoring is concerned with the necessity of combining the quantitative and qualitative. But instead of referring to the way a story can be told, it identifies the ontological assumption across explanations that the quantitative is more rooted and solid than its qualitative counterpart. However, the need to root the personal into the solidity of the quantitative is not a
straightforward task. Anchoring points towards the fluid and somewhat uncontrollable nature of trying to attach a specific, personal account to the general statistical mass. Whilst individual experience can almost always be quantified into a number – e.g. a burglary can be placed within statistics on crime – the numbers in question might not be enough for that story to be told. And the opposite can also be true: a perfectly news-worthy statistic about crime rates might exist but a personal account might elude the journalist.

It should also be recognised, however, that the act of the boat docking at a port is not just one of journalistic procedure. This process is set within a broader environment – the weather, the sea and the currents – that considerably affect the practice of joining the qualitative to the quantitative. Let us consider one dimension of this environment: how the act of intersection is subjected to nefarious forms of strategic communication that we can simplistically refer to here as propaganda. This type of communication often pushes an unrepresentative personal testimony for political gain, imagined within the anchoring metaphor as occurring in two distinct ways. Strong winds or fast currents could work against the personal from connecting to the data because there is, in fact, no suitable port that the boat can attach to. In this case, the boat remains unmoored. On the other hand, the boat might form a ‘false attachment’ to the port: a deliberately misleading or inaccurate number can make the personal testimony seem representative when it is actually misleading, inaccurate or entirely false.

Given that journalists often sit between political discourse and the public, they deal with these strategic winds and currents on a regular basis. This is particularly evident in the humanitarian sector, where agencies have been known to exaggerate particular statistics to artificially inflate the magnitude of a crisis (Crisp, 1999: 11–14; De Waal, 1997; Dijkzeul and Sandvik, 2019: S92). In light of this, the careful and diligent mooring of the personal is an important practice of verification, which is underpinned by certain normative positions of holding power to account, as well as a process of representation.

**Conclusion**

Taken together, the quantitative-qualitative relationship sketched out in this article allows for an explanation that sidesteps the specific-general underpinning much of journalism. It does so at a representational level by emphasising the combination of form and colour over the replication of the specific. This shifts the emphasis away from the equivalence and accumulation logics of a mosaic towards the limitless possibilities of intersections between the personal and the data. Simultaneously, through anchoring, the article accounts for the desire of journalists to root their work in the data realism that the specific-general paradigm also offers. Yet it also emphasises the potential difficulties, at a practical level, of reporters being able to combine these two forms of storytelling and points to the ideological or strategic nature of communication that they mediate. How can this re-conception of the qualitative-quantitative divide help us think through humanitarian journalism?

**Colouring** can help unpick some of the long standing questions within literature on mediated suffering regarding the quantitative and qualitative ways of representing crises. Much of the current work positions numbers as morally deleterious modes of representation where the sufferer is symbolically annihilated through statistical amalgamation (see
Chouliaraki, 2006: 89). Other work, however, has attempted to step outside this logic to emphasise the necessary role numbers play in mediating suffering. This has been articulated in the way statistics can bring observers away from suffering to maintain ‘proper distance’ (Silverstone, 2003) and in the work of Paul Frosh (2011) who examines how sets of images of suffering engender a particular type of morality that relates closely to a productive form of politics. I advocate for the metaphor of colour to be used in a similar fashion, adopted to emphasise that the individual is not necessary lost in quantification yet forms part of the ‘painting’ of suffering that is often structured by numbers.

Beyond humanitarian journalism and communication, this study also offers insights for other genres of journalism. Whilst the relationship between numbers and non-numbers is particularly important for those covering human suffering, the article has also highlighted the necessity of journalism studies as a whole to look at both the quantitative and the qualitative. To examine just one and not the other would fail to grasp the way journalist try to tell stories in their work. The anchoring metaphor in particular emphasises the difficulty for journalists to combine individual stories and data when constructing a news story, a combination that is deemed necessary given the ontological solidity offered by the quantitative. Exploring how this anchoring process functions for journalists within different specialisms – the photojournalist, the data journalist, the health report, the politics editor, and so on – can help gain an understanding journalistic practice but also the way certain stories appear within public discourse at certain times.

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