

# A Review of the Participant Observation Method in Journalism: Designing and Reporting

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## Abstract

The participant observation method involves numerous methodological competencies and procedures, yet no systematic research has been found to date that evaluates the qualitative practice. The method has played a foundational role in the field of journalism and is growing in use among researchers. Despite its contributions to knowledge about organizations, movements, and cultures, the procedures that encompass the method may be unfamiliar or unclear for some researchers according to the literature. The study analyzed journalism researchers' reporting of methodological information in studies involving news contexts and assessed scholars' adherence to methodological reporting best practices in 150 journal articles. The results showed participant observation researchers employed data trustworthiness techniques by primarily using qualitative formal interviews and they also provided site selection logic. The results, however, also showed evidence of methodological conceptual ambiguity when referring to participant observation method techniques and low reporting of several specific recommended techniques associated with participation observation. The narrative reflects our desire to help other researchers learn more about the method, while also encouraging methodological transparency to improve the collective understanding of the method. We put forth eight participant observation reporting recommendations rooted in anthropology and sociology to consider when reporting methodological practices. The hope is this introduction and the proposed measures will initiate discussions and support community around the practice of participant observation.

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## Highlights

- This study reviewed and clarified concepts due to the varied and imprecise usage of them in journal articles.
- No systematic analyses evaluating the state of participant observation methodological practices were found in the literature.
- This unobserved state may lead scholars seeking to learn how to report their research designs to rely on journal articles for guidance.
- We proposed 8 participant observational reporting recommendations: 1) site justification, 2) site access negotiations, 3) observer-participant type, 4) rapport building strategies, 5) participation observation data techniques, 6) field notes, 7) disengagement site justification, and 8) participant observation data trustworthiness.
- Researchers employed data trustworthiness techniques by primarily using qualitative interviews.
- They justified site selection by providing background information on the site.
- The content analysis results also showed low reporting of most other standards.
- We shared exemplar reporting examples found in journal articles to assist participant observers in their reporting practices..

## Content

A HISTORY OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION .....	117
PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION METHODOLOGICAL TERMS.....	118
Ethnography .....	118
Case Study .....	121
Participant Observation .....	121
PARTICIPATION OBSERVATION METHOD REPORTING PRACTICES .....	122
1. Site Justification .....	123
2. Site Access Negotiation .....	125
3. Observer-Participant Type .....	125
4. Rapport Building Strategies .....	125
5. Participant Observation Data Collection Methods .....	126
<i>Document Analysis</i> .....	126
<i>Field Interviews</i> .....	126
6. Field Notes.....	126
7. Disengagement Site Justification .....	127
8. Participant Observation Data Trustworthiness.....	127
<i>Triangulation Methods</i> .....	127
<i>Member Checking</i> .....	127
<i>Peer Debriefing (Expert Feedback)</i> .....	128
Research Questions .....	128
QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS METHOD .....	130
Sampling Procedure .....	130
Sample Descriptives .....	131
Intercoder Reliability .....	131
Measures .....	132
RESULTS .....	133
Method or Approach Label .....	133

Social Setting .....	134
Site Justification .....	134
Site Access Negotiation .....	134
Observer-Participant Type .....	135
Rapport Building Strategies .....	135
Data Gathering Techniques .....	135
Field Notes .....	136
Disengagement Site Justification.....	136
Data Trustworthiness Techniques .....	136
DISCUSSION .....	136
Mediated Observations.....	137
Reporting Recommendations.....	137
CONCLUSION.....	138
REFERENCES .....	139

The participant observation method is the foundation of the scholarly mass communication and journalism fields and should be systematically evaluated given its importance to the field (McQuail, 1985, p. 93). Participant observations of newsrooms have provided valuable insights into news production processes by enabling researchers to see “what goes on inside news organizations” (Singer, 2009, p. 191). Journalism is an appropriate study context to summarize peer practices due to relatively little research evaluating observational methods, a recent renaissance of the participant observational method within journalism, and the influential roots of the method within journalism studies (Belair-Gagnon & Revers, 2018). Gans (1999) stated participant observation “is the only one that gets close to people. In addition, it allows researchers to observe what people do, while all the other empirical methods are limited to reporting what people say about what they do” (p. 540).

But there are other reasons to take a closer look at participant observation. It is methodologically complex, requires many decision points, and the terms associated with the method and adjacent methods appear to be conceptually ambiguous. Fields such as journalism, communication, health, or organizational studies tend to house small groups of participant observers who learn the method while in the field rather than in the classroom (Spradley, 1979), partially because it a challenging course to teach (Cohen, 2000). Research method socialization often begins during one’s grad-

uate program. Mass communication doctoral programs, however, are less likely to emphasize and require qualitative method courses (Lu, 2007). Moreover, a study of Australian psychology students found lower exposure to qualitative methods during their program influenced their perceptions that qualitative methods were biased, time-consuming, and less rigorous in comparison to quantitative methods (Roberts & Povee, 2014). It also may be assumed a lack of training leads graduate students and scholars to turn to journal article studies for guidance on how to report their participant observation research designs. Yet we were unable to find a single systematic study evaluating the state of participant observation methodological reporting practices.

In this article, we seek to engage scholars who desire to learn and intellectually invest time in dialogue about the methodological intricacies of the participant observation method by (a) conducting a study on researchers’ reporting of their participant observation methodological practices and (b) offering introductory-level methodological guidance to novice researchers due to the content analysis results showing low reporting of several standards associated with the method. Specifically, we analyzed the content of authors’ observed social settings and methodological labels in journal articles that included a news-related participant observation from January 1960 to December 2020. We also identified evaluative criteria based on a synthesis of methodological literature stemming from anthropology and sociology be-

cause the roots of the method stem from these fields (e.g., Becker, 1958; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Kawulich, 2005; LeCompte, 2000; Spradley, 1980). In this study, we employed a social scientific approach in which conceptual abstractions are quantified and knowledge claims are based on statistical description. We coded whether they followed eight reporting recommendations including the reporting of (a) site justification, (b) site access negotiations, (c) observer-participant type, (d) rapport building strategies, (e) participation observation data techniques (i.e., document analysis, field interviews), (f) field notes, (g) disengagement site justification, and (h) participant observation data trustworthiness techniques (i.e., triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing). In the following literature review, we offer an overview of the method's history, clarify concepts associated with the method, and suggest eight recommended reporting practices for participant observers.

### A History of Participant Observation

The participant observation method originated in the field of anthropology prior to the late 19th century to study primitive societies. Platt (1983) found in her historical research on the method that sociology researchers described their participant observation studies as a *life history* or *case study* prior to World War II with the participant observation term being more frequently used after the 1950s. Platt stated that adult education researcher Eduard C. Lindeman was the first to use the participant observation term in his book *Social Discovery* in 1924 in sociology and British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski was said to have coined the term participant observation in 1922 in his three-year study of the Trobriand Islands prior to World War I. University of Chicago sociologist Joseph D. Lohman was the first to refer to participant observation as a method in 1937 in the field of sociology. Modern interpretations of participant observation emerged when Western scholars became interested in understanding unfamiliar non-Western cultures (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998). Anthropologists, however, have been accused of misrepresenting people that are being studied by framing them as exotic or as *others* rather respectfully reporting their cultures (Cohen, 2000). Sociologists later used this method to understand emerging urban subcultures with an emphasis on stigmatized or deviant social groups. In 1902, the first sociology department housing both anthropologists

and sociologists was built in the U.S. at the University of Chicago. In 1913, sociologists Ernest Burgess and Robert E. Park (a former newspaper reporter), whom Stephen Reese (2009) described as the “original media sociologist” (p. 281), joined the university. Becker (1996) stated Park was a proponent of both quantitative and qualitative methods, and they were credited for encouraging the humanistic focus of the Chicago School through the codification of participant observation and teaching students how to physically observe people (Di Domenico & Phillips, 2010; McKechnie, 2008; Platt, 1983).

In the field of journalism, mostly sociologists, and later journalism scholars used the participant observation method to study journalists' professional cultures by documenting behavioral patterns in newsrooms with particular attention on news production and news decisions (Westlund & Ekström, 2019). Journalism researchers often study a single newsroom to document phenomena not accessible by the public, such as journalists' decision-making processes; unwritten rules and norms; social stratifications; rituals; or interpersonal relationships with sources. The applied socio-psychological sender-receiver approach in the 1960s was replaced by a sociological approach in which researchers examined how social forces had an impact on workers' behaviors in the 1970s (McQuail, 1985). Journalism scholars often read early newsroom participant observation studies because they are considered foundational in understanding journalists' behaviors and culture (Becker & Vlad, 2009; Paterson & Domingo, 2008; Reese & Ballinger, 2001). Two important early foundational conceptual frameworks that resulted from these works include gatekeeping (White, 1950) and objectivity (Tuchman, 1973), which emphasized the power that journalists held in deciding whether and how to present news to the public. The 1970s and 1980s marked another influential peak when early newsroom research shifted the unit of analysis from individual journalists to “news organizations as complex institutions” (Tuchman, 2002, p. 80). These studies collectively suggested that news content was the result of organizational routines that “guaranteed sufficient news stories were produced on time and a predetermined form” (Cottle, 2000; Cottle, 2007, p. 3; Reese, 2016; Westlund & Ekström, 2019). Participant observation research transitioned from an individual level of analysis to an organizational level because researchers found news professionals working in newsrooms modified their behaviors to meet organizational expectations, even when those ex-

expectations conflicted with their own personal values (Breed, 1955; Epstein, 1973). These early works inspired media sociology to become a subfield of journalism research (Reese & Ballinger, 2001).

As the journalism participant observer community has matured, a few researchers began questioning the analytical focus and observed social setting choices of researchers. In 2000, Cottle argued that a second wave of ethnographies, following the first wave in the 1970s and 1980s, was needed. He stated internet and digital technologies such as mobile phones or social media had an impact on news production and news decisions resulting in a “differentiated news ecology” (p. 19). The present study investigated to what degree researchers followed this call. New technologies and economic instability have also led to changing work conditions such as increased remote and freelance work requiring scholars to rethink how they observe *newsrooms* and define a field in a study. The classic participant observational space transitioned from the individual (1950s and 1960s) to the organization (1970s and 1980s) with a push for researchers to venture outside of the newsroom to observe both physical and mediated workspaces. Cottle (2007) and Zelizer (2004) argued the scholarly emphasis of observing physical newsrooms limited scholars’ understanding of journalistic practices because many interactions take place outside of the news desk setting.

## Participant Observation Methodological Terms

The conceptual overlap surrounding participant observation terms makes it challenging to learn and study it. Cross-disciplinary applications of the participation observation method have led scholars to refer to participant observation in inconsistent ways, which has led to repeated statements by scholars mentioning the ambiguity of these methods (e.g., Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Hockey & Forsey, 2012; Yin, 2003). For example, scholars use ethnography, fieldwork, field research, participant observation, observation, and case study interchangeably in narratives (e.g., Blevins, 2017; Hockey & Forsey, 2012). Researchers also use the term *participant observation* synonymously with *ethnography* in journalism studies (Cottle, 2007). One area of confusion is whether the term refers to a *method* or an *approach*. Some methodologists state ethnography is distinct from participant observation (Gans, 1999;

Hockey & Forsey, 2012; Kurz, 1983) because researchers employ participant observation as a method during an ethnography (McKechnie, 2008). Gans (1999, 2011) argued against the use of ethnography to describe participant observation research stating that the term ethnography clouded the value and rigor of the participant observation method. He claimed that no researchers at the University of Chicago employed the term ethnography, “I reject all attempts at being labeled an ‘ethnographer’ calling myself, as I always have, a sociologist whose primary research method has been PO [participant observation] (p. 544).”

We explain each term to help those who desire to learn about the differences of each intellectual approach and method. We understand the conceptual boundaries are porous, but our quest is to support (a) discussion and increased precision associated with the linguistic boundaries surrounding these concepts, (b) the cultivation of a methodological community, and (c) future systematic evaluations, such as this study, of the method. Our reading of the sampled articles indicated authors used a wide range of labels when referring to their participant observation research: observational technique, field observation technique, ethnographic case study, observational research, newsroom ethnography, participatory observation, ethnography-inspired participant observation, semi-ethnographic study, and field-based study. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) explained the language is confusing because the participant observation method has been “reinterpreted and recontextualized” over time (p. 2). Due to the importance of labels for scholarly communication and learning, we overview the tapestry of slippery terms that relate to the method, particularly ethnography, case study, and participant observation. [Table 1](#) includes more information on these terms or adjacent terms such as direct observation, observation, non-participation observation, and field research.

## Ethnography

Spradley (1980) referred to ethnography as a term anthropologists would use as a descriptor for their body of qualitative approaches. Ethnography is used to primarily understand participants’ points-of-view, while participant observation, the primary method in ethnographic research, is a method employed to study a group of people in social settings such as organizations or communities (Blevins, 2017; Kawulich,

**Table 1.** Summary of Methodological Terms (back to p.118)

Method   Approach	Definition	Key Points
Field Research	<i>Field study</i> or <i>field research</i> are broad terms that encompass various types of non-experimental research designs conducted in real-world settings (Aziz, 2017; Persaud, 2010).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field study methods involve methods that are carried out in uncontrolled settings.</li> <li>• Field research may be either exploratory or hypothesis-driven research.</li> </ul>
Ethnography	<i>Ethnography</i> is defined as “a description of culture” and a culture is made up of a group’s customs and behavioral patterns (Spradley, 1989, p. 63).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethnographic research involves the exploration of social phenomena, an investigation into participants’ points-of-view within a context, or a rich description of a culture (rather than testing hypotheses).</li> <li>• This approach toward research is often tied to the belief that reality is socially constructed, and researchers should immerse themselves in social settings for long periods of time because interpretations of phenomena are context-dependent (Gehman et al., 2018).</li> <li>• It is a strategic research <i>approach</i> to conducting research rather than a single data collection <i>method</i>.</li> <li>• Ethnographic research appears to lean more <i>participant</i> than <i>observational</i>.</li> </ul>
Case Study	<i>Case study</i> is defined as “an intensive study of a single unit” (Gerring, 2004, p. 341) or a “research strategy which focused on understanding the dynamics within single settings” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 534).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Like ethnography, case study is an umbrella term for an <i>approach</i> that typically involves multiple methods that may include both quantitative and qualitative methods.</li> <li>• Case studies are appropriate when the site or group is too complex for survey and experimental research or when generating theoretical propositions or scientific constructs without the use of statistical tests (Bloor &amp; Wood, 2011; Eisenhardt, 1989).</li> <li>• Case study experts appear to adopt an epistemological position that leans more social scientific—meaning the intent is to contribute to social science theory (i.e., propositions).</li> <li>• A case study may focus on a person, event, group, institution, process.</li> <li>• Case studies tend to lean more <i>observational</i> than <i>participant</i>.</li> <li>• Researchers who carry out multiple or cross-case analyses seek to accomplish at least one of these outcomes: (a) increased confidence in findings (i.e., site triangulation) when constant comparisons are made after each similar or polar site visit, (b) observation of sub-units within an organization or community, or (c) verification of whether a social science theory or concept holds in real world settings in similar contexts or does not hold in polar case contexts (Eisenhardt, 1989, Gustafsson, 2017; Shenton, 2004; Yin, 2003). Eisenhardt (1989) recommended observing between 4 and 10 cases per study in an iterative fashion to produce credible results while also ensuring that the researcher is not overwhelmed by the amount of data.</li> </ul>

**Table 1.** *Summary of Methodological Terms* (back to p.118)

Method   Approach	Definition	Key Points
Participant Observation	<p><i>Participant observation</i> refers to a data collection method “in which researchers take part in everyday activities related to an area of social life in order to study an aspect of that life through the observation of events in their natural contexts” (McKechnie, 2008, p. 599).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participant observers obtain data through interactions with participants in a natural setting (Corbetta, 2003).</li> <li>• Researchers develop their understanding of phenomenon by engaging with people within a setting; asking participants about the meanings behind their behaviors; and reviewing relevant information from data sources identified in the field (e.g., internal documents, diaries, and chats), while observing and recording routines; taking field notes; and managing trust levels of those being observed (Guest et al., 2013; McKechnie, 2008).</li> <li>• Participant observers immerse themselves in a field for a significant period of time to learn about a culture, identify with participants, and earn participant trust.</li> </ul>
Direct Observation & Non-Participant Observation	<p>Methods in which the researcher observes but does not interact with participants in the field.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Direct observation</i> or shadowing participants falls under the <i>observational method</i> umbrella and primarily involves quantitative data such as counting frequencies, measuring intensities, or mapping a scene often carried out by watching video recordings (Guest et al., 2013).</li> <li>• The term <i>non-participant observation</i> is used when participant observers play a role of a complete observer (i.e., they do not participate in the social setting).</li> <li>• The <i>observation method</i> consists of both <i>laboratory-</i> or <i>field-based</i> observations in which a researcher watches participants interacting in a space (Corbetta, 2003).</li> <li>• The differences that we identified between direct observation and participant observation method is the setting, quantitative nature, and concept abstractness. First, participant observation is often classified under the observational methods umbrella. The observation method consists of both <i>laboratory-</i> or <i>field-based</i> observations in which the researcher watches participants interacting in a space (Corbetta, 2003). Second, direct observation or shadowing participants falls under the observational method umbrella and primarily involves quantitative data such as counting frequencies, measuring intensities, or mapping a scene often carried out by watching video recordings (Guest et al., 2013).</li> </ul>

2005, Korbin, 2018, McKechnie, 2008). Our review of the literature on the ethnographic method revealed a few consistent themes related to the attributes that make ethnography distinct in relation to this research project. An ethnography emphasizes studying a (a) culture (or community) by which the (b) researcher behaves as a member of the cultural group to document that culture (c) by immersing themselves in a culture over a substantial period, 4) to learn from them regarding how they create meaning. Simply,

ethnography is defined as “a description of culture” and a culture is made up of a group’s customs and behavioral patterns (Spradley, 1989, p. 63). Spradley (1979) argued an ethnography emphasizes the identification of *shared meaning or processes*, including the meaning of objects to a group, more than creating classifications based on observations because a culture is a shared system of meanings that are maintained through people’s interactions within contexts. He stated that it is the researcher’s job to interpret one culture so that a dif-

ferent culture may learn more about unfamiliar cultures. Ethnographic researchers often employ methods such as informal or narrative interviews with the intent of conceptually organizing people's stories; documenting complex social relationships; understanding the dynamics that influence how participants communicate with one another; or studying how participants construct their identities and realities within a context (Frank, 2012). An ethnography is characterized by the following features: exploring the nature of social phenomena and describing a culture (rather than testing hypotheses) over extended periods of time; studying small numbers of cases in detail; working with unstructured data requiring flexible application of techniques; and analyzing data through the lens of participants (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998). Thus, ethnography is a strategic *approach* to conducting research rather than a single data collection *method*.

## Case Study

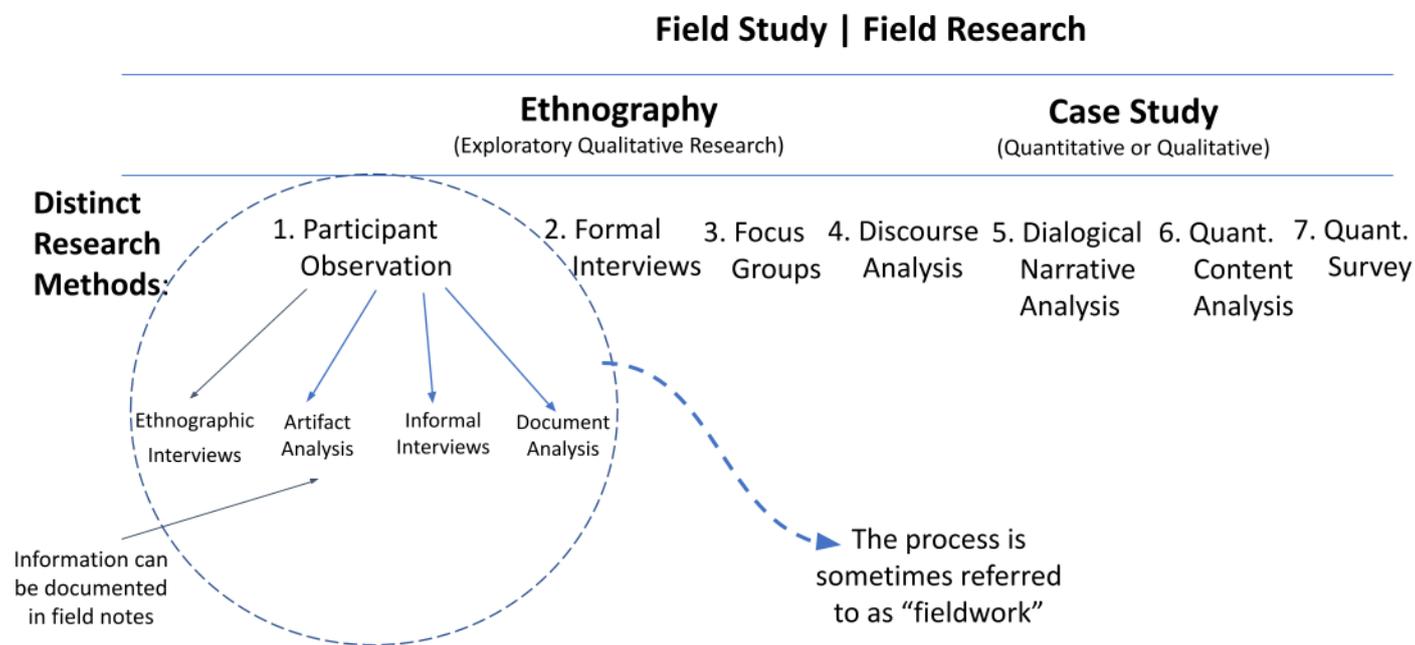
A case study is a “*research strategy* which focused on understanding the dynamics within single settings” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 534). They are often used in an applied way to evaluate a particular practice, process, or intervention within an *uncontrolled* social context for organizational members and policy makers (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gerring, 2004; Yin, 2003). Robert K. Yin (2003), who wrote one of the most cited books on case studies, and comparative case study influential scholar Kathy Eisenhardt (1989) argued the difference between an ethnography and a case study is that case study researchers typically specify a theoretical proposition prior to entering the field to assess a theory's usefulness, strengths, and weaknesses in real world contexts, while ethnography researchers seek to richly describe a site's complexities; tell people's stories within a unit; or document their own personal experiences. Case studies are especially appropriate when generating theoretical propositions or identifying the dimensionality of a scientific construct without the use of statistical tests. The participant observation method may be applied in a case study, but ethnography would be the more appropriate term if researchers take an exploratory approach to understand a culture within a context.

## Participant Observation

Participant observation may be used as a data collection method in ethnographic or case study research (Blevins, 2017). By definition, *participant observation* refers to a data collection method “in which researchers take part in everyday activities related to an area of social life in order to study an aspect of that life through the observation of events in their natural contexts” (McKechnie, 2008, p. 599). Corbetta (2003) explained the uniqueness of participation observation in that data stems from researchers' participation through interactions with participants in a natural setting and those relations are essential to validly document the participants' points-of-view and behaviors. Researchers' involvement and psychological identification with participants enables them to validly document phenomena and identify informants who educate the researcher about their contextual realities (Corbetta, 2003; Spradley, 1979). Participant observers study a group of people over a long period of time typically ranging from a few months to a few years to earn participant trust and openness. Participant observers develop their understanding of phenomenon by engaging with people within a setting, asking about the meanings of behaviors, and reviewing relevant information from various data sources (e.g., internal documents, diaries, and chats), while observing and recording routines, taking field notes, and managing trust levels of those being observed (Guest et al., 2013; McKechnie, 2008). Bernard (1994) stated participant observers should apply impression management strategies such as being open and nonjudgmental. He defined participant observation as the process of establishing rapport within a community and learning to act in such a way to blend into the community so that its members will act naturally, and then removing oneself from the setting to immerse oneself in the data to process and write about it. The results are then meticulously reported in *thick descriptions* that are rich in empirical detail (Schensul & LeCompte, 2012). These details are presented as evidence of the researchers' understanding of a culture.

As a result of the need to precisely describe a culture or setting, participant observation is almost always accompanied with other data collection methods to provide a holistic understanding of a culture, community, or phenomena of interest (Becker & Geer, 1958; Guest et al., 2013; Kawulich, 2005). Researchers apply multiple methods to also verify their observations of a social setting and demonstrate to readers the integrity of their interpretations due to the indi-

Figure 1. Participant Observation Method Boundaries



vidual subjectivity involved with the method (De Beer, 1993; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Some data collection methods naturally fall under the participant observation umbrella, but still require methodological articulation by an author, while other methods are separate from the participant observation method, and they require a clear section detailing their methodological designs by the author. For example, methodological approaches such as artifact analysis, informal interviews, unstructured interviews, casual conversations, or ethnographic interviews (i.e., speech events in which the researchers balance conversation with natural inquiries with informants in the field) fall under the participant observation data collection umbrella. On the other hand, formal interviews, quantitative surveys, and focus groups carried out prior, during, or following a participant observation of a site should be classified as a distinct method in methodological narratives. For example, informal conversations are more likely conducted during a participant observation to help researchers understand what they observed on the spot, while formal methods most often follow a participant observation because that data informs the questions asked or concepts investigated (see Figure 1).

### Participation Observation Method Reporting Practices

Qualitative researchers may employ concepts that are similar to quantitative researchers such as validity (e.g., theoretical case selection, clarifying researcher biases and relationships with participants) and reliability (e.g., peer review, member checks; Silverman, 2006; Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007), while other qualitative researchers may employ different terminology (i.e., transferability, dependability, trustworthiness) to communicate the ethics and quality of their work to other researchers (Becker, 1996; Hammersley, 2004; Shenton, 2004). For example, *transferability*, like external validity, addresses the extent that findings may be applied to another study. Qualitative researchers abide by this principle by richly and accurately describing the context of their study so that other researchers may assess the extent that their findings hold in other similar social settings. The *dependability* principle is one in which the qualitative researcher reports enough methodological detail to ensure that future researchers can repeat the study, but they should not necessarily expect the same results (Shenton,

2004). One critical action to demonstrate the *trustworthiness* of data is through detailed methodological description because researchers should demonstrate the credibility of their interpretations to readers (Hammersley, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Some qualitative interpretivists argue that qualitative methods do not need to be guided by rigors such as validity or reliability but rather principles in which researchers demonstrate their moral responsibility to behave ethically and thoughtfully toward human participants (Angen, 2000). Angen (2000) argued the qualitative research community needs to come together to identify a more shared or clear understanding of good qualitative research. Simply, we believe the reporting of methodological details encourages learning of the method.

Participant observation is characterized by its reflexive and fluid nature. Methodologists note that some steps may occur simultaneously or veer back and forth once researchers enter the field because findings may be revised several times during their time in the field (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Guest et al., 2013; Van de Ven & Poole, 2002). As an inductive craft, participant observers may even revisit the field to refine their understanding of the phenomena under study (Guest et al., 2013). Yet Becker (1958), Jorgensen (1989), and Spradley (1979) argued the method is sequentially carried out to some degree because participant observation data often informs the selection of participants to be interviewed, the questions asked, and the subsequent methods employed.

Qualitative researchers are more likely than quantitative researchers to diverge epistemologically regarding their beliefs on data collection and reporting. Angen (2000) categorized qualitative researchers into two broad groups: interpretivists and positivists, while Fink and Gantz (1996) classified all mass communication approaches into three broad traditions: interpretive, social science, and critical. Qualitative positivist research hypothetically contributes to social science theory in which data are collected to build social science concepts and theory in comparison to interpretivist or constructivist researchers' who seek to collect non-static data that richly describes a site's complexities; tells people's stories within a unit; encourages participants to create artistic works; or shares personal narratives of researchers' experiences associated with conducting a study. Grounded theory expert and social constructivist Denny Gioia's approach abides by the viewpoint that researchers should immerse themselves in social settings for long periods of time because interpretations of phenomena are situationally dependent requiring them to report thick descriptions

of a complex interactive social setting including how participants create meaning and relationships with objects. Based on this perspective, engagement with data is an active process in which researchers engage with participant partners to mutually make data, and researchers actively assemble and reassemble it in a non-linear and interactive way to capture a collection of moments, stories, experiences, and memories (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020; Gehman et al., 2018). We will address below how qualitative researchers differ in their interpretations of standards. We, like most qualitative methodologist authors, assume that methods require some level of systematic application by the researcher when studying settings or individuals. Thus, we overview participant observation procedures to reflect the general steps that scholars may take when carrying out the method (see [Table 2](#)). Researchers may report the following methodological information in a participant observation including: 1) site justification, 2) site access negotiations, 3) observer-participant type, 4) rapport building strategies, 5) participation observation data techniques (document analysis, field interviews), 6) field notes, 7) disengagement site justification, and 8) participant observation data trustworthiness techniques (triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing).

## 1. Site Justification

Participant observation researchers should communicate information about their research venue(s) and provide a theoretical justification behind their choices including a site's linkage to research questions. Guest et al. (2013) emphasized the importance of venue selection because "your choice of venues determines your sample (who, where, what you will observe)" (p. 85). Site selection, however, may be limited for many reasons including difficulties in gaining permission to access a site or the physical distance from a researcher's geographical residence (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Researchers also often choose to study social groups in which they are members such as gender identity, ethnicity, jobs, or hobbies (Beckmann, 2017).

We suggest that scholars report the venue selection rationale because researchers must weigh several factors, such as research funding availability, research labor commitments, geographical accessibility, site permission, etc. (Guest et al., 2013; Schensul & LeCompte, 2012). They should also investigate whether the venue provided qualified data directly related to research objectives and articulate how the site influenced the answering of their research questions (Singer, 2009).

**Table 2.** *Best Practices and Common Pitfalls* (back to p. 123)

	<b>Best Practices</b>	<b>Common Pitfalls</b>
1. Site Justification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide theoretical justification behind the choice of research sites.</li> <li>• Explain links between site and research questions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No clear justification or logic behind site selection.</li> </ul>
2. Site Access Negotiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain the identification of gatekeepers and the negotiation process (number of visits and activities researchers may attend; length of observation period; data access; protection of identities).</li> <li>• Describe how researchers acquired access with people lower on the social hierarchy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No mention of how the researchers gained access to the site or groups.</li> </ul>
3. Observer-Participant Type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate observer-participant strategy based on an existing typology.</li> <li>• Properly label the typology category employed based on its definition.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No mention of a typology category or the misuse of a labeled category.</li> <li>• No information about degree or the extent that the researcher participated in the setting.</li> </ul>
4. Rapport Building Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present how the researcher cultivated relationships with key informants, how they earned participants' trust, or how they reduced participant skepticism.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No information about how they built social bonds or trust.</li> <li>• No information provided whether the researcher faced obstacles or barriers in building relationships with participants.</li> </ul>
5. Participant Observation Data Techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain the logic behind the selection of documents and how they enhanced understanding.</li> <li>• Explain how/why conversations with participants were initiated during an observation, including what researchers learned.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No key information about reasons researchers analyzed documents or conducted informal interviews in the method or findings sections.</li> </ul>
6. Field Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present details of field notes (types of documentation, observations, frequencies of observation).</li> <li>• Notes should be written in a very detailed and rich way.</li> <li>• Field notes may include observations of the place (physical settings, social settings); actions (formal and informal interactions); actors; and researcher interpretations and experiences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No field note data is presented in the findings.</li> <li>• No mention of field notes or what was documented in the field notes.</li> <li>• Notes are not organized in chronological order or immediately following an observation (same day or no later than 48 hours).</li> </ul>
7. Disengagement Site Justification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Report reasons for departing venues (theoretical saturation, predetermined length of time)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No information or logic about why/when researchers stopped collecting data.</li> <li>• Ambiguous information about the length of stay.</li> </ul>
8. Data Trustworthiness Technique	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide information about methods researchers used to triangulate observational data, and whether they investigated their interpretations via member checking or peer debriefing.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No mention of data trustworthiness technique</li> </ul>

## 2. Site Access Negotiation

Once the field is selected and defined, researchers need to receive permission to access a participant observation site. This first step is difficult, and it can be a lengthy process. Researchers need to identify the person(s) who will approve their observation of a site and negotiate research details with them such as the number of visits, activities the researchers may attend, the length of the observation period, or the time of day or week that observations are allowed (Blevins, 2017). The process often requires the researcher to formally negotiate access with the gatekeeper (i.e., minimize disruption, access to data, protection of identities, payment, sponsorship) and informally negotiate access with people lower on the social hierarchy (i.e., anonymize identities, address fears of reprisal from management, Bloor & Wood, 2011).

## 3. Observer-Participant Type

The participation degree influences—and thus implies—how researchers observe a culture or the phenomena under study (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). The researchers themselves become instruments of research in a participant observation (Becker & Geer, 1958; Caines, 2010; Guest et al., 2013), with varying roles of involvement that reside on a continuum between complete observer (no participation) to complete participant balancing objectivity and subjectivity (Aktinson, & Hammersley, 1998; Baker, 2006; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Participant observers make a conscious decision regarding the extent they observe or participate in a social setting because their participation may evoke reactions and behaviors among those being studied. Lindlof and Taylor (2017) urged researchers to reflect on their role choice, “Careless researchers may forget that we always choose how to see an event, and this choice influences our explanation of it” (p. 180). For example, an observational-leaning approach tends to involve less time in the field but may result in higher levels of distrust toward the researcher, resulting in concealment of information by the participants (Kurz, 1983). The participant-leaning approach aligns more with an interpretivist approach and may result in a unique cultural perspective due to spontaneous interactions and greater participant openness, but researchers may become too biased due to an overidentification with members (Adler & Alder, 2011; Corbetta, 2003). One should account for how their presence may influence the data and interpretations in the participant-leaning approach.

Seim (2021) carried out both roles while in the field finding that a participant-leaning observation enabled the researcher to document their rich experiences with participants in field diaries while also gaining participant trust. On the flip side, the observation-leaning approach allowed the researcher to move more freely among different departments and enabled them more time to concentrate on recording their observations in field notes.

Researchers should cite the categorization they used and report which participation role they enacted in a study including whether that role changed over time. Several methodologists have provided typologies in terms of the varying degrees of participation (Adler & Adler, 2011; Gold, 1958; Spradley, 1980). Gold (1958) is often referenced as the first influential person to create a useful participation degree categorization ranging from *complete observer* to *complete participant* depending upon whether the researchers revealed their identity to participants and based on their interaction levels with participants. He also suggested two blended categorizations—*observer as participant* or *participant as observer*. Sandiford (2015) argued, however, most participation observation studies based on Gold’s categorizations would fall under the *participant as observer* category due to very little research involving the researcher masking their identity (covert vs. overt observation). Spradley (1980) later developed a nuanced categorization emphasizing the interaction levels of researchers ranging from *non-participation* to *complete participation*. Some journalism researchers likely take on the *active participation* role in which they seek to learn a skill or behave as a journalist in the field. They *passively participate* if they do not interact with people to a great extent and they take on the *moderate participation* role if they oscillate between participation and observation according to his categories.

## 4. Rapport Building Strategies

Once access is gained, the next step typically involves time *building relationships and rapport* with key informants (i.e., people with social standing or cultural/institutional knowledge within an environment who teach the researcher about their culture) to gain trust and acceptance into a community to encourage them to be open and honest. Methodologists highlight the importance of creating a good impression for the community because they are often suspicious of researchers’ intent, and trust of participants is necessary to acquire rich and in-depth information (Baker, 2006; Blevins,

2017; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, Kawulich, 2005). DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) explained that establishing good rapport involves listening to participants, treating the participants with respect, and protecting their rights, while also protecting the integrity of the study by not revealing details that may influence their responses. In summary, scholars should report how they initiated relationships and built rapport (Baker, 2006; Kawulich, 2005).

## 5. Participant Observation Data Collection Methods

### *Document Analysis*

Researchers also often review various documents they encounter in the field to enhance their understanding. A document analysis may involve reviewing internal company documents, letters, memos, meeting minutes, diaries, official documents, and internal reports; but we argue a formal analysis of documents such as quantitative content analysis or discourse analysis should not fall under the participant observation method umbrella to encourage clarity regarding what is participant observation for readers (Di Domenico & Phillips, 2010; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Researchers should communicate information about how they collected that data and how it supported their observations.

### *Field Interviews*

Participant observers often interview people in the field during their observations. The labels for these techniques include unstructured interviews, informal interviews, casual conversations, or ethnographic interviews. Ethnographic interviewing, a perhaps unfamiliar term in media and communication, is a formal method that resembles informal interviews in that they are unstructured and take place within a natural environment. Ethnographic interviews are researcher-engaged speech events in which the researchers balance friendly conversation with research-related questions during an unplanned speech interaction. One step in the method, for example, is that the researcher facilitates the retrieval of data by encouraging an informant to take on the role of expert to educate the researcher about their cultural knowledge while the researcher conveys both interest and ignorance (Bauman & Greenberg Adair, 1992; Spradley, 1979).

## 6. Field Notes

A researcher should communicate field notes use and what type of information was logged in them. Researchers describe their observations and interpretations of the physical setting; informal and formal social interactions and behaviors; social actors; events; roles; and personal reactions and feelings in field notes (Corbetta, 2003). Participant observers carefully pay attention to their environment, and they describe their observations in rich narrative detail such as body language, colors, sounds, tone, timelines, traffic patterns, subjective feelings, etc. that may be later coded and analyzed as data. Field notes are defined as “written observations recorded during or immediately following participant observations in the field” (Tenzek, 2018, p. 2). The researchers’ observations and thoughts are most often documented in the form of field notes that are “organized around those basic conceptual frames or questions” (Schensul & LeCompte, 2012, p. 67). Field notes produce a thick description (providing detailed and visual textual descriptions) of the context and meaning of people’s activities relevant to the phenomenon of interest (Kawulich, 2005; Schensul & LeCompte, 2012). Data in the form of field notes help researchers recall the details of their observations and subsequently are used for further interpretation (McKechnie, 2008). Thick description also allows other researchers to assess the accuracy of the data and evaluate how they arrived at their knowledge claims (Humphreys et al., 2021). Memos are additional notes in which the scholar revisits their field notes to write reflections, reminder prompts, or comments about their observational recordings, whereas research diaries are entries in which the researcher recalls their own experiences, feelings, and stories in the field. The researchers’ interactions with the participants such as access negotiations and rapport building interactions may be reported in the findings. We expected field notes to be the term most employed by researchers despite the differences in documentation categories. Field notes refer to any form of information logged by the participant observer, and they can include: (a) written notes, audio, and video recordings of observation, casual conversations, and informal interviews; (b) counts of specific observations, such as frequency, intensity, sources of behaviors; (c) room diagrams, community maps, or process flows drawn in a chart visual; (d) lists of items, categories, and/or rules of inclusion or exclusion; (e) sensory details such as smells, sounds, textures, colors, etc.; and (f) speech

and body patterns (e.g., accent, volume, cadence, body language, Harrison, 2018; Guest et al., 2013; McKechnie, 2008). Researchers employ various media and tools to document field notes including drawing pictures, making maps, creating multimedia recordings, taking photos, and writing scratch notes. (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Schensul & LeCompte, 2012). Researchers should record notes in private places or in unobtrusive ways so that their notetaking does not affect participants' activities (Given & Leckie, 2003). Participant observation data is recorded in field notes, and they may be shared by researchers in their findings section.

## 7. Disengagement Site Justification

The decision to leave is important because time spent in a field influences the depth and accuracy of the observations (Singer, 2009). Researchers may be only allowed to stay for a predetermined time; they may also wait until data is saturated before exiting; or external factors may affect their stay time such as access denial by participants (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Kawulich, 2005). The term *theoretical saturation*—the point at which the data becomes repetitive, and no major new insights are gained—is often the logic used when deciding whether to leave a site (Glaser & Strauss, 1968; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Researchers should communicate information about their length of stay and what led them to decide to withdraw from a field.

## 8. Participant Observation Data Trustworthiness

### *Triangulation Methods*

The verification of researchers' observations and interpretations is considered an essential part of the participant observation process because data are filtered through their eyes (Becker & Geer, 1958; Caines, 2010; Kawulich, 2005). Participant observers largely employ triangulation—the practice in which researchers study phenomena through multiple methodological lenses to answer the same research questions—to corroborate what they observe or expand upon their interpretations. Data trustworthiness is the most debatable of the eight recommendations because it may be argued to be a qualitative positivist rigor (i.e., triangulation, independent peer analysis, member checks). Some qualitative

researchers are instead guided by other broad principles that guide them while in the field (Berkovick, 2018, Crick, 2021). Angen (2000) stated many interpretivist researchers, for example, may perceive that seeking out divergent cases is a more appropriate approach because they disagree with the assumption that reality can be converged upon.

Typically, interview data is used to explain observed participant behaviors (Shenton, 2004). As is often the case in case study or ethnographic research, scholars verify their participant observational findings by supplementing that data with *focus groups* (or *group discussions/interviews*), *quantitative surveys*, and *formal interviews*, in addition to the method of participant observation itself (Beckmann, 2017; Guest et al., 2013). *Focus groups* refer to small-group discussions guided by a researcher(s) on a given topic. *Quantitative surveys* involve a set of mostly close-ended questions asking about the opinions or perceptions of a group of people. *Formal interviews* are individual conversations conducted with interview guides to collect data about a given topic. It is important for scholars to precisely communicate the appropriate method label and explicitly state whether other methods were employed to verify the findings stemming from the participant observation data. Participant observers typically conduct semi-structured interviews with questions framed around a particular analytical focus or they conduct narrative interviews in which interview protocol questions are framed in a way to collect stories and life histories from informants (Flick, 2009). Hockey and Forsey (2012) argued that formal interviews are a separate method that anthropologists often reduce to a lesser status in comparison to participant observation, but interviews are critical and distinct in helping researchers to understand what drives human action. We expect that journalism researchers will likely employ qualitative interview research in their participant observation studies due to its popularity as a companion method to participant observation (Forsey, 2010; Spradley, 1980).

### *Member Checking*

Researchers function as self-instruments in participant observation. Therefore, they should communicate their biases when studying local communities and social groups since interpretations stem from their individual observations and immersion within a setting. *Member checking* involves researchers' confirming their interpretations with participants

in terms of whether themes and information are accurate and whether findings resonate with participants' actual experiences (LeCompte, 2000). A researcher may member check their interpretations on the spot or following data collection to communicate the credibility of their observations (Shenton, 2004). Member checking encompasses the verification of researchers' transcripts or findings, modification of them, or the addition of new data.

Interpretivists may argue, instead, that researchers use multiple methods to enrich their findings. They may also argue their findings reflect a collaborative creation between the researcher and the participants in which their interpretations may change each time they reengage with data (Angen, 2000; Bloor & Wood, 2006; Silverman, 2006). In this regard, some qualitative methodologists—particularly those who take constructionist and interpretivist perspectives—might argue that one should not assume that participants will achieve consensus of their social realities or the notion that reality is fixed (Crick, 2021). Researchers should also be wary that triangulation will provide a complete picture of any given phenomenon. Fink and Gantz (1996) found that almost all of interpretivist and critical sampled mass communication journal articles did not include verification operationalized as member checking or peer debriefing. Most qualitative methodological experts, however, recommend member checking in qualitative research (Birt et al., 2016; Hart, 2022; Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007). Member checking could fall under an ethical obligation umbrella in which researchers check with each participant to determine if their information is trustworthy or researchers could meet with respondents to re-construct new meanings (Birt et al., 2016). The data trustworthiness recommendation and the other seven recommendations provide a coherent description of the method, but recommendations should be evaluated whether they align one's epistemological perspective or experiences in the field.

### *Peer Debriefing (Expert Feedback)*

Researchers ask disinterested peers to probe their observations and validate interpretations to confront subjectivity concerns as another way to communicate the credibility of their data. Peer debriefing enables researchers to ensure “the trustworthiness of the data” (Kawulich, 2005, p. 16). Peer debriefing is the process of asking outside researchers to verify researchers' interpretations, while member checking

is associated with researchers' confirming their interpretations by checking with the informants in the study (Shenton, 2004). Morse (1994) stated some interpretivists argue that peers cannot validly judge their interpretations because they were not immersed in the social setting, but Angen (2000) argued that peers are able at a minimum to evaluate the soundness of arguments and writing.

## Research Questions

We sought to assess the extent to which researchers reported essential methodological information within the context of news participant observations. The research questions reflect our goal to identify patterns through conceptual lenses stemming from participant observation methodological recommendations literature to uncover how journalism researchers interpret the participant observation method. Our study is exploratory because we have not identified a researcher that has conducted such a study. Our research is a quantitative descriptive study because we want to explore the state of participant observation research through the development of newly created measures and by presenting a proposed methodological reporting framework. First, we investigated how researchers labeled their primary data collection methods or approaches by coding the mentioned terms in articles.

RQ1: How do participant observation researchers label their methods or approaches in journalism-related participant observations?

We also examined whether scholars followed the call to redirect their attention to study journalists' technological practices and whether scholars defined fields beyond a newsroom setting. We investigated whether studies took place inside the newsroom, outside the newsroom, or both.

RQ2: To what extent did participant observation researchers observe journalists' technology use in journalism-related participant observations?

RQ3: What are the participant observation social settings in journalism-related participant observations?

We also analyzed to what extent researchers adapted their observations to mediated communication channels as well. Mediated participant observation refers to research that involves researchers' observations of virtual spaces and communication technology platforms (e.g., social media, forums, emails, chats). The future of participant observation is evolving due to external forces such as spatially dislocated work-

spaces making it difficult for researchers to both observe and relate to participants. Fragmented work settings make it challenging to employ the method that is intended to narrow the gap between what people say and what they do. The pandemic associated with the coronavirus, for example, forced organizations to employ innovations and technologies to allow workers to work from home leading to observational challenges such as gaining access to watch workers who conduct their work across multiple digital networked spaces in their homes (Bunce et al., 2017; Luff et al., 2010; Mabweazara, 2013).

Observational methods that involve online settings appear to be categorized into three approaches: (a) observing participants' interactions by recording behaviors in online forums or social network platforms; (b) observing participants' interactions across multiple physical places and online platforms, while the researchers participate in research subjects' activities or move with them in these spaces; or (c) requesting participants to document and journal their regular activities (Sumiala & Tikka, 2020). In studies that involve online settings and digital technology, Mabweazara (2013) observed journalists' activities both in physical newsrooms and on Facebook to understand how journalists used social media to identify newsworthy information. In Bunce, Wright, and Scott's (2017) study, they monitored social interactions among journalists via Slack—a messaging app for businesses—to see how journalists remotely worked and collaborated to produce news stories. To circumvent the social distancing restriction during the coronavirus global pandemic, participant observers may also ask participants to document their activities and routines using digital devices such as asking them to record their daily activities through mediums such as digital diaries, body cameras, mobile texts, photographs, or videoclips. Researchers may also mine their social media data or install a surveillance camera (Silverman, 2020; Sumiala & Tikka, 2020). Video-based observation is one method that has been used for several decades in medical or educational settings in which (a) participants or the researcher video records work practices, (b) a surveillance camera records a setting or computer behavior, or (c) a participant records video clips of their daily lives (e.g., photo elicitation). The researcher essentially carries out a direct observation technique in which they catalogue the behaviors and conversations that take place in a recorded space. Researchers may also need to critically reflect, for example, how data is affected by the positioning

of the camera in which a camera is in a high-angle position looking down on participants. This mediated observation angle may create a more passive and non-intimate relationship with those being observed. The benefits of video recordings include them being less intrusive, fewer resources are required of the researcher to conduct the observation, and recordings allow for playback, while the drawbacks include equipment problems, technical training of participants, limited observational context, privacy concerns, confinement of researchers to analyzing only what participants share with them, a limited ability to participate in a setting, and an inability to conduct informal interviews on the spot (Borg, 2021).

RQ3a: To what extent do participant observation researchers report conducting a mediated observation in journalism-related participant observations?

The next set of research questions relate to the reporting practices associated with the participant observation method. We assessed the following concepts and variables that represent reporting recommendations: site justification, site access negotiations, observer-participant role, rapport building strategies, participation observation data techniques (document analysis, field interviews), field notes, disengagement site justification, and participant observation data trustworthiness techniques (triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, see [Table 3](#)).

RQ4: To what extent do participant observation researchers follow participant observation recommended method reporting practices?

RQ4a: To what extent do participant observation researchers report site selection justifications in journalism-related participant observations?

RQ4b: To what extent do participant observation researchers report procedures pertaining to gaining access or making initial contact in journalism-related participant observations?

RQ4c: To what extent do participant observation researchers report information about observer-participant type in journalism-related participant observations?

RQ4d: To what extent do participant observation researchers report their rapport building strategies in journalism-related participant observations?

RQ4e: To what extent do participant observation researchers report participant observation data gathering techniques in journalism-related participant observations?

RQ4e.1: To what extent do participant observation researchers report using informal interviews in journalism-related participant observations?

RQ4e.2: To what extent do participant observation researchers report participant observation using document analysis in journalism-related participant observations?

RQ4f: To what extent do participant observation researchers report collecting field notes in journalism-related participant observations?

RQ4g: To what extent do participant observation researchers report logic associated with leaving a site(s) in journalism-related participant observations?

RQ4h: To what extent do participant observation researchers report the data trustworthiness of their observations and interpretations in journalism-related participant observations?

RQ4h.1: To what extent do participant observation researchers triangulate their participant observation findings with a formal method in journalism-related participant observations?

RQ4h.2: To what extent do participant observation researchers report member checking in journalism-related participant observations?

RQ4h.3: To what extent do participant observation researchers report peer debriefing in journalism-related participant observations?

## Quantitative Content Analysis Method

### Sampling Procedure

The unit of analysis was the journal article published from January 1960 to December 2020. We used the Communication and Mass Media Complete database which houses full-text communication scholarship provided by EBSCO. The search string was developed by testing several combinations of keywords (and Boolean operators) pertaining to ethnography and the participant observation method in news settings. The selection of keywords aimed to collect as many relevant articles as possible from the database. Followed Stryker and colleagues' (2006) recommendations, inclusion and exclusion keywords were developed to find the best search strings. The precision rate of the final search string was 56 percent. Initial trials involve keywords related to

various labels of participant observation methods (ethnography, ethnographic, participant observation, case study, field research, fieldwork, and field study) and terms equivalent to news outlets (news organizations, newsrooms, journalism) and/or journalists and reporters. After several trials, two additional terms—TV and news—were added to the search string and tested again. Case study, field research, and field work were deleted because the use of these terms resulted in too many irrelevant journal articles that did not include a participant observation, but case study research was included when it included a participant observation or ethnography. The final search string “(ethnography or ethnographic or participant observation) AND (newsroom or TV or news or journalist or reporter)” was determined to be the best. Following this search process using the Communication and Mass Media Complete database advanced search function, we manually evaluated: (a) whether the journal articles focused on a participation observation study or mentioned ethnographic approaches that focused on observation; and (b) whether the studies were conducted in the context of any department in a news organization as well as in other institutions such as a government agency related to news production, or it included news workers. Participant observations that involved journalists interacting with public relations professionals, media department professionals in non-news organizations, and journalism students in classrooms were also included. Citizen journalists who worked outside of a newsroom setting were excluded but those who worked with news organizations were included in the sample. This process resulted in a total of 171 articles from 55 journals. However, we found only two articles between January 1961 and December 1990 using the aforementioned search string. We observed that scholars in early studies often did not refer to a particular research method. We conducted an additional search using the keywords *making news*, *news routines*, and *gatekeeping*—the terms that frequently appeared in the titles or abstracts of early ethnographic studies—for the time periods between 1960 to 1990. Using the search string “making news or news routines or gatekeeping,” we obtained nine additional relevant articles. We also manually dropped an additional irrelevant 30 articles resulting in a total of 150 journal articles from 55 journals that mentioned participant observation but did not conduct one. Six articles were from 1971-1980; six from 1981-1990; four from 1991-2000; 32 from 2001-2010; and 102 from 2011-2020. As one can see, the participant observation method is growing in use among journalism scholars.

## Sample Descriptives

Almost half of the articles (44.6%) were published in three peer-reviewed journals: *Journalism* (26, 17.3%), *Journalism Practice* (23, 15.3%), and *Journalism Studies* (18, 12.0%). The number of average authors was 1.4 per article. Among the authors that reported the number of sites visited for their study, the average number of sites visited was 1.86 and the median was 1.0. Among articles that included formal qualitative interviews, 63.3 percent of those reported the number of interviewees. The average interview sample size was 18.0 people.

A critique and assumption of participant observation journalism research is that it is primarily conducted on sites located in the United States (Batabyal, 2012; Elmasry, 2011). Participant observations appear to be somewhat geographically diverse in terms of site locations. The social settings included the U.S. (42.0%), followed by Europe (32.7%), Asia (10.0%), Africa (8.7%), South America (3.3%), and other (3.3 %).

The length of stay involves the amount of time that participant observers were in the field. Generally, the narrower and more grounded the research focus, the shorter amount of time that is needed for one to stay in the field. A participant observer may spend two to three months for journal studies and methodologists suggest a few years for book-length pieces or research on sensitive subjects (Kurz, 1983). Harrison (2018) argued that a rigorous ethnography should last for at least a one-year minimum, while Hassan and Elmasry (2019) stated they typically last six months or more. Gans (1999) urged that participant observation research requires immersion in the social setting(s) over significantly longer periods such as many months or years in which a researcher mentally blocks out many other commitments to gain intimate familiarity. Eighty five percent of scholars presented the length of stay in some form: 27.3 percent of them provided the length of stay in hours; 13.3 percent in months, 11.3 percent in weeks, 8.7 percent in days, and 4.0 percent in years. Scholars were often not precise and instead presented ranges of time such as “between October 2006 and March 2007” (14.0%) or they provided information on a shorter time period such as May 2013 (4.7%). After only transforming the concrete reported time periods from those that reported their length of stay in hours, days, and weeks (8 hours for each day) ( $n = 71$ , 47.3%), scholars stayed in the field an average of 27.8 days.

Researchers may explore the social setting based on a framework, but it is not expected that they employ a framework (Spradley, 1980). Approximately half (46.7%) listed a formal framework. Gatekeeping and Field Theory tied as the most frequently used frameworks applied to interpret the data. Gatekeeping was mentioned nine times in total (1980, 1982, 1990, four times in 2017, two times in 2018) and Bourdieu’s Field Theory was mentioned an equal amount with nine mentions (2007, 2013, 2015, three times in 2018, three times in 2019). Participant observers should state whether they linked their data interpretations to a formal conceptual or theoretical framework to analyze their data.

## Intercoder Reliability

One doctoral student and a faculty member trained in quantitative content analysis independently coded the articles. Disagreements were handled through discussion of variables and the revisiting of literature. The protocol was piloted tested during three rounds of coding on randomly sampled units employing participant observations of organizations in general that were not from participant observation sample due to the low sample size. The pilot sample was created by employing the search terms “organization AND (participant observation or ethnography)” during 1960 and 2020 to create the pilot samples. Three variables were refined based on these pilot tests.

The minimal reliability level of .70 was set *a priori* because all measures were newly developed based on the literature (Lacy et al., 2015). Following the recommendation of Riffe et al. (2019), a formal intercoder reliability test sample size of 39 randomly selected articles were computed for intercoder reliability. Krippendorff’s alpha ( $\alpha$ ) was used for reliability analyses, and reliabilities ranged from .72 - 1.0 for all but one variable. One was dropped (overt vs. covert) due to it being difficult to code and its low presence. Riffe et al. (2019) recommended reporting simple agreement and Gwet’s (2008, 2014) coefficient agreement coefficient (AC) when data is skewed. We applied Gwet’s AC1 to rare event variables with high percent agreement (>90%) and a low intercoder reliability coefficient (<.70), which included the focus groups variable (Gwet’s AC1 = .97, 97% agreement). A second round of intercoder reliability ( $n = 37$ ) was conducted to address the refined *participation type* variable and six variables were added based on the observations during the first round of intercoder reliability.

## Measures

The abstract, introduction, method, and footnote sections of the journal articles were the only parts coded. When method sections were not articulated, equivalent sections were included (e.g., sections that provided information on research venues, including sections with headings such as *Research Sites* and *Data* or *Data Collection*). Variables were coded as either present or absent.

1. **Participant Observation Label.** This category is concerned with the terms that authors used to describe their methods: ethnography ( $\alpha = .77$ , 95% agreement); fieldwork/field research/field study ( $\alpha = .75$ , 87%); participant observation ( $\alpha = .95$ , 95%); observation (or field/direct observation) ( $\alpha = .70$ , 85%); case study ( $\alpha = .84$ , 92%); newsroom observation ( $\alpha = 1.0$ , 100%); and newsroom ethnography ( $\alpha = 1.0$ , 100%).

2. **Social Setting.** *Mediated participant observation* ( $\alpha = .77$ , 95%) refers to research in which authors observe journalists physically working in mediated or virtual spaces (e.g., computers, social media, forums, emails, search engines). It does not include observation of content from these spaces such as is the case of discourse or content analysis, but the researchers observe them working in real time in virtual spaces. *Technology use* ( $\alpha = .84$ , 95%) is the observation of how journalists use technologies to do their work such as adapting to and using technology during the reporting or news construction process. *Observational settings* ( $\alpha = .77$ , 89%) refer to physical spaces or field in which the researcher observes activities, which included *inside the newsroom*, *outside the newsroom*, or *both*.

3. **Conceptual Framework.** The conceptual lens variable is concerned with whether authors employed a conceptual framework when observing phenomena and analyzing the data ( $\alpha = .90$ , 95%).

4. **Site Justification.** Research venue site justification was present when it included reasons such as theory, geographic accessibility, accessibility due to membership (i.e., familiarity of the people working on the site), convenience, etc. ( $\alpha = .78$ , 90%).

5. **Site Access Negotiation.** This variable was concerned with whether authors reported information relevant to access procedures such as gaining access, making initial contact, and other related details to how they negotiated access to a site or gatekeepers ( $\alpha = .90$ , 95%).

6. **Observer-Participant Type.** Coders evaluated the researchers' expressed activity participation level or membership role. Coders recorded the variable as *active participant* if the

researchers participated in group activities, while they observed participants, or coders coded it as *passive participant* if the researcher stated they took a more observational-leaning approach by watching group activities. The article was coded as *moderate participant* if they oscillated between types. Coders focused on manifest content, which is typical in content analysis, in which the author explicitly communicated their participation level ( $\alpha = .74$ , 84%).

7. **Rapport Building Strategies.** The researcher expressed efforts of trying to put the participants in the study at ease by making them feel comfortable and securing their trust. For example, authors expressed steps of building relationships with participants, communicating with participants about their study or goals, or strategies to convince participants to share information with them ( $\alpha = .72$ , 95%).

8. **Participant Observational Data Technique.** *Informal interviews*, *ethnographic interviews*, and *casual conversations* ( $\alpha = .80$ , 90%) were coded and *document analysis* (other than field notes, formal content analysis, or discourse analysis) ( $\alpha = .90$ , 95%) were coded. Documents could include internal reports about a company, marketing materials, in-house surveys, newsletters, correspondences, diaries, archival documents, or meeting minutes.

9. **Field Notes.** A researcher's observations, insights, scratch notes, and thoughts are recorded in the form of *field notes* ( $\alpha = .90$ , 95%).

10. **Disengagement Site Justification.** This variable was concerned with whether authors reported any information regarding leaving the site(s) such as a predetermined length of stay or whether they waited until data was saturated ( $\alpha = 1.0$ , 100%).

11. **Data Trustworthiness.** Methods used in addition to participant observation were coded with the following variables: focus groups (group discussions/interviews, *Gwet's AC<sub>1</sub>* = .97, 97%), quantitative surveys (a set of mostly close-ended questions asking about the opinions or perceptions of a group of people,  $\alpha = 1.0$ , 100%), and formal interviews (any form of face-to-face conversation that involved asking open-ended questions that were associated with an interview guide,  $\alpha = .79$ , 97%). In addition, *member checking* and *peer debriefing* (expert feedback) were coded. Member checking involves the researchers reporting that they confirmed their data interpretations with the study participants ( $\alpha = 1.0$ , 100%). Peer debriefing was coded as present if the authors asked peers or experts to probe their thoughts and interpretations. It is also known as expert feedback ( $\alpha = 1.0$ , 100%).

**Table 3.** *8 Recommended Participant Observation Methodological Reporting Practices and Study Findings* ([back to p. 129](#); [back to p. 134](#))

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1. **Site Justification** (67.3%)
  2. **Site Access Negotiation** (25.3%)
  3. **Observer-Participant Type** (58.0%)
    - a. Passive Participant (42.7%)
    - b. Active Participant (14.0%)
    - c. Moderate Participant (1.3%)
  4. **Rapport Building Strategy** (9.3%)
  5. **Participant Observation Data Techniques** (50.0%)
    - a. Informal Interviews or Ethnographic Interviews (32.7%)
    - b. Document Analysis (36.7%)
  6. **Field Notes** (37.3%)
  7. **Disengagement Site Justification** (5.3%)
    - a. Theoretical Saturation (4.0%)
    - b. Predetermined Stay Length (1.3%)
  8. **Data Trustworthiness Techniques** (93.3%)
    - a. Triangulation Methods
      - i. Qualitative Formal Interviews (90.7%)
      - ii. Quantitative Content Analysis (12.7%)
      - iii. Critical Discourse Analysis (5.3%)
      - iv. Focus Groups (4.0%)
      - v. Quantitative Survey (2.7%)
    - b. Member Checking (8.7%)
    - c. Peer Debriefing (0.7%)
- 

## Results

Overall, the results show journalism scholars use their methodological narratives to justify and describe their site selection and authors also reported the use of a companion method, primarily formal interviews, in participation observation studies. The reporting of the other variables (i.e., field notes, participant observation data techniques, site access negotiation, rapport strategies, and disengagement with the site) associated with the carrying out of the method, however, were reported to a lesser extent (see Table 3). Adjacent to the quantitative content analysis results, we also share exemplar reporting practices found in these articles to help people learn more about the method.

## Method or Approach Label

RQ1 examined to what extent news participant observers used the method label participant observation. The results suggested that approximately half of the scholars (52.0%) used the term *participant observation* to refer to their data collection method. Scholars often referred to their studies as an ethnography (78.7%), case study (39.3%), observation (37.3%), and 45.3 percent described their study using field study terms. We also sought to understand whether scholars used language that emphasized the newsroom space by referring to their method as a newsroom observation or newsroom ethnography, and we found that 7.3 percent of the sample referred to their study as *newsroom observation* and 12.0 percent used the term *newsroom ethnography* to describe their study.

## Social Setting

RQ2 investigated to what extent researchers observed journalists' technology use, and we found that 20.7 percent reported this analytical emphasis. RQ3 is related to the social settings where observations were made and we found 74.0 percent of studies involved observations of journalists inside the newsroom, 12.0 percent reported that they observed activities outside a newsroom, and 14.0 percent observed journalists both inside and outside.

The observation part of the research consisted of shadowing four specific reporters from three different news organizations as well as attending general formal and informal press events at the State Capitol building. Shadowing consisted of observing reporters at work, in interaction with colleagues and sources in their offices and around the building (Revers, 2015, p. 8).

I talked informally with photographers and reporters as they drove to and from stories and I was at times the silent back seat observer as the news crews revealed their 'journalist's nature' in preparing themselves for the story ahead (Steele, 1987, p. 8).

The call to investigate the impact of journalists' technology use is being answered, but we also argue for a need to develop ways to study fragmented communication settings. RQ3a represents the empirically initiated effort to examine the extent that participant observation researchers observed journalists' activities in mediated settings, and we found 5.3 percent of studies employed a mediated observation. Fragmented workspaces due to remote and freelance work are influencing how researchers carry out participant observations. Jordaan (2020) noted the difficulty of observing interactions online, "Obtaining permission to join internal discussions on platforms such as Slack or WhatsApp is not an easy feat due in part to ethical concerns. In some cases, I simply pulled up a chair behind a journalist to observe their work and digital communications" (p. 63). Steensen (2009) agreed with this observation that interactions often took place on communication technology platforms such as email or chat.

I was struck by the silence surrounding the work practice. It took me several days to understand that the journalists communicated via chat even though they sat within voice reach of each other in an open-plan newsroom. It took me an additional couple of days to be able to understand what kind of matters they discussed through chat and to read their behav-

ior (e.g., body language) so that I understood when they chatted with colleagues about matters of importance to their role performance (p. 707).

## Site Justification

RQ4 represents a set of questions exploring the extent that journalism participant observers followed methodological reporting recommendations. RQ4a sought to determine whether scholars justified their venue selection. We observed that it was common for researchers to describe their social setting to justify its relevance. The results revealed that 67.3 percent of studies justified their selection of the given research venue(s) (see Table 3).

This research site choice was based primarily on my ability to gain sufficient access to the station's newsroom and staff as well as some of the professional sports teams the station covers on a regular basis. I had been employed as an associate producer at this station until 2003. Since that time, I had occasionally worked in a freelance capacity; however, I did not accept any freelance opportunities during the course of my data collection in an effort to avoid potential conflicts of interest as well as to convey to the participants my new role as researcher as opposed to sports television colleague (Genovese, 2015, p. 60).

## Site Access Negotiation

RQ4b investigated whether they reported information how they gained access to a site. Approximately a quarter of scholars (25.3%) reported how they negotiated gaining access to a site.

I worked twice a week as an unpaid intern at a small, regional newspaper in the northeastern United States, hereafter referred to as *The Daily Express*. Shortly before I began working there, I met with the managing editor, and he said he would not be opposed to me conducting research in the newsroom as long as it did not interfere with my duties. I later confirmed his permission to do research in the newsroom via email (Hettinga, 2013, p. 33).

After some negotiation, I was not only granted permission to observe and record the conversations of the working group but was also strongly encouraged to take part in the discussions (Hokka, 2019, p. 78).

The research had full cooperation from the management of the paper and access to the newsroom, meetings, and documents was allowed without restrictions (Tameling & Broersma, 2013, p. 20).

Only after a firm assurance that their position could not be threatened because their identity would not be revealed did they agree to the observation and interviews. Their decision to cooperate was stimulated also by the expressed belief that in this way they might contribute to eventual changes of these practices in the future (Erjavec & Poler Kovačić, 2010, p. 362).

## Observer-Participant Type

RQ4c examined whether scholars provided information about participation degree. Results showed that 42.0 percent did not report their role as a researcher with 14.0 percent identifying as an *active participant* and 42.7 percent stated that they were behaving as a *passive participant*. Two of them (1.3%) reported *moderate participation* in that they went back and forth between both roles.

The first author had the opportunity to serve in the role of participant-as-observer while she worked in a full-time position within The Paper's creative services division, which produces the advertorial products (Eckman & Lindlof, 2003, p. 68).

To minimize any effect of my research on the events, I restricted my presence to being a silent observer except when socializing was expected by the occasion. I certainly did not express any views on matters of journalistic planning, judgments, or values (Nip, 2008, p. 182).

The first author, who conducted fieldwork, assumed the observer-as-participant role. This stance allowed the researcher to take notes during observations and establish good rapport with editors (Tandoc & Vos, 2016, p. 955).

## Rapport Building Strategies

RQ4d investigated the extent that participant observation researchers reported they obtained participants' trust to build informative relationships with them. Almost a tenth (9.3%) of the studies provided details regarding how they developed rapport with participants.

In essence, my approach was to maintain an open and consistent image, and to refrain from challenging any assumptions about me in order to develop rapport with Channel I. I always endeavored to show an interest in the issues they raised, and I tried to sympathize with their point of view, to develop a better understanding of their concerns and, to use Habermas' term, their lifeworld (AŞİk, 2018, p. 592).

At the start of my observations, I introduced myself to all interested parties and reassured them about my intentions. I also

familiarized myself with the basic organization of the newsrooms, that is, who sits where, and their respective responsibilities (Mabweazara, 2013, p. 105).

When I began to attend the meetings, I quickly realized that my role as one of the 'developers' created a more collegial, and thus more trustworthy, relationship with the journalists than a fly-on-the-wall set-up would have provided. During the process, I utilized the 'ethnographic self' technique... I openly revealed to other developers that I had no journalistic training (Hokka, 2019, p. 78).

Building trust relationships starts the moment you approach key informants for access to the newsroom and ends long after you have exited the newsroom. I first approached Media24's CEO for formal permission to do my fieldwork about six months prior to my first visit, and also corresponded with the then editor-in-chief of the website, and later with his successors. After completing my fieldwork and writing my dissertation, I shared my findings with the editor and all the journalists who participated in the study... It takes time to overcome suspicion amongst journalists and news managers who might feel exposed to ridicule or reprimand when an outsider puts their daily practices under the microscope. In my case, getting the nod from management to continue with my exploration was very helpful. Yet, I still had to constantly assure the journalists, in an attempt to gain and maintain their trust, that I am not in the employment of the company, nor was my aim to spy on them on behalf of their bosses. (Jordaan, 2020, p. 58-59).

## Data Gathering Techniques

RQ4e investigated the extent that participant observation researchers reported data gathering techniques associated with the participant observation method. Approximately one-third of the studies reported the use of informal interviews (32.7%) and document analysis (36.7%).

Informal conversations were undertaken in the newsroom to make explicit journalists definitions on their work and the technologies they used (Erjavec, 2004, p. 558).

I attended editorial meetings, had private chats with news practitioners or joined casual conversations in the newsroom or in cafés in the news stations (AŞİk, 2018, p. 591).

Collected relevant written materials, including email correspondence, newspaper 'budgets,' and memos. Our data consist of audio-recordings of storyboard meetings, and computer screen shots taken at various stages during the articles' production (Vandendaele & Jacobs, 2014, p. 885).

## Field Notes

RQ4f investigated the extent that participant observation researchers reported the use of field notes during their observations. A notable proportion (37.3%) reported documenting observations and interpretations.

I jotted field notes in real time and supplemented them later each day with memos and observations; I then organized field notes and interview transcripts through an open coding process to better identify and understand relevant observations (Moon, 2019, p. 1718).

In fact, my field notes were often the basis for the questions I asked journalists (Jordaan, 2020, p. 61).

During this period each assistant spent two 4-hour observation sessions per week, loosely following an observation guide developed before fieldwork began. This amounted to 85 4-hour sessions that yielded 200,000 words of field notes plus an array of sketches, photographs, and artifacts (Boczkowski, 2009, p. 103).

## Disengagement Site Justification

In terms of venue departure justification for RQ4g, 5.3 percent of scholars explained the reason for departing venues: 4.0 percent reported theoretical saturation and 1.3 percent reported that they left after a predetermined length of stay.

For this phase of the research, the researcher spent a total of 43 days or 367.5 hours in the field, during a time period beginning January 18, 2013, and ending April 9, 2013. Weiss (1994) wrote that when information acquired becomes redundant and begins to not add to conclusions, fieldwork should conclude. By the beginning of April, the information gathered started becoming redundant. The researcher then stayed in the field an extra week to corroborate the correctness of this determination (Ferrucci et al., 2017, p. 252).

## Data Trustworthiness Techniques

RQ4h examined the degree that participant observation researchers reported investigating their observational interpretations. Particularly, RQ4h.1 asked to what extent researchers triangulated their observational data. Researchers frequently used observation data to inform their formal interview questions with the intent of verifying their observa-

tions. The results showed that scholars largely reported using qualitative formal interviews (90.7%), and they less frequently used quantitative content analysis (12.7%), discourse analysis (5.3%), focus groups (4.0%), and quantitative survey (2.7%).

The use of in-depth interviews was, above all, intended to check the data gained by participant observation, and add to it, whereas the secondary goal was to obtain the participants' responses to promotional news practice (Erjavec, 2004, p. 558).

In-depth interviews were used to check the data gained by observation, and to find answers to the question (Erjavec & Poler Kovačič, 2010, p. 361-362).

RQh.2 and RQh.3 queried to what extent participant observers validated their interpretations by requesting participants or outside experts review their interpretations. The results revealed scholars rarely reported employing member checking (8.7%) or peer debriefing techniques (0.7%) to confirm their interpretations.

I sent my journalist informants their quotations as well as my entire article for review. Very few had comments, indicating the accuracy and viability of going 'behind the scenes.' (Lund, 2012, p. 204).

I conducted member checks at two critical junctures in the research process. First, immediately after finishing data collection for each case, I wrote a paper with preliminary findings and sent it to key members of the online paper. Then, after writing of findings... I sent either the whole text or the relevant chapters to key members of each organization (Boczkowski, 2004, p. 203).

## Discussion

Scholars use search terms to find research, and a consistent use of labels is one way to support community around a method. We encourage researchers to clearly communicate both their data collection method and their approach because concept labels matter. Labels also influence how a scholarly community interprets a concept—and in this case—a method. We manually and critically assessed each article to ensure that each was a participant observation study, yet less than half referred to their method as participant observation. By far, researchers were most likely to refer to their participant observation research as an ethnography, followed by a field study. We recommend that scholars refer to participation observation by the formal label of *participant observation*.

Approximately a tenth of scholars referred to their method as a *newsroom ethnography* and *newsroom observation*. This label may inadvertently signal that participant observation should take place in newsrooms. Our findings, however, showed 26 percent of studies involved observations outside of the newsroom.

## Mediated Observations<sup>1</sup>

The newsrooms were historically centers of observation; however, researchers will likely rethink their participant observational practices due to digital collaborative environments, production tool use, and fragmented workspaces. We found one-fifth of the articles focused on the use of new technologies by journalists, but they rarely included observations of fragmented settings. Mabweazara (2013) argued researchers will need to learn how to observe mediated (i.e., video recordings of search engine searches, accessing journalists' internal social media accounts) and physical workspaces (i.e., observing them as they work on their computers). A reimagining of participant observation will likely lead to trends in participant observation that include an increased use of *document analysis* due to internal and external communications taking place via email, chat, or social media. Researchers could investigate in the future how journalists use technologies to communicate and collaborate with one another or how they are used to secure or maintain source relationships in mediated spaces.

In mediated environments, researchers may need to protect participants from harm such as harassment or reputation damages. Researchers should ensure that accessible online quoted information, multimedia clips, or usernames cannot be traced back to their identity. Researchers ethically engage with participants by anonymizing their data including images; requesting their consent to participate in the study including the use of their information; not quoting research participant posts verbatim to ensure that others cannot find them via a search engine; and periodically reconfirming participants' participation in a research study (Hennell, Limmer, & Piacentini, 2020; The British Psychological Society, 2021).

The shifting of work diffused across loosely linked networks likely has influenced the increased use of field theory. Field Theory conceptualizes a professional field (e.g., a journalistic field) as a social space in which individual agents *compete* for their positions within a field's hierarchy for power and peer recognition (Benson & Neveu, 2005; Bourdieu, 2005; Willig, 2013). Future research should investigate scholars' use of Field Theory to determine how it is being applied and investigate other non-predetermined analytical approaches such as the use of grounded theory.

## Reporting Recommendations

Overall, the findings showed researchers assessed the trustworthiness of their data by primarily using qualitative interviews and they justified site selection by providing background site information. The content analysis results also found low reporting of most other standards. Sandiford (2015) stated the volume of data to report may be a reason authors neglect to provide a detailed method section. We urge journal editors and publishers to offer higher word count space to researchers who conduct participant observation or mixed method research to support the reporting of details associated with each method.

A quarter of the scholars reported how they gained access to a site, while only six percent reported their logic as to why they ended their study. Gaining access is the first step of *going into* the field that determine the scope of the study and the data (e.g., activities that the researchers may attend, the length of time researchers stay in the field, the people allowed to be observed). These details communicate the boundaries put in place by gatekeepers and communicate information about the openness and willingness of the community being observed. Communication about the length of stay in the field may indirectly communicate information about data quality and depth.

The scholars' placement of self on observational-participant continuum should be explicitly communicated because the researcher is a data collection instrument and their behaviors, beliefs, biases, assumptions, and backgrounds influence the resulting data. It is important for participant observers to decide whether they will actively interact with

<sup>1</sup>The British Sociological Society ethical guidelines, 2021

participants (or keep a distance from them and minimize interactions), whether they will communicate their research objectives to participants (or hide them), and whether they will try to adopt participants' beliefs, attitudes, and points of views (or maintain an outsider perspective). The researchers primarily enacted the *active participant* perspective when they worked as a journalist or an intern.

Participant observation may mend the mistrust between academics and journalists because researchers treat participants as experts and researchers learn about their realities through prolonged relationships with them. Yet only 10 percent of articles provided information how they established rapport and relationships with journalists in the field.

One should communicate generally what they documented in their fields notes in the method section and report their field notes in their findings. Participant observations typically involves field interviews, document analysis, and field notes and around a third of authors reported employing these techniques. The lack of observational data finding aligns with Forsey (2010) research that showed British, Australian, and American anthropological research data consisted mostly of *formal and informal interview data* rather than *observational data*. These results led Forsey to argue that ethnography would be more accurately termed as engaged listening due to a lack of observational data found in participant observational research. This finding suggests that social norms, qualitative training, word limit constraints, or awareness may influence the reporting observational data in participant observation studies.

Participant observers preferred to use qualitative interviews as a companion to participant observation, but few researchers reported verifying the soundness of their interpretations using member checks or peer debriefings. Participant observation involves subjectivity, which is why researchers verify their interpretations by asking participants whether their interpretations are correct (i.e., member checking), asking outside researchers to review their interpretations (i.e., peer debriefing), and/or revisiting the research venue(s) to confirm their interpretations. We did not code for *investigator triangulation* (i.e., the use of a team in a field to observe the same social setting) as a strategy to reduce bias or increase certainty in observations. Investigator triangulation may involve team members engaging in different roles in the field (e.g., interviewing, geographical placement, etc.) or another investigator may play the devil's advocate by chal-

lenging the researcher's observations (Bloor & Wood, 2011; Eisenhardt, 1989), but our informal coder observations lead us to believe that it was minimally present. We did not originally develop a variable for *quantitative content analysis* or *critical discourse analysis* since we followed best practices literature from outside of the field, but we coded for *other triangulation methods* and found journalism scholars often analyzed content. This finding is new, but not surprising since the home of content analysis is in the field of communication and journalists create content products.

## Conclusion

Scholars should note this analysis reflects the reporting practices of journalism scholars, which means the results should not generalized beyond journalism, but rather replicated to see how other fields perform. Our contribution to methodological practice is that we identified and developed content measures to encourage non-experts to learn more about participant observation methodological standards and concepts. Journalism studies research concentrates on organizational settings more so than community or action-focused (e.g., protests) ones (Seim, 2021). Future research should compare work-centered studies from other fields or apply these variables in other contexts to evaluate the reporting behaviors.

While the field of journalism may be urged to head in a more macro direction related to defining a field, outside ethnographers argue that a more microscopic approach is emerging in which researchers take on the role of detailing a particular phenomenon or a concept in need of theoretical specification by identifying the multiplicity of meanings associated with a concept (Geertz, 1973; Emerson, 1987; Verd et al., 2021). The substantial periods of time and labor involved with one research project may require professional sacrifice due to counter pressures such as high publication numbers and teaching requirements that academics face when trying to earn tenure or career advancement. These tenure-track scholars or applied researchers may employ a more focused approach in which data collection is constrained by some preidentified conceptual lenses or they may implement a *rapid participatory appraisal* if they plan to spend shorter times in a space in comparison to the years that are suggested for a conventional ethnography (Verd et al., 2021).

Lastly, we hope this study will encourage the qualitative methodological community to discuss and coalesce around the method within media and communication field journal spaces. We sought to encourage conceptual clarity and design logic with this study. We believe that methodological syntheses and analyses in journal articles encourage increased methodological literacy, identity, unification, and

community engagement. We understand that researchers approach research with varying assumptions and views about the how the social world works, and members of these invisible colleges possess different epistemological preferences. Therefore, we invite readers to review and discuss our codification of good participation observation practices.

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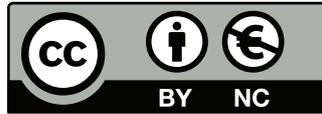
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