

# Qualitative reconstruction interviews to study journalistic practice

## **Journalistica: The Methods Section**

In this section, Journalistica puts a spotlight on research methods used in journalism studies and/or journalism practice.

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## **KEYWORDS**

reconstruction interviews, news production, qualitative interviews, journalism

## **1. Description of the method**

This approach to reconstruction interviews focuses on reconstructing journalistic practices through retrospective interviews anchored in a concrete news product, often described as the “biography” of a news story (Brüggemann, 2013). They center around one or more specific news item(s), and trace how these were produced – from the initial idea to editorial choices and publication (Reich & Barnoy, 2020). Reich and Barnoy (2020) provide a comprehensive overview of how reconstruction interviews can be implemented in a quantitative manner; this method brief specifically focuses on the qualitative reconstruction interviews. In the following, a step-by-step guide is provided using the example of a news story reconstruction.

Sampling for reconstruction interviews can begin with either the journalist or the journalistic text, depending on the research design. The key criterion is that the journalist must have been directly involved in producing the news item(s) relevant to the study. Sampling can be either purposive or systematic, depending on the research objectives and context. Reconstruction interview guides use open-ended questions that are typically organized in a two-part structure (Reich & Barnoy, 2020). 1) In a biographical-narrative section, journalists are encouraged to retrospectively recount their news production process in detail. The

interview may begin with an open-ended prompt: “Can you walk us through how this story came about, from the very beginning?” (Boesman et al., 2015, 2016). Guided by the interviewer, journalists narrate reasoning behind stylistic or editorial choices, norms, values, or constraints that influenced their work, always centering on the final news story to illustrate points. 2) In a focused-discourse section, researchers can probe specific elements of interest related to the study objectives based on the news story at hand, such as interactions with sources, editorial pressures, or journalistic roles. This stage allows for a more targeted exploration of the production process, often returning to particular story elements, passages, or decisions to elicit deeper reflection. The method is flexible: the semi-structured interview guide format enables researchers to go back and forth between sections, the news story text, and emerging themes, allowing journalists to introduce themes the researcher may not have anticipated – an important advantage in complex and evolving media environments.

The systematic analysis of the interviews typically triangulates two perspectives. A perceptual (i.e., how a journalist perceives their practice) or agent-based analysis centers on the journalist’s interpretations, experiences and decision-making processes in their work. A performative (i.e., how a journalist performs their practice) or item-based approach anchors the analysis in the text – examining what the journalist actually did, and how their narrative aligns with the finished news story. The researcher aggregates individual insights into meaningful themes or patterns, for example, by following the steps in thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) or grounded theory approaches (Charmaz, 2015). Reconstruction interviews can also be supplemented with content analysis (Anderson, 2013).

## 2. Example of use

While the origins of reconstruction interviewing trace back to early newsroom ethnographies (Tuchman, 1978), the method has gained increased recognition in various journalism subfields, particularly through the work of Zvi Reich and colleagues (Reich, 2006; Reich & Barnoy, 2016, 2020). Recent scholarship has investigated increasingly complex working realities of journalists, such as journalist-source relationships (Brüggemann, 2013; Lawson, 2023; Malling, 2021; Reich, 2010), journalistic role negotiations and interactions (Arregui Olivera, 2024), the influence of technology and algorithms in news reporting (de Haan et al., 2022; Matsilele et al., 2022), or crisis reporting (Hoxha & Hanzitzsch, 2018; Lawson, 2023). In my own work, I have studied how journalists negotiate their role and interaction with lobbyists (Schwinges et al., 2024) to understand how the institutionalized role of watchdog

journalism (Bovens et al., 2014) is transformed when applied to powerful new actors like technology companies.

### 3. Main advantages and challenges of using the method

Qualitative reconstruction interviews are a valuable tool for studying journalism practice but require careful methodological considerations. While the method provides a dual perspective on journalism practice, it is necessary to keep an analytical distinction between agent- and item-based insights to avoid oversimplification and conceptual conflation (Schwinges, 2024); instead, the method can be used to study their interplay and ensure robustness of insights. One key challenge lies in the method's reliance on journalists' retrospective accounts. Agreeing on the story in advance and using prompts like the published article can help the journalist prepare and recall details more accurately. While the method's flexibility challenges academic rigor and replicability, this very same adaptability helps to reveal previously unexamined and tacit aspects of news-making (Malling, 2023), and together with its avoidance of *a priori* assumptions (Reich & Barnoy, 2020), makes it suitable in new research settings.

Reconstruction interviews have gained increasing popularity as a way to address the complexity and opacity of journalistic practices (Reich & Barnoy, 2020). Unlike think-aloud protocols, which capture real-time cognition, they are valuable for their systematic, reflective examination of journalistic processes that are not necessarily visible in the final news product (Malling, 2023). In increasingly complex information ecosystems - where boundaries between different levels of influence are blurring (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Xu & Jin, 2017) - the reconstruction method is particularly well-suited to study journalistic practice across micro, meso, and macro levels of influence (Schwinges, 2024). Newsroom ethnographies often integrate reconstruction interviews for story-level insights when analyzing journalistic ecosystems (Boesman et al., 2016).

### 4. Ethical considerations

Some ethical guidelines are paramount to this specialized form of interviewing. Detailed accounts of news items may reveal sensitive details about internal processes, interpersonal dynamics, or editorial conflicts. Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of both the journalist and others involved in the news story is essential but also complex. Anonymization may be insufficient and should be complemented by focusing reports on aggregate insights rather than identifiable news item content. While the item anchored testimony (Reich & Barnoy, 2016) creates

some robustness, the reconstruction method remains dependent on journalists' subjective accounts in need for further contextualization to ensure accuracy and transparency. Particularly when applied to novel research settings, insights that contradict common assumptions should be reported with nuance.

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