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# Cultural journalism—Journalism about culture

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## Abstract

This article is an introduction to “cultural journalism,” a specialised type of professional journalism that covers and debates the broad field of arts and culture. The article points to some of the research traditions that have engaged with the news media's coverage of arts and culture and inspired contemporary cultural journalism research, among them cultural sociology and the sociology of journalism. Furthermore, the article outlines the institutional roles and epistemology of cultural journalism, which in several respects differ from dominating normative conceptions of Western journalism. At the same time, the article shows that contemporary journalism shares many similarities with the approaches found in cultural journalism, such as interpretation, emotionality, and subjectivity. Finally, the article points to important future paths for cultural journalism research, including comparative perspectives and the political dimensions and potentialities of cultural journalism.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

“One of the most significant transformations of our time has been a remarkable shift from a media focus on public affairs to a focus on the domain of everyday life,” Hanitzsch and Vos (2018, p. 156) argue. This could also be phrased as a change from hard news to soft news (e.g., Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2012). As a result, media and journalism studies today examine not only political news but also human interest stories (Hughes, 2017), celebrity journalism (Dubied & Hanitzsch, 2014), gossip journalism (Van den Bulck, Paulussen, & Bels, 2017), lifestyle journalism (Hanusch, 2012, 2017), arts journalism (Harries & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007; Janssen, 1999), and cultural journalism (Heikkilä, Purhonen, & Lauronen, 2017; Jaakkola, 2015; Kristensen & From, 2015a; Kristensen & Riegert, 2017). These specialised types of journalism may be distinct in theory but often overlap in practice in terms of focus areas and the professionals who produce them. The sheer number of specialised sub-fields emphasises the importance of studying them from a scholarly perspective, as they can all tell us something about the media's overall shift of attention.

This article introduces one of these specialised types of journalism, i.e., “cultural journalism,” which has received increasing attention from both cultural sociologists and media and journalism scholars since the early 2000s, even though it has only recently become a more distinct research field. Cultural journalism engages with a wide range of cultural issues, from the arts to everyday life, or from culture understood narrowly as aesthetic expressions to culture viewed more broadly as “a whole way of life” (Williams, 1958). It is produced by permanent as well as freelance cultural reporters and critics. The emergence of citizen journalism has resulted in people *outside* the institutionalised frameworks of the news media contributing to the production and distribution of texts pertaining to culture, such as criticism or reviews of cultural goods on (v)blogs (e.g., Jaakkola, 2018; Kristensen & From, 2015b; Verboord, 2010, 2014). These contributions will not represent a central point in the following, however, as the article primarily aims to introduce cultural journalism as a research field and professional practice.

The article starts out by discussing important research strands that have informed the study of journalism *and* culture and, more specifically, the study of journalism *about* culture. Cultural sociology and the sociology of journalism represent two key approaches, while Hanitzsch's (2007) conceptualisation of “journalism culture(s)” is a third take that will be pursued in the second part of the article, as it may help distinguish some of the particular traits of cultural journalism *as* journalism, emphasising institutional roles and epistemologies. Third, the article uses some of the main findings from research in the field as a basis for pointing to important future scholarly paths.

## 2 | JOURNALISM AND CULTURE: SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES AND TERMINOLOGIES ABOUT CULTURAL JOURNALISM

The “journalism and culture” nexus is not new. Different research strands have long taken an interest in the *interplay* between journalism and culture, although their take on the polysemantic concepts of both “journalism” and “culture” have differed substantially. A complete account of this research is beyond the scope of this article, but selected perspectives of particular importance to the study of cultural journalism are highlighted.

### 2.1 | Cultural studies, cultural sociology, and journalism studies

Since the early 1990s, cultural studies have examined the relationship between journalism and popular culture, focusing on journalism “not as a professional but as an ideological practice” (Hartley, 2008, p. 43). A main approach has been to examine journalism as a textual system, or the textual aspects of journalism and popular culture media content, and, by extension, identity issues and power relations as they become visible through journalistic texts (e.g., Hartley, 1996). An important argument has been to broaden the conceptualisation of journalism beyond the normative and idealised self-conceptions of the profession (e.g., Dahlgren, 1992). Similarly, scholars from various aesthetic disciplines, e.g., literature, film, and music, have long used journalistic texts to examine critical discourses about these particular cultural domains. This is because magazines, the press and their cultural reviews present important institutional settings and genres for cultural criticism and thus for the study of how critical standards have evolved over time within particular cultural fields and/or within particular regions (e.g., Frey, 2015; McDonald, 2007; Said, 1984).

Cultural sociologists have also used cultural media content as a point of departure for studying broader sociocultural transformations, such as cultural globalisation, dissolving hierarchies between high art/popular culture, and the emergence of cultural omnivores with broad cultural tastes (e.g., Janssen, Kuipers, & Verboord, 2008; Janssen, Verboord, & Kuipers, 2011; Peterson & Kern, 1996; Purhonen et al., 2019). Especially *elite* newspapers and their cultural supplements and reviews have been analysed as important spaces and genres for cultural legitimation processes (e.g., Baumann, 2007; Janssen, 1999; Purhonen et al., 2019; van Rees, 1987; Yaren & Hazir, 2018). Much of this research has been informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984) and, among other things, his concept of the cultural intermediary, epitomised by cultural journalists and critics, who not only mediate between cultural producers and audiences, thus serving as gatekeepers, but also ascribe cultural legitimacy to cultural subfields and phenomena

by means of their attention and discourses (see also Janssen & Verboord, 2015; Matthews & Smith Maguire, 2014). As I shall return to, the notion of the cultural intermediary has inspired recent cultural journalism research.

Crudely put, a common denominator of these quite different research strands—exemplified by cultural studies, aesthetic disciplines, and cultural sociology—is a strong preoccupation with journalistic texts addressing cultural issues as *empirical records or data* to exemplify broader power structures, aesthetics values, or transformations in culture and society. These studies have to a lesser extent engaged with the media institutional frameworks and professional cultures of journalism, or accounted for how these frameworks and cultures influence the production of cultural stories. Such institutional and professional perspectives are more prevalent in media studies and, more recently, in journalism studies.

Especially during the 1970s, the sociology of news shifted its attention from the individual choices and predispositions of the journalist to organisational structures and later external influences, such as the political economy and culture of news and journalism (e.g., Gans, 1980; Schudson, 2005). Boudieu's field theory has also been an inspiration to media and journalism scholars, especially since the early 2000s (e.g., Benson & Neveu, 2005; Dickinson, 2008; Schultz, 2007), and so has the sociology of professions, even if journalism is not a profession in the traditional sense (for an overview, see Örnebring, 2010). These studies have, however, not focused on the cultural newsroom, the sociology of cultural journalism, or cultural journalism as a particular journalistic beat and professional practice. Nonetheless, historical and longitudinal studies of the changing composition of media content have pointed to the increased role of arts, culture, and lifestyle in newspapers, in the magazine press' ever-growing palette of subcultural focus areas, and in the "lifestyling of television" (e.g., Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001; Brunson, 2003; Christensen, 2012; Lewis, 2008).

As journalism studies itself became increasingly institutionalised as a distinct academic discipline with structural frameworks, such as institutions for higher education, scholarly organisations, and conferences from the early 2000s (e.g., Steensen & Ahva, 2015), increasing attention has also been devoted to the interplay between journalism and culture. This interplay has been addressed in different ways, as exemplified by the concepts "journalism as culture," "journalism culture(s)," and, of course, "cultural journalism." Zelizer (2008, p. 8) argues for studying "journalism as culture," which means focusing on how journalism conveys "value preferences" and mediates "meaning about how the world does and should work." This approach emphasises studying journalistic activities beyond or across traditional distinctions, such as hard and soft news, elite and tabloid, and text and visual. The study of "journalism cultures" has received attention since the late 2000s as a result of a global comparative turn in the field (e.g., Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2017). One point of departure has been Hanitzsch's (2007) conceptualisation of "journalism culture," which emphasises institutional roles, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies. This suggests that "journalism as culture" and "journalism cultures" may have little to do with "cultural journalism" as a journalistic beat. However, the concepts can help explain the distinct nature of cultural journalism. A key trait is, for example, its dissimilarity from the institutional roles and epistemologies most often associated with Western journalism—a dissimilarity, which has been a focus point in the cultural journalism research that has emerged especially since the early 2010s.

Thus, contemporary cultural journalism research is informed by many of the above-mentioned research strands: cultural studies, cultural critique, cultural sociology, media sociology, and media history as well as journalism studies, including the sociology of news and journalism. These research traditions have different foci and interests, indicating that a distinct academic culture of cultural journalism scholarship, sharing particular theories and methodologies, has yet to emerge. Nonetheless, the mentioned research strands have all provided cultural journalism research with a diverse and strong theoretical as well as methodological underpinning.

## 2.2 | Diverse terminologies about cultural journalism

Even though the various research strands point to a prolonged scholarly attention to the interplay between journalism and culture, "cultural journalism" has only more recently become an established *term*. There may be at least three reasons for this.

First of all, journalism scholars (as well as journalists) have used and continue to use different terminologies for this type of journalism. Some use the inclusive term “lifestyle journalism” (e.g., Fürsich, 2012; Hanusch, 2012, 2017), others the more exclusive term “arts journalism” (e.g., Chong, 2017; Harries & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007; Sarrimo, 2017), while still others focus on particular cultural sub-beats, such as music journalism, food journalism, and fashion journalism (e.g., Bradford, 2014; Turner & Organge, 2013). This lack of terminological consensus has made cultural journalism a less demarcated research area.

Second, cultural journalism can, in theory, be analysed as a distinct field of research, but empirically, its boundaries blur towards other culturally saturated subgenres, such as celebrity journalism, gossip journalism, and lifestyle journalism, as indicated in Section 1. Furthermore, the boundaries blur towards more politicised cultural topics such as race, ethnicity, and nationality (e.g., Roosvall & Widholm, 2018), which may at times be addressed by cultural reporters, critics, and columnists but also sometimes by other beat reporters or news journalists (e.g., Kristensen & Roosvall, 2017).

Third, cultural journalism is a more distinct and prioritised type of journalism in some regions, e.g., Northern Europe (Jaakkola, 2015; Kristensen & Riegert, 2017), than in others, e.g., the United States (Szántó, Levy, & Tyndall, 2004). Accordingly, it has received less scholarly attention in the last-mentioned context. Media systemic, market, and organisational structures may accentuate this diversity. Regional and local media often have fewer resources for designated cultural reporters or critics, while some national news media may use a strong cultural department as part of their media brand (e.g., Jaakkola, 2015; Kristensen, 2010; Riegert, Roosvall, & Widholm, 2015).

The fact that “cultural journalism” has become a more commonly used international scholarly term since the mid-2010s (e.g., da Silva & Silva, 2014; Heikkilä et al., 2017; Hovden & Knapskog, 2015; Jaakkola, 2015; Kersten & Janssen, 2017; Kristensen & From, 2015a; Kristensen & Riegert, 2017) denotes a middle-ground perspective between the very inclusive and more narrowly delineated terms and the emerging institutionalisation of cultural journalism as a distinct sub-discipline in journalism studies. This is confirmed by the fact that even though cultural journalism may not (yet) have its own journals or conference divisions, it is offered as an academic subject at many universities.

### 3 | THE JOURNALISM CULTURE OF CULTURAL JOURNALISM

As suggested, Hanitzsch's (2007) conceptualisation of “journalism culture” may be useful for fleshing out the distinctive nature of cultural journalism, including its institutional roles and epistemologies. *Institutional roles* concern the roles (cultural) journalism play in society, normatively and functionally, while *epistemologies* concern (cultural) journalism's obligation and approach to truth. Hanitzsch points to ethical ideologies as a third aspect, which will not be addressed in the following, however, as institutional roles and epistemology have most explanatory value for the argument presented here. Especially institutional roles link closely to the sociology of journalism and, in the context of this article, the sociology of cultural journalism.

#### 3.1 | Institutional roles

When outlining institutional roles as one key pillar of journalism culture(s), Hanitzsch (2007) points to three dimensions, all on a continuum, that characterise how journalists are expected to perform these roles and in fact do. Journalists may play a more *active* or a more *passive* role, i.e., be engaged/socially committed or detached and impartial; journalists may act more as *adversaries* or be more *loyal* to those in power, i.e., perform as watchdogs or agitators; and journalists may be geared more towards the *market* or more towards *the public interest*, serving consumers or citizens. Being detached, an adversary and serving the public interest are key professional norms associated with Western journalism (e.g., Deuze, 2005).

Research has shown that cultural journalism differs from these institutional role conceptions in several respects. In a study of British arts journalists, Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen (2007) argue that this professional group perceive themselves as “passionate moral saviors and crusaders for the sake of art” (p. 632) and as being on “a crusade to improve society by educating the public about the arts” (p. 635). Hovden and Knapskog (2015, p. 791) use the term “cultural patriots” to define the role of Norwegian cultural journalists in society. Others have argued that cultural journalists appear loyal towards artists and cultural producers, as they are often closely intertwined professionally or even personally, sharing the same passion for arts and culture (e.g., Forde, 2003; Kristensen, 2018). Hovden and Kristensen (2018) show that monitoring elites is less important to cultural journalists, who are more inclined to educate the audience, tell stories, and promote tolerance, i.e., to provide “a cultural filter” (Riegert et al., 2015; Roosvall & Widholm, 2018) on sociocultural issues. This is inconsistent with the adversary or watchdog role. Some ascribe this to cultural journalists more often being trained within the arts and humanities, suggesting that they are anchored in the arts world as much as, or even more than, in journalism (Hellman & Jaakkola, 2012; Hovden & Knapskog, 2015; Kristensen & From, 2015b). Others argue that this leads to artists and cultural producers setting the agenda of cultural journalism, thus reducing cultural journalists to “cheerleaders” for the cultural industries (Klein, 2005, p. 13).

Regardless of the terminology, i.e., crusaders, patriots, or cheerleaders, this places cultural journalists in an intermediate position between serving the market and the public interest. Using the cultural coverage of blockbuster movies as a case, Kristensen and From (2015c) show that cultural departments may have both commercial and public service incentives for covering such popular culture phenomena in a substantial, critical, and engaging manner. Chong (2017, p. 11), in her interview-based study of cultural journalists and book critics, shows that “their goal for writing reviews was not to sell books but to inform the general public about new books as part of a broader cultural conversation.” Accordingly, scholars often point to cultural journalists performing the role of cultural intermediary or mediator between cultural producers and cultural citizen-consumers, thus turning to theories from cultural sociology to explain the distinct role conceptions and performances of cultural journalists (e.g., Hovden & Knapskog, 2015; Jaakkola, 2015; Kristensen, 2018; Kristensen & From, 2015b). As mentioned, these theories also emphasise cultural journalists' and critics' position as cultural gatekeepers and tastemakers since they select which cultural issues are brought to public attention and by critically discussing them, they contribute to the valorisation of the culture being covered (e.g., Baumann, 2007; Janssen & Verboord, 2015; Shrum, 1991; van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010).

Overall, this suggests that cultural journalists perform a more active rather than a passive role, are passionate about or even loyal towards the cultural field(s) rather than perform as adversaries, and serve the cultural citizen as well as the cultural consumer.

### 3.2 | Epistemologies

*Epistemology* relates to journalism's obligation to report the truth and involves two dimensions also on a continuum, according to Hanitzsch (2007): *objectivism*, i.e., whether journalists adhere more to an *objective* than a *subjective belief* in how reality or truth can be conveyed, and *empiricism*, i.e., whether journalists base their commitment to truth more on *empirical facts* than an *analytical approach*. Being objective and factual is a key professional norm of Western journalism culture, even though objectivity is also a most contested concept (e.g., Deuze, 2005; Schudson & Anderson, 2009).

Again, research has shown that the journalism culture of cultural journalism differs from these epistemological notions in several respects. Critique, criticism, and reviewing of cultural trends, phenomena, and expressions have long been key to cultural journalism. Such approaches have, as mentioned, also been central when cultural sociologists have studied processes of cultural legitimation and changing cultural hierarchies. One consequence is that this type of journalism is often associated with more subjective and analytical styles and genres (Kristensen & From, 2015b; Kristensen & Riegert, 2017), including not only the review but also critical essays, analyses, and columns. Etymologically, cultural critique, criticism, and reviewing connote slightly different things, but they are often used

interchangeably about parts of the work that cultural journalists do—from providing a detailed, expert-based cultural evaluation to appraising or commenting on a cultural product in the media (e.g., Blank, 2007; Jaakkola, 2018; van Rees, 1987). Such approaches are by nature more subjective and analytical than, for example, news reporting. As Blank states (2007, p. 4) in his work on critics, reviews, and ratings, reviewers must convince, i.e., persuade, the cultural public or cultural consumers of their arguments, which influences the rhetorical strategies applied. Chong (2017), among others, outlines how arts and cultural journalists are driven by different types of subjectivism, especially in reviews: bias, e.g., which cultural works are chosen for review, aka cultural gatekeeping; emotionality in terms of critical tone; and self-interest in terms of balancing self-publicising and giving due consideration for the work under review. In addition, cultural journalism and cultural criticism have a tradition of being performed by not only professionally trained journalists but also public intellectuals, critical thinkers, academics, and cultural columnists (e.g., Kristensen & From, 2015b; Riegert et al., 2015; Sarrimo, 2017) adhering to truth claims grounded in subjectivity, analysis, and expertise. They provide their interpretations, reflections, and multifaceted perspectives or their “cultural filter” in a distinct voice. As argued by Knapskog, Iversen, and Larsen (2016, p. 171) in their work on interpretive journalism, this makes the writer “explicitly present in the text” as an “identifiable subject arguing, explaining and speculating about an issue.” In that sense, they share traits with literary journalists and New Journalism (e.g., Pauly, 2014).

While such tones or voices are most visible in critical and analytical genres, they also influence how cultural reporting takes shape more broadly. This suggests that cultural journalists adhere more to a subjective belief in how reality or truth can be conveyed, often basing their claims to truth on an analytical approach. For these reasons, cultural journalists have been labelled “journalists with a difference” (Forde, 2003; Hovden & Kristensen, 2018), who exercise “arts exceptionalism” (Harries & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007) and apply an “aesthetic paradigm” (Hellman & Jaakkola, 2012).

### 3.3 | Cultural journalism becoming more like journalism, and vice versa

Ongoing scholarly debates indicate, however, that cultural journalism may be becoming more like other types of journalism, and vice versa that other types of journalism are increasingly characterised by traits associated with cultural journalism.

In cultural journalism research, Sarrimo (2017), using the Swedish context as a case, points to cultural departments losing autonomy vis-a-vis the news department due to media organisational changes. This has weakened the tradition of hiring academics and intellectuals to provide parts of the content and critical debate, and it has changed the position of the cultural editor from being a distinct voice and sovereign initiator of cultural debate to being “an administrator and budget keeper.” (Sarrimo, 2017, p. 673). Based on Norwegian data, Hovden and Knapskog (2015) show that an increasing number of cultural journalists are trained as journalists rather than in the humanities, which means that the professional logics of journalism may be overriding the aesthetic logics of the arts in the cultural journalism production. Longitudinal studies show that news genres take up more space in the cultural columns (e.g., Jaakkola, 2015; Verboord & Janssen, 2015) and, in a U.S. context, Szántó et al. (2004, p. 13) show that “Arts news reporting, as distinct from arts criticism, appears to be gaining ground as a strategic priority across the industry.” For these reasons, scholars speak of an ongoing “newsification” or “journalistification” of cultural journalism (Hellman & Jaakkola, 2012; Sarrimo, 2017). These changes are often framed as a narrative of decline, implicitly confirming that analytical, interpretive, and subjective dimensions are seen as intrinsic to or definitional of this type of journalism.

Conversely, journalism scholars have pointed to an *interpretive* turn in news journalism and political reporting (e.g., Barnhurst, 2014; Knapskog et al., 2016). The characteristics of this turn are summarised by Salgado and Strömbäck (2012) as follows:

... going beyond descriptive, fact-based or source-driven journalism; entailing greater journalistic control over news content and a more prominent journalistic voice, which may include overt commentary by

*journalists; entailing a stronger emphasis on the theme chosen by the journalist; and as entailing a focus on the meaning and Why of news rather than on the Who, What, Where and When (p. 149).*

These traits thus share many similarities with the approaches found in cultural journalism. Accordingly, Peters (2011) argues that *emotionality* has long been an important—but criticised—characteristic of news journalism, which has become more prominent and diverse in recent decades in order to engage audiences. Wahl-Jorgensen (2013, 2019) refers to contemporary journalism as emotional labour and shows that *subjectivity* (e.g., appraising language) and storytelling are important traits of even Pulitzer-prize-winning journalism, i.e., journalism considered (Western) journalism at its finest. Steensen (2017) emphasises the distinctiveness *and* interlinks between subjectivity and the increasing focus on individuals in journalism by distinguishing between the journalist as an author (“byline subjectivity”) and journalism placing the personal story of individuals at the centre (“source subjectivity”). A common argument of much of this research is that scholars should abandon dichotomies such as fact/interpretation, objectivity/subjectivity, emotion/rationality, and hard/soft news. Interpretation, emotionality, and subjectivity cannot be reduced to the pejorative opposite of facts, rationality and objectivity, and the boundaries are blurring between hard news and soft news—and between the political and the cultural in journalism, one could add (Kristensen & Roosvall, 2017; Riegert et al., 2015; Roosvall & Widholm, 2018).

## 4 | FUTURE PATHS FOR CULTURAL JOURNALISM RESEARCH

### 4.1 | Comparative perspectives and “the political in the cultural”

Based on some of the main findings from research in the field, this final section points to paths that future cultural journalism research might pursue to further contribute to the study of the media's broader shift of attention towards culture and everyday life domains, as suggested by the opening quote of this article.

#### 4.1.1 | Comparative research

An important and emerging approach is comparative cultural journalism research with a focus on production, content, and audiences across journalism cultures and platforms.

Few single country studies of *production cultures* have focused on the role perceptions and professional norms of cultural editors and journalists, especially in Northern-European contexts (Harries & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007; Hovden & Knapskog, 2015; Riegert et al., 2015; Sarrimo, 2017; see Botma for the South-African context, 2008, 2013), though a broad, global comparison has also been made (Hovden & Kristensen, 2018). As indicated, these studies show that the cultural journalism production culture differs from other types of journalism cultures, but also that media systemic contexts matter. Producing more robust comparative knowledge about what cultural journalism means and looks like in different media systems could flesh out the potentialities of this type of journalism on a more global scale.

Most cultural journalism research has focused on the cultural media content, especially in (printed) newspapers, applying mainly *national* perspectives. Golin and Cardoso (2009) have focused on Brazil, Kristensen (2010) on Denmark, Hellman and Jaakkola (2012) and Jaakkola (2015) on Finland, Larsen (2008, 2012) on Norway, Janssen (1999) on the Netherlands, da Silva and Silva (2014) on Portugal, Riegert et al. (2015) and Roosvall and Widholm (2018) on Sweden, and Szántó et al. (2004) on the United States. Cultural sociologists have, as mentioned, conducted *comparative* studies, using elite newspapers in various Western contexts to point to processes of cultural globalisation, legitimation, and changing hierarchies and tastes (e.g., Janssen et al., 2008; Janssen et al., 2011; Purhonen et al., 2019). Main findings across these national and comparative studies are that more column space has been devoted to the coverage and debates of an increasingly broad range of cultural topics and domains of everyday life. Comparing different periods in time, cultural fields, and national contexts, also beyond the Western perspective,

seems particularly important to future cultural journalism research, as existing research emphasises the importance of the global/local (national) nexus (e.g., Janssen et al., 2008; Purhonen et al., 2019).

The predominantly national focus in much existing cultural journalism research naturally relates to pragmatic issues, such as language barriers and access to media content and respondents, as newsroom studies, qualitative interviews, and content analysis are established methods within the field. At the same time, these national and production-content-centred approaches appear somewhat paradoxical in view of the global-comparative turn in journalism studies more broadly and the fact that (print) newspapers are losing ground with audiences. This points to the audience perspective being another important path for future comparative cultural journalism scholarship. While research has long taken an interest in studying people's use of various media platforms to engage with news in both national and comparative perspectives (e.g., Hasebrink, Jensen, Bulck, Hölig, & Maesele, 2015), audience research into particular types of content, such as cultural news and journalism, is more scarce. This is contradictory, as both cultural sociologists and cultural journalism scholars have, as mentioned, pointed to the news media and cultural journalists serving as important cultural gatekeepers, information providers, and tastemakers. Furthermore, these roles have come under pressure from global media actors (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2017), algorithmic culture (Roberge & Seyfert, 2016) and the advanced public participation in debates about and evaluations of arts and culture afforded by digital media (e.g., Frey, 2015; Verboord, 2010, 2014). However, we know relatively little about how these changes have influenced the role of cultural news media in audiences' consumption of news and information about culture, nor about the status and authority of cultural journalism and cultural journalists as seen from audiences' point of view today.

#### 4.1.2 | The political in cultural journalism

The political dimensions of cultural journalism have not been a main focus in previous research, which may be a result of the research questions posed so far. Political or politicised issues have come more to the fore in recent years, however, reiterating some of the discussions raised by cultural studies scholars in the 1990s, when engaging in the study of journalism and popular culture. Even though cultural journalism engages primarily with the cultural public sphere, journalism about arts and culture may also be political.

In this case, a distinction between (cultural) politics (e.g., institutionalised politics about arts and culture) and the political (e.g., the broader ideological aspects of cultural issues) is relevant. (*Cultural*) *politics* is often low on the agenda of cultural departments, as it may carry less news value in contexts, where cultural policy plays a minor role, while it may be a sensitive topic in contexts, where artists and cultural producers partly depend on public subsidies (e.g., Kristensen, 2010). *The political* is potentially more prevalent in cultural journalism. Research about cultural criticism has, for example, pointed to the key distinction between evaluative standards focusing on *aesthetic* or *socio-political* aspects of a work (e.g., McDonald, 2007, p. 64) but also to the intertwinement of the two (e.g., Frey, 2015, p. 14). Another example is Purhonen et al.'s (2019) recent comparative study that suggests that though politicisation of culture is not a main characteristic in European newspaper columns, the particular socio-political context may be an important factor for the cultural coverage. Using Spain and Turkey as examples, they conclude that "In both cases, the newspapers cultural coverage clearly reflected the political processes of the country" (Purhonen et al., 2019, p. 171; see also Yaren & Hazir, 2018). Another interesting case in point is the Nordic context, where arts and culture as well as media and journalism are publicly subsidised and represent important pillars of the Nordic Welfare and Media model (e.g., Kristensen & Riegert, 2017; Syvertsen, Enli, Mjøs, & Moe, 2014). Nordic research has demonstrated that cultural journalism may provide alternative and less polarised worldviews and interpretative frameworks than other types of journalism, e.g., in regard to politicised cultural topics such as ethnicity, race, and nationality (Roosvall & Widholm, 2018) with Swedish cultural journalism appearing particularly political (Hellman, Larsen, Riegert, Widholm, & Nygaard, 2017, p. 127; Purhonen et al., 2019, p. 157). This points to the interconnectedness of comparative cultural journalism research and research about the political dimensions of cultural journalism.

More broadly, public sphere scholars have argued for the importance of moving beyond the study of the political public sphere and engage critically in the study of the cultural or aesthetic public sphere (e.g., Dahlgren, 1992; Gripsrud, 2008, 2017; McGuigan, 2005; Roberge, 2011). A main argument is that the boundaries between the political public sphere and the cultural public sphere are blurred. Roberge (2011, p. 448), for example, argues that “criticism is always normative and interrogative, always tries to define culture through a political lens and conversely, politics through a cultural lens.” In similar ways, Gripsrud argues (2017, p. 182) that “both ideally and in practice, it seems fair to say that cultural journalism for the most part contributes to certain forms of deliberation: Those taking place within the cultural public sphere or on the borders between the cultural and the political.” More specifically, he points to cultural journalism’s engagement with identity issues, its potential for inspiring empathy, and its argumentation-based form of communication as key, thus reiterating some of the already articulated features of this type of journalism (Gripsrud, 2017, p. 184). News, journalism, and criticism about arts and culture should thus be considered important parts of the cultural-political nexus of the communication circuit today. In that sense, it seems misunderstood when journalism under the soft news umbrella term, including cultural journalism, is at times viewed as being of less civic value or quality, which is often indicated by the traditional distinctions between public affairs/everyday life or hard news/soft news.

Though political dimensions may not be key aspects of cultural journalism, future research could engage more in studying how cultural journalists cover and debate cultural norms, values, and ideologies at times of high political intensity, such as (national or EU) elections, and how they approach foreign affairs, international conflict, or politically motivated violence.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

This article has introduced a specialised type of professional journalism that covers and debates the broad field of arts and culture, spanning the high/popular distinction, or the cultural public sphere. Although this type of journalism has many names, “cultural journalism” has become a recurring and recognised term during the 2010s. It is a type of journalism that is produced not only by professional journalists but also by freelance critics, intellectuals, and cultural pundits, often termed “cultural journalists” and “cultural critics.” The article has looked to cultural studies, cultural sociology, media studies, and the sociology of news and journalism to trace some of the research traditions that have inspired contemporary cultural journalism research. Furthermore, it has outlined how the institutional roles and epistemology of cultural journalism differ from dominating normative conceptions of Western journalism. At the same time, it has argued that today classical types of journalism shares many similarities with the approaches found in cultural journalism, such as interpretation, emotionality, and subjectivity. This suggest that cultural journalism could serve to exemplify some of the changes we see in journalism and the media more broadly today, including the increased attention to everyday life issues, as pointed to by, among others, Hanitzsch and Vos (2018). However, the outline also suggests that this transformation may have more to do with an increasing *blurring of the boundaries* between the public and the private, the political and cultural, and hard news and soft news than with a shift of attention *away* from public affairs. Many of the issues treated in cultural journalism echo broader sociocultural and socio-political issues of our time. For that reason, the article has, finally, pointed to the political dimensions and potentialities of cultural journalism as a future research path, especially from comparative perspectives, to further break away from some of the dichotomies that have so far characterised journalism scholarship.

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