Computer-Assisted Journalism

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1. Computer-assisted journalism’s historical roots

Computer-assisted journalism refers to all the different ways in which computers are used by journalists to fulfill their professional duties. As such, computer-assisted journalism is neither a journalistic reform movement with specific, normative goals, such as development journalism, public journalism, and solutions journalism, nor a journalistic genre characterized by particular kinds of news content and reporting styles, such as investigative journalism, literary journalism, and tabloid journalism. Instead, computer-assisted journalism is best understood as a description of one of the technical means with the most profound impact on the practice of journalism today.

Indeed, computers have had and continue to have such a strong impact on the practice of journalism that it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine any form of journalism that is not impacted by them; it is hard to think of many industries that use computers more than journalism. Nevertheless, some observers still insist on making a distinction between computer-assisted journalism and what they refer to as good, old-fashioned shoe-leather journalism, where the journalist, literally and figuratively, hits the pavement in search of news stories.

But such a distinction makes little, if any, sense. Even the most computer-averse shoe-leather journalist—someone who does not make use of data sets from electronic databases or interact with sources via email—has no choice but to use a computer-based word-processing program to write his or her news stories. Thus, all journalism today is to some degree computer-assisted. The important question, rather, is to what ends computers are used and what effects they have.

2. Computer-Assisted journalism’s historical roots

Computer-assisted journalism can be traced back to the early 1950s and, more specifically, to the 1952 US presidential election featuring Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson where CBS News used a computer, the Remington Rand Univac, to predict the outcome on the basis of early voter