Computer-assisted reporting, Philip Meyer and *The Emperor's New Clothes*

by Stephen Lamble

This paper critically examines the influence of United States journalism professor Philip Meyer on the methodological origins of computer-assisted reporting. Meyer is a former journalist. He has been one of the most influential journalism academics and writers in the second half of the Twentieth Century. He is currently the Knight Chair in Journalism Professor of journalism in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina. To put the paper in context it should be explained that I am currently researching a PhD on computer-assisted reporting, or CAR, and its relationship with freedom of information (Lamble: 2001). In doing so, I have closely examined the methodologies of both journalism and CAR. That resulted in several major surprises. The first was an initially disconcerting, if naïve, discovery that journalism was supposedly something of an orphan child academically because it reputedly had no recognised methodological parentage. In fact I now know that many of you would be aware that one researcher, Hartley, had rather unkindly claimed in 1995 that journalism was "a *terra nullus* of epistemology" and "an uninhabited territory of knowledge" (1995: 27). At first I was perplexed by that suggestion. Then I learned that the apparent lack of a methodology of journalism had actually been discussed and debated in detail at the 1996 JEA conference and that two books were subsequently published on the topic. They were an excellent collection of ideas put together by Suellen Tapsall and Carolyn Varley in their book *Journalism Theory **in** Practice* and another thought provoking collection, *Journalism Theory **and** Practice*, edited by Myles Breen. It is beyond the scope of this paper to revisit the issues canvassed in those books or at the 1996 conference, except to make a couple of quick observations in passing. One, logic dictates that journalism must have a methodology, if for no other reasons than because journalism is and journalism happens. Two, the real issue, and this is something I see as developing into a post-doctoral research project that might keep me busy the rest of my life, is how to identify and document that methodology.

That takes me now to Meyer, CAR and the fact that there seems to be a generally accepted belief among many computer-assisted reporting educators that CAR is an area of journalism informed by something Meyer dubbed "precision journalism". In my thesis I explain that my research is primarily based on a mix of methodologies from history and law – disciplines very closely aligned to journalism. I have also made a point of practicing what I preach by employing CAR techniques to enrich the

research and take me around the world to places I could not have visited otherwise. Therefore I felt it was not only important to go hunting for the methodology of journalism as a whole, but to also see what could be discovered about the methodology of CAR. What do I mean by methodology? Philosopher Abraham Kaplan defined it thus:

> "The word 'methodology' … is one which is used for a certain discipline and for its subject matter. I mean by *methodology* the study – the description, the explanation, and the justification – of methods, and not the methods themselves (Kaplan in DeFleur 1997: 212).

Before continuing, however, I must digress a little and explain that while I am critical of Meyer in what follows, that is not the way I set out. Neither am I critical of Meyer's specific suggestions about how journalists might use statistical techniques, surveys, polls and computers. What I do object to are attempts to link the "methodology" of his precision journalism to CAR. I also make the point that I am not Meyer's only critic. Professor Mark Pearson, for example, took issue with Meyer in his presidential address to the 1993 JEA annual conference. In an *Australian Journalism Review* article adapted from that address, Pearson criticised a suggestion by Meyer that, quote: "He [Meyer] notes that journalism schools are fast becoming schools of journalism and mass communication and that the next logical step is to drop the [word] "journalism" from their titles (Pearson 1994: 102)". Interestingly in the current context, Pearson suggested that Meyer had made the mistake of confusing the technology of mass communication with the practice of journalism (Pearson 1994: 103).

In relation to CAR, I believe Meyer similarly muddied the waters for those who followed him. The problem dates from the 1970s when Meyer claimed to have founded "precision journalism". At that time he said precision journalism was an almost purely quantitative approach. He said it employed social science survey methods to gather statistics which could be used as the basis of news stories. In his landmark 1973 book *Precision Journalism: A Reporter's Introduction to Social Science Methods*, which he updated in 1979, the opening sentence of Meyer's first chapter contained a wonderful, if unintended, irony wherein he wrote: "Sometimes we get things wrong." In the following pages he outlined statistical and mathematical techniques which he urged journalists to adopt. He described his motivation thus:

> It used to be said that journalism is history in a hurry. The argument of this book is that to cope with the acceleration of social change in today's world, journalism must become social science in a hurry (Meyer 1979: 14).

What Meyer did not do at the time was unambiguously declare that there was a potential conflict of interest in his advocacy of social science methodology. In the book's preface he did mention an organisation by the name of the Russell Sage Foundation and its "generous support", its provision of "a place to work" and the "continuing guidance" of "people at the foundation". He did not reveal the full implications of those links, indlcuding the fact that he was the foundation's project director. Neither did he disclose that the actual term "precision journalism" was not his own. He similarly glossed over the

same points in the 1979 edition of *Precision Journalism*, although he did acknowledge in that edition that the book was begun in a Park Avenue, New York office "obligingly supplied by the Russell Sage Foundation" (Meyer 1969: preface to second edition). It was not until 1991 that Meyer actually revealed that publication of *Precision Journalism* had been made possible by a grant from the Russell Sage Foundation, that the foundation was an organisation "devoted to the support of the social sciences" (Meyer 1991: 5) and that the specific purpose of the grant "was to produce a manuscript with the working title 'The Application of Social and Behavioural Science Research Methods to the Practice of Journalism'. "(Meyer 1991: preface). Significantly, too, those 1991 admissions were made in a new book titled *The New Precision Journalism* in which Meyer recanted methodologically – dumping social science in favour of the much more "scientific" methodology of pure science.

Despite the foregoing, Meyer's original precision journalism was credited during the mid and late1990s with being the precursor of computer-assisted reporting – a view that is still widely held and something that has seen Meyer literally attain guru status in the United States, where he is described as such on the Investigative Reporters and Editors, IRE, Web site (http://www.ire.org/training/advbootcamps.html). In my view, however, his widely accepted 1970s' argument that social science provided ***the*** basis for what amounted to number crunching by a relatively few statistically inclined journalists was poorly focussed, at times illogical and sometimes contradictory. On one hand, for example, Meyer was an enthusiastic self-confessed stickler for the definitive quantitative techniques of social science-style surveys and polls. He simultaneously decried "old journalism" while attacking the journalistic ideal of objectivity, claiming the latter was for the "simpleminded" (Meyer 1979: 6). On the other hand, as the following passages from his 1970s book demonstrate, he was condescending and disparaging when it came to the language of his adopted discipline:

> Journalists and social scientists used to be much more alike than they are today [1979]. Together, we would rely heavily on observation and interpretation, collecting our observations from public records, from interviews, from direct participation, and then spinning out our interpretations. Together, we cheerfully accepted the American folk wisdom which Samuel Stouffer once described as the conviction that anyone with "a little common sense and a few facts can come up at once with the correct answer on any subject." The difference was that we journalists put our interpretations in readable English while the social scientists couched theirs in jargon. A score of years has passed since Stouffer, a social scientist, complained that much social science consists of "a few data and a lot of 'interpretation' " which used the jargon to hide the absence of a connection between the two. "If the stuff is hard to read," he said, "it has a chance of being proclaimed as profound."
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> A lot has happened to social science in the intervening 20 years. Not so much has happened to journalism. Social science has experienced something like a revolution based largely on the development and widespread availability of the high-speed, electronic computer. Data too vast and unwieldy to quantify suddenly yielded to counting and measuring (Meyer 1979: 3).

Perhaps Meyer saw social science as providing journalists with a backdoor access to computers that

they might not otherwise have had at that time – although, if that was the case, he might not have done much for the cause by so obviously scorning the jargon of social science. Yet in the later pages of his original book, Meyer slid into employing that very same jargon himself. In another of several major back-flips, Meyer also turned away from the strictly quantitative approach he had advocated and was obviously overwhelmed by a tangle of his own construction of concrete statistical methods and ethereal qualitative theories. Consider, for example, the following extract from *Precision Journalism*:

> The new methods in the social sciences are, by and large, quantitative methods. They use numbers to count, measure and evaluate (Meyer 1979: 16).

Which, from a journalistic viewpoint, sounds fine. But the statement is in remarkable contrast to the anything but quantitative nonsense which leaps off some later pages in the same book. For example:

> Concepts are the building blocks of theory. What are concepts made of? Other concepts. Eventually, you shake things down to certain primary concepts which are **assumed**[1] rather than defined (Meyer 1979: 41).

> The idea is that concepts and theoretical models exist in everyday life and at mundane levels. They also exist at somewhat higher levels of thought which involve more difficult problems … . At different levels, sometimes lofty, sometimes mundane, theoretical models are used to try and understand how human social life functions.

> There is some debate among sociologists over just what constitutes theory (Meyer 1979: 42).

And, remembering Meyer's contempt for jargon:

> Models in sociology, political science, or social psychology tend to have a wider gap between the complexity of the real-world phenomenon and the simplicity of the model. This gap in no way invalidates the use of models. In fact, it makes them more necessary. The trick is to remember what a model is. **It is not the real world**.[2] You do not waste time agonising over whether the world is really like the model. But you do hypothesise the world is enough like it so that, for the purposes of improving your understanding of the real world, the real world behaves *as if* it were like the model (Meyer 1979: 48).

> … much of the methodological problems in social science research turn on the need to hold enough factors constant so that you can be sufficiently confident that X is being left free to do its thing to Y without a lot of unknown variables getting in the way (Meyer 1979: 62).

Meyer's confusing brew of jargon, statistical methods, nebulous models, and uncertain theories of "Xs" "left free to do" their "thing to Y" did not constitute a new methodology of journalism or even a branch of it. Yet those who feted precision journalism during the1990s seemed to have overlooked the glaring contradictions in Meyer's first book. They also appeared immune to the fact that Meyer had publicly recanted in his second book *The New Precision Journalism* in 1991. In the 1991 work his original attempt to link precision journalism with social science methodology had almost totally vanished. The void was filled with a fresh set of theories favouring the methodology of pure science. Explaining that

the term "precision journalism" was not really his at all, but that it had merely been "adopted" from the work of another researcher (Everette Dennis) because it had "the right ring" – by which one assumes he meant it sounded good – Meyer (1991: x) excused his methodological double-take with statements in his preface such as:

> … this book is an attempt at a new start … the overall approach has been made kinder, gentler, and, I hope, more logical … and if I didn't get it right this time, I'll try again (Meyer 1991: ix, x, xi).

And that:

> Scientific method offers a way to make happenings objectified, measured and named (Meyer 1991: 5).

Therefore:

> The new precision journalism is scientific journalism. … It means treating journalism as if it were a science, adopting scientific method, scientific objectivity, and scientific ideals to the entire process of mass communication. If that sounds absurdly pretentious, remember that science itself is restrained about its achievements and its possibilities and has its own sanctions against pretension (Meyer 1991: 6).

Pretension and methodology aside for a moment, it must also be understood that Meyer's original precision journalism could not have had anything to do with informing that very large part of CAR which involves using the Internet to access the World Wide Web. That is simply because the Web did not exist until 1990 and the first browser, Mosaic, was not released until 1992/93 (Griffiths 2001). Neither was Meyer the first to predict that personal computers would have a big impact on society, including journalism. In fairness, he had used computers to analyse statistics as early as 1967, which must have made him one of the first journalists to do so (DeFleur 1997: 74), but McLuhan, for example, had spoken repeatedly in the early 1960s about what he called "electric technology" and its role in the emergence of something he envisioned as "the global village" (McLuhan 1964: 343). Another, much less popularly acclaimed visionary, United States legal scholar Professor Arthur Miller, made equally pertinent predictions. In a book published in 1971, two years before Meyer's *Precision Journalism*, Miller had prophesied:

> When historians come to write the story of our time, they may well characterise it as the Age of Cybernetics. Surely, of the most significant aspects of this period is the technological revolution centred around a species of machine we call "the computer," a revolution that is dramatically increasing man's capacity to accumulate, manipulate, retrieve and transmit knowledge (Miller 1971, 15)

And:

> Although claiming no gift of clairvoyance, I too can foresee a time when today's brick-and-mortar library will be obsolete. Our primary source of knowledge will be electronic information nodes or communications centres located in our homes, schools and

offices that are connected to international, national, regional and local computer-based data networks. Through these systems will come the newspapers and magazines of the future, the literature and arts of the world, and the intellectual achievements of society. Much of the recorded experiences of mankind literally will be at our fingertips. The day will also come when children learn to operate a computer terminal even before they begin to write (Miller 1971, 16).

Meyer, then, did not stand alone. Neither was he as perceptive in his estimation of the power of computing or its effects on news production as some others. There were also obvious flaws in the methodologies of both his precision journalism and new precision journalism and he used jargon he claimed he despised. So why didn't alarm bells jangle among fellow academics and journalists? Why did highly respected and ground-breaking United States educators who published texts on CAR during the mid-to-late-1990s – appear to have turned deaf ears? Why were some of those key pioneers, people like Bruce Garrison, Brant Houston and Margaret DeFleur generous in their praise of Meyer's work? Perhaps they were too polite to notice that the guru was methodologically naked – that, as in the Hans Christian Andersen fable, the emperor was parading around in new clothes which were not only invisible but also transparently so! Maybe they were just too keen to find a methodology to hang CAR on. Perhaps they had played follow-the-leader and had failed to check the primary sources – Meyer's books. Whatever the case, Garrison, for example, credited Meyer with being the "father" of CAR (1998: 270). Houston referred to Meyer as a "first generation CAR journalist" and an "inspiration" (Houston 1996:xiii, 1999:x). Of the three, Margaret DeFleur possibly had the best understanding of Meyer. She built much of her PhD around his work and he was one of her doctoral dissertation examiners. Yet she, too, seemingly ignored the almost McLuhan-like gobbledegook in some of Meyer's writings. She also made it clear that she was aware of Meyer's methodological leap from social science to science (DeFleur 1994: 269 and DeFleur 1997: 200)

Yet, no matter what the reasoning, no matter how much it employs the latest whiz-bang technology as an aid to research and to transmit its products, journalism simply is not science. It never has been, never can be. Neither is it purely social science – nor for that matter rocket science! Overwhelmingly, though, and while Meyer cannot be blamed for the enthusiasm of others who promoted him as a guru and the founder of CAR, I believe Meyer's overriding mistake was in trying to impose inappropriate methodologies on what in essence were pretty ordinary statistical techniques which could, in the hands of some mathematically-oriented journalists, be used to inform investigative journalism. In doing so he made mountains out of molehills. That is not to say that Meyer might not have raised awareness of how computers could become research tools for investigative journalists. Neither is it to say that there are not aspects of social science and science which can inform and enrich journalism, just as elements of journalism can inform and enrich other disciplines. The point is that Meyer, like many other theoreticians since time immemorial, seems to have found a grain of truth and blown it out of proportion by over-generalising.

So if Meyer's role as the "father of CAR" is under challenge, who else might be eligible to claim the

title? Possibly no one. It might well be that the evolution of CAR was more the result of an unorganised movement by many individual computer-savvy journalists working in different parts of the world, rather than the efforts of any one individual. That said, Canadian journalist and educator Tom Koch could be seen to have had a more directly positive influence on CAR than Meyer. Koch appears to have been the first person to have actually written a book about CAR – something he called "computer-generated journalism". That was published in 1991, the same year as Meyer's *The New Precision Journalism*. Koch's book was titled *Journalism in the 21st Century: Online Information, Electronic Databases and the News*. In many ways it is still a significant work. It is also interesting that Koch's only reference to Meyer in passing and then only to report a somewhat contrary statement of Meyer's in light of Meyer's previously noted disdain for "old journalism" (Meyer 1979: 6) that computer-based journalistic research was really only "the same old journalism but with better tools" (Koch 1991: xv).

So, if one rejects the view that Meyer's precision journalism informs CAR, what are the alternatives? In short, much more appropriate, simple and intellectually rigorous methodologies can be found in the traditional disciplines of history and law. It is well beyond the scope of this paper to explain those approaches here. Suffice to say that the links between history, law, journalism and CAR and many of the specific methods of each seem virtually inseparable. That affinity, and an ambiguity which some-times makes it difficult to decide what is journalism, what is law and what is history, becomes evident in the following explanation by Startt and Sloan in which the words "journalism" or "law" could legitimately be transposed for the word "history":

> … history has been primarily a humanistic study, an exploration of what people have done. It is a form of inquiry into the past that asks questions about the things people have done and elicits answers based on evidence. In that process there is a story to be told and truth to be found (Startt and Sloan 1989: 2).

Identified methodological ties between journalism and law – especially investigative journalism, as deeper CAR is – date from at least the 1940s when United States journalist and academic Frederick Siebert made one of the earliest attempts to identify a methodology of journalism. He said that research into legal problems of communications fell within the ambit of "immediately related fields" of journalism, law and political science (Siebert (1949) in Nafziger & Wilkerson 1968: 34). The head of journalism at the University of Illinois from 1941 to 1957 and later director of journalism at Michigan State University, Seibert was concerned about the relationships between journalism and new technologies of his time including radio and television. In that context it is worth noting that just as we now take radio and television for granted, there really is nothing magical about computers or their application to journalism. Yes, CAR is a very powerful, often underestimated, tool but all it really does is add more and better ways of finding answers to the basic questions of all journalism – what Rudyard Kipling (1986: 291) called his "six honest serving men", *who, what, when, where, how* and *why*. It should also be understood that CAR employs exactly the same mix of methods as all journalism – a variable blend of qualitative and quantitative techniques and a mixed bag of primary and secondary sources. At its

simplest levels, Quinn (2001: 2) refers to "basic CAR" as "easy techniques such as using e-mail to arrange interviews or locate experts". At the other extreme Quinn (2001: 3) points to the fact that "deep CAR" or "investigative CAR" is complex. The latter approach is one of CAR's real strengths. It can involve highly detailed quantitative research and statistical analysis in computer spreadsheet programs such as Microsoft Excel and Access, with the processed results interpreted qualitatively. It can also involve complex searches of the World Wide Web for documents, data, information about individuals, companies and laws as well as for government-held data. Overwhelmingly, however, there really is no more or less demand for precision in the use of those CAR methods than there is in the demand for accuracy and objectivity generally inherent in all good journalism.

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