On the two topics of *newspaper article study (NAS) critical evaluation competence* and its *learning pathway*: a research note

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Abstract:

 In the newly conceived subject of newspaper article study as a secondary research method of Ho (2019a), a vital topic is the NAS critical evaluation competence learning pathway. Drawing on the literature of the NAS, newspaper research (NR), journalism, research methods and managerial intellectual learning (MIL), the writer makes additional theoretical clarification and contribution to this quite new and provisional academic venture of the newspaper article study (NAS) and, particularly, its associated topics of the NAS critical evaluation competence [topic 1] and the NAS critical evaluation competence learning pathway [topic 2]. In particular, this article examines an array of NAS quality assessment criteria from the journalism and research methods perspectives.

Key words: Journalism, newspaper article study (NAS), NAS quality assessment criteria, the NAS critical evaluation competence, the NAS critical evaluation competence learning pathway, newspaper research (NR), managerial intellectual learning (MIL).

INTRODUCTION

News article study (NAS) has been employed as a secondary research method in social sciences. It is a useful information source for "seeing how people viewed an event when it

happened" and "providing multiple points of view about and issue" and "permitting researchers to trace the historical development of subjects over time", etc. (The Ohio State University, n.d.). Its research method nature as such has been studied and further enhanced conceptually by Ho (2015; 2019a), notably in the context of the agile literature review approach (ALRA) for applied business research (Ho, 2019b; the Facebook group of *the agile literature review approach*). This article takes up two subthemes of Ho (2019a), which are on the NAS critical evaluation competence as well as the learning pathway to develop the NAS critical evaluation competence. To do so, it draws on ideas from the literature on newspaper research (NR), journalism, research methods and managerial intellectual learning (MIL) (re: the *Managerial intellectual learning* Facebook page). The goal of this article is to contribute conceptually to the topic of newspaper article study (NAS) as a secondary research method by dwelling on the twin topics the NAS critical evaluation competence (topic 1) and the NAS critical evaluation competence learning pathway (topic 2).

On the NAS quality assessment criteria from the controversial profession of journalism perspective

To begin with, the NAS quality assessment criteria, despite much similarity, are not totally the same as criteria of a good newspaper, e.g., as described by Karthik (n.d.), the perspective of which is anchored on "what constitutes a good newspaper business". Here, the key concern is on newspaper quality as an information source, as the journalism profession (a controversial topic itself) sees it. For that, the discussion covers the purpose of journalism, the profession of journalism, as well as the NAS quality assessment criteria. The **purpose of journalism** is by Powell (2018) depicted as "top-heavy with invocations of 'the public's right to know', 'telling truth to power' and all the rest of the All The President Men/ Lou Grant/ The Post idealism". According to the American Press

Institute (Americanpressinstitute.org, 2019), the purpose of journalism is "to provide citizens with the information they need to make the best possible decisions about the lives, their communities, the societies, and their governments". To achieve, often, journalists participate in field research (Carter, Jr., 1956). More fundamentally, on the topic of **journalism as a profession**, there has been "an ongoing debate about whether journalism is a craft or a be considered as a profession" (Witschge and Nygren, 2009) In particular, Godkin (2008) reminds us that "In the 1920s American philosophers Walter Lippmann and John Dewey engaged in an ongoing debate about the role of journalists. The debate never really ended. What they both agreed was that journalists played a vital role in a democratic society. What they disagreed was how that role should be played". Regarding the topic of **objectivity**, it also mentions that "the field should make its cornerstone the study of evidence and verification" and "just because news is complex and slippery, good reporting requires the exercise of the highest scientific virtues" (Americanpressinstitute.org, 2019). Objectivity has also been conceived as "when covering hard news, reporters don't convey their own feelings, biases or prejudices in their stories.... by writing stories using language that is neutral and [who] avoids characterizing people or institutions in ways good or bad" (Rogers, 2018). Next, regarding the topic of **bias**, it is defined as "an inclination of temperament or outlook; especially: a personal and sometimes unreasoned judgment" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary as cited in the LibGuides (n.d.).). The American press institute (2019) reminds us that "draining a story of all bias can drain its humanity, its lifeblood.... A bias, moreover, can be the foundation for investigative journalism. It may prompt the news organization to right a wrong and take up an unpopular cause". The last assessment criteria covered in this article, other than objectivity and bias is **fairness** in journalism. This can be understood as "exploring all sides of an issue and

reporting the findings accurately. Members of the public should never be used to exaggerate the importance of a story" (Brewer, 2015). Similar, Enticott (2016) maintains that "Fairness in a journalist context is about reporting the truth accurately, exploring every angle and view available".

A vital source of ideas on journalism and, more generally, newspaper research (NR) mainly comes from the academic journal of *Newspaper Research Journal*. A number of these ideas are gathered and presented in *appendix 1* in the table of "Some main points related to the Journalism and Newspaper Research (NR) field via a brief literature review by the writer". They are grouped into the four related categories of (i) "related to the quality of newspaper contents), (ii) "related to newspaper readers", (iii) "related to the newspaper organizations and their journalists, and (iv) "related to the political, economic, social and technological trends" (Ho, 2019a). With these diverse and controversial journalism and NR viewpoints in mind, it can be argued that the profession of journalism a debatable theme itself, tends to favour the research philosophy[1] of positivism while, at the same time, recognizing the relevance of interpretivism and the social conflict theory paradigm in sociology. It also has an array of quality assessment criteria, e.g., objectivity, bias [treatment] and fairness. This understanding on these assessment criteria goes some way to help a researcher to assess newspaper articles' quality for secondary research. However, to gain a more in-depth understanding of the quality assessment criteria of NAS as a secondary research method[2] per se, it is vital to take a look at the quality assessment criteria of NAS with reference to its underlying yet multiple research method perspectives.

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[1] On the topic of research philosophies, readers are referred to Saunders *et al.*, (2016).
[2] Some research methods sources consider newspaper articles as primary data, which is not the position adopted in this article. On this Amy-Lepore (n.a.) offers a concise clarification, stressing consideration of "the purpose of the [newspaper] article and how it was written".

On the quality assessment criteria of newspaper articles from the research methods perspective

Newspaper articles is well recognized as a less reliable source of information as compared with the academic source for research purpose (University of Hull, n.d.). Newspaper articles can be inaccurate because "they are often written with a tight deadline, and in the rush to go to press" (The Ohio State University, n.d.). The discussion here is, however, on a different topic, namely, on the NAS quality assessment criteria per se for secondary research purpose. This is different from the previous section, which is from the journalism profession perspective. Roughly, the quantitative research methods are associated to the objective, positivistic research philosophy while the qualitative research methods are affiliated to the subjective, interpretive research philosophy. In this respect, we can draw on the discussion in the business management research methods literature on research method quality assessment criteria to shed light on the quality assessment criteria of NAS as research method. To start with, for Bryman *et al.* (2008), their survey indicates that the main assessment criteria for quantitative research are validity and reliability, with slighter greater uncertainty on replicability and generalisability. As to qualitative research, Bryman and Bell (2011: Chapter 16), citing Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Licoln (1994), identifies two broad assessment criteria of qualitative research, i.e., trustworthiness and authenticity. In turn, these two broad assessment criteria on qualitative research comprise sub-criteria:

(i) for *trustworthiness*: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability and,

(ii) for *authenticity*: fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity and tactical authenticity

There are thus different sets of quality assessment criteria to evaluate NAS as a research method, depending on what

research philosoph(ies) the NAS researcher anchors the NAS on for its application in a specific research project. Such discussion touches on the multi-perspective, systems-based (MPSB) research concepts of perspective anchoring and perspective switching[3]. To newspaper journalists, the findings are based on their own primary (e.g., own field research (Carter, Jr, 1956).) and secondary data while, to the researchers using newspaper articles for research purpose (e.g., content analysis (Jacobson *et al*., 2012; Zhu and Wang, 2018) and discourse analysis (Teo, 2000; Izadi and Saghaye-Biria, 2007), these newspaper articles are secondary data. The nature of the research data, being primary or secondary, in turn, affects the research finding quality, e.g., in terms of data accuracy and relevance. The writer now moves on to examine the two topics of NAS critical evaluation competence [topic 1] and its learning pathway [topic 2] in the next section.
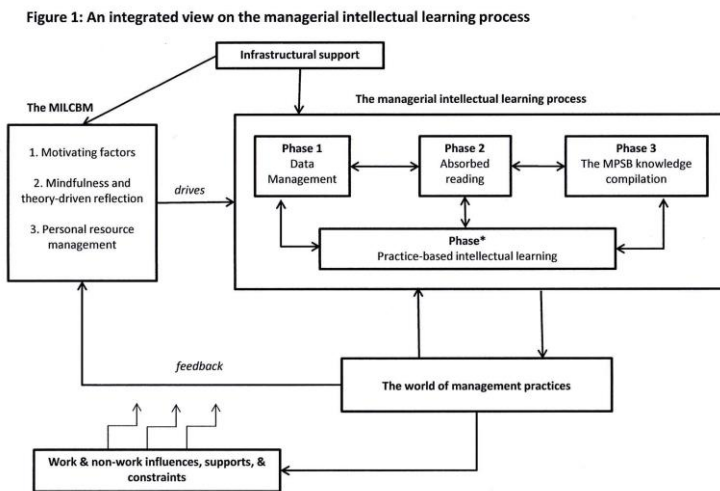
The nature of NAS critical evaluation competence and its learning pathway

For Ho (2019a), the NAS *critical evaluation competence* (topic 1 of this article) is defined as the intellectual ability to judge with social and methodological awareness the (i) nature, (ii) source(s) of origin, (iii) range of underlying worldviews, (iv) analytical strengths and weaknesses, (v) idea restrictiveness (including cognitive blind spots and hidden agendas) of a reported information and associated viewpoints, and (vi) the range of stakeholders' reactions to newspaper articles. The main learning pathway for a researcher[4] to build the NAS critical evaluation competence is to study the literature of journalism, online information services, discourse analysis and research methods, among others (Ho, 2015; 2019a). Beyond, to promote

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[3] The topics of *perspective anchoring* and *perspective switching* have been examined in the multi-perspective, systems-based (MPSB) research of this writer (re: the m*ulti-perspective, systems-based research* Facebook group).

[4] The main interest of the writer in this article is on NAS for applied business research, not on the broader concern of social sciences per se.

critical and holistic evaluation competence, the writer recommends to anchor the NAS critical evaluation competence learning pathway (topic 2 of this article) on to the managerial intellectual learning (MIL) approach, which is critical systems thinking[5]-based (re: the Facebook page of *Managerial intellectual learning*). Such a learning pathway, based on MIL, involves a number of linked processual components (Ho, 2014), as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: An integrated view on the managerial intellectual learning process

Based on the MIL integrated view, the NAS critical evaluation competence is an ingredient component of the encompassing managerial intellectual learning capability-building mechanism (MILCBM). The MILCBM learning process itself comprises the MILCBM, the managerial intellectual learning process, as well as the various infrastructural support and constraints. More specifically, the academic literature of newspaper research (NR) and journalism offer vital academic ideas (as input) for (i) the multi-perspective, systems-based (MPSB) knowledge

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[5] For further information critical systems thinking, readers are referred to Jackson (2003).

compilation[6] and (ii) the immediate [e.g., for specific problem-solving and applied business research projects] as well as long-term managerial intellectual learning [i.e., for building up MIL capability]. On the whole, the nature this NAS critical evaluation competence learning pathway should not be conceived as an isolated intellectual learning journey but better be grasped more holistically from the managerial intellectual learning (MIL) perspective. To do so is to master creative holism competence for the learner.

Concluding remarks

It is acknowledged from the literature review on journalism and newspaper research that these topics themselves are rather controversial. In this article, as research methods and intellectual learning topics, the NAS critical evaluation competence (topic 1) is considered as mainly a topic in research method and newspaper article study (NAS) while that of the NAS critical evaluation competence learning pathway (topic 2) is more associated to the subject of managerial intellectual learning (MIL). The review remains brief here, though it has pointed to other academic sources, notably on MIL and the MPSB research, for more in-depth examination of the two topics. On the whole, the two NAS topics are quite new and provisional at this early intellectual venture stage. Thus, much more academic efforts need to be made to further develop these two NAS topics conceptually.

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[6] The notion of the *MPSB knowledge compilation* is a key concept in the *MPSB research*.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Some main points related to the journalism and newspaper research (NR) field via a brief literature review by the writer

Categories of points in the journalism and NR field	Academic viewpoints and findings gathered mainly from the journalism and NR literature review by the writer
Category 1: related to the quality of newspaper contents	**Point 1.1**: "News quality has been measured in many ways. One way to measure news quality is in terms of what editors and readers say are important attributes; however, the order of those attributes can vary from market to market" (Li and Thorson, 2015). **Point 1.2:** "What is written in newspaper articles is highly dependent on the specific purposes of press organs, the institutionalised routines of the media, the formats of single articles, newspaper sections and newspapers. Furthermore, the institutional environment of the media has an influence: its political allegiances, institutional politics, political cycles, and economic pressures .... The form and the place of events also influence what is reported, e.g., scandals and protests have a high newsworthiness regardless of the actors involved and events in central areas are more likely to be covered than those in the periphery ... The strong gatekeeping to newspapers affects the principal quality of newspaper articles as a data type for social science research" (Baumgarten and Grauel, 2009). **Point 1.3:** "The framing of media coverage also can affect public understanding, especially understanding of topics that are not part of people's daily lives. Framing is the process through which the media selects certain aspects of an issue or event to emphasize in a piece ...... A frame, sometimes referred to as a schema, is defined as "the central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning" for an event or issue .... By emphasizing different aspects of an issue, media coverage may affect public interpretation of the issue. For example, presenting a story from an economic, moral, or conflict perspective may lead the public give extra salience to these aspects of the issue and less salience to other aspects ...." (Jacobson *et al.*, 2012).

	Point 1.4: "Opinion discourses in newspapers in China can be roughly categorized as 'editorials', 'commentaries' and 'letters to the editor'. Similar to western countries, editorials usually represent the 'official' voice of a media outlet (quite often the Party's voice in China) on matters of public importance, while commentaries usually represent the expressed opinion of a single individual associated with an affiliate news outlet, or an accredited expert outside the media industry, who nevertheless possesses specialized, 'insider' status, for example, an academic researcher or former government officer. Letters to the editor, as the name suggests, are selected letters written by readers to discuss some issues of public interest. In the West, there is usually a clear boundary between hard news and commentaries. However, in China, besides the clear-cut hard news and commentaries, there is also a hybrid form known as comprehensive news recast (xinwen zongshu). Differing from ordinary news reports, comprehensive news recasts (xinwen zongshu) in China usually include explicit opinion elements that cannot be found in 'hard' news reports" (Wang, 2008).
Category 2: related to newspaper readers	**Point 2.1:** "Findings suggest that, cross-sectionally, individuals who spend more time using media have stronger agreement on important public issues within the social groups to which they belong than do those who spend less time using media" (Du and Wong, 2013). **Point 2.2:** "The agenda-melding hypothesis postulates that mass media provide an agenda and people join a group, although not formally formed, by adopting the mass agenda" (Du and Wong, 2013). **Point 2.3:** "During their teenage years, millennials did not consume news the way Baby Boomers (those born from 1946 through 1964) or Generation Xers (those born from 1965 through 1980) did as teenagers. Millennials did not depend on news or think being informed about current events was important" (Cannon and Mackay, 2017). **Point 2.4:** "If citizens were not informed, unscrupulous officeholders might be able to mislead them. Two assumptions of civic-duty research have been that citizens with a strong sense of civic duty to keep informed (1) would seek information from news media about issues facing government and (2) would be more

	likely to vote than were those who do not accept such a duty" (Cannon and Mackay, 2017).
Category 3: related to the newspaper organizations and their journalists	**Point 3.1:** "News organizations have a social responsibility to act in the public's interest, which includes serving as a common carrier of public discussion. This normative role means that journalists will act as a "conversational partner" and engage the audience rather than talking at them. Online commenting has taken on a significant role in journalism over the past decade and is frequently used as a space for public opinion" (Wolfgang, 2018).
	Point 3.2: "A small number of elite organizations instead of ordinary citizens, as M. Hindman pointed out, dominate the landscape of news and political information sources" (Lee and Fujioka, 2017).
	Point 3.3: ""Provoked by an absurdly trivial dispute, I have decided to stop writing for the South China Morning Post (SCMP) after years as a contributor. In my heart, though I know that this decision should have been taken for more fundamental reasons back in February. It was then that the Post became a willing participant in a grotesque propaganda ploy to discredit the detained bookseller Gui Minhai, who was kidnapped and held because of his activities selling books in Hong Kong that embarrassed the Chinese leadership" (Vines, 2018).
	Point 3.4: "A Hong Kong journalist has quit in a controversy over disputed remarks that Jack Ma, founder of Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba Group, is reported to have made in support of Beijing's violent crackdown on Tiananmen Square protesters in 1989. The controversy comes ahead of the anticipated listing of Alibaba, expected to value the firm at $60-$100 billion, which in turn has put a critical spotlight on Ma, the wider Chinese Internet industry and its approach to freedom of speech. Ma denies he made such an assertion siding with the government and the journalist, too, has said her report for the South China Morning Post this month was changed in editing, and she has apologized to Ma. The daily, though, is standing behind the story" (Sweeny, 2013).
	Point 3.5: "In 2015, Chinese ecommerce giant Alibaba announced that it would purchase the South China Morning Post, often called Hong Kong's English-

	language paper of record. The deal brought a huge infusion of cash to the venerable newspaper, but also many questions about whether the new owners would maintain the SCMP's editorial independence from Beijing" (Goldkorn, 2018).
	Point 3.6: "Newspapers are quality papers with high ambitions. It often happens that the newspapermen's ambitions extend beyond journalism to the creative, literary sphere as well. This is because the journalists have many and wide contacts with other people in the creative arts and the professions, such as scientists, academics, artists, writers, engineers, physicians, etc. The journalists want to raise their prestige to the level of those professions, and therefore try to make their work look as creative as possible. They specialise in various subjects, and try to secure a stable position not only in their own world of the press, but also in the particular environment - artistic, legal, .political, or theatrical, etc. - in which they are professionally interested" (Matejko, 1967).
	Point 3.7: "To report authentic news items as well as complete happenings in the society, the staff reporters have to face many obstacles which may cause them either psychological or physical or both kinds of stress. But they rarely get themselves eschewed away from these different types of stresses/hassles, as most of them are inherent part of their profession. This is not all: many a times, these reporters while investigating particular events or handling sensitive stories also get threatening calls from the persons or the groups who might get affected by the reports" (Singh and Dhillon, 2003).
	Point 3.8: "News reporting is an exercise in following leads to develop stories, find the best sources and fill the gaps and unknowns in story assignments. Along the way, it is likely the journalist will come across information and new angles they did not expect. .... This experience is an example of what is in human information behavior (HIB), a research field within library and information science, known as information encountering" (Bird-Meyer and Erdelez, 2018).
Category 4: related to the political, economic, social and technological trends	**Point 4.1:** "While television remains a major news source for all demographic groups, millennials are three-to-four times more likely than adults 60 and older to discover news online and to see it on mobile

devices" (Cannon and Mackay, 2017).

Point 4.2: "Digital technologies have empowered citizens to express themselves through multiple online platforms and share opinions with a large auditorium. As a result of the widespread interactive tools available on the Internet, audiences nowadays engage in the creation and dissemination of information. New technologies have enabled them to produce blogs, build websites, publish stories and share posts on social media" (Pantic, 2018).

Point 4.3: "Studies on gatekeeping theory suggest that in a traditional, top-down media environment, multiple gatekeeping forces limit the range of information available to the public. However, the media landscape has undergone significant changes and is now defined by active audiences who participate in storytelling. As a result of growing usage of the Web 2.0 platform, alternative sources emerge online, supplying the public with information they need and triggering the gate removal process in the media" (Pantic, 2018).

Point 4.4: "... research has shown that a higher level of news consumption is associated with a greater level of political participation. Also, scholars have examined which types of news sources may contribute to political knowledge. Hollander reported that many earlier studies found that exposure to newspapers predicted a higher level of political participation than does exposure to television; however, more recent ones provided conflicting results" (Lee and Fujioka, 2017).

Point 4.5: "Ongoing economic uncertainty, the diffusion of technologies once restricted to journalists, a realignment of the boundaries between journalists and audiences, the proliferation of a multitude of new media actors and the increasing blurring of boundaries between news and opinion mean the contemporary media environment is one where the only certainty seems to be the constancy of change" (Tandoc Jr. and Thomas, 2017).

Point 4.6: "Online commenting on news stories is ubiquitous across news media and is considered essential for interaction between news media and their online audiences. Despite the popularity of online commenting, many journalism professionals and

	Internet users are troubled by their anonymous nature. Many think that the digital disguise offers a shield for commenters to launch offensive personal attacks, which are irrelevant to story content and often contain insensitive, even vulgar, wording. Even in cases when commenters chose to identify themselves, users can never be sure about the true identity of the commenter, because commenters often use false names and pseudonyms" (Pjesivac *et al.*, 2018). **Point 4.7:** "Media producers are currently experiencing the greatest changes to their field since the days of the penny press' introduction. One factor causing this upheaval of decadesold norms: technological change. It is not only important to understand how journalists use technology, but also how technology allows the audience an influence on news construction processes.... Scholars have defined digital journalism as news produced by news workers using digital tools such as publishing software and social networking sites. Digital journalism is news produced for a digital environment. Technology has become a mainstay and necessity in newsrooms today. Others have defined technology associated with digital journalism as anything computer-based that has affected journalistic practices and routines" (Ferrucci, 2017).

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