

# I-P<>LHYS

INVESTIGATING POLARIZATION IN HYBRID MEDIA SYSTEMS

## I-POLHYS Talks

### Interview with Mary Lynn Young University of British Columbia

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#### Transcription of the full interview

The video-interview is available at [www.ipolhys.it](http://www.ipolhys.it) (“Talks” section)

The interview was carried out on June 22, 2023

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## Interview with Mary Lynn Young

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### Transcription

#### Question 1

*The phenomenon of political polarization is most frequently discussed with reference to party politics, citizens’ attitudes and behavior and political communication. How would you define political polarization in the context of journalism?*

00:00:11

Mary Lynn Young: I think one of the useful ways of looking at polarization in journalism is through professor Splendore’s study. So, he’s talking about a specific, what he’s terming media polarization. And, basically, that in his work, Italian political journalists understand the nature of their political system through their own lens, that is, media systems and media habits that support their own kind of polarization, in the sense. And I think it’s relevant to other contexts and countries as well.

#### Question 2

*The concept of “journalism culture(s)” has become one of the cornerstones in the comparative approach to the study of journalism. Do you believe that adopting the prism of “culture” could assist also in better understanding how journalism as a system of norms and values deals with the issue of political polarization?”*

00:01:05

Mary Lynn Young: You know, I definitely think culture is a useful term and a useful lens to approach questions about the role of media, and society, and how media do their job. James Carey talks a lot about media as culture. For Carey, it’s a special kind of public conversation within culture and a book that Candis Callison and I recently did call “Reckoning”<sup>i</sup> actually asserts that Carey’s lens and a cultural lens is useful to understand media power separate from information because, you know, as Carey talks about, journalists are not only providing information, and often scholars and publics have seen media through the lens of democracy, right, media required to support democracy. But in Carey’s approach and the approach that we build on in our book, and extend, you know, media are also about, or journalism is all about creating enemies and allies. Right? So, it is sort of creating, supporting cultural understandings of community and self through representation and content, and you know, reifying or reinforcing some and others, and not so much others.

#### Question 3

*And polarization could be related in some way to the amplification or intensification of “genuine differences” characterizing society. How would you describe the relationship of professional journalism to difference, and what are the implications when it comes to the role that journalism can play in the context of contemporary democracy?*

00:02:39

Mary Lynn Young: Well, if you look so, I you know, I did a presentation a few years ago at a conference, and I talked about how journalism basically has a hard time dealing with genuine difference. I mean, there's a lot of differences in society now, we live in different countries, you know, there's obviously a lot of difference in terms of cultural, individual, identity level. And so, media, you know, when you look at journalism habits, you know, a useful example to see is the headline rule that you know, or sort of the lead rule, that you can't lead in with "results are mixed", or it's not appropriate. You've got to pick a side. You've got to pick a position. And Professor Splendore's results also show these habits in Italy. And so, in picking a side, you know, journalists, instead of basically reinforcing, or, you know, recognizing the fact that really a lot of life is about the "results are mixed", right? It's complicated. There's not necessarily one side or the other. Journalism has forced journalists to choose one perspective or one approach over another, and that already starts to amplify, or, you know, exaggerate is probably too strong of a word, but it starts to move from the fact that there's difference, and how do we deal with it to, you know, you've got to have a position on that difference. And that's where Carey comes in, and then our book comes in. That really, journalism is about social ordering to a large degree, and in identifying enemies and allies, and in dealing with difference in that way it really supports an amplification at the outset of, you know, a charge to that difference which is problematic, particularly when we're talking about polarization where really people hold very different values potentially or very different beliefs about the same issue. So, journalism is already kind of in it, contributing to cultural understanding in these ways.

#### Question 4

*Aside of your academic activity, you are the co-founder and a board member of The Conversation Canada, a national non-profit journalism organization, and affiliate of The Conversation global network. Could you tell us something on this initiative, its organization, and goals?*

00:05:22

Mary Lynn Young: Of course. So, The Conversation Canada it's part of a global network. And so, my colleague, Alfred Hermida, and I, basically, you know, 7 years ago, started to think that Canada would be an effective site for, I mean, a part of the network, for a Canadian Conversation. Because, when you look at the Canadian media context, you know, there's a lot of professional journalism. It's largely commercial, aside from a public broadcaster and it has a lot of the structural impediments that other media systems have, in terms of struggling to have the finances and knowledge at times to, you know, contribute quality information to public discourse. I mean, it does a good job in some senses and not in others, and so The Conversation as a model is intended to provide scholarly research as journalism into the public realm, and, in that way, it's intended to support it in an evergreen sense at times, right? It sort of addresses a current and contemporary concerns, but also in a way that addresses long-standing questions. One of the most popular, kind of, long-standing pieces in The Conversation Canada has been, you know, "What is neoliberalism?". So, in a way, it's also supporting people to really understand a bit more deeply about some of the issues. So, yeah, so we thought that it would be useful in an information sense in terms of providing quality information from scholars. And also, you know, the research on Canadian newsrooms is that users have been largely white. It goes back to late 1990s, a bunch of scholars started to look at the demographics of newsroom and really find, you know, elements of white supremacy in the sense that, you know, these structures kept newsrooms largely white. And that's obviously problematic. And so, The Conversation Canada model by having scholars as journalists. And it's not just, you know, it's not just demographics, it's also positions. In political science, there's a term called the Overton Window, and this is from Stefan Schultz, who's a Der Spiegel journalist. And so really, there's a kind of push to keep ideas and perspectives in a narrow window. So, Canada, you know,

has those similar impulses in its media system. So, The Conversation Canada, basically, the newsroom becomes all scholars. It's 90+ institutions. And so, the demographics are wider than a newsroom. The political and ideological perspectives are wider than a newsroom, and there are also critical studies perspectives, critical indigenous studies, critical race studies, approaches that you wouldn't see in mainstream journalism. And so that's why we launched The Conversation to try to extend the newsroom and extend what is journalism in Canada. So, it's been operating for 5 years. I was on the board for the first 5 years, and, you know, it's doing really well and, in terms of the polarization, The Conversation what it does usefully - and this is from some work by Stefan Schultz - in terms of, it basically supports synthesis instead of having the, you know, two sides, like two sides is very simple, but journalism can - and I don't want to say always like, I mean, I don't want to overclaim - journalism can because of constraints kind of narrow to a few sides of an issue and leave the perspective that, you know, that's where the issue stands, whereas The Conversation Canada has the opportunity to - provided the scholars, provided the conditions - to provide some synthesis which is useful, right? And it allows people to say: "Okay, well, these are multiple perspectives." And this is where the evidence lies to support one potentially over the other, and to show the gaps in approaches. So yeah, it was a, it's intended to be a generative contribution to the system. It's not for profit, any, and all journalism organizations can pick it up if they use the article in its entirety. So yeah, that was why we did it. And I don't have audience data on this, this is just in terms of the content.

## Question 5

*What are the best methodological approaches to address and understand polarization in the context of journalism studies?*

00:10:14

Mary Lynn Young: Well, I think Professor Splendore is really kind of starting a conversation that's needed, right? He's looked at political journalists in Italy. And so, I think that's one obviously useful methodology is to interview journalists about, you know, as he did, you know, what they think is polarization, and then what they're doing about it or not doing about it. In a country level context, I could see that being replicated globally in a number of different conditions, and then having some comparative data. I think, obviously, it would also be useful to have some audience data, you know, [it would] be really interesting to have some comparative data internationally, you know, what do some countries media systems, you know? How does their content, or how does some different, like The Conversation Canada compared to another media outlet that's maybe more conventional journalism, how do various publics understand issues given the formats and framing?

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<sup>i</sup> Callison, C., & Young, M. L. (2019). *Reckoning: Journalism's limits and possibilities*. Oxford University Press.