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Metajournalistic Discourse as a Stabilizer Within The Journalistic Field: Journalistic Practice in The Covid-19 Pandemic

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Metajournalistic discourse as a stabilizer within the journalistic field:

Journalistic practice in the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 Pandemic created a two-fold challenge for journalists: first, the task of gathering and distributing information vital to the responses of the public and second, the challenge of mitigating the complexities of the journalism field. The purpose of this study is to connect the theoretical frameworks of metajournalistic discourse and field theory, using the touch point of journalistic practice. Prior research has postulated that metajournalistic discourse operates as a stabilizing force in the journalistic field. Using the timely test of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study seeks to explore the discursive construction of journalistic practice during a pandemic through the lens of both metajournalism and field through metadiscourse (n=141) gathered from the United States, United Kingdom, and Austria. Therefore, the study examines how international journalists have discursively constructed their practice given a unique human event that has implications that reflect on the institutional forces that shape media performance within the field. This study will argue that metajournalistic discourse stabilizes the field by affirming the tools western journalists use in order to make sense of a crisis like COVID-19, and by providing a discursive avenue between the ideals of the journalistic field—in the *journalistic doxa*—and the habits of the field—as represented by *journalistic habitus*.

Keywords:

Journalism, pandemic, field theory, coronavirus, crisis communication, COVID-19, metajournalistic discourse

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In the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, *The Nation* published a reflection on pandemic news reporting, which argued that “the coronavirus pandemic is a tragic reminder of just how essential fact-based, outspoken journalism is, especially in times of crisis” (Hertsgaard & Pope, 2020). The authors go on to imply that journalists might do well to stop reporting the claims of then-U.S. President Donald Trump; they undertook a sort of power maintenance (Gutsche, 2018), given that Trump’s claims both downplay the seriousness of the epidemic and develop fake controversies that aim to discredit science and medical experts. By illuminating scientific studies as well as what medical experts say, rather than focusing on misinformation and “fake controversies,” the journalist would provide information that would equip the broader community to avoid irresponsible behaviors that could spread the disease—and in essence slow the spread of it (Hertsgaard & Pope, 2020).

This required vigilance and attention on the part of journalists. Apoorva Mandavilli, a reporter on science and global health for *The New York Times*, said she and her colleagues had to process so much information while also trying to gauge the speculative nature of the pandemic and consult the updated medical research that was increasing hourly (Makari, 2021).

In the Q and A, Mandavilli said:

As a science writer you learn to become very wary of any scientist who says they have all the answers, especially in a situation like this. So, my go-to sources are all people who are not just good at knowing what they know, but also very honest and candid and careful about saying what they don’t know—what the field as a whole doesn’t know (Makari, 2021).

Mandavilli's advantage? She is a science reporting specialist, used to covering the nuanced nature of science. The majority of journalists have had little, if any, reporting on the nature of science and medicine before the all-encompassing nature of COVID-19 and that made navigation of pandemic information even more challenging. Worth noting is that these reporting expectations are placed upon journalists already in a vulnerable economic situation (Finneman & Thomas, 2021; Perreault & Perreault, 2021) as a result of financial instability in the field. Mandavilli's story was shared through metajournalism—the journalism about journalism reflected often in the trade press and editorials—which serves as a means for journalists to discursively discuss issues within the field (Carlson, 2015).

Hence, this study aims to connect the theoretical frameworks of metajournalistic discourse and field theory, using the touch point of journalistic practice. Prior research (Carlson & Usher, 2016) has postulated that metajournalistic discourse operates as a stabilizing force in the journalistic field—but how so? Using the timely test of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study seeks to explore the discursive construction of journalistic practice during a pandemic through the lens of both metajournalism and field. While the COVID-19 case is unique in both its prominence and its effect internationally, many journalists also noted the obvious Anthropocene connections between the coronavirus crisis and the climate crisis. Hence, while this study examines how journalists have discursively constructed their practice given a unique human event, it has implications that reflect on the institutional forces that shape media performance within the field (Pinto, 2008). This is done through a discourse analysis of metajournalism (n=141) collected from February to November 2020 from the journalism trade press using a custom searchable database, the Discourses of Journalism Database, for data

from the U.S., the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism for the U.K., and *Der Österreichische Journalist, Horizont, Extradienst* and *Medianet* for Austria. This study will argue that the field is stabilized by the sort of experiential *norming* that occurs in metajournalistic discourse—a norming of experiences, practical behaviors, and perspectives on those experiences and behaviors—which allow a largely fragmented, uneven field to operate in a unified manner.

Field Theory

This study operationalizes Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory to understand how metajournalistic discourse operates as a stabilizing agent within the journalistic field. In Bourdieu’s framework, the *field* operates as the central manner to understand the interactions between individuals and social phenomena (Bourdieu, 2005). In general, the theory reflects an interest in understanding the “reproduction of fields of intellectual or economic striving” (Lizardo, 2004, p. 377) and journalism in this manner reflects the reproduction of intelligence. The theory helps to make sense of the elements interacting within the field and the interactions between fields (Benson, 2004). Dominant agents within fields tend to fight for maintaining the status quo, in the preservation of their space (Bourdieu, 1998) and journalism is no different, with prior research illustrating how journalists have fought to preserve traditional news values and practice—the field’s *doxa* (Vos, Craft & Ashley, 2012, p. 852).

According to Bourdieu (1977), the *doxa* both informs and is informed by the *habitus*—the “strategy generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations” (p. 77). This *habitus* helps journalists navigate such situations as integrating new

technologies into their newsroom practice (Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020; Perreault & Stanfield, 2018) or how to ideally manage the coverage of dangerous actors (Perreault, Johnson & Klein, 2020). The habitus can be defined as the accumulated experience in a field that helps actors understand the rules of the game—Bourdieu (1977) uses an analogy of a baseball player who knows when to swing at a fastball with little conscious thought. The ingrained nature of the *habitus* is reflected in that actors mistake behaviors as natural, when they actually have been culturally shaped. Thus, journalists anticipate certain forms of journalistic coverage in such a manner which enables them to report on them with little conscious thought.

From a field theory perspective, what actors are aiming for in the field is *symbolic capital* within journalism, the resources within the journalistic field. Sterne (2003) describes *symbolic capital* as the “agency and prestige” within a field and typically this comprises three forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social (Benson & Neveau, 2005). *Economic capital* refers to the economic resources available within the field (Benson, 2004). Journalists might seek such resources in order to do work toward *cultural capital*--indicated often by awards--or *social capital*, often indicated by the size of an actor’s social network (Siapera & Spyridou, 2012). *Economic capital*, by contrast, is often assessed through circulation rates, advertising revenue, and audience size in journalism (Benson, 2004; Benson & Neveu, 2005). All of this together indicates the degree to which these forms of capital are interconnected and complement one another. Through this lens, it then makes sense that the most economically rich newsrooms would also be those often most capable of obtaining cultural and social capital. That said, journalists have demonstrated a past willingness to part with economic capital if it would allow them to obtain greater cultural capital (Vos, 2019).

COVID-19 then would have obvious implications on the journalistic field, given the diminished economic capital (Perreault & Perreault, 2021). As Lewis (2020) postulated in his commentary on the pandemic, COVID-19 has not added new issues for journalists as much as it compounded and amplified existing issues within the field. As a field, journalism needs to grapple with the “complexity of covering crisis and trauma while also experiencing it yourself” (Lewis, 2020, p. 685).

Metajournalistic Discourse

Metajournalistic discourse, simply put, primarily involves journalists talking about their field, and at stake is that the “stories journalists tell themselves have the potential to shape the field in powerful ways” (Moon, 2021, p. 1). Hence, this discourse operates as a “site in which actors publicly engage in processes of establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism’s legitimacy” (Carlson, 2016, p. 350). Metajournalistic discourse, as the field’s institutional conversation, provides a mechanism for the field to diagnose problems (Johnson, Bent & Dade, 2020), assess transgressive actors (Kananovich & Perreault, 2021), and delineate the boundaries of the field (Perreault & Vos, 2020; Vos & Perreault, 2020). Some of this discourse is outward-facing--reflecting journalists’ awareness of the interest of those outside the field--but primarily, this discourse tends to be inward-facing, aimed at discussion primarily among other journalists (Vos, 2016).

Primarily, the institutional aim of such discourse is to assert professionalism, normalize practices and improve legitimacy in journalistic practice (Carlson & Lewis, 2015). Such discourse allows journalists to police their field informally--through trade publications such as *Columbia*

Journalism Review in the United States, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in the United Kingdom, and *Österreichische Journalist* in Austria—and formally through public statements, amicus briefs, and letters to the editor (Johnson et al., 2020). Through labelling activities and actors as either meeting or not meeting institutional expectations, journalists conduct power maintenance on strong institutions and individuals. This policing fills an institutional gap in that similar powerful institutions—law, medicine—operate with licensing and accrediting standards for practitioners. However, self-policing fills in the necessary institutional gap, given that the accrediting standards represented in the fields of law and medicine run counter to ideals of journalistic autonomy.

In times of crisis, journalism often fails to assert itself as central to the crisis situation and hence, often misses opportunities to consider alternative approaches (Zelizer, 2015). Any crisis presents a feeling of uncertainty, second-guessing, and the urge to change the outcome—even as a challenge grows larger and becomes overwhelming (Bauman & Bordoni, 2014). Some editorial policies become more lenient in a crisis and allow for conversations that would not normally occur, reflecting journalism’s layers of transformation in history (Carlson, 2016; Schudson, 1982; Perreault et al., 2020). Such crises often have the result of drawing the veil back on “a blurry line between editorial values and commercial interests, and media businesses” (Pinto, 2008, p. 768) given that journalists are operating in times of “high uncertainty and instability” (p. 769). However, in the pandemic, there is no benefit of hindsight given that there is no precedent for the COVID-19 environment. Hence, studying metajournalism on COVID 19 offers insight into how journalists would be making sense of a singular event. Indeed, research on metajournalism on COVID-19 demonstrated that

“journalists discursively placed themselves in a vulnerable position as a result of the economic consequences of market pressure, given that many were experiencing the effects of the pandemic in their own communities, families, and careers” (Perreault & Perreault, 2021, p. 11).

The Case of COVID-19

COVID-19 is an unprecedented circumstance for journalists in that it placed them in a situation unlike any other crisis or disaster, but with important similarities. Often in a crisis or disaster, journalists will interpret information provided by official sources and share it with the public in a way that helps the public to mitigate risk and adapt to the crisis. For example, tornado warning messages are often broadcast to the public in a tornado and are considered a trusted form of communication, with journalists acting as remediaries of public information (Perreault et al., 2014). Just as journalists share information of consequence in a natural disaster, the way journalists relate to information and share it with the public in a pandemic can differ given the challenges of the disaster, but also might resemble normal practices used in everyday reporting (Perreault & Perreault, 2021). Journalists who must navigate COVID-19 conditions for their personal wellbeing may make decisions to refrain from interviewing people face-to-face, instead, they might opt to socially distance or use video conferencing software to mitigate pandemic restrictions.

News reporting plays a vital role in crisis and disaster communication in that it connects journalists, citizens, and information. The cyclical nature of social media platforms allows for back and forth between journalists, citizens, and public information liaisons (Houston et al., 2015). Journalism itself is a resource for the general public but also a place where history is

made in the process of documenting a crisis. Similarly, covering topics like health and science (and applied subtopics within those specialties such as natural disasters, climate change) can present challenges for journalists who do not have training in these specific fields (Hiles & Hinnant, 2014). The developing frame and changes surrounding the way that journalists have covered climate change is just one example. Developing science over the last few decades drastically changed how that narrative has developed in the press. Journalists have found it difficult to communicate scientific information in a way that is accessible to the general public (Brüggemann, 2017). Journalism as a profession is focused on providing objective facts and is not entirely able to account in that process for the uncertainties of a developing public health crisis and the foundational knowledge that might surround infectious diseases like COVID-19.

While journalists are for the most part used to cover crisis and disaster, with the core news value as conflict (Zelizer, 2015), they perform their work with a specific communicative approach in the pandemic (Perreault & Perreault, 2021). The norms of reporting in a pandemic, however, are not something journalists anticipated in advance but rather became normalized within the first nine months of the pandemic by adapting skills learned from covering other crises and disasters. This adaptation and innovation are not new to journalism but rather reflect adaptation based on the pandemic's ebb and flow of expectations, risks and audiences' needs. There are four journalistic practices that have become established over time, 1) research, 2) freedom of speech, 3) a pursuit of truth and accuracy, and 4) integration of ethical principles (Pavlik, 2013). In particular, journalistic practice emphasized the use of "history as a strategic resource, reminding their readers of the long and storied histories of their respective newspapers and giving them the impression that hundreds of years of history were on the line"

(Finneman & Thomas, 2021, p. 14). It is those key practices, which establish the professional function of journalism and provide the understanding of what the role of a journalist is performing when covering a news story.

The challenges of living and covering a crisis are complex to navigate. While many journalists may live their daily lives never experiencing trauma, local journalists may be more akin to the coverage of crises and disasters that directly affect their constituents as well as themselves (Perreault, 2020). The constant negotiation and navigation concerning safety, risk, legitimacy of information and the personal and professional effects of those decisions become augmented in a crisis or disaster, and COVID-19 has emphasized those challenges for journalists.

Journalists use formal and pre-established networks to source and develop stories and share information with the public. Early in a crisis, the ability to trust information and verify that information might be difficult, even if the journalists have trusted information from a given source in the past. Hence, journalists approach their reporting with certain frameworks that help them navigate the reporting. For example, research has shown that journalists operate as *storytellers* when mitigating coverage of dangerous actors (Perreault et al., 2020)—a way to avoid a balancing of truth and falsehood, as *enrichers* when trying to comprehensively serve a particular community and enhance the experience of learning new information (Perreault & Bell, 2020), and as *disseminators*—just the facts!— when attempting to maintain objectivity in a volatile cultural space (Perreault et al., 2020). Frequently in crises, journalists operate as *facilitators* to monitor, or observe, the environment for “relevant information about events, conditions, trends, and threats” (Christians et al., 2010, p. 139) and journalists operate this way

in response to a perceived need for collaboration. The facilitative journalist draws on an understanding that the journalist is responsive to society and contributes to the public's decision-making in a crisis.

The countries reflected in this sample all bore unique circumstances that naturally shaped their concern relative to reporting on the pandemic. For example, in Austria, April 2020, nearly half of the population feared that government crackdowns would result in restrictions on free press and free expression. However, they largely trusted the large national news brands within the country (Fronaschütz, 2020). In the United States, covering the coronavirus bore particular challenges given that it operated in 2020 under populist, conservative political leadership that actively undermined scientists and challenged the nation's health leaders. This made the practice of reporting in the pandemic all the more challenging, particularly if we consider journalism as a "cultural act" that tends to promote the views of the already powerful (Gutsche, 2018, p. 7). The United Kingdom and United States both experienced an early surge in news readership followed by a return to pre-pandemic levels within just a few months: resulting in concerns about misinformation and enhancing the trustworthiness of messaging (Nielsen et al., 2020c). This is to point out what is perhaps obvious—that the different countries in this sample operate in different political and media environments—but this belies the more valuable commonality between the countries for the sake of this study: that the trade press in these countries presented a location for journalists to share their concerns about a global pandemic and consider the best ways to practice their craft in light of that pandemic.

Hence, this leads us to pose the following questions:

Research Question 1: How do journalists discursively construct the practice of pandemic reporting?

Research Question 2: How do journalists use metajournalism as a stabilizing agent within the field in discourse regarding pandemic reporting?

Method

Given that the frameworks of both metajournalism and field both consider journalism as a discursive institution, it is fitting to then examine them through the lens of their discourse. Discourse pays particular attention to language and how it is used (Candlin, 1997) and examines that language within its “institutional context” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 11), which would naturally occur in institutional discussion of the pandemic. Discourse analysis treats texts as a “a site of struggle over meaning” through a sort of discursive “negotiation” (Fürsich, 2009, p. 244). In other words, discourse operates as a sort of collective meaning-making within the field that occurs over time. Time is an important component to consider in discourse given that the analysis of the sequence of texts can “explain the implications of previous discursive positions on subsequent ones” (Carvalho, 2008, p. 163).

The metajournalistic discourse data (n=141) was collected from a custom database of the U.S. journalism trade press using the Discourses of Journalism database for U.S. data (n=70), the website of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (n=16) for the United Kingdom, and the APA Onlinemanager database as well as the Austrian trade journal *Der Österreichische Journalist* (n=55), which shares content with several German-language trade

press publications in Germany and Switzerland: *Medium Magazin* and *Schweizer Journalist*¹.

Articles were initially identified with the keyword searches for *coronavirus* and *COVID-19*, published from February to November 2020, and specifically reflected journalistic discourse related to the pandemic.

The U.S. trade press database was developed using a web scraper to archive and download articles from 21 sites where journalists discuss journalism. The webscraper includes *NiemanLab*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Media Shift*, *Editor & Publisher*, *Ad Age*, Ryan Sholin, *Broadcasting Cable*, *Poynter*, *American Journalism Review*, *FAIR*, *Buzzmachine*, *American Society of Media Photographers*, *Media Post*, *Folio Mag*, *RJI Online*, *NiemanLab*, *Online Journalism Review*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *WAN IFRA*, *Jim Romenesko*, and *Press Think*. These sites presented 83 discrete articles of data from the U.S. trade press. Less relevant results (e.g. articles in which coronavirus was a footnote as opposed to the dominant topic), were eliminated resulting in 70 articles. The results of this database were combined with data gathered from the United Kingdom--using the search function on the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism website—which resulted in 16 articles; and data gathered from Austria using the APA Online Manager databases to gather content from trade websites *Horizont*, *Extradienst* and *Medianet*. This was supplemented with three issues of the trade magazine *Der Österreichische Journalist*—these three issues focused specifically on coronavirus.

This data together resulted in a corpus of metajournalism (n=141) from advanced, democratic, western countries. The coauthors analyzed the entire sample with the research

¹ Data was drawn from *Der Österreichische Journalist*, but we will consider the Austrian discourse presented here as emblematic for German-speaking discourse in Germany and Switzerland, given that the content collected is content-shared, and unaltered, within respective trade magazines of the countries.

questions in mind and then compared the themes. Given that content from *Der Österreichische Journalist*, *Horizont*, *Extradienst* and *Medianet* was in German, a German-language native speaking member of the research team read these articles. Through a series of research meetings, the authors discussed the themes as a team for congruencies and differences--determining that the data, despite the language difference, reflected on the pandemic in a largely unified manner. Hence, the results will reflect on the metajournalism as a unified corpus but will denote the trade press specifically when context requires. Inductive analysis involved reading through the discourse, maintaining awareness of temporal context as the pandemic developed, and as journalistic understanding of the pandemic developed. The coauthors each analyzed the discourse and compared themes, returning to the texts to see if themes in one part of the discourse—or in one trade publication—were apparent throughout. The authors then returned to the data to apply the themes to quantify them and to ensure they best reflect the data across contexts.

Results

In regards to research question 1, “How do journalists discursively construct the practice of pandemic reporting?” we found four themes in pandemic reporting: press freedom, practical adjustment, service orientation and media self-criticism.

Press Freedom

A less common theme in the metajournalistic discourse, but one shared throughout the sample, was a concern for *press freedom* (n=9)--particularly reflected in participants describing difficulty accessing information due to restrictions on journalists. This related both to verifiable data on numbers of infections and deaths as well as the ability to report on the ground. As

noted in April 2020, journalists had trouble receiving access to and gaining access from hospitals. In the *Columbia Journalism Review*, they likened it to the difficulties in obtaining information in a war zone--the only difference, at the time, was journalists' absence from the "harrowing, heartbreaking front lines":

Not that hospitals are all working to accommodate journalists—far from it.

Photographers have reported being shoed away by security guards, even if they're just snapping pictures of hospitals' exteriors. (Allsop, 2020a)

Similarly, *Der Österreichische Journalist* reprimanded members of police and security for their intruding on press freedom by intervening in interviews with nursing staff. Governments have used "the pandemic as an excuse for further crackdowns on journalists," according to *Reuters* (Nielsen et al., 2020b). It goes without saying that this presents a challenge in accurately conducting pandemic reporting. How do you educate local readers and viewers about a phenomenon you cannot see or gain information about? Of course, this also largely reiterates extant findings regarding the coronavirus and the pandemic (cf. Perreault and Perreault, 2021): the lack of interest in accommodating journalists (and perhaps lack of trust of journalists) reflects a prior condition exacerbated by the pandemic. In this case, trust in news has been a long-standing concern and so with a topic that is as life-and-death as the coronavirus pandemic it then follows that, early-on in particular, newsrooms would struggle to gain accommodation from local entities. Quantifying this trust, one journalist wrote:

Trust in news organizations as a source of news and information about COVID-19 stood at 59 percent, ahead of every type of organization apart from scientists, doctors, and national health organizations. By contrast, platforms fared very

badly. Even the Google search engine was trusted by only 45 percent of respondents. Twenty-nine percent said they trusted YouTube, 26 percent trusted Facebook and Twitter, and only 24 percent trusted messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. A whopping 40 percent of respondents said they actively did not trust social-media platforms, compared to only 18 percent who said they distrusted the news media (Bell, 2020)

While the higher evaluation of news organizations compared to others might seem initially encouraging, the percentage--59 percent--belies the more essential concern journalists articulated: not just mistrust of the information they produced but a mistrust of information in general. Where this exists in the populace, journalists argued, they would naturally struggle to obtain information and to communicate it.

In the United States, there was a lack of trust in the Trump administrations response: in discussing a recent research study, journalists noted “a stark contrast between those who rely on the White House for coronavirus news--16 percent of Americans--and those who get their information primarily from other sources” (Scire, 2020). Put simply, some Americans were unwilling and negatively perceived any information from groups outside the White House. Particularly negative perceptions were held for journalists. In reflecting on this, journalists noted that this was not particularly surprising given that the U.S. President at the time, Donald Trump, “used coronavirus briefings to continue his attacks on individual journalists and news organizations” (Scire, 2020). Journalists perceived that the infused hate against them only accelerated in the midst of the pandemic and made their job harder.

Practice Adjustment

Secondly, journalists acknowledged that pandemic reporting is a scrappy practice and required them to engage in practice adjustment (n=57). In particular, journalists had to adjust to practical implications of decreased financial resources—needing them to do more with less and acclimate to an uncertain employment situation in the newsroom—and the necessary changes resulting from remote work. For example, *Reuters* reflected on the increasing number of journalists drawing from Reddit and Facebook in order to obtain—in particular—“first-hand testimony in text, images, or video from people who had witnessed or had been passed something of interest and relevance” (Frankel, 2020). For journalists early on in the metadiscourse, numerous articles decried the practices lost in the transition to remote work and empty newsrooms. As time passed in the dataset (and the coronavirus progressed), journalists discussed this less perhaps as it became normalized. Earlier in the pandemic, *Mother Jones* reporters in San Francisco noted that they tried to continue reporting as they did pre-pandemic, by only asking reporters who “opted in” to be sent into the field and then providing them with “mask, gloves, sanitizer and goggles” (Markam, 2020). But that ended quickly with stay-at-home orders, then requiring newsrooms to log on to video conferencing software in the mornings to plan the days’ coverage. However, as the pandemic progressed, more journalists bemoaned that creativity suffered from working in a virtual newsroom. Moreover, some highlighted the issues of social isolation and working constantly had problematic effects on journalists’ work-life balance to the end that a journalist in *Der Österreichische Journalist* predicts that the pandemic would destroy the appeal of remote work: “In the post-Corona era (...) hardly anyone will work at home any more so soon unless he or she absolutely has to” (Lang, 2020).

With remote work, journalists had fewer opportunities to emphasize the visual in their reporting, instead emphasizing data. In the metajournalistic discourse, several articles applauded data-driven reporting pieces published regarding the coronavirus. As data journalists were applauded and awarded for their work, more and more journalists voiced interest in working with data and statistics, or as one reporter from *Der Österreichische Journalist* put it in the September issue, they “learn[ed] to love data” (Prinzing, 2020). The emphasis on data during the pandemic also had resulted in a close eye to the trends in viewer attention to news sites, with *NiemanLab* noting triumphantly in late March, “We now have data on what everyone was already probably thinking but didn’t want to say in the middle of a pandemic: Coronavirus has been great for traffic!” (Tameez, 2020)

Service Orientation

This also speaks to the third theme of pandemic discourse: increasing service orientation (n=24). Journalists noted that they found that certain types of reporting were particularly popular with their audience--and indicated they had leaned in on those topics, not merely for market purposes, but also to be responsive to the audience. These topics included “social distancing (especially as recommended by experts), analyses and explainers on topics like “flattening the curve,” self-quarantine, social distancing & the economy, local and international travel restrictions.” This self-awareness reflects the awareness of journalists to these changes--their standard reporting practices--and what had not--the need to be mindful of the audience as a normative journalistic responsibility.

This was less explicit in the U.K. sample (*Reuters*), and only appeared in one piece. The *Reuters* piece noted that “the majority of the UK public relies on news media for information

about COVID-19 and a majority find news helps them understand and respond to the crisis” (Nielsen et al., 2020a). Journalists saw part of their responsibility in pandemic reporting as serving to keep their audience calm and keep their audience safe. As one journalist put it, “the coronavirus pandemic is a tragic reminder of just how essential fact-based, outspoken journalism is, especially in times of crisis. Without it, people die” (Hertsgaard, 2020). Early on in the pandemic, journalists noted the challenges of covering “panic buying,” without amplifying the problem (Beery, 2020). “It seems likely that journalists will continue to find themselves tasked with covering panic buying and other anxious responses. Not exacerbating those behaviors depends on de-emphasizing fear and providing context that ties the issue into much larger ones” (Beery, 2020). The journalist noted that the balm for such reporting is to pair it with reporting that would normally seem to be tedious, even public relations-oriented: stories about the redundancies at grocery stores. PBS NewsHour, journalists argued, did an excellent job in their reporting in part because they made a “compelling case that we have abundant supplies of basic groceries, and that if people would just stop panic hoarding, we’ll have plenty for all” (Beery, 2020). This reflects the degree to which journalists were very aware that not only did they have the ability to help make things better, they also had the tools, and the capability, to amplify the dangers of the pandemic. Journalists noted:

Some coverage is more likely to spur this [panic buying] than others.

Sensationalist angles that paint grocery stores as war zones full of crazed customers and menacing security guards are not helpful. Neither are visuals that border on disaster porn—Sawyer highlights ‘the endless panning of empty grocery shelves’ as a particularly bad but very common tactic (Beery, 2020).

Journalists similarly framed the need for fact-checking and verification through the lens of a normative public service. “Fact-checking and verification were already crucial skills for journalists before the COVID-19 pandemic came along...But the coronavirus has made fact-checking and filtering skills even more important” (Ingram, 2020a). Journalists noted that an increasing amount of pandemic reporting was calling out misinformation online: that drinking bleach or taking mega doses of Vitamin C would cure COVID-19, or that cellphone technology caused the virus to begin with. The infrastructure of misinformation was already in existence prior to the pandemic.

Media Criticism

Finally, journalists engaged in media criticism in their reflections on what the pandemic meant for journalism (n=51). This included criticism of specific actors in the field, for example, tabloid journalists who employed emotionalized reporting to generate clicks. Here, journalists engage in distinguishing their practices from others and discursively maintained the dominant journalistic doxa. As one journalist in *Horizont* said, “good journalism helps audiences to understand the world surrounding them, bad journalism [i.e. tabloid journalism] leaves them angry and anxious” (Braun,2020). But this theme also includes criticism of journalistic businesses for under-financing science journalism over the past decades and the journalistic community at large for being compliant with those in power.

In Austria, especially, journalists criticized in hindsight how the community reacted to the beginning of the pandemic and Austria’s infamous role in spreading the virus globally through the ski-resort Ischgl. Here, authors criticized that journalists failed to comply with their Fourth Estate function and that most investigative reporting on Ischgl initially came from

foreign press before it was picked up by Austrian news outlets (Plaikner, 2020). Even public broadcast news anchor Armin Wolf, known for his critical interrogation style, was criticized as “a tame Wolf [who] seemed to prefer playing with sticks instead of gnawing on the bone” (Oberauer, 2020). Wolf himself, in another article published in *Der Österreichische Journalist* reflected on the “feeling of collective cohesion and of sticking together and not being allowed to question” (Taitl, 2020).

Moreover, journalists described reporting on the pandemic as reporting on a lived experience. As one piece put it “I’m learning along with everybody else” (Harris, 2020). Journalists were keenly aware of their own weakened position in the industry, noting the number of furloughs affecting their colleagues. They reflected, “For years, we’ve watched local journalism efforts wither and news deserts form, leaving a growing list of critical stories uncovered. We’ve chronicled those losses, and chewed them over in conferences and white papers too numerous to mention. Yet inertia reigned—partly because the problem, in its scale and financial depth, seemed nearly unfixable” (Pope, 2020). The challenges of prioritizing personal and professional responsibility amidst the practice of pandemic reporting cause journalists to recognize the need for more training and conversation about the function of emotional work in the field of journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Science writing is not something that the average journalist studies, and health journalism is covered by even less people. When Shelby Grad, the *Los Angeles Times* metro editor, wrote about the guidelines that were recommended to reporters, she did so amidst little clarity and consistency from government messaging; hence, the *Times* developed their own system of guidelines and

provided reporters with PPE (personal protective equipment), sanitizer and goggles when possible.

Journalists also noted the dire situation for news organizations that felt the financial crunch of the pandemic as much as--if not more than--most industries. In the U.K., the trade press voiced fears of the economic downturn leading to a “media extinction event” (Nielsen, Cherubini, & Andi, 2020b). These harken to conversations pre-pandemic around the depletion of local journalism, news deserts, and a lack of journalists who can devote time to a niche area or beat. Similarly, in Austria, advertisement revenues dropped by 45%, leaving many, especially freelancers, fearing for their financial security (OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus [COVID-19], 2020).

Metajournalism as a stabilizing agent

In regards to the second research question, “How do journalists use metajournalism as a stabilizing agent within the field in discourse regarding pandemic reporting?,” journalists used metajournalism as a stabilizing agent within the field by normalizing experiences and perspectives on those experiences. Journalists also used pandemic reporting to strengthen their positions within the field by reifying distinctions between “good” and “bad” journalism. The metajournalistic discourse certainly acknowledged a difference in experience between freelancers or journalists at financially strained local newsrooms, suffering from the threat of furloughs, and the national newsrooms with the financial privilege to be able to read excitedly about the burst of website traffic caused by the pandemic noted earlier. Yet the discourse also noted, as importantly, the experiences shared among journalists.

This norming of experiences certainly included the financial strain of the pandemic. Journalists noted that “Even if newspapers are able to cobble together enough income to survive, a large number of them have already cut their quality so deeply over the past decade that there will be no point in buying them. And so, people won’t” (Hamilton, 2020). It is a harsh message, but there is some comfort to be found in knowing you’re not the only one who shares a concern about your livelihood. Here journalists made it clear that this financial concern was a broadly shared one.

It was not a concern felt as acutely by some. In the same piece, the journalist acknowledged that under Jeff Bezos, *The Washington Post* was expanding, not contracting. The individual journalists at *The Washington Post* might not fear for furlough, but--the author notes--a system that depends on the graciousness of billionaires is overall flawed and could cause problems for *The Washington Post* in the future. As the author put it, “This dynamic, which now afflicts everything from art museums to public health, grants wealthy people credit for privately doing through philanthropy a fraction of what we should be publicly doing by taxing them” (Hamilton, 2020).

Similarly, journalists normed the experience of continually covering a topic as dark and depressing as a global pandemic. No moment better illustrated the challenges that come with this coverage than with the release of John Krasinski’s *Some Good News*. Krasinski, best known as “Jim” from *The Office*, offers a mirror image to the modern TV set: he appears at a desk in what appears to be his den, complete with a sign--hand drawn by his children--that reads “sgn,” the acronym for the show. The purpose of the show is to be uplifting, not satirical. As one author puts it “the fact that Krasinski’s show apes the design and structure of a regular TV news

program implies that it's intended, in part, as an antidote to the real thing, because regular news is too depressing and negative"(Ingram, 2020b). But the author notes that the news, if it is to reflect reality, must be depressing and negative given the circumstances. The reason for the success of *Some Good News* isn't because the news is doing something wrong, but because it is doing something right: "The problem is that the whole point of the news is to inform people about the world, to give them the knowledge of events that might affect them. And a lot of that knowledge involves depressing things like viruses, or quarantines, war, and death"(Ingram, 2020a).

Thus, reporting on the pandemic is bound to have an emotional impact on the journalists covering it day-in and day-out in a community. As noted in one piece, "Even journalists need to take breaks, as CNN reporter Brian Stelter admitted he had to do recently, after getting overwhelmed by the relentlessness of coronavirus coverage"(Ingram, 2020b). The discussion of Stelter reflects the emotional toll such reporting is bound to have, and, to some degree, to normalize its impact in reporting. It is not just the emotional toll of covering death, illness, sickness and loss, but even just keeping up with the changes in reporting expectations can exhaust journalists. *NiemanLab* and *Columbia Journalism Review* in particular published exhaustively on newspaper closures and staff cuts; an indication that not just the reality of the pandemic, but also its implications for the news industry were an essential focus in journalism.

The temporal expression of the themes from RQ 1 also indicates the stabilizing nature of metajournalism through normalizing perspectives on experiences. The themes' prominence differed through the progression of the pandemic with the theme "press freedom" prominent in March and April 2020 before disappearing almost entirely (one last piece of this theme

appeared June 30 in *Der Österreichische Journalist*). It would make sense that journalists would share a concern regarding access to information as the world largely shut down due to lockdowns and as many hospitals were just beginning to develop media policies. Yet as the coronavirus, lockdown procedures, and the resulting media policies standardized, it was less necessary to discuss this theme. Similarly, but less prominent, focus on “service orientation” declined in the discourse. Numerous articles early in the pandemic focused on how journalists could ease the fears of the audience, stem panic buying, and help audiences navigate disinformation. This theme persisted longer—well into June—but was more prominent during the initial national lockdowns in March and April. “Practice adjustment” and “media criticism”, however, continued throughout the sample because even as the pandemic became *normal*, journalists had to adjust to changes in reporting procedures following health commission guidelines in their respective countries. The responsiveness of the former two themes however reflects how much journalists used metajournalism as a means to maintain their national status quo even as they sought to maintain their professional status quo.

Finally, noteworthy in discussions about challenging misinformation about the pandemic is the degree to which it was used to reify existing notions of what constitutes “good journalism” as opposed to “bad journalism.” For example, *Reuters* made a point of advising journalists to “focus less on politicians and pundits, except where absolutely necessary, and more on sources that are (a) highly and broadly trusted and (b) demonstrably help people understand the crisis, most notably...scientists, doctors and other experts” (Nielsen et al., 2020c). This description of course reflects a range of actors that do the opposite of this guidance and by extension indicates that their practice—while not immediately “bad

journalism” nevertheless has been expelled from the category of “good journalism.” A similar argument was made in *Der Österreichische Journalist*: Jungwirth (2020) argued that journalists failed in their Fourth Estate obligations during the early pandemic by amplifying political propaganda. In the U.S., the trade press largely placed right-wing media in the category of “bad journalism” relative to the pandemic given the degree to which right-wing media “encouraged their audiences to join Trump in his denial in the face of a health disaster” (Grossman, 2020). Quoting Ben Smith from the *New York Times*, Grossman (2020) notes that “Hosts and guests, speaking to Fox’s predominantly elderly audience, repeatedly played down the threat of what would soon become a deadly pandemic.... Fox failed its viewers and the broader public in ways both revealing and potentially lethal.”

All of this notes that part of the stabilizing function of metajournalistic discourse is in reifying the dominant actors and transgressive actors within the field.

Conclusion

This manuscript sought to examine the role of metajournalistic discourse as a stabilizing force within the journalistic field, through the timely and relevant case study of the coronavirus pandemic. The first research question specifically dealt with the case, the phenomena of pandemic reporting, and how it was discursively constructed. We found that journalists discursively constructed the practice of pandemic reporting in terms of difficulty in access to information, challenges in the changes to journalistic practice—changes necessitated by the reality of remote work, the need to use their reporting to calm their audience, and reflecting the fact that the journalists themselves were inextricably tied to the story. The second research question examined the theoretical link in its practicalities; that journalists used the

metajournalistic discourse to share common experiences, normalize common perceptions, and normalize the emotional toll of the trauma presented by the pandemic. It is noteworthy, given the diversity of sources presented—the U.S., U.K., and Austria—that the themes presented were so similar despite the national differences in coronavirus response, differences in pandemic acuity in its early stages, and differences in media system as well.

The coronavirus pandemic, journalists argued, was a microcosm of a much more existential threat in climate change. In this way, the pandemic is a “test run for the challenges of a climate crisis that continues to accelerate. Our job, as journalists, is to extract lessons from the COVID-19 crisis that we can apply to covering the climate crisis” (Hertsgaard, 2020). Given this, these practices gain importance not only for reporting on the pandemic but in regard to climate change concerns more broadly. These findings show the challenges of pandemic reporting in a democracy where the free-flow of information ebbs and flows depending on the availability of information (Brüggemann, 2017). Journalists may have nothing new to report, and then all the sudden have a deluge of information from both reliable and unreliable sources, or may spend days mulling over the public’s desire and frustration for new information. Similarly, to Pinto (2008), the journalists exist within a profession with specific standards, but also must adjust to the expectations of their role within democracy and a free press to provide information that assists the public in response to a crisis or challenge. Given that journalists have seen the ground shift beneath them in the United States (Finneman & Thomas, 2021; Perreault & Perreault, 2021), it makes sense that journalists would adjust in turn.

From the lens of field theory, we can see here that metajournalistic discourse operates as a tool of the habitus—journalistic production is a habit that serves a normative purpose of

producing the news, educating the public (Carlson, 2015), and the not-unimportant practical purpose of ensuring the journalist gets a paycheck at the end of the month. It then follows that journalists would naturally operate with those same tools that brought them success in the past when their field is in crisis. Hence, the production of metajournalistic discourse itself in some ways reflects the habitus—there would be a natural comfort to confronting crisis by using the tools of news production that had led to past successes. In short, metajournalistic discourse stabilizes the field by affirming the process of news production—reaffirming journalists that the tools they use for work are similarly applicable to reflection within the field.

That said, metajournalistic discourse does not always occur during times of crisis, the current case notwithstanding, so it bears consideration that metajournalistic discourse does more in the stabilization of the field than simply affirming the use of standard tools. Prior research has suggested a conversive relationship between the field habitus and doxa in that the values and assumptions of the field would naturally inform the habits that ensure its operation (Bourdieu, 1997; Lizardo, 2004). Similarly, the habits of the field would seem to naturally reaffirm the values and assumptions of the field in the *doxa*. So, the process of metajournalistic discourse, in this light, reflects the *habitus* serving to normalize—and to some degree adjust—the journalistic *doxa*. The metajournalistic discourse, seen more completely here, stabilizes the field then by norming shared experiences and perspectives within the field as a way to revisiting the normative expectations of the journalistic *doxa*.

Finally, it bears consideration of what—more abstractly—this metajournalistic discourse has to offer the *doxa* as it stabilizes the field. The fact that the metajournalistic discourse in this study played a role in norming experiences and perspectives begs further consideration of the

operation of the habitus on the doxa. As a recurrent process, metajournalism connects the practice of the field to the field's ideology (Carlson, 2015). This was seen in the temporal nature of two of the themes from the first research question, "press freedom" and "service orientation" were only prominent in initial coverage but became less so as the concerns about those issues were mitigated. So even as differentiation between news outlets was at its most acute between the haves—national, well-funded—and the have-nots—local, lesser-funded journalism in western countries appeared to approach the coronavirus and its related crises in a unified, consistent manner through the metajournalism; suggesting—or at least normalizing—a response from the field. All of this together affirms the central role of metajournalistic discourse with the journalistic institution despite national, political and cultural differences reflected in this study's different trade press samples.

Limitations and Future Research

Certainly, there are numerous avenues of metajournalism, reflected in letters to the editor, obituaries, legal documents, all of which could present a divergent presentation of the pandemic present the stabilization of the field in a different manner. The use of the trade press is sensible for this study given its focus on the institution and given that databases allow for a standard search criteria. Future research might consider alternative venues of metajournalistic discourse and how they might serve to stabilize the field. The challenges of covering a pandemic in real time are challenging for journalists, news organizations and sources. New boundaries must be drawn as journalists innovate.

Journalism is a field in flux, a fact only exacerbated by the pandemic. Metajournalism, as the field's institutional discourse, provides an avenue to normalize and reflect.

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