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## The Discursive Construction of The Gamification of Journalism

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## The Discursive Construction of the Gamification of Journalism

### Abstract

This study explores the discursive, normative construction of gamification within journalism. By analyzing a significant corpus of metajournalistic discourse from 2006 to 2019, the study demonstrates how journalists have negotiated gamification's place within journalism's boundaries. The discourse addresses criticism that gamified news is a move toward infotainment and makes the case for gamification as serious journalism anchored in norms of audience engagement.

### Keywords:

Gamification, discursive institutionalism, metajournalistic discourse, discourse analysis, journalistic norms

*NOTE: This is the ACCEPTED version of the manuscript and hence may not reflect all changes in the final version.*

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US journalists have largely made a turn toward their audience; experimenting with and adopting a range of audience-focused initiatives (Batsell, 2015). But the scope and degree of the audience turn is not altogether understood (Kreiss & Brennen, 2016). Many journalists have embraced greater engagement with the audience as a much-needed revitalization of journalism's democratic potential (Carpentier, 2011). At the same time, many journalists remain reluctant to embrace a radical renegotiation of the journalist-audience relationship, in part, fearing commercial motives are at the core of such initiatives and will ultimately undercut or dilute journalism's normative obligations (Borger, van Hoof, Costera Meijer & Sanders, 2013). It's unclear where the so-called gamification of journalism – the combination of game designs and dynamics with news content on digital news platforms – stands within this broader outlook (Ferrer Conill & Karlsson, 2016). While scholars have debated this question (see Ferrer Conill & Karlsson, 2016, for an overview), journalists' own outlook is still little understood. Do journalists themselves see gamification as building civic knowledge and engagement or as commercially inspired edutainment or as something else?

The purpose of this study is to explore the discursive, normative construction of gamification within the institution of journalism. As journalists engage in discussion about gamification, they inevitably place it within larger discourses about journalism's roles and purposes. Hence, this study examines a significant corpus of journalists' own discourse about gamification to examine the legitimizing and delegitimizing strategies that ultimately situate gamification within journalism's institutional purposes and boundaries.

Thus, the study can tell us much about the discursive construction of gamification within journalism, but also about the institutional landscape of journalism. How are journalism's roles and purposes negotiated in the context of real-world debates about doing journalism in a digital environment?

### **Theory and Literature**

This study is premised on the notion that journalism is a discursive institution (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017). Journalism, of course, is a material reality, as is the gamification of journalism. But, as an institution, the '-ism' of journalism is an essential feature. Journalism is anchored by norms and beliefs that are manifested in discourse. To understand the discourse is to understand something essential about journalism.

#### **Journalism as a Discursive Institution**

Journalism is an institution in as much as it is "a site of systematized principles of action enduring across time and supervising a central area of social and political life" (Cook, 1998: 15). An institution is often understood as a system of rules, norms, and beliefs (Parsons, 2007). These are what link persons together in a shared experience and shared outlook. Journalism has long been understood to be driven by routines and typifications (Tuchman, 1978). In other words, journalists have been socialized into the institution of journalism, which then structures how journalists think about and do their work (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017). These principles and rules are sometimes explicit, but often remain implicit until disruptions of various kinds force them to be enunciated.

Principles, rules, and norms play an important role in establishing legitimacy for both the institution and its various institutional actors (Parsons, 2007). Because of journalism's historical role in establishing the veracity of truth claims made by political, economic, and other social actors, these same actors are often motivated to either establish or challenge journalism's social authority (Carlson, 2017). Thus, journalists have had to discursively negotiate and establish their own legitimacy (Zelizer, 2004). This is a process whereby journalists tap into society's broader legitimizing discourses. So, for example, journalists have defined their legitimacy in terms of their contribution to democracy (Schudson, 2001) and modernity (Vos, 2012) and by way of their adherence to scientifically valid procedures (Schudson, 1978). Legitimacy, then, is expressed in institutional scripts – or discourses – such as, being a 'watchdog of the public interest' or 'democracy dies in darkness'. Legitimacy hinges on the social resonance of these discourses and the institution's ability to overcome competing discourses, such as 'yellow journalism' is 'all about the money'.

While some point to the deinstitutionalization of journalism, evidence suggests that journalistic rules, norms, and beliefs remain resilient (Picard, 2014). Deinstitutionalization is actually a naturally-occurring process whereby institutions re-institutionalize to accommodate disruptions (Picard, 2014). In fact, because the institution of journalism is inherently social and because discourse is at the heart of its institutional identity, its discourse is the means to negotiate change. Thus, examining institutional discourse provides "insights into the dynamics of institutional change by explaining the actual preferences, strategies, and normative orientations of actors" (Schmidt, 2010: 1). Thus, we

can see how the institution of journalism has adapted to changing economic realities, which have ushered in new kinds of news organizations, by positioning something journalists have called “entrepreneurial journalism” relative to the institution’s received normative perimeters (Vos and Singer, 2016). These discourses can try to situate emergent practices within existing norms, or they can try to reconfigure the norms.

**Metajournalistic discourse.** Journalism’s institutional discourse has been called metajournalism; which is basically journalists talking and writing about journalism. This discourse is “the site in which actors publicly engage in processes of establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism’s legitimacy” (Carlson, 2016: 350). Such discourse appears via news media outlets – in media-related columns or discussion shows – journalism trade journals and sites, journalists’ social media posts, and wherever else journalists discuss journalism, including face-to-face discussions. Some of the discourse is directly, outwardly facing; while other discourse is inward – among journalists – but nevertheless indirectly engaged with imaginary or real public interlocutors (Vos, 2016).

Institutional discourse plays a particularly important role within journalism. While most professions have accrediting and licensing standards that codify certain institutional norms and practices, journalism is rarely delimited in such fashion. Based on principles of press freedom, journalists have eschewed formalized codes and boundaries, lest these be used to limit journalistic autonomy. Nevertheless, journalists self-police the field through their informal discourse, marking various actions and actors as either comporting to institutional principles and norms or not.

Like theories of discursive institutionalism, Carlson (2016) stresses that metajournalistic discourse is *both* a structured context that shapes how journalists think and talk about their work *and* a site of journalistic agency. Journalists have discursive tools at their disposal and they can use these tools strategically. “Discourses morph and change, with new articulations arising through emergent understandings and material changes” (Carlson, 2016: 353). A central concept in the literature, then, is that discourse is adaptable. This adaptability allows journalists to steer journalism through a changing institutional terrain.

**Journalistic Norms and Journalism Innovation.** While much of journalism’s ways of operating are taken for granted, journalistic norms are necessarily explicit (Schudson, 2001). Norms have moral force only in as much as they are articulated and held out as guides to what is proper, right, and good (Artemas et al., 2018). Even practices that are accepted as common and normal, might still nevertheless be seen as violating normative principles. News organizations act in their self-interest on a fairly regular basis; however, they are also regularly admonished for doing so because it is believed such behavior compromises journalism’s public service obligations (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014).

Indeed, journalism’s economic goals, which often drive journalistic innovation, are also a key source of normative tension. Thus, entrepreneurial journalism has been seen both as the way forward for an economically troubled institution and as problematic in light of normative, institutional scripts about a ‘wall of separation’ between business and editorial functions of news outlets (Coddington, 2015; Vos and Singer, 2016; Jukes, 2019). Whatever the innovation might be, journalists will likely be faced with interlocutors who

will push journalists to situate that innovation within existing normative frameworks. Journalism's normative parameters – if they are truly normative – will be manifested in discourse (Schudson, 2001), and thus naturally occurring metajournalistic discourse is the appropriate setting to explore journalism as an institutional phenomenon (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017) and gamification as an institutional innovation.

### **Gamification of Journalism**

While the gamification of news is often positioned as a recent innovation, it should be pointed out that gamification in news is not new. However, historically, it was little more than simple games, such as quizzes and crosswords. Journalism's digital transition has opened up new possibilities for adapting digital games to journalism—a transition that has been imbued with much hope, but also with some concerns. Digital games, for example, have sometimes been seen as distracting citizens from news media use (Putnam, 2000).

For scholars, gamification is an “approach to design” (Seaborn and Fels, 2015: 28) that emphasizes using “motivational affordances in order to invoke gameful experiences and further behavioral outcomes” (Hamari, Koivisto, and Sarsa, 2014: 2). In short, gamification is the process of making activities function like a game (Werbach, 2014); this is in contrast to the related concept of newsgames which are full games used to “participate in the public sphere” (Conill and Karlsson, 2016: 15-16). Both share the related mission of conveying current events in an “engaging manner to an audience that responds and is engaged by the language of video games” (Conill and Karlsson, 2016: 15-16).



Historically, gamification had two precursor movements. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the Soviet Union experimented with a “workplace-based socialist competition” hoping that the power of games could replace capitalist competition with something more humane, but would similarly motivate productivity (Nelson, 2012: 23). Similarly, in the 1990s and 2000s in America, American businesses promoted a “trend of ‘fun at work’ that reimagined the workplace as a fun and playful locale” (Nelson, 2012: 23)

Gamification has become a buzzword in numerous industries interested in invoking the experiences that games provide; such as in health (McCallum, 2012), education (Nicholson, 2015; Kapp, 2012), business (Houtari and Hamari, 2012), and technology (Fujiawa and Manki Min, 2013). Yet, some manifestations of gamification have also drawn significant criticism that they fail to fulfill the essential functions of a game and fail to accomplish the goals of the “marketers and consultants who seek to ...exploit an opportunity for benefit” (Bogost, 2015: 65). Bogost (2015) argues that numerous industries are attracted to gamification given that it seems to take a potential competitor—games—and utilize it for their own purposes. In many industries, games are seen as “magic attention machines, inspiring players to devote tens or hundreds of hours to them. Yet the cost, complexity and unfamiliarity of games makes them seem risky, expensive and confusing” (Bogost, 2015: 67). Bogost (2015) describes gamification as “exploitation ware,” in that the term more adequately characterizes the goals of those who promote it—to exploit audience expectations as well as the expectations of those who hire consultants to implement the process. Thus, Bogost (2015: 77) sees the process as “bullshit because its very interpretation and purpose are bullshit.”

Yet it is hard to fault journalists for recognizing that “game developers know better than anyone else how to inspire” and that “game design isn’t just a technical craft. It’s the twenty-first century way of thinking and leading” (McGonigal, 2011: 13). And while earlier forms of gamification—such as quizzes—have been successfully translated into digital news, it is video games that are reported to be “majorly engaging younger audiences” (Conill and Karlsson, 2016: 7). In short, gamification in journalism aims for a less business-oriented goal than much of what Bogost (2015) critiques, since the news media need to “find methods that engage users to be informed” (Conill and Karlsson, 2016: 8).

Conill and Karlsson (2016) see the “gamified news service” as having the potential to engage users—particularly younger users—with the news. Yet, Conill and Karlsson (2016: 10) acknowledge that gamification would likely face pushback in the journalistic field given that games could be perceived as a “threat to creative journalism, selling core values of journalism to entertainment media.” In other words, they anticipate that gamification will have to navigate a normative, discursive landscape to be seen as legitimate journalism.

With this in mind, we pose the following questions to explore in this study:

**RQ1:** What have journalists meant by gamification?

**RQ2:** How have journalists discursively placed gamification within the institutional practices and norms of journalism?

**RQ3:** How have journalists discursively legitimized or delegitimized gamification?

## Study Design

Based on a framework of journalism as a discursive institution (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017), it is only fitting that the study analyze the discourse of journalism, or metajournalistic discourse. Discourse analysis pays particular attention to “language in use” (Candlin, 1997: ix) and language in its “institutional context” (Fairclough, 1995: 11), in this case naturally occurring institutional language about gamification. Discourse analysis treats texts as a “negotiation” and “a site of struggle over meaning” (Fursich, 2009: 244). In other words, discourse is a kind of collective meaning-making among interlocutors that emerges over time. Indeed, it is important to attend to the temporal context and sequences of discourse, since the analysis of the sequence of texts can “explain the implications of previous discursive positions on subsequent ones” (Carvalho, 2008: 163).

Discourse about gamification has been collected from the US journalism trade press using a custom searchable database and from US news outlets using the ProQuest searchable database. The trade press database was created by using a web scraper to download and archive articles and posts from 25 sites where journalists discuss journalism. A network analysis indicated the most trafficked sites and how the sites’ connected to each other. These included sites such as American Journalism Review, Editor & Publisher, MediaShift, and NiemanLab. The goal was to choose sites that represented institutional discourse and eliminate sites that were at the margins of the institution. The ProQuest search focused on articles in daily US news outlets. The outlets ranged from major dailies, such as *The Wall Street Journal* to smaller and regional papers, such as *The Daily Herald* (Arlington Heights, Illinois). The data amounted to a significant corpus of metajournalistic

discourse (224 articles in the trade press and 207 articles from general news outlets) over the course of more than a decade (2006-2019). The timeframe allows for ongoing debates to be tracked and the arc of the discourse to emerge.

Analysis involved looking for themes in the discourse, with awareness of the temporal and publication context (trade press vs. general news outlets). In the end, there were no notable differences in discourse based on publication context. The coauthors each analyzed portions of the discourse and then compared themes, returning to each portion of the texts to see if themes found in one portion of the discourse were also apparent in the other portion of the texts. Since the findings are presented as institutional discourse – and for reasons of readability – we do not include full citations for the metajournalistic discourse that follows. We do indicate the year in which the discourse appears as a means of context.

### **Discourse on Gamification**

It is clear that the discourse about gamification is indeed a “negotiation” (see Fürsich, 2009)—it attempts to reconcile things that have historically represented different sets of values. Gamification, as one article noted, was part of an effort to “combine two seemingly incompatible industries: gaming and the news” (2015). The metajournalistic discourse acknowledged that gaming is partly a marketing tactic, but also a means of meeting journalism’s traditional social obligations. As one editor said, “It appeals to the younger crowd but it’s also another way of conveying information” (2015). Thus, gamification was often defined and characterized in ways that positioned gamification

within journalism's normative framework, and in doing so, legitimized gamification as proper, right, and good.

### **Characterizing Gamification**

What did journalists mean by gamification? When journalists spoke to themselves in the trade press, characterizations were scant or brief, and only slightly more descriptive when speaking to a broader public. Earlier definitions were generally more detailed than later descriptions, when readers would have presumably already known something about gamification. A 2006 definition referred to it as “the use of game mechanics, feedback loops, and rewards to spur interaction and boost engagement, loyalty, fun and/or learning” (2006). Later descriptions were generally of the variety: Gamification “adds game-like elements to activities that are not really games” (2014). The occasional description was more flippant: “Think of it as Candy Crush for tracking police militarization or Flappy Bird to uncover government waste” (2015).

Journalists also described gamification in terms of where it came from, pointing to the origins of gamification in the social networking app Foursquare, born in 2010, in which users competed to become the “mayor” of local venues (2017). Others noted that a Knight News Challenge winner had championed gamifying news, giving gamification the heightened visibility and credibility that the Knight Foundation brought to journalistic innovations (2011).

An important feature of the definitions of gamification or gamifying news is in the characterizations of the phenomenon. What was gamification an example of? In many cases, journalistic discourse indicated that gamification is predominantly a business and

marketing strategy. It was defined in relation to the “consumer experience”—hence, as a tool of the marketplace (2014). Gamification in the journalists’ estimation was a “business trend” (2012). It was “a natural progression that capitalises on this new market” (2015)—a market for games that was growing much faster than the economy as a whole.

Furthermore, as a business trend, journalists often described it in relation to management objectives, given that they describe the opinion of the employee as fairly immaterial in the implementation of gamification: “all evidence suggests that your work one day will operate like a videogame to be conquered, rather than a craft to be perfected” (2014). In short, this was not a grassroots movement within the workplace, but a strategically initiated process. This was particularly relevant in digital journalism, according to the discourse, given that social media allows “my bosses’ return-on-investment on my work [to be] measured” (2014). It was not an ennobling discourse; in fact, it was the basis for subsequent criticisms of gamification.

For many of the characterizations of the phenomenon, the focus was less on what gamification *was* than on what it *did*, that is, on the effects it produced or the goals it achieved. For example, the discourse defined the practice as an “application of gaming to encourage certain types of behavior” (2017) and to “build habits” (2016). Or it was described in terms of mental effects, such as “immersion into the subject” (2015). It turned a “traditionally boring process into a competition” (2011). The fun of gamification was, then, largely a “veneer” (2014)—it was a means to achieve strategic ends. Those ends were often explained in altruistic terms; for example, news games could “increase users’

news literacy skills” (2018). Indeed, much of discourse characterized gamification as a tool for audience engagement (more on this below).

These characterizations were also fleshed out in comparisons of gamification to other phenomena. Thus, gamification was like social media, which is designed to compel you to “interact over and over again” (2013). It was like clickbait, where people click a link for the “same reason they keep playing slots: maybe this time it’ll be good” (2016). These were not always the most flattering comparisons, but the discourse rarely used such comparisons to marginalize gamification.

It should be noted that even as journalists defined gamification, many sought to locate the practice on a familiar footing that anticipated critical interlocutors. For example: Gamifying news was “where video game technology and practises are used in conjunction with traditional journalism methods” (2015). Gamified journalism was still journalism.

### **Placing Gamification within Journalism**

At times, journalists adamantly placed gamification outside the realm of appropriate journalistic practices, it with business or other marginalized practices. Yet at other times, journalists passionately defended the practice, seeing it as entirely compatible with journalistic norms.

Journalistic discourse has long challenged actors and actions that tested the boundaries of proper journalism (see Carlson, 2017). These challenges were apparent here too. As already noted, journalists often identified gamification as existing entirely as a business practice, related with “airline rewards programs” that are “attractive to

marketers” (2015). Some argued that gamification could be debilitating in how it had been applied in digital journalism given the “pressure to make numbers” in the field (2014). It was a discourse that reinforced traditional norms separating news and business functions (see Artemas et al., 2018). It was also believed that gamification pushed the bounds of normative journalistic practice given that games were designed to encourage behavior and practice that would fit more in line with a journalistic advocacy role than with traditional roles associated with neutrality and objectivity (2017). For example, it was believed that news games could be “used to persuade, many times without the player realizing that the game is specifically designed to shift or influence their thinking” (2015).

Yet, most of time, journalists saw gamification as squarely within journalism’s traditional norms and practices. Journalists have long seen a dissemination role as central to their social duties; and here gamification was just another way of “conveying information” (2011). The editor-in-chief of *USA Today* saw gamification as an extension of – and in some ways an improvement on – what journalists have done all along. “I think it really helps people understand the news. It’s another way of telling the story and helping educate, and in some cases, entertain people” (2015). Gamification, in other words, built on existing journalistic skills.

When you’re a journalist you have to understand the topic you are talking about globally, and you have to think about the situation and what are the elements that made the situation the way it actually is right now ... That’s exactly what a game designer does. It’s almost the same thing (2015).



Thus, gamification still required sound journalistic judgment. For example, one gaming journalist reassured interlocutors, “we were cognizant throughout of the gravity of our subject and asked ourselves each step of the way whether our interactive offered a fair and accurate representation of the refugee experience” (2017). Gamifying the news did not stand in the way of doing good journalism. Journalists saw gamification as compatible in terms of storytelling (2015), the related—and already-cemented—use of interactive graphics, and the desire to keep readers “actively engaged” (2013).

The discourse also positioned gamification as a way to overcome some of journalism’s nagging shortcomings. “Finding new ways to tell stories to younger audiences is a common concern among journalists; news gamification is just one of these ways” (2016). Thus, it was argued, “games allow us to experience things that other storytelling formats don’t get to do” (2016). Advocates promised, “Games communicate differently than other media: They simulate processes rather than telling stories. For this reason, games are great at characterizing the complex behavior of systems” (2011). Gamifying the news could engage “audiences with otherwise complex content” (2015). It had lessons to teach journalists about how to “reach, inform, and engage our readers” (2013), and to “target a millennial audience, as well as boost engagement” (2014).

A relatively recent trend in journalism has been the valorization of engagement as an emergent journalistic norm (see, for example, Lawrence et al., 2018). As already suggested, this was on full display in the metajournalistic discourse about gamification. Gamification was often legitimized as befitting the goals of engagement. Gamifying the

news provided the means for individuals to have a first-hand experience with news events, such as the bombing of Aleppo, a hurricane in Haiti, the challenges of a family farm, a food line in Los Angeles, or violence on the US-Mexico border. These news games engaged audiences to “feel empathy for the real-life people involved in the event” (2016). News games allowed players to “feel an emotion more powerfully than any other medium,” giving consequence to the topic at play (2013) and leading to “deeper thinking about an issue” (2015). According to one documentary journalist turned game designer, “Once I started working in this format, once the technology kind of caught up, to me it has a whole different impact than a documentary film - extremely visceral, extremely deep” (2015). Simply put, news games “engage users in a highly meaningful, memorable and influential way” (2013).

In other metajournalism, legitimizing discourse focused on engagement as directed at the news product itself. A journalist-game designer noted, “When you read an article, of course you want to read the article until the end, but you can always stop because you’re distracted.” But, gamification, he argued, pulled readers in and kept them to the end. “The reader’s engagement is very strong” (2015). Simply put, gamification encouraged the audience to “engage longer” (2012). Meanwhile, one news game that attracted much attention invited players to engage in playing the role of an investigative journalist. The hope was that journalism would be more valued as a result.

There were hints in the discourse that the engagement that came with gamification might not be wholly good. For example, it relied on “additive” – and hence exploitive –

behaviors (2015). Nevertheless, news engagement was such a self-evident good, in the discourse, that the goal of engagement was rarely questioned.

### **Legitimizing Gamification**

Legitimizing discourses about gamification far outweighed delegitimizing discourses. As a general practice, gamification was occasionally seen as exploitive. For example, one trade publication argued that audience data was sometimes abused “to trivialize or gamify the relationship with readers” (2014). Such practices left players “measured and monitored” (2014). When applied to journalism, some believed gamification could “degrade journalistic practice” (2016). Some discourse saw the practice as controversial, as an “ugly neologism that has seen terrific hype and terrific backlash” (2014). There were early skeptics who found “gaming-for-good” as naïve and “cringe-inducing” (2011). Another skeptic saw gamification as a bad sign for journalism: “If people can’t process news without having it turned into a game for them, something’s tragically wrong” (2011).

Discourse about gamifying the news acknowledged such criticisms. In fact, 2011 saw a sustained volley of back-and-forth discourse prompted by criticisms of gamifying the news. But nearly all those criticisms were dismissed as outdated or misguided. The discourse might acknowledge that “(g)amification got a deservedly bad wrap for being kind of cheesy” but that those problems had been addressed with games that treated serious issues respectfully (2015). “Most people think that games have to be trivial, they are not fitted to serious topics,” a journalist-game designer complained. “If you can make movies or you can make comic books on serious issues, why couldn’t you make video

games about that?" A newspaper games editor offered a similar defense, dismissing criticisms as a misunderstanding of games. "It is, in short, an old-fashioned moral panic, a dated reaction to a medium that has been maturing for over 40 years" (2015). Indeed, resistance to gamification was little more than stodginess—stodginess that stood in the way of improving journalism's fate. "Take investigations out of the ivory tower, and stop preaching to the converted and try to bring it to a different audience" (2015). Meanwhile, it was the "progressive editor" that pursued gamification (2015).

Thus, journalists gave full-throated legitimacy to gamifying news. Gamification was the future, it was the present, and it was consistent with journalism's storied past.

When it came to the gamification of journalism, the legitimizing discourse mostly pointed to a practice that hearkened a coming phase of technological and economic solutions to journalism's problems. As one publisher said about gamification, "We are excited about the future and what the dynamically-evolving media landscape has in store for us" (2012). It was promised that gamification "blazed important trails to where journalism is headed" (2011). The discourse connected gamification with other technology-driven and future-oriented trends in journalism, such as "QR codes, augmented reality" (2011), virtual reality, 360-video, and wearables. Gamification was promoted as "the next big technological breakthrough for receiving news" (2011) and as something that needed to be "on the radar on every news organization" (2011). As early as 2006 and as late as 2016, gamification was promoted as the future of media and "the next generation" of journalism (2016).

The discourse also legitimized the practice by showing examples of gamification that were currently being published by reputable news entities, such as ProPublica, the Washington Post, “the BBC, the Guardian, and the New York Times” (2015), and by portraying journalism schools as already onboard with gamifying news (2015). Gamification had arrived. And by linking it to established social media, such as Foursquare and Twitter (2013), the discourse indicated the degree to which the principles of gamification were already widely applied and “approaching ubiquity” (2017).

Meanwhile, gamification need not be feared because it was really an extension of what news organizations have nearly always done. In fact, “for those who think of game strategies as an innovation,” journalists were reminded that crossword puzzles and similar games had a long history (2015). As already hinted, the discourse legitimized gamification by arguing it could overcome past problems and make important news engaging again. It could take news that was thick with statistics and “do so much with it” (2015).

Gamification was also legitimized as a “serious” undertaking. These were not just games, they were “social impact game(s)” (2013), “games with a purpose” (2011) “purpose-driven gaming” (2017), and “(s)mart gamification” (2013). Here too, discourse anticipated critical interlocutors. Gaming was more than entertainment. Likewise, an advocate argued, “While traditional methods of newsmaking like writing and broadcasting may seem more sophisticated and respectable than videogames in theory, the opposite is true in practice” (2011). This discourse confronted notions that games were somehow incompatible with the serious business of journalism.

However, there was another, entirely different kind of legitimization. Legitimizing discourses could be unabashedly utilitarian—it simply worked. When journalists talked about gamification broadly – outside of journalism per se – they saw an engaging and successful practice. The same was true when journalism embraced gamifying the news. As one journalist put it, “gamification has worked very well for us. We launched a badge and achievements program ... and have seen a considerable increase in the amount of content we get and the level of engagement” (2011). Another journalist wrote that same year: “70% of large companies will use the techniques for at least one business process” (2011). A publisher was described as “using gamification to get logins, engagement, and subscriptions. Eight months in, the company has grown traffic and advertising revenue” (2019). A headline promised details on how one platform had “gamified journalism for 1.3 billion monthly page views” (2014); another headline offered the “newsonomics of the newly quantified, gamified news reader” (2014). Simply put, gamification brought in people, clicks, and revenue.

Similarly, journalists legitimized gamification by connecting it to other popular media trends, such as Pokémon Go, which one journalist offered as “proof that gamification...works” (2017). In the search for revenue for news, the Apple Store provided a clear clue: “apps with the highest revenues are games” (2016). Such utilitarian discourses ultimately undercut claims that gamification’s value was ultimately in its ability to improve journalism, rather than just improve the bottom line. However, nearly all of this kind of discourse was aimed at publishers, editors, and other responsible for keep news organizations afloat. The normative – rather than utilitarian – discourse was

overwhelming aimed at working journalists. Here too the discourse was a negotiation—offering up legitimizing discourses that would win over one intended audience without alienating another audience.

## **Conclusions**

While there are contradictory discourses surrounding gamifying the news, a strong, consistent theme emerges. Audience engagement is key to the definition of gamification; it is engagement that places gamification clearly with the boundaries of normative journalism practices; and hence engagement in the serious business of news is key to the legitimization of gamification. This discourse shifted focus away from seeing gamification as a drift toward entertainment and economic values.

There were only minor inflections in the arc of the discourse. Gamification emerged at a time of enormous economic stress on journalism and this was – at least initially – a key theme in the discourse. Gamification, it was hoped – and sometimes feared – would be part of journalism’s new economic model. When the Knight Foundation got behind gamifying news, a significant flurry of discourse on the topic emerged in 2011. This was also the time when critics offered their strongest criticisms. The advocates of gamification addressed these criticisms, sometimes implicitly, and discursively turned to engagement as a central legitimizing concept. Gaming was not infotainment; it was serious business that allowed journalism to build on its strengths and do things it had heretofore struggled to do effectively.

This discourse indicates the degree to which journalism conceives of itself as an exception in regards to the use of gamification. It may be that, as Bogost (2015) argued, that gamification is used as a tool to exploit audience expectations in the realms such as business and technology. Journalism depends on audience attention in order to provide valuable consequential information and by doing so to enact its normative values. As journalists saw it, gamification provides an avenue to “engage users” (Conill and Karlsson, 2016:8) toward a realm with pro-social benefits. So whereas gamification that promotes predatory credit cards would certainly still be identified as topic of concern by journalists, journalists saw their own use of gamification as decidedly different given that the starting intentionality and purpose was different.

Thus, the discourse about gamification also said much about journalism more generally. Journalism was hurting and new technologies, it was hoped, would provide answers. Audience engagement was central to journalism’s role and hence to its social legitimacy (Lawrence et al., 2018). Journalism was about making a difference in people’s lives—well constructed news led people to think deeply and critically and to act accordingly (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014).

Clearly, journalism functions as a discursive institution (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017). Journalists seek to discursively position new practices within the normative frameworks of the institution (Carlson, 2017). They discursively negotiate (Fursich, 2009) through and past contradictions, settling on new scripts – ‘gaming is serious,’ ‘gamification is about deep engagement’ – to maintain the institution and help it adapt to new realities (Picard, 2014).



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