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## About the Journal

*#ISOJ Volume 13, Number 1, Spring 2023*

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### About Us

#ISOJ The Journal of the International Symposium on Online Journalism is an international journal devoted to advancing the scholarship in the area of journalism and innovative technologies. The editors invite manuscripts reporting original research, methodologies relevant to the study of journalism and innovative technologies (online, tablets, mobile platforms, etc.), critical syntheses of research and theoretical perspectives on journalism today. The journal maintains a social scientific and broad behavioral focus. We encourage submissions from scholars outside and within the journalism and mass communication discipline.

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## Editor's Note

By Amy Schmitz Weiss, Ph.D. & Rosental Calmon Alves

Welcome to this 13th volume of the #ISOJ Journal!

We are delighted to present this edition of #ISOJ Journal with five research articles that reflect some of the most pressing issues of journalism in 2023. The papers, which were accepted in a very competitive blind-review process, are attuned to the International Symposium on Online Journalism's tradition of bridging the gap between academia and the news industry.

The first article, "News You Can Use: Pragmatic Solidarity as a News Value in Online Community Journalism," is a case study of the Milwaukee-based Neighborhood News Service. The authors, Ayleen Cabas-Mijares, Joy Jenkins, and Laura Nootbaar, show how the NNS deployed the news value of pragmatic solidarity to cover historically excluded communities.

In "Architects of Necessity: BIPOC News Startups' Critique of Philanthropic Interventions," Meredith D. Clark and Tracie M. Powel analyze the data from 100 BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) news media founders and publishers. They focus on the publishers' efforts to balance "the constraints of digital news production with the information needs of the communities they serve and the demands of the philanthropic support that make their work feasible." Their research opens up key insights into this field and looks at where support and resources are needed for the evolution of BIPOC news startups moving forward.

The third article comes from the Philippines. In "Of Media Shifts and Crises: Mapping Digital Journalism and Online News Deserts in the Philippines," Maria Raizza Renella P. Bello and Robbin Charles M. Dagle identify regions in the Philippines that can be considered "online news deserts." They also analyze contemporary challenges and characteristics of digital journalism in the country.

In the fourth article, researchers from the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics and Department of Computer Science and Engineering Santa Clara University — Subramaniam (Subbu) Vincent, Xuyang Wu, Maxwell Huang, and Yi Fang — study if the journalistic routine of quoting sources can help people and

machines to identify authentic journalistic content online. The article, “Could Quoting Data Patterns Help in Identifying Journalistic Behavior Online?,” shows that “journalistic sourcing routines are deeper in the reporting practice, and their manifestations may be harder to game by inauthentic journalistic and/or news actors.” As AI technology continues to evolve, the news practice of reporters’ sourcing remains a crucial element in journalism to help challenge the ever-changing digital space that poses existential questions of truth, validity and authenticity with news content today.

Finally, the fifth article dives into thousands of reviews of news podcasts. In “Five Stars Because They Tell It Like It Is: A Parasocial Examination of Mainstream, Conservative and Far-Right Reviews on Apple Podcasts,” Marcus Funk, LaRissa Lawrie, and Burton Speakman conclude that “Para-social phenomena appear to be an essential part of podcast loyalty and listening habits; reviews of mainstream news podcasts overall express that loyalty with less frequency and emotional intensity than reviewers of a spectrum of other non-fiction podcast content, including far-right podcasts that are deeply toxic.”

We are very grateful to the fourteen researchers whose articles are published in this 13th Volume of #ISOJ Journal and to all other researchers who participated in the competitive call for papers launched at the 24th ISOJ. We are also grateful to the panel of international researchers who helped us with the selection of the five papers of this volume of the journal and, anonymously, helped the authors with constructive critique and edits. Finally, we want to thank the team at the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas at the University of Texas at Austin for its support of this journal, especially Mallary Tenore, Filipa Rodrigues and James Ian Tennant.



## **“News You Can Use:” Pragmatic Solidarity as a News Value in Online Community Journalism**

***By Ayleen Cabas-Mijares, Joy Jenkins, and Laura Nootbaar***

*This research examines how a hyperlocal online news outlet deployed the news value of pragmatic solidarity to cover historically excluded communities. Through a case study of the Milwaukee-based Neighborhood News Service (NNS), we analyzed NNS’s most viewed and engaging news articles (N = 240) and semi-structured interviews with NNS staff members (N = 7). These data revealed that this news outlet exhibits the principles of pragmatic solidarity with a priority on identifying critical information needs and sharing actionable information with readers. NNS journalists enhanced value for marginalized communities through building trust with residents, social justice-oriented organizations, and individuals as a means of identifying sources and story ideas and promoting the perspectives of the community and stigmatized groups in coverage. A focus on pragmatic solidarity also involved leveraging technology to address the information needs of the community, with the NNS website functioning as a platform to connect residents with information and resources to meet these needs. Lastly, NNS staff members challenged the stereotypes and stigmatization evident in traditional local media through presenting the residents of these communities as problem-solvers who initiated solutions to issues that impact their communities.*

Local news plays a vital role in communities, informing and equipping citizens to actively participate in civic life. In “communities of place,” local information is the core of community media, whether it consists of serious information, courageous editorials, or gossip (Reader & Hatcher, 2011). The presence of local journalists in a community can foster collective identity and a sense of connectedness, contributing to “the cohesion of local community life” (Harte et al., 2017, p. 161). Local journalists can also serve as community champions and advocates by bringing people together to discuss community and political issues or campaign for change (Hess & Waller, 2017). Studies of community journalism have grown and largely focus on relationships between journalists and the communities they serve (Reader, 2012).

As local news organizations have worked to adapt to trends resulting from the move to a digital-, mobile-, and platform-oriented media environment, discon-

nections have emerged between local journalists and their audiences. Franklin (2006) argued that the move toward larger, centralized newspaper offices has removed journalists from their communities. Similarly, Nielsen (2015) reinforced that local journalists cannot assume that their work is valued but must constantly prove it is relevant and trustworthy. When there is a lack of relevant news coverage, some audiences may turn to interpersonal networks to meet their information needs and stay connected to their communities (McCollough et al., 2017).

Many local journalists are working to rebuild or strengthen these relationships, with some focused particularly on engaging with audiences who have been historically marginalized by legacy media outlets. Publishers of hyperlocal journalism focus on creating wide community benefit, citing community value as a primary motivation, including journalistic initiatives and “offline action that helped build local social capital, and strengthen communities in concrete ways” (Harte et al., 2017, p. 172). Local news organizations increasingly agree that they have a mandate to improve their community or support those who do (Ali et al., 2020).

This approach resonates with news value of solidarity, which focuses attention on the systemic failures that prevent communities — particularly minoritized ones — from enjoying equitable access to opportunity and safety (Varma, 2022). Solidarity, Varma argues, leads journalists to seek not just the testimonies of minoritized people but their social and political perspectives, which showcases their agency. Furthermore, solidarity-driven stories entice audiences to engage in transformative action, going beyond mere empathetic feelings toward marginalized individuals (Varma, 2020).

Varma’s pioneering work about solidarity has explored its philosophy and practices in the context of *mainstream* coverage of minoritized communities. We explore the news value of solidarity in a different context: *hyperlocal online* coverage for and by minoritized communities. Drawing from textual and interview data, we examine the online journalism practices of the *Neighborhood News Service* (NNS) and how it draws from the news value of solidarity to cover Black and Latinx Milwaukee neighborhoods. The observed journalism practices in this online and diverse local environment allow for theorizing a new news value within the umbrella of solidarity reporting — *pragmatic* solidarity — which prioritizes the sharing of actionable information with minoritized communities so that people can exercise their agency and address contingent problems without losing sight of the systemic nature of social injustices.

## **Shaping the News: News Values and Local Journalism**

News values, or the criteria that shape news selection, play a key role in the production of news. Journalists are faced with more options for stories than their

organizations have resources to cover, so they reduce phenomena to typifications that allow them to make decisions quickly (Tuchman, 1978). In determining story suitability, journalists look for stories that are important or interesting, and an ideal story carries both qualities (Gans, 1979). Gans found that stories for journalists became important based on factors such as the rank of the actors, impact on the nation or national interest, impact on the greatest number of people, and significance for past and future. News values build on these assessments, functioning as a “shared shorthand operational understanding of what working journalists are required to produce to deadline” (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017, p. 1470). Parks (2019), in an analysis of the history of news values in the United States, found that they have remained consistent for a century, with news factors such as prominence, proximity, unusualness, magnitude, human interest and timeliness dating to the earliest textbooks and mirroring contemporary texts, with conflict the only addition.

Galtung and Ruge (1965) initiated the study of news values through proposing 12 factors shaping news selection. As summarized by O’Neill and Harcup (2019), the factors are: frequency (unfolding within the publication cycle of the outlet), threshold (the greater the intensity, the greater the impact), unambiguity (how easily an event can be interpreted or understood), meaningfulness (culturally familiar), consonance (predicting newsworthy events), unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite nations, reference to elite people, reference to persons, reference to something negative. Schulz (1982) built on this work, identifying six dimensions to news selection and 19 news factors: status (elite nation, elite institution, elite person); valence (aggression, controversy, values, success); relevance (consequence, concern); identification (proximity, ethnocentrism, personalization, emotions); consonance (theme, stereotype, predictability); and dynamics (timeliness, uncertainty, unexpectedness).

Golding and Elliott (1979, as cited in O’Neill & Harcup, 2019) suggested that news values emerge from occupational norms, and assumptions and could be reduced to audience, accessibility and fit. These considerations emphasize whether topics are important, interesting or relevant to the audience. Some outlets, however, are guided more by commercial values than civic values to achieve audience reach and popularity, with an emphasis on audience choice becoming even more prominent in the digital age (Harcup, 2019; Harcup & O’Neill, 2017).

News organizations now have social media and audience engagement managers who draw from audience metrics to influence news selection, often incorporating perspectives from outside traditional journalism (see Tandoc et al., 2021). Traditional journalists may also reconfigure their news values based less on content characteristics and more on the characteristics and biases of the journalists themselves. As Tandoc et al. (2021) wrote, “What might be odd for one editor might not be odd for another, so news values do not exclusively reside on

news events and issues. They are internalized and deployed by journalists” (p. 87).

As personal background and bias inform perceptions and assessments of newsworthiness, news values play a role in (mis)representation. Ndlela (2005) argued that news values are “trained tendencies that shape the reported world while rendering invisible those people and events that do not meet explicit or implicit standards of newsworthiness” (p. 785). With American newsrooms being dominated by white cisgender heterosexual men and commercial interests (Usher, 2021), the standard of newsworthiness meets the point of view of the hegemonic majority, leaving the experiences of people outside those identifications more susceptible to misrepresentation.

Concerns about dominant conceptions of newsworthiness are evident in scholarly work on ideology, hegemony, gatekeeping, and other areas, with individuals and organizations working to challenge these conceptions through producing alternative or “counter-hegemonic” forms of journalism that “problematize the very concept of news values,” such as feminist magazines and investigative online news sites (Harcup, 2019, p. 6). The increasingly fragmented news market and interest in nontraditional and marginalized journalistic genres and discourses has led to a focus on “soft” and hybrid news, as well as interpretive approaches to journalism (Mast & Temmerman, 2021).

### **News Values in Local News**

Scholars have suggested that local journalists embrace a distinctive set of news values that embrace human potential, emotions and problem-solving, prioritizing narrative appeal through telling stories that resonate with readers, featuring both national elites and locally prominent individuals, and using human-interest angles (Hess & Waller, 2017). Local media also distinguish between “low threshold” issues — those that people experience in their daily lives — and “high threshold” issues — those with which they have no experience (Hess & Waller, 2017). Hanusch (2015) found an emphasis among local journalists on strengthening political engagement in their communities and providing information people need to participate in political activity. Local print coverage also reflects elements of social cohesion in communities, including social networks, solidarity and helpfulness (Leupold et al., 2018).

Even as digital and mobile media are “changing the idea of what is local, near or proximate” (Schmitz Weiss, 2018, p. 47), audiences expect journalists to be personally engaged with and understand their community’s history (Pew Research Center, 2019). Heider et al. (2005) found that readers preferred their local newspapers to serve more as “good neighbors” than watchdogs, with a focus on providing a forum for community views, highlighting interesting people and groups in the community, and offering solutions to community problems.

Achieving these aims can be difficult as the local sector grapples with dwindling circulation, shrinking newsrooms and increasingly consolidated ownership models, as well as fewer resources to invest in digital innovation (Ali et al., 2018; Hess & Waller, 2017; Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020). Research has found that declines in local news have contributed to decreased civic knowledge and engagement (Hayes & Lawless, 2015, 2018).

### **Solidarity in Journalism: Centering the Marginalized**

Solidarity has always informed reporting, even though it has been historically unacknowledged as a news value. Drawing from political philosophy, Varma (2020, p. 1706) defines solidarity as a categorical commitment to social justice, “when social justice is defined as dignity for everyone.” As a news value, solidarity refrains from traditional individualistic framing and elite focus to render the perspectives of marginalized communities newsworthy (Varma, 2022). Furthermore, solidarity requires reporters to develop non-extractive community relationships that uphold and enable the agency of minoritized audiences (Varma, 2022).

According to Varma (2022), solidarity in journalism can manifest as (a) intra-group solidarity, based on shared identities, heritage and/or experiences; (b) civic solidarity, when geographic proximity binds people together; (c) political solidarity, when people share commitments to certain principles, causes and goals; and (d) moral solidarity which, in the words of Scholz (2008, p. 42), calls for “responses to other humans in need based on our shared humanity.” In her study about local coverage of homelessness in San Francisco, Varma (2022) found that civic and political solidarity were most used among reporters as they centered the voices of local officials and organizations who sought to address systemic issues facing the homeless community. Moral and intragroup solidarity manifested the least. However, Varma argues, moral solidarity is the news value that yields the most transformative potential for journalism as it leads reporters to seek and place authority on the perspectives of marginalized people, not just their benefactors. As marginalized voices are given credence, their position as agentic humans deserving of rights and protection comes to the fore in solidarity reporting.

Varma’s pioneering studies about solidarity illuminate its use in local mainstream coverage about marginalized communities. As this study engages a hyperlocal news outlet composed mostly by minoritized reporters covering minoritized communities, distinct manifestations of solidarity emerge, namely pragmatic solidarity.

Within human rights studies, Farmer and Gastineau (2002, p. 657) defined pragmatic solidarity as the “rapid deployment of our tools and resources to improve the health and well-being of those who suffer [structural] violence.” The

emphasis on timely responses to the needs of the marginalized anchors the concept of pragmatic solidarity. However, Farmer and Gastineau (2002, p. 659) underscore that pragmatic solidarity must go beyond prompt service delivery to seek “equality and justice” for the marginalized.

By centering justice in pragmatic solidarity, the needs and interests of the marginalized, as articulated *by* the marginalized, become a priority (Farmer, 2004; Farmer & Gastineau, 2002). Farmer and Gutiérrez (2013, p. 45) specify that, in working to address the needs of the poor, a focus on justice takes human rights workers to first, “seek the roots [sic] causes of the problem;” second, to “elicit the experiences and views of poor people;” and, third, to “incorporate these views into all observations, judgments, and actions.” The marginalized, then, become active partners in the execution of their own liberation.

Pragmatic solidarity as a news value, then, directs reporters’ attention to the perspectives of the marginalized to identify not only the root causes of their marginalization but also strategies to address contingent and systemic hardships. Stories shaped by pragmatic solidarity would prioritize the coverage of resources, tools and courses of action that are readily available to marginalized audiences and could improve their situation in the short term. These stories, then, simultaneously draw from and enable the agency of marginalized communities as the narratives push readers to action.

The approach to news making that pragmatic solidarity — and solidarity more broadly — enables is particularly relevant for minoritized communities who have been historically stigmatized in mainstream U.S. journalism (Wenzel, 2019). Studies have found that African American and Latinx residents in major U.S. cities have felt neglected and harmed by local news coverage (Wenzel et al., 2016). Mishandled interactions with reporters, stigmatizing story selection and framing, and a lack of newsroom diversity have compromised relationships with minoritized communities (Bui, 2018). Furthermore, Wenzel and Crittenden (2020) found that members of these communities perceived that journalists only covered crime stories, and prominent residents — including community leaders and business owners — said they had little contact with local reporters. These instances highlight how some journalistic practices have become extractive with reporters taking interest in minoritized communities only when their stories have shock value for other audiences (Yahr, 2019).

At NNS, reporters note that news production is designed to address the specific needs of their selected minoritized audiences. Editor-in-Chief Ron Smith notes that particularly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic his newsroom has prioritized the production of “news you can use” (personal communication, November 5, 2021). That is, news that shares actionable information and resources for residents to solve or alleviate pressing problems, such as eviction, food insecurity and health care needs. This focus resonates with the principles

of pragmatic solidarity and opens the door to investigate the following research questions in the context of hyperlocal online news production:

**RQ1:** How does pragmatic solidarity manifest in NNS coverage?

**RQ2:** How does pragmatic solidarity shape NNS journalistic practices?

## **Method**

To address these questions, we use an exploratory multi-method qualitative case study. A case-study approach allows us to obtain an in-depth, holistic understanding of a complex phenomenon (Haas, 2004). Case study uses detailed investigations to illuminate how behaviors and processes are influenced by and influence the real-life contexts in which they emerge (Cassell & Symon, 2004). Case study's strength lies in the opportunity to evaluate a variety of types of evidence, in this case, documents, interviews, observations and artifacts (Yin, 2009). Here, we examine a unique case in the context of a specific issue or concern (Creswell & Poth, 2016), that is, the under-studied landscape of grass-roots hyperlocal digital news.

## **Case Description**

NNS launched in 2011 as a nonprofit online newsroom covering three historically Black Milwaukee neighborhoods. In the application for seed funds from the Zilber Family Foundation, journalist Sharon McGowan proposed NNS would “remedy Milwaukee mass media’s habit of ignoring the city’s neighborhoods except for stories about crime and decay” (Gunn as cited in Lowe, 2014, p. 53). The Diederich College of Communication at Marquette University provided office space, equipment, the editor-in-chief’s salary, and unpaid interns to support NNS.

Two years later, NNS had doubled its budget with grants from the Greater Milwaukee Foundation and the Knight Foundation, which allowed it to expand its coverage to 14 neighborhoods. Today, NNS Editor-in-Chief Ron Smith, an African American Pulitzer-prize winner and Marquette alumnus, leads the work of five journalists and three staff in 18 Milwaukee neighborhoods. By focusing on this newsroom, this study examines how pragmatic solidarity guides local online coverage in an urban environment.

## **Sample and Procedures**

First, we conducted an inductive textual analysis of 240 news articles published on the NNS website between March 2020 and February 2022. For each month within that timeframe, the 10 articles with higher audience engagement metrics on NNS’s Facebook account were selected for analysis. We considered number



of views, reactions, shares and comments to assess engagement in the social platform. Facebook was prioritized for data collection because it is the platform that generates the most audience engagement around NNS content, according to newsroom staff. Several NNS reporters also agreed that Facebook was central to NNS's online news distribution strategy because most of their audiences got exposed to and shared NNS news using this platform. A Facebook-intensive strategy is not unique to NNS, as many other digital-only newsrooms have used the platform to better reach and expand targeted audiences at the local level (Weber et al., 2019). The stories selected covered several topics, including public safety, employment, housing, health and wellness, education and economic development.

Considering engagement in data collection is relevant in this study because a feature of pragmatic solidarity is the centering of audience's information needs and the sharing of resources to address contingent problems. Articles that generate higher engagement not only are viewed more but are, potentially, more valued by NNS readers. For articles that share resources and solutions, this high engagement might signal that the content has indeed resonated with readers' needs. While we recognize that these engagement metrics are not optimal, they provide the current study with an adequate proxy to the audience's approach to and appreciation of NNS content. Future studies will examine the audience perception of NNS and its approach to online local journalism; however, an audience study is outside of the scope of this manuscript. The stories selected covered several topics, including public safety, employment, housing, health and wellness, education and economic development.

Second, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the NNS staff (N = 7), including the editor-in-chief, staff reporters, community engagement reporter, and others. The interviews lasted an average of approximately 50 minutes and were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Questions focused on asking participants to describe the mission of NNS, its coverage area and audience, approaches to developing story ideas and sourcing, editorial goals and perceived impact and community role, among others.

In the last phase of the research, we launched an online survey on NNS's website to capture the perspectives of its readers. The survey, which remains open, addresses how often readers access content, their engagement with content, the perceived accuracy of neighborhood depictions, and areas for improvement. We will use the survey to recruit audience members for a series of focus groups, to be conducted in early spring, about their perspectives of the value of NNS news and their experiences with NNS journalists.

The three authors independently coded the NNS articles and interview transcripts. We engaged in an initial immersion in the data and then proceeded with line-by-line coding, comparing each line to the previous one (Tracy, 2013).



During secondary-cycle coding, we reorganized and condensed the first-cycle codes into categories and themes (Saldaña, 2009). We discussed and compared the themes we identified, which we describe below.

## Findings

The analysis shows that the Milwaukee *Neighborhood News Service* hyperlocal digital newsroom has adopted solidarity as a news value. Defined as a commitment to upholding everyone's right to live with dignity, solidarity helps reporters seek stories that highlight systemic inequity and the perspectives of the oppressed (Varma, 2022). Pragmatic solidarity, as defined by Farmer and Gutiérrez (2013), narrows down the scope of news-making to focus on presenting the public with viable interventions or solutions to contingent problems. Furthermore, pragmatic solidarity requires reporters to identify and assess issues *alongside* the marginalized. In line with this value, NNS coverage intentionally highlighted the systemic nature of social issues, recognized the agency of residents of historically excluded neighborhoods, and prioritized sharing actionable information with readers.

This approach, NNS reporters noted, has allowed this outlet to build trust with residents and social justice-oriented organizations and activists serving in the targeted neighborhoods. By steering away from stigmatizing representations, leveraging digital technologies to identify information needs, and showcasing initiatives and perspectives from the community, NNS's coverage also reflects the news values of helpfulness and problem-solving, which enable social cohesion in local communities (Leupold et. al, 2018).

Our interview data and textual analysis reveal that NNS' work resonates with pragmatic solidarity in three ways: (a) NNS news coverage uses context and history to reveal the systemic nature of community issues alongside the success of minoritized communities; (b) the perspectives and needs of community members guide coverage; and (c) NNS draws attention to the perspectives and initiatives of marginalized communities, going beyond their experiences of dispossession.

### **Context Matters: Showing the System's Failures *and* Black and Brown Success**

Pragmatic solidarity relies on nuanced knowledge about the root causes of social problems (Farmer & Gutiérrez, 2013). As solidarity insists on enabling transformational action (Varma, 2020), acknowledging the systemic nature of local issues becomes key for journalists to, on the one hand, hold the appropriate entities accountable for the continuance or exacerbation of problems and, on the other, to effectively assess responses to those problems. All journalists at NNS showcased a deep awareness about the power imbalances that have

rendered Black and Latinx communities in Milwaukee particularly vulnerable to, for instance, poverty, food insecurity, eviction and subpar education. This awareness not only informed their reporting practices but also the content of their articles.

A baseline understanding of systemic discrimination allows NNS to start reporting from a place of nuance and empathy. NNS Managing Editor Ricardo Pimentel noted that NNS coverage is unique because it does not question the existence of social inequities, which opens up time and space to investigate these inequities' impact on people's lives. "We recognize all the pathogens that afflict our community as well as all the good things that are happening to it. But ... the undercurrent are the pathogens, the challenges these communities face" (personal communication, November 4, 2022). Pimentel said that providing fair and accurate information about these social "pathogens" to residents is essential because information is power. The goal, he argued, is to give NNS audiences "the information they need on a grassroots level to be aware of the problems and find some solutions."

For Senior Staff Reporter Edgar Mendez, the mark of an NNS story is the focus on context. "When we cover something, we are covering an issue, not a specific incident" (personal communication, September 30, 2021). All NNS reporters noted that, when considering the communities NNS serves, other outlets in Milwaukee tend to pay more attention to particular events, like shootings, than to the broader issues and catalysts of those incidents, like chronic disinvestment or over-policing. These testimonies suggest that NNS journalists favor thematic over episodic news frames or, at least, use a mix of these in individual news stories, which helps readers to appreciate how systems work and avoid blaming individuals for their misfortune (Boukes, 2022; Iyengar, 1991). In a story titled "An enduring system of disadvantage," NNS reported on a study by the UW-Milwaukee Center for Economic Development that detailed patterns of systemic oppression in the infamous 53206 zip code in Milwaukee: "The study provides an in-depth look at over two decades worth of data on factors that significantly impact 53206 residents, including employment and poverty rates" (Mendez, 2019, para. 23).

A story by Ana Martinez-Ortiz covered the motivations and legacy of anti-racist youth-led movements in Milwaukee to situate the protests that took place in the city in response to George Floyd's murder in 2020. Martinez-Ortiz emphasized the importance of learning this history to make a fair assessment of the present and provided readers with a list of resources to educate themselves:

Part of addressing the root of the problem is understanding how history has shaped the policies, practices and behaviors of today. Below is a list of critical and historical resources. The list is broken into several parts and has sections on Milwaukee's history, educational resources, films/documentaries and books. (Martinez-Ortiz, 2020, para. 17)

NNS news stories, then, leveraged history and data to demonstrate that community issues were more outcomes of systemic inequities designed to imprint precarity on these neighborhoods than the result of residents' incompetence or deviance. To achieve these narratives, NNS relied mostly on the voices of residents and activists who shared their perspectives and strategies for improvement. For example, in a profile of organizer Nate Hamilton, NNS reported on his work with the Milwaukee Police Department to improve police-community relations. In the story, Hamilton emphasized the importance of having residents, particularly Black people, involved in police reform. Black people "both as individuals and as a whole, have failed to acknowledge the importance of ourselves," Hamilton said. "It has become my goal to encourage people to attach themselves to what they care about and fight for it" (Byers & Fogarty, 2020, para. 6).

The centering of community voices, which we will expand on in the next section, enabled nuanced news narratives in which the complexity and severity of systemic issues did not diminish residents' ability to understand or address them. This resonates with the news value of solidarity, which calls journalists to seek the perspectives of people at the receiving end of oppression (Varma, 2022). Furthermore, in the spirit of pragmatic solidarity, these stories drew from the expertise of minoritized residents to explain discrimination systems and showcase effective community interventions.

### **Centering Community Needs: The "News You Can Use" Approach**

Farmer and Gutiérrez (2013, p. 45) argue that within the framework of pragmatic solidarity, the views of the marginalized must guide "all observations, judgments, and actions" of those who attempt to empower them. As NNS advances its mission to serve minoritized communities in Milwaukee, the newsroom makes active efforts to learn these populations' information needs and cater its coverage to fulfill them, an approach that challenges news decisions dictated by journalists' individual characteristics and biases (Tandoc et al., 2021). Community engagement practices, according to all study participants, sit at the core of newsmaking in NNS, with reporters leveraging their own presence in these communities, the NNS platform, and mobile communication technologies to stay attuned to the demands of readers.

Considering the existing news ecosystem in Milwaukee and the particularities of Black and Latinx neighborhoods, Editor-in-Chief Ron Smith (personal com-

munication, November 5, 2021) decided that NNS would adopt a “news you can use” approach, which strives to “bring news to a ground level” so that audiences can know exactly what steps to take to either access resources or prevent problems. NNS, then, used journalism as a tool to support readers. Importantly, NNS coverage prioritized the voices of residents, showcasing the perspectives, agency, and resourcefulness of people who live in historically Black and Latinx neighborhoods, supporting local news’ emphasis on highlighting conflict-resolution and human-interest stories (Hess & Waller, 2017).

This approach manifests as NNS’s articles are notably action- and solutions-oriented. Following pragmatic solidarity (Farmer & Gastineau, 2002), a significant portion of the coverage provided residents with resources to address issues that called for a rapid response. For example, NNS posts weekly an article titled “5 Things to Know,” which informs residents about events and resources. During the height of the pandemic, many of these articles became “COVID-19 Editions” in which reporters offered updates about vaccination sites, public health policies, mask distribution, webinars about health and budget management, and more. In the housing beat, Byers published an article titled “What Milwaukee homeowners (and those who want to be) should know” (Byers, 2021a) that shared a list of organizations and resources to support prospective and current homeowners. These resources were explicitly catered for Black and Latinx residents who, the article noted, must deal with the remnants of discriminatory systems like redlining. NNS, then, was intentional in adapting its coverage to the circumstances and needs of its main audiences, rather than privileging the power elite (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017).

NNS staff members asserted that the action orientation of their coverage is a newsroom priority. Reporter Sam Woods said NNS seeks to provide “information that illuminates what [residents] are going through... or helps them navigate what they’re going through on a day-to-day basis” (personal communication, October 21, 2021). For staff reporter PrincessSafiya Byers (personal communication, September 30, 2021), service always trumps style:

Prior to NNS, and even in school, we learned about narrative writing, how to be a good writer, how to tell a good story, what words to use, all that cute stuff. And then, once I started at NNS, I learned very quickly that that’s cute and cool, but people who need things don’t care about how good of a writer you are. They don’t care about your performance.

Similarly, Woods focuses on how readers can use his reporting to improve their lives. He highlighted how, during the pandemic, he noticed other local outlets reporting on policy and administrative challenges, particularly with the rollout of economic stimulus and other social programs. Meanwhile, NNS devoted coverage to connecting residents with resources. “Our coverage of it was, ‘If you’ve

gotten pushback from DHS about money you're entitled to, you're not alone ... if you meet these criteria, you're eligible for this money. Don't let anyone tell you differently and keep calling this number” (personal communication, October 21, 2021). This type of advocacy connects with the problem-solving orientation proposed by the news value of pragmatic solidarity.

NNS reporters also considered that establishing ethical and non-extractive relationships with neighborhood residents was key to fulfilling NNS's mission. Reporter Matt Martinez argued that, when approaching minoritized communities, his interaction with the interviewee could be as important as the story. “If nothing else comes out of a story, I want somebody to feel like they were able to express what they were going through ... and feel like somebody listened to them. I'm not just there to get a soundbite” (personal communication, September 30, 2021). This resonates with the principles Smith and Pimentel said they have established as editors, which require NNS journalists to earn the communities' stories instead of feeling entitled to them. Good community relationships, Pimentel contended, are fundamental for NNS to gain trust and, thus, share information that readers will feel confident acting upon (personal communication, November 4, 2022).

NNS reporters actively participate in community engagement practices. Most of them live or grew up in the covered neighborhoods, which equips them with first-hand experiences that, they say, bring nuance and credibility to their reporting. It is normal practice for these journalists to be present in the neighborhoods and community events when they are not on assignment. “Even if I'm not covering things, I kind of show up if I have the time” (P. Byers, personal communication, September 30, 2021).

Additionally, journalists in NNS said that they dwell in the same digital spaces as their target audiences. Community Engagement Reporter Ana Martinez-Ortiz noted that Milwaukee is a “Facebook city,” with many Black and Latinx neighborhoods and organizations using the platform to voice concerns or announce events and initiatives that would be of interest for NNS (personal communication, October 8, 2021). Reporters said that they constantly monitor Facebook to get story ideas and share resources.

Pimentel also highlighted the News 414 joint initiative between NNS and *Wisconsin Watch* (another non-profit digital newsroom in Madison), which allows residents to provide news tips to or request information from NNS directly via text message. Through the News 414 service, NNS reporters can assist residents in finding content — by NNS or other outlets and organizations — that would help them address problems. “A brutal truth about our audience is that they have a lot on their plate,” said Pimentel, so “making news digestible and accessible and helpful is vital for us and for them ... Their questions and problems guide us (personal communication, November 4, 2022).”

These community engagement and news distribution practices resonate with pragmatic solidarity in that they center the perspectives and needs of the marginalized at all stages of news production. Editor-in-Chief Ron Smith (personal communication, November 5, 2021) argued that grounding coverage in the community's wisdom serves multiple purposes for NNS, as it dispels stigmatizing representations of urban Black and Latinx communities, provides actionable information for residents to either help themselves or their neighbors, and restores trust between the community and journalists.

### **Communities in Action: Minoritized People as the Solution**

Research has found that local news in the United States still struggles to disrupt extractive news practices and harmful narratives about minoritized communities (Bui, 2018; Wenzel & Crittenden, 2020; Wenzel et al., 2016). The focus on episodic coverage and the over-reliance on official local sources have been some of the elements that contribute to marginalized communities feeling unheard. In contrast, NNS stories favor the voices of diverse neighborhood residents over authority figures, such as politicians or police officers, evident in traditional news values (Schulz, 1982). The perspectives of community members not only shaped story selection but also the news narratives themselves, as residents and members of grassroots organizations comprised the majority of the quoted sources. Moreover, in the "Community Voices" section, residents are given a space to publish opinion pieces on the NNS website.

In alignment with the news value of solidarity, NNS coverage rendered newsworthy the perspectives and projects of the communities. Beyond showing hardship and oppression as the main features of life in Milwaukee's north and south sides, NNS consistently portrayed Black and Latinx residents as problem-solvers and innovators whose initiatives contribute to the community's well-being. For example, a profile of Jeremy Walton, an African American teacher, highlights how his work defies negative stereotypes and contributes to the incorporation of more Black men in early childhood education (Martinez, 2021a). Another story covered the Zen Den, a space that two northside residents created in partnership with Peace Garden Project MKE and Mental Health America of Wisconsin to provide healing and wellness tools to the surrounding community (Martinez, 2022).

This focus on the agency of residents was salient in NNS content and part of staff members' efforts to show a fuller and more accurate picture of these neighborhoods. Smith (personal communication, November 5, 2021) insisted that NNS's goal is to "educate, illuminate, and celebrate," which brings to the fore important issues as well as small and big victories in the community. A story about Bellies and Babees, a nonprofit that assists local mothers in need, illustrates this as it showcases the impact of an organization founded by Milwaukee southside residents (Martinez, 2021b). The services this nonprofit reportedly

provides help minoritized mothers navigate a wide range of issues, from housing to childcare and employment. The article, then, shows community members as active agents alleviating community issues.

The consistent coverage of residents' initiatives has recontextualized the neighborhoods for NNS reporters, including those who were born and raised in the city. "I grew up in Milwaukee — in one of the neighborhoods we cover — so then you're like, 'I didn't even know all these cool people lived here'" (P. Byers, personal communication, September 30, 2021). This comment, anecdotally, speaks of how stigmatizing and issue-oriented coverage of central city neighborhoods of Milwaukee has obscured the fact that many people living in these marginalized areas manage to not just survive but also thrive against the odds.

Uplifting and humanizing representation of minoritized people is, then, part of the NNS brand. A significant number of stories highlighted the initiatives of youth. To illustrate, one article profiled Que El-Amin, a young resident who "has combined his passion for architecture with his need to serve by creating affordable housing for some of Milwaukee's most economically challenged neighborhoods" (Byers, 2021b, para. 4). Stories like this are relevant for Editor-in-Chief Ron Smith because "Black and Brown people need to see themselves winning, contributing. That's our story, too" (personal communication, November 5, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

This study examined pragmatic solidarity as a local news value present in the editorial philosophies and work of the Milwaukee *Neighborhood News Service* (NNS). As a news value, pragmatic solidarity emphasizes the perspectives of the marginalized, illuminating the systemic factors contributing to their marginalization as well as solutions for addressing the hardships they face. Pragmatic solidarity builds on traditional functions of community media, including providing a forum for community views, highlighting interesting people and groups in the community, and offering solutions to community problems (Heider et al., 2005). Pragmatic solidarity is, however, distinct in that it draws almost exclusively from the perspectives of historically excluded publics to establish newsworthiness, framing, community engagement and news distribution strategies, and a problem-solving orientation in news. This approach differs significantly from news-selection practices based on traditional news values reflecting established professional norms and assumptions (Golding & Elliott, 1979), including prominence, proximity, unusualness, magnitude, human interest, timeliness and conflict (Parks, 2019).

Rather, NNS journalists identify resources, tools and actions that readers can take to improve their situation, whether they are reporting on organizations assisting the unemployed, resources to find affordable housing, access to



healthcare and banking services or others. This shows an emphasis on “low threshold” issues (Hess & Waller, 2017) as well as efforts to create alternative or “counter-hegemonic” forms of journalism that problematize established news values (Harcup, 2019). These stories also serve local information needs in that they are original, focused on the local community, and addressing critical information needs, such as health, transportation and education (Napoli et al., 2017).

The “news you can use” approach outlines the steps readers should take to access resources or prevent problems, particularly in times of crisis. NNS coverage is solutions-oriented, reflecting the turn in local journalism to identify problems as well as examine ways to solve them (Ali et al., 2020; Wenzel et al., 2016). This practice broadly reflects the news value of solidarity — particularly moral solidarity (Varma, 2022) — in its emphasis on enabling responses to systemic issues. However, as this hyperlocal nonprofit is comprised mostly by staff of minoritized backgrounds serving audiences who are often ignored and stigmatized by news media, NNS’s deployment of solidarity has distinct characteristics that prioritize not only service and fair representation, but the explicit recognition of the contributions of minoritized people, challenging stereotypes that can accompany traditional news values (Ndlela, 2005).

This coverage, therefore, illuminates the work that people in marginalized neighborhoods are doing to enhance social cohesion. NNS staff members emphasized that their editorial decision-making is driven by the perspectives and needs of community members, following Farmer and Gutiérrez’s (2013) call that decisions and actions in pragmatic solidarity be guided by the views of the oppressed. Pragmatic solidarity, as applied in journalism, reflects a transformational rather than extractive approach to reporting that listens to sources, builds relationships over time, and returns to communities for follow-up reporting or to identify opportunities for improvement (Heider et al., 2005; Yahr, 2019).

NNS’s community-engaged approach leverages the experiences of community members in ways that go beyond stereotypes or traumatic experiences, instead featuring stories of community uplift. This challenges traditional news coverage that can leave African American and Latinx audiences feeling neglected and harmed (Wenzel et al., 2016). Rather, NNS’s editorial framing aims to offer a sense of agency to readers and make clear how they can take part in transformational action (Varma, 2020). It also allows journalists to build trust with their readers and enhance their reporting with first-hand experiences. NNS seeks to repair the negative interactions with reporters, editorial stigmatization, and lack of newsroom diversity prevalent in the news industry (Bui, 2018).

NNS’s coverage, as evident in the interviews and textual analysis, also goes deeper, addressing the systemic nature of social issues, offering historical context, and acknowledging how these issues have disproportionately imprinted



precarity on marginalized groups. In doing so, it functions as a form of “mediated social capital” (Hess, 2015), specifically in its emphasis on bonding (fostering community), bridging (sharing information with people), and linking (connecting people with decision makers). Rather than favoring topics like crime and privileging the voices of elite sources (Wenzel & Crittenden, 2020), these stories prioritize the voices of neighborhood residents.

This case study opens opportunities to continue exploring the impact of solidarity as a news value on journalism epistemologies, practices and content. More studies are necessary to critically examine the circumstances that enable the centering of social justice and human dignity in news reporting at local, regional, national and international levels. Furthermore, audience studies must complement such research to help elucidate to what extent the embrace of solidarity as a news value contributes to journalists’ efforts to ethically engage communities in news making and (re)build trust with minoritized constituencies. Such research would enable serious assessments of the potentialities and pitfalls of solidarity that could lead to creative strategies that maximize its potential to improve journalism practice and restore the institution’s credibility.

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## Could Quoting Data Patterns Help in Identifying Journalistic Behavior Online?

**By Subramaniam (Subbu) Vincent, Xuyang Wu, Maxwell Huang, and Yi Fang, Markkula Center for Applied Ethics and Department of Computer Science and Engineering Santa Clara University**

*One of the hardest problems for recommenders and aggregators when sorting news and news-like content is to identify whether a news site is in fact a “journalistic actor” or is acting as a journalist does or “should.” The problem of journalistic boundaries online — what counts as journalism and what does not — is a hard one for news ranking and distribution. Journalism’s contested ethics complicate the algorithmic approach further. Quoting, one of the most rudimentary routines in everyday journalism, is a key marker of journalistic behavior. Our question is: Could analyzing quotes for source diversity proportions in “news” sites show us any identifiable boundaries between different types of news sites such as local, national, hyper-partisan, disinformation sites and others? Our hypothesis is that quoting related data may be useful. We examined quotes data extracted from several thousand English news sites and found that the case for classification boundaries does exist.*

One of the hardest problems for digital news aggregators and social media products when sorting news and news-like content is to identify whether a publisher or author is, in fact, a journalistic actor or is acting as a journalist does or “should.” Both news and the boundaries of journalism (Carlson & Lewis, 2015) are not well-defined and continually contested in democracy. While some debates are long-running, the internet, search and social media have brought a new turbulence to the discussions about what is journalism and what is not. The problem of journalistic boundaries and contested journalistic ethics complicates the algorithmic approach to news ranking and distribution.

Quoting, one of the most rudimentary routines in everyday journalism, is a marker of journalistic behavior. Could analyzing quote data such as source diversity proportions for “news” sites show us any identifiable boundaries in such behavior? Would local news sites differ from their national counterparts? How would hyper-partisan sites and opinion sites line up? Would disinformation sites show different gender and expert quote proportions than traditional news sites?

Site “behavior” is a key pillar of actor classification on the big tech platforms, and in particular, they use the term “inauthentic behavior” to identify bad actors.

Our hypothesis is that quote data proportions from “news-like” websites, if examined for proportionality patterns, will likely have useful signals around the sites’ approaches to journalism. This may open the door for deep examination of journo-technical questions such as: Could we build a signals-paradigm for authentic journalistic behavior? In our analysis, we asked whether quoting proportions around gender, expertise, community quotes and other criteria might serve as a proxy for authentic journalistic behavior, and if so how. We created a research dataset to explore these questions both by human observation and automated data analysis and reviewed our hypothesis.

## Literature Review

Qualitatively, many systematic questions within journalism’s contested boundaries are dealt with comprehensively in the book *Boundaries of Journalism* (Carlson & Lewis, 2015). This effort examines journalism’s boundaries around professional norms, practices and participation, broadly situating it as an ever-evolving cultural occupation. Our interest is in computational approaches to identifying journalistic boundaries online. One computational approach evident in the literature here has mapped the question of identifying journalism and/or boundary-behavior to identifying journalists, using easily available social media speech and behavior to identify who may or may not be a journalist relative to a non-journalist. One such approach (De Choudhury et al., 2012; Zeng et al., 2019) involves taking advantage of claims, assertions, keywords and associations journalists make on Twitter into a category classification problem for machine learning. An earlier approach (Bagdouri & Oard, 2015) used “seed” sets of pre-identified journalists combined with journalism keywords for down the line identification.

Our interest, though, is at the site-level or publication-level. One notable computational effort that attempts to evaluate a site-level approach uses publicly available third-party media bias and factuality ratings data to build predictions on news site factuality and political leaning (Baly et al., 2018). Indeed, we use labels in this effort’s dataset in our work. Independent of academic efforts, big tech news distribution platforms already use data about and from news sites for ranking or prioritization on news feeds. This indicates the use of site-level signals (computed or otherwise) in news recommenders (Smyrniotis, 2015). There has been a lacuna in the area of site-level analysis using computation methods that explicitly create datasets around specific and well-understood vocabularies that describe journalistic work systematically, which in turn may manifest in news text and go untapped at scale for boundary detection or journalism-presence signals. This is where we situate our work around the use of quoting and source-diversity data about quotes.

## The Problem of Boundaries and Boundary Detection in Journalism

As we noted in the introduction, one of the hardest problems for platforms when sorting news and news-like content is to identify whether another publisher or author is, in fact, a journalistic actor or is acting as a journalist does or should. Implicit in this problem are the definitions. Who is a journalist? What is news? Is news strictly called so when professional journalists produce it? Anyone can claim to be a “journalist,” whether or not their work is seen as news, or breaking news. Likewise, is everything newsworthy that a newsmaker says or does, automatically “news”?

Furthermore, there is a bidirectional flow of meaning and conflation between the words “news” and “journalism” that creeps over into the boundarylessness of both fields. In addition to this, journalism, through the work of journalists, has a power relationship with other actors in a democracy — policy makers, politicians, bureaucrats, criminals, scamsters, disinformation super-spreaders and so forth — and hence a relationship with democracy itself. The relationships manifest through sourcing as quotes in the news. Data about quotes, their frequency (proportionality) and perhaps other characteristics of quotes such as proportion of expert vs. non-expert quotes, gender, length of quotes, etc., may carry the deeper or structural behaviors implicated in these sourcing relationships.

For the technology platforms, classifying online news content is complex because the boundaries of journalism (Carlson & Lewis, 2015) are not well-defined and continually contested in democracy. Disinformation actors want to take advantage of the internet’s flattening of the space between journalism-produced “news” and “content,” a manifestation of boundary breaking, to sow confusion, anxiety, cynicism and propel false narratives (Vincent, 2020; Vincent, 2023). It is into this quagmire that we launched our study.

In particular, the problem of boundaries has complicated and influenced the algorithmic approach to news quality scoring and distribution. Third-party technology entities distributing news worry about technical definitions of journalism causing new negative externalities such as excluding smaller less industrialized truth-oriented news actors. They prefer to operate with definitions of “news” (News Distribution Ethics Recommendations, 2022) that differ platform to platform. Our question is where do we start if we are to explore reliable signals about journalistic behavior to complement or supplement existing site-level signals in algorithmically curated news feeds?

From a data standpoint, approaching such questions requires pinning down and defining behaviors that are journalistic — for example, adherence to facts, reality, accuracy, multiple perspectives and quoting people. In this study we look at one journalistic behavior: quoting. We test a hypothesis that estimating source-diversity proportions (using some journalism ethics vocabulary) for quotes in

news articles from a given site, at scale, could be a helpful marker for identifying and delineating different types of journalistic boundaries. This could be the basis for building a suite of tools — dataset creation about news and ethics as well signals to stack on to and clear the noise in existing machine-led classification mechanisms.

## **Journalism Ethics Data and Boundary Detection**

Journalism ethics concerns itself with the right and wrong of journalistic work and decisions, usually undertaken by writers, reporters, photographers, editors, columnists, producers, publishers and so forth. In the United States, many news organizations and journalists acknowledge allegiance to a code of ethics built around seeking the truth, minimizing harm, acting independently and being accountable and transparent (SPJ Code of Ethics—Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). More recently, however, a debate on new journalistic norms has emerged where there is a shift to questions of diversity and inclusion (or lack of it), bias, amplification, false equivalence and more (Columbia Journalism School, n.d.).

When journalists and news organizations strive to consistently apply ethical considerations to their work, evidence of this application is likely to manifest in their work online. Applying this to quoting, our question is whether such behavior should be identified using computational and hybrid approaches? If so, are they markers for journalism itself? There are implications for journalism’s boundaries here because of the possibility that ethical routines (such as a greater balance in gender for quoting experts, or a higher proportion of quotes of people without formal titles to represent community views) are usually deeper in the reporting practice, and their manifestations may be harder to game by inauthentic journalistic and/or news actors. The intuition is that an absence of specific journalism ethics routines in non-journalistic actors producing news-like content may be discernible through its corresponding lack of manifestation. Or, the degree and pattern of manifestation of this behavior may be different enough when compared with journalistic organizations, that it is detectable.

## **Quoting as a Facet of Journalistic Behavior**

Quoting people is both a manifest and deeply cultural activity in journalistic work. It is almost second nature to reporters and opinion journalists to quote people. Quoting serves a variety of different purposes in news stories:

a) it adds credibility to the reporter’s story; the reporter was “on the scene” and/or talked to people involved; the reporter talked with a number of people and decided to relay their views, responses, reaction, justifications, lived experiences and perspectives about the question or issue through quotes,

- b) it allows the reporter to show what questions s/he asked of the person and for which the quotes are responses,
- c) direct quotes let the authentic voice of the quoted people to come out,
- d) reporters can relay the views of people they are sourcing from to each other, and get reactions and quote those too (this is the “I disagree/agree with so and so” type of quoting),
- e) adds a conversational and accessible style to everyday stories,
- f) allows readers to relate to the people quoted more directly,
- g) allows the reporter to relay powerful, persuasive, rhetorical or affective statements as quotes for readers to engage with the story. Often such quotes can drive the frame of the story or even the narrative (and this power in journalism is abused to amplify false claims too), which the reporter allows implicitly or explicitly.
- h) reporters can quote people at length or quote them in brief depending on many factors, including but not limited to story frame, narrative fit or direction of the inquiry.

These ends have also changed and evolved with the arrival of social media. Because newsmakers (politicians, policy makers, scientists, celebrities, artists, sports stars and others) are already directly on social media, their own direct reliance on reporters to relay their views to the public is diminished. But the questions reporters generate are unique to the story inquiry, and hence when those responses are quoted in stories, their value exists independent of whether or not the sources directly said those words on social media.

### **The Opportunity for Boundary Detection**

The central opportunity for boundary analysis and detection comes from the intuition that habits (journalistic or otherwise) do not change very easily. This is rooted in two reasons, at the very least.

One, it is costly to contact people. Reaching people after several attempts of not being able to, getting responses, developing relationships, avoiding being manipulated, etc., is real effort and necessarily time consuming. Once journalists develop relationships with a range of people, especially with some structural power (title in government or associations/organizations), the tendency to stay in contact and quote the same people over and over again for new inquiries and controversies, is real and productive. Two, journalists are themselves trapped in their own social networks and tend to know more people from their social/ethnic

group or gender or professional class, or prior occupational background. (For example, if they came into reporting after a law career, they are likely to know more lawyers, which helps with sourcing for legal stories.) We expect these habits — even with some expected swing or cadence around news cycles, political seasons, and major events — will simply show in the quote proportions data.

Fundamentally, quoting decisions involve considerations that have ethical dimensions. A quantitative aspect of this is the “How often” question:

How often are men quoted?

How often are women quoted?

How often are people who identify as non-binary quoted?

How often are experts or people with formal titles quoted?

How often are community members (people without titles) or witnesses, bystanders, people with lived experiences, and people with knowledge of local history quoted ?

How often are people of minority, or historically or recently marginalized, communities quoted?

How often are rural people quoted? And urban?

These become questions around which news sites and reporters can see their own patterns, and the DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) movement in journalism is currently driving discourse and reform in reporters’ sourcing practice for greater inclusion and accuracy in storytelling. (It must be said here that the “how often” is not the only type of useful empirical question involving quotes. What people are quoted about also matters.)

## **Method**

For the purposes of our inquiry, we appropriate our lens on quoting to curate data and datasets at the news site level, about quotes. A news site’s output is in essence, the output of a group of news and commentary writers operating as a team, with gatekeeping usually done by editors. In this study, we only account for text-based stories from conventional text-based websites that may also carry video and audio. We did not include pure-play video or audio news outlets. (See section on limitations.)

Depending on the nature of the site, there could be reporters, freelancers,

columnists or invited opinion writers in the writing group, or plain commentary sites simply have everyone as an opinion contributor. We compute proportions of source-diversity in quotes across gender and title (and cross-categories such proportion of quotes of women with and without title) for large numbers of articles from these sites, and these represent the initial “ethics features” of our dataset about sites. Before we proceed with the main analysis on our hypothesis that journalistic boundaries may exist in the data, we need to assess a fundamental question:

Are the source-diversity proportions and quote properties computed at scale for individual news sites systematic, i.e. are such measures reliable? Or do these site-level values for each site fluctuate so much across short differences time periods that using them to compare between sites itself is moot? (We used a well-known statistical method to determine reliable measures and verified this for our dataset. See later section on systematicity of proportions data.)

We then did a manual exploratory data analysis on the ethics features to throw light on a number of questions:

Do known (i.e. labeled) disinformation sites show up differently for computed value ranges of the features?

Do the proportion values for the ethics features help explain intuitions about particular types of journalism such as opinion journalism, trade/finance/technical sites, women’s websites and so forth?

How do traditional journalistic sites, i.e. the mainstream U.S. press, compare between national and local? What types of sites offer high proportions of community quotes vs. experts? How do newer-age digital news organizations compare?

## **How We Created the Dataset**

We created a dataset for over 5,000 U.S. “news” sites. Starting with the U.S. news sources in the NewsQ database’s sites list (News Quality Initiative, 2020), we identified a corpora of legally usable news article archives. We used three corpora sources:

1. Webhose.io’s COVID-2020 (Dec 2019-Feb 2020) corpus (Webz.io., 2020)
2. A Lexis Nexis 3TB news archive corpus of three months March-April-May 2020.
3. The Fake News Corpus on Github (2016+) (Szpakowski, 2016)

## Processing Pipeline to Deliver Quotes Data

We built a processing pipeline (see Figure 1) using Stanford University’s CoreNLP package (Manning et al., 2014) for natural language processing (quotes and titles extraction), insertions into a database, and computations to derive the source-diversity proportions using Santa Clara University’s high performance computing cluster (WAVE Research Projects, n.d.). We extracted all the data around quotes from the stories and inserted them into a relational database with a schema designed around sources, articles, URLs, quotes, people, titles, organizations and some custom data for project buckets to hold various experimental runs together.

**1. Ground-truthing:** We tested the Stanford CoreNLP system with ground truth data (manually reviewed quotes, speakers, titles, organizations, gender, etc.) for a 20-article proto corpus of traditional sources and 30-article proto-corpus of fake news sources.

**2. Accuracy of annotations:** We documented the following accuracy scores for different aspects of our annotation system. Our interest in accuracy relates to boundary detection. We can tolerate a level of inaccuracy that is high enough that systematic differences in ethics data proportions are still a reliable indicator of behavioral differences in quoting.

1. Speaker resolution for mainline news sources: 92% accuracy.

2. Speaker resolution for “fake news” sources: 86% accuracy.

3. Title presence resolution for mainline news sources (is the quoted person identified with a title, even if the exact title is not matched): ~86%.

4. Title presence resolution for “fake news” sources: 67%.

5. Gender detection system: We used a hybrid tandem system of using Stanford CoreNLP first (pronoun presence, he/she), gender\_guesser (open source) next, and a commercial API service called Gender\_API at the final level if the first two do not resolve.

6. Published accuracy for Gender\_API is 92% for European name corpora. Our tandem system during ground truth testing was able to get 87% accuracy for gender.



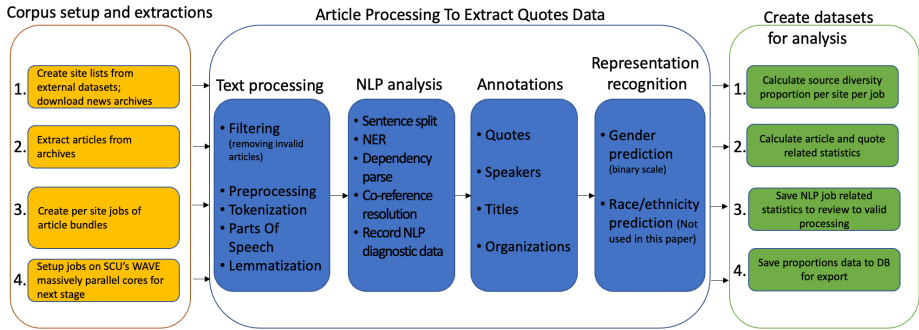


Figure 1: Flow diagram showing creation of quote proportions datasets from news archives. (Shang et al., 2022)

## List of Per-Site Properties for the Dataset

Our final list of 29 source-diversity, quotes and article related properties created at the news-site level for our dataset is in Appendix B. For purposes of length, in this section, we describe only those properties we use in this paper’s analysis, while maintaining the same property serial number as in the appendix.

For the property definitions below, valid quotes are quotes of length  $\geq$  five words. Short or dropped quotes are quotes of length less than five words (property #29).

6. `article_len_distr`: Mean, media and standard-deviation of article-word-lengths in article sample.

12. `prop_quotes_with_title`: the number of quotes where speaker has title/the number of total valid quotes with speaker.

(The title related properties starting at 12, and going down, are in a category called Known vs. Unknown in journalism ethics [Gans, 2004]).

13. `prop_quotes_without_title`: the number of quotes where speaker has NO title/the number of total valid quotes with speaker.

14. `prop_speakers_with_title`: the number of unique speakers with title/the total number of unique speakers.

15. `prop_speakers_without_title`: the number of unique speakers without NO title/the total number of unique speakers.

16. `prop_quotes_gender_female`: the number of quotes which gender is female/the number of total valid quotes with speaker.

17. `prop_quotes_gender_male`: the number of quotes which gender is male/the number of total valid quotes with speaker.

19. `prop_quotes_known_gender_female`: the number of quotes which has title and gender is female/the number of total valid quotes with speaker and with title.

20. `prop_quotes_known_gender_male`: the number of quotes which has title and gender is male/the number of total valid quotes with speaker and with title.

22. `prop_quotes_community_gender_female`: the number of quotes with NO title and gender is female/the number of total valid quotes with speaker and without title.

23. `prop_quotes_community_gender_male`: the number of quotes with NO title and gender is male/the number of total valid quotes with speaker and without title

29. `prop_quotes_dropped_too_short`: the number of quotes less than five words in length/(the number of total valid quotes + total quotes less than five words in length).

In our proto experiments, we observed from ground truth data that Stanford CoreNLP quote-to-speaker resolution has higher accuracy for quotes of length five words or more. We also found that short quotes are not spoken ones. They are slogans, catchy phrases, etc.: “Housing first,” “Build Back Better,” “Make America Great Again,” etc. So we use quotes  $\geq$  five words for all source-diversity proportions calculations. Since our interest is in journalistic quoting of people as a systematic behavior, we also know that when journalists invest time in interviewing or source from people there will usually be at least one other quote in the same article that is longer, even if there is a short quote from that person. So our claim is that we do not run as much of a risk of under-counting legitimately quoted people by dropping the short quotes from source-diversity analysis. Instead, we created a separate, complementary property: proportions of quotes that are below five words in length. We initially marked this property as experimental. But we did see large differences in the ranges for this value between different types of news sources, so we included it in our analysis. (More methodology details in Appendix A and B.)

## **Analysis**

### **Systematicity in Quoting Behavior: An Introduction**

Our central thrust is that if journalistic quoting practices are substantially different in different types of sites, this may show as boundaries in source-diversity

proportions that separate those different types of news sites. However, for this, source-diversity proportions themselves have to be systematic to a site's news stream, as noted earlier, i.e. they do not change dramatically, or they do not change to the degree that they make the idea of boundaries itself moot. So we wanted to find a way to test the systematicity of source diversity proportions in quotes. As noted earlier, our intuition here is that journalistic routines are often habits (such as the list of experts a reporter goes to, or when a reporter may go to some types of sources and when not) and that these routinized practices tend to repeat themselves over and over again on story cycles or story series cycles. One solution: process a very large sample of stories from the site that was analyzed (such as six months or one year's worth of data), and calculate the long-term mean for each of the source-diversity proportions.

However, this leads to a new problem. We may not always have access to the full long-term archives of a news source, and even if we did, calculating that for thousands of news sources on demand to develop a systematic source-diversity proportion set appears to not be very cost-effective computationally. Also, what if a new online news source is relatively low in volume and the detection system does not have enough time to wait for several months to gather 5,000 or 10,000 article samples? We addressed this problem using a statistical technique called bootstrap sampling (Dror et al., 2018.)

### **Establishing Systematicity in Proportions**

We wanted to answer one question: What smallest sample of size of randomly selected articles from a news source may reasonably represent the proportions data? At what sample size would there be no more than a tolerable variance (say 5% or 10%) with respect to the long-term mean for a given proportion property? The long-term value is usually calculated from say 5000, or 10,000, or 20,000 articles of that site.

The bootstrap method is a statistical technique for estimating quantitative values about a population by averaging estimates from multiple small data samples, re-sampled from the same pool. (Re-sampling involves replacing the earlier retrieved sample back into the pool, i.e. it is not removed. In normal random sampling, the earlier picked sample is removed from the pool.) First, we choose the number of times we will draw the bootstrap samples (news articles) from the pool (for example 20 times). And we also pre-define the sample size of the article for each source, i.e. the number of articles. For each bootstrap sample, we randomly select articles of the chosen sample size (e.g. 500). Then we calculate the source-diversity and quote related statistics for that sample set, and repeat for each set. Finally, we calculate the mean and standard deviation for our source-diversity proportions across all the sample sets. In addition, we calculate the 95% confidence interval based on the statistical results.

To calculate a confidence interval (two-sided, upper bound and lower bound), we follow these steps:

1. Assume the sample size as 500 for each bootstrap sample sub-dataset.
2. Find the mean value of your sample.
3. Determine the standard deviation of the sample.
4. Choose the confidence level. The most common confidence level is 95%.
5. In the statistical table find the Z (0.95)-score, it's 1.959.
6. Compute the standard error and multiply this value by the z-score to obtain the margin of error.
7. Subtract the margin of error from the mean value to obtain the confidence interval. lower bound = mean – margin of error; upper bound = mean + margin of error.

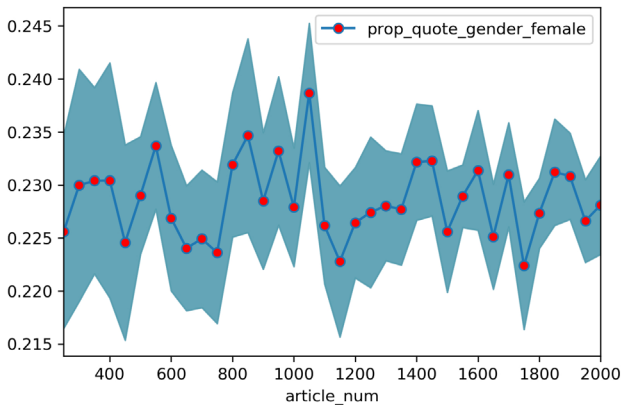


Figure 2: Example of bootstrap sampling to decide acceptable sample sizes to estimate source diversity proportions. This chart shows the proportion of quotes for women for a news site in the 23% range. The variance from the mean (amplified at this scale) is higher at very small sample sizes (expected) and reduces as larger samples are used to calculate the statistics.

For eight sources (six mainline news — journalistic sites — and two well-known disinformation sites), we annotated between 5,000 to 20,000 articles) and established the long-term means for the source diversity and other quoting proportion values. The sites were: CBS SF Bay Area, *Modesto Bee*, Vice, *Washington Examiner*, Fox News, Breitbart News, 21CenturyWire.com and TheLibertyBeacon.com. The last two in the list are well-known disinformation sites. The first six are news sites on the political left and right. We found that at 1,000 samples onwards the proportions stabilized for the sources we tested. At 500 samples, the departure from the long-term mean reduced to 10% or so.

The final dataset we used for the analysis in this paper has 5,171 sites of which 2,617 sites have a 500-sample bootstrap determined source-diversity and quote data proportion values. The rest have smaller article numbers in the samples used for the proportions calculation because those sites were already very low in volume.

## **Manual Review Findings in our Dataset**

Given the accuracy limitations of the annotations and gender detection systems, we first wanted to manually review the full dataset using routine spreadsheet sorting and clustering techniques to see what sites emerge at the edges of the proportions (highest and lowest ranges of values). Understanding which sites fall at the edges would allow us to identify those sites quickly and verify what types of sites these were. And to the degree their sourcing pattern was expected on those sites, it would also validate our system and dataset as reasonably accurate in representing the quoting practice for the purposes of rough review.

We sorted the sites around various source-diversity proportions such as gender (male/female), titled/non-titled, short quote proportions, average number quotes per article, etc. It was relatively easy to see types of sites clustering around the two major ethics features in the data: gender and title proportions. One surprising element was the emergence of the proportion of short quotes as a distinctive feature for different types of sites. We will go more into this further.

1. Gender proportions of quoted people.
2. Titles (expert/official) vs. non-titles (community) proportions.
3. Short quotes (< five words).

We also used Tableau to do multi-variable cluster analysis for 2,600 sources having 500 sample articles in the dataset. (See Figure 9.)

### **1. Gender proportions in quotes:**

Many news sites and magazines targeting female audiences rank very high on gender proportions for both expert and community quotes. These include *Vogue*, *Marie Claire*, *O, The Oprah Magazine* and *Refinery29*. We see this mostly as validating the data annotation system we are using. *Atlantablackstar.com*, a progressive narrative news site target, was an example of a digital community news site, off the mainstream media, that has among the highest proportions for women being quoted. It is not a gender-focused news site. This site stood out as an example of diverse sourcing in evidence, systematically.

Conservative-leaning disinformation sites (e.g. 21CenturyWire.com) are showing an 80%–20% proportion split between male and female quotes, where mainline news sites almost all fall in the 50%–50% to 70%–30%. Partisan “left” opinion sites also show around 60%–40%, male-female proportions split, indicating that merely being “left-leaning” has not altogether balanced out the gender quoting proportions.

Opinion and blog sites consisting of mostly male authors expectedly have very high percentages of male quotes (e.g. Outsidethebeltway.com, a political opinion blog). Some broadcast news organizations (KQED.org for example) are approaching 50%–50% in male-female gender distributions. On the whole, as a single category, a candidate for a boundary or a component of a boundary may be the gender proportion of 20% female quotes or lower in a political news site.

## **2. Titles (expert) and non-titles (community) in quotes**

In our ground-truthing, the accuracy level of title detection for site content from the Github “Fake News” corpus was low, and hence it may not be possible at this stage to review hypotheses on boundaries that compare disinformation or anti-factual sites with industrialized news sites.

However, there were still some interesting findings with regard to the data for industrialized/big, traditional sites and trade publications. Most high-title proportion sources (90% range) seem to be business, trade, law and finance-markets journals. On these sites, reporters are likely to quote people by expertise (title is a proxy for expertise) in these domains, so it is not surprising to find high-titled vs. non-titled proportions. For traditional news outlets, the titled quotes are in the 60%–75% range, and community quotes in the 25%–40% range, indicating a general “expert bias.” This validates a long-standing critique of mainline journalism that people with titles are quoted a lot more and hence drive the narratives and framing, whereas the lived experiences of community members or “the publics at large” are not represented or elevated as much.

Our observation is that boundary possibilities on the expert-community quotes proportion line are primarily around sector-specific/trade sites vs. mainline news.

## **3. Proportion of short quotes (< five words)**

Originally, we did not have the property “prop\_dropped\_quotes\_too\_short” in our dataset. During our initial dataset creation we gathered statistics on the proportion of quotes in a site’s sample article bucket that were < five words and > five words. We started seeing that the mainline news sites were usually in the < 30% short quote proportions whereas some well-known disinformation sites were all ranking ~50% or higher for short quotes. We created this as a new

property to examine what was going on. This has been a surprise finding.

Consistently through our experimental runs, many well-known “fake news” disinformation/non-factual sites (e.g. 21stcenturywire.com, thelibertybeacon.com) emerge with excess of 50% of their quotes less than five words long. Whereas almost all the “traditional journalistic” sources are averaging short-length (dropped) quotes well under 30%. This is a big difference. On further investigation we found that sites doing a lot more original reporting, especially local news sites, have even lower percentages of very short quotes. Many known local news organizations have short quotes proportions less than 10%–20%. Main-line news organizations running a lot of reportage and opinion have ranges in the 20%–30%.

Another interesting finding is that sites that are mostly opinion, analysis-only, hyper-partisan, blogs and disinformation appear to be the ones with excess of 50% short quotes. Legal information, trade, advice and special sites also have excess of 50% short quotes.

A few exceptions have emerged. For example, businessinsider.com and democracynow.com have higher percentages of short quotes than the mainline press. It is possible these sites do a lot of curation and rapid newswriting during trending developments, citing other sources and less original people spoken to. Democracy Now does a lot of interviews, and those articles are formatted as interview pages without each voicing out by the interviewee being placed in quotes.

This manual analysis indicates that there is a likely boundary tendency for journalistic behavior around this property. Where news organizations’ reporters are engaged in seeking out people, talking to them and quoting them in a sentence or two in stories, or multiple sentences, at a systematic level, they are producing higher proportions of longer quotes (> five words) and hence their short quotes count is lower. For news organizations’ whose writers are not doing this substantially, or tend to clip quotes to very short key phrases or slogans, they show a greater proportion of shorter quotes.

### **Automated Data Analysis Findings in the Dataset**

To go further from our manual review, we ran feature importance data analysis routines on the dataset to compare sets of sites with differing labels. We used the two sources for site labels:

1. MIT dataset: Rating labels from the Media Bias Fact Check news source/site rating effort were crawled by MIT researchers for their own study (Baly et al., 2018) about sites. We cross-tagged the sites in our dataset with their labels—FACTS-High, FACTS-Mixed, and FACTS-Low. These labels help bucket

news sites into two broad categories: Those that are committed to some basic journalistic standards and those that are not.

2. Fake News Corpus dataset, Github: This archive of news sites (used by researchers) already has a set of labels to tag problematic sites. These are: conspiracy, rumor, junksci, fake, clickbait, hate, unreliable and satire (Szpakowski, 2016).

We used the MIT dataset's FACTS-High label to select one set of sites, considered more "factual" from our data, and the Fake News corpus labels conspiracy, rumor, junksci, fake, clickbait, hate, unreliable and satire to select another set of sites — which would be the problematic set of sites. The latter group was meant to represent sites that produce "news"-like content but may not adhere to journalistic standards.

To automatically determine which features are most associated with the labels, we employ feature importance measures in machine learning. Features that are highly effective in predicting the outcome (e.g., fake news sites vs. factual/legitimate sites) are considered more important. Specifically, we calculate the importance of a feature as the (normalized) total reduction of the Gini impurity brought by that feature. It is also known as the Gini importance, which is one of the most widely used metrics for feature importance. In the implementation, we utilized the `feature_importances_` attribute of `sklearn.ensemble.ExtraTreesClassifier` in the Scikit-learn machine learning library in Python. Our goal was to see which source-diversity and quote properties may be important in predicting one vs. the other type of site. The number of sites in the MBFC/MIT and Fake News site corpuses are relatively small compared to our larger NewsQ and LexisNexis sites lists. Hence our feature importance analysis ran on a smaller subset but clearly labeled set of news sites.

Our findings are summarized below each featured chart we have included. The overall indication is that some properties are better aligned with one or other labels as outcomes. Note: Even though we calculated the values for proportion of articles with named authors (`prop_named_authors`) and proportion of doubtful speakers (`prop_quote_CoreNLP_doubtful_speaker`), we are not including them in commentary about the charts in this paper because they are part of future work.

***FN-conspiracy (74 sites) vs. MBFC/MIT: Facts-HIGH (162 sites)***



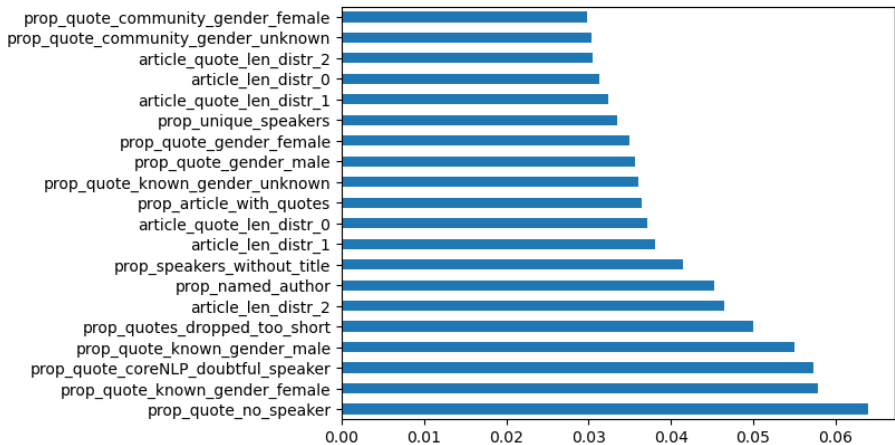


Figure 3: Fake News-conspiracy labeled sites vs. High Factuality sites labeled by MIT/MBFC corpus.

**Explanation:** This analysis chart compares 74 conspiracy-labeled sites with 162 high-factuality sites. The highest importance features were: proportion of short quotes and the proportions of quotes around male gender and community (no title)-female gender combinations. Possible behavioral contributors to this are: a) Conspiracy sites are not carrying a lot of original reporting and rely greater on short quotes compared to the higher factuality sites; b) Non-titled/ community female quotes are likely lesser in these sites in comparison to mainline sites (even though in mainline journalism female gender quoting is already lesser compared to male); c) Male quotes (`prop_quote_known_gender_male` and `prop_quote_gender_male`) are overall driving another distinction between conspiracy sites and high factuality sites. In our manual review we found that disinformation sites had a noticeable higher proportion of male quotes.

***FN-clickbait (37 sites) vs. MBFC/MIT: Facts-HIGH (162 sites)***

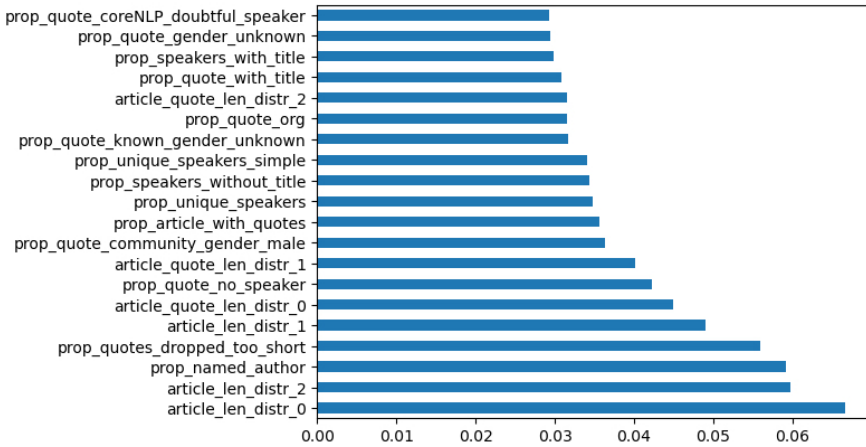


Figure 4: Fake News-clickbait labeled sites vs. High Factivity sites labeled by MIT/MBFC corpus.

**Explanation:** In this comparison between clickbait-labeled sites and the high factuality set, the mean and the standard deviation of the article length values, and the short quotes proportions are playing important feature roles in driving distinctions between the sets of sites. This could be because consistently click-baiting sites do not run long articles as much as the high factuality sites. They are also likely to be doing far less original reporting and instead using clipping bits and pieces of what prominent people may be saying, hence the indication that the shorter quotes proportion is an important feature.

***FN-unreliable (42 sites) vs. MBFC/MIT: Facts-HIGH (162 sites)***

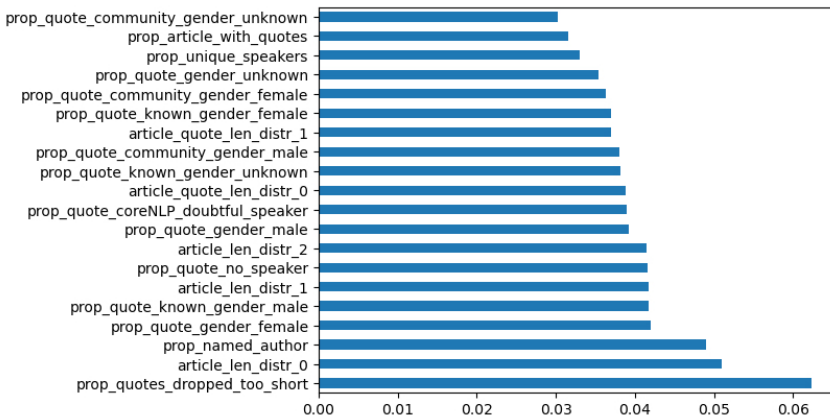


Figure 5: Fake News-unreliable labeled sites vs. High Factivity sites labeled by MIT/MBFC corpus.

**Explanation:** “Unreliable” is another human label used for sites in the Fake News corpus. Our observation here is similar to that of the conspiracy sites. Key features driving distinctions between the site sets are shorter quote proportions and gender proportions.

***FN-hate (18) vs. MBFC/MIT: Facts-HIGH (162)***

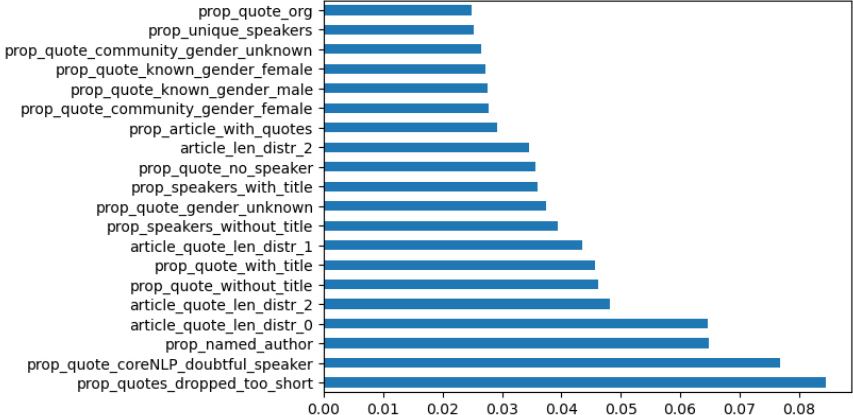


Figure 6: Fake News-hate labeled sites vs. High Factuality sites labeled by MIT/MBFC corpus.

**Explanation:** This comparison is interesting because the feature analysis is looking at sites labeled as hate sites vs. the high factuality sites. The top feature driving distinctions between the site sets turns out to be the proportion of quotes around gender, and in particular women, without titles — as well as short quotes. It is possible that hate sites quote more prominent women to attack them while at the same time do not quote as many women without title relative to high factuality sites. This comparison itself needs more investigation by increasing the volume of sites in the analysis.

***FN-junksci (32) vs. MBFC/MIT: Facts-HIGH (162)***

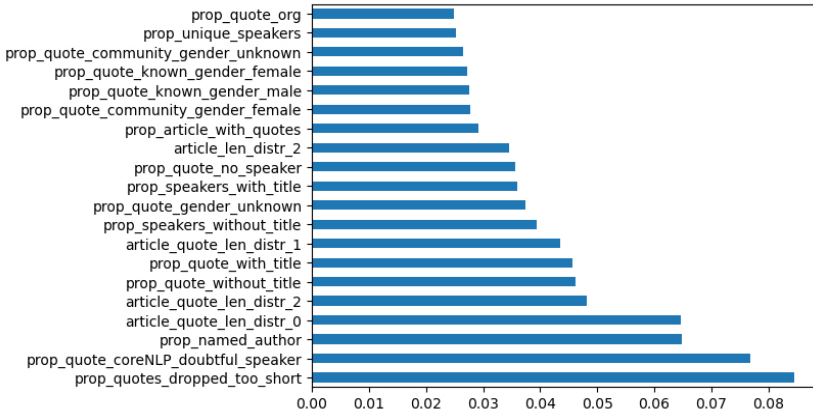


Figure 7: Fake News-junksci labeled sites vs. High Factuality sites labeled by MIT/MBFC corpus.

**Explanation:** The junksci label connotes junk science. This comparison is similar to the earlier comparisons on reliance on short quotes, but different in the absence of quote gender proportions as important features. Our explanation is that junk science or pseudoscience sites are types of unreliable sites and hence share some feature importance aspects with those sets of sites. In addition, their quoting practice may not have a strong gender bias to it one way or another, and therefore it does not show up in the highest features by importance.

**All fake news label (260 sites) vs. MBFC/MIT: Facts-HIGH (162)**

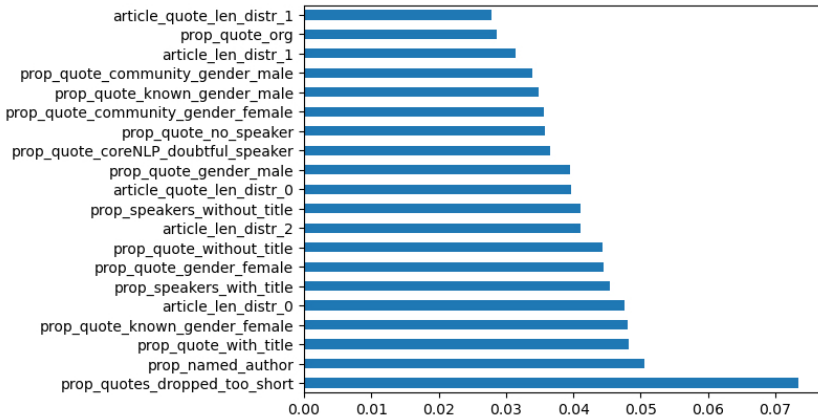


Figure 8: Fake News-(all) labeled sites vs. High Factuality sites labeled by MIT/MBFC corpus.

**Explanation:** This analysis compares the union of sites to which the Fake News corpus has attached at least one or more of the problematic labels (conspiracy,

unreliable, junksci, etc.) with the high factuality sites. The short quotes proportion is the only key feature here that is at the same relative scale of importance as in the other charts. The proportion of expert (titled) quotes and female titled quotes are showing some significance.

### Site Clustering Analysis: Proportion of Female Quotes vs. Short Quotes

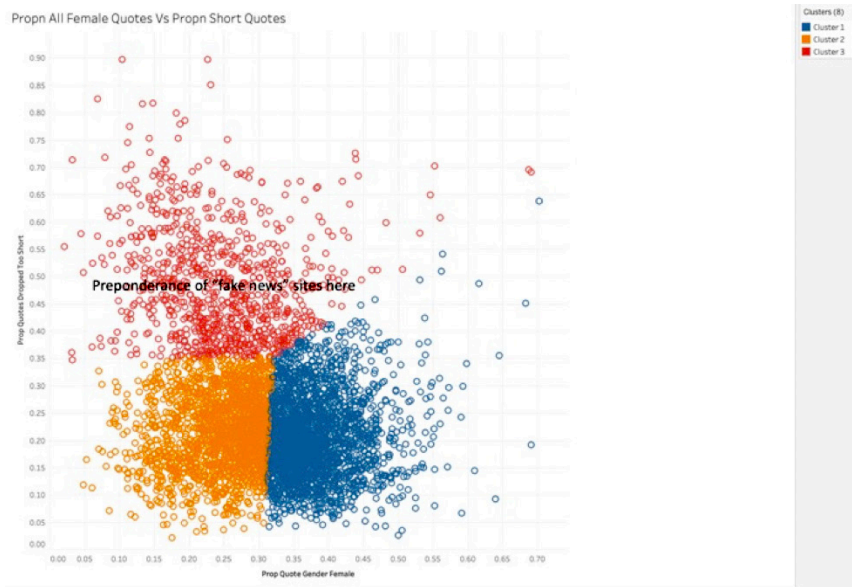


Figure 9: This figure shows the output of a Tableau clustering analysis of the 2,617 sites with 500-a title bootstrap-based proportions, around the female quoted proportions vs. very short quotes.

**Explanation:** We found that a preponderance of disinformation sites were quoting fewer women and using greater proportions of short quotes. Note: “The word Prop(n) in the graphic is short for “proportion.”

### Discussion

We began with the hypothesis that quote data proportions from “news-like” websites, if examined for proportionality patterns, will likely have useful signals around the sites’ approaches to journalism. We asked if this may seed a new pathway for a signals-paradigm to center authentic journalistic behavior.

Overall, our observations — from both the manual and automated analysis — are showing that source-diversity and quote proportions data are manifesting possible boundaries between news outlets doing original reporting, hyper-partisan sites, disinformation and conspiracy theory sites, opinion and blog sites, trade publications, and so forth. This validates our hypothesis that creating such datasets would be useful. We make the following list of boundary-related claims.

**Claim 1:** If the gender proportion of female quotes is 20% or lower, that is a signal to be combined with other data about that site. The central point here is that it is unusual for news stories in (liberal democracies) to be skewed so heavily towards quoting male sources that the proportions exceed 80% male quotes. There is something systematic that is being perpetuated or reflected, which in turn may manifest in other content-related measures for the site.

**Claim 2:** If the titled quotes proportion is > 90%, the site is likely to be a trade or technical news site, such as foreign exchange, law, stock markets and so forth. Neither disinformation sites nor mainline news sites reach this level of titled quote proportions. As noted earlier, professional journalists inherently lean towards quoting people with title (behavior). But as a wave of new norms is emerging in the profession, local and community news sites are quoting higher proportions of “everyday people.” A skew of over 90% of titled quotes is usually a unique marker of a technical or trade site, or rank elitism, both of which are useful signals.

**Claim 3:** If the short quotes proportion is > 50%, the site is likely to be mostly a commentary or opinion only site, or a disinformation/conspiracy site — it is a site that very likely does not carry significant original reporting. Conversely, if the short quotes proportions are less than 20%, this indicates more original reporting on the site. Despite its higher costs, original reporting is a key component (not the only) of authentic journalistic work that releases new information to the public sphere. Journalistic endeavors pride themselves on it (see property 29 in “List of per-site properties”).

**Claim 4:** It is possible to robustly establish site-level quote proportions estimates without the need for large-sized archives (thousands or tens of thousands of stories). Quoting represents a key behavior in journalistic culture. While one way to produce robust quantitative estimates is to operate only on very large archives, this disadvantages rapid scrutiny of low-volume sites that may have recently emerged online. We established that the bootstrap sampling technique can save time and resources and provide accurate enough estimates for both low-volume and high-volume sites.

### **Applying These Claims**

This research makes the case to evaluate boundaries in combination with each other. For instance, sites with higher proportion of female gender quotes *and* higher proportion of female titled quotes *and* low proportions of short quotes are very unlikely to be non-journalistic sites. Second, these boundary indications are suited to evaluation for algorithms used on the news platforms as secondary signals to be stacked on top of other data such as topics coverage, author data, etc.

At the higher level, this work surfaces another cross-cutting insight. The question of boundaries is connected to concerns in the literature about “context collapse” online. Current research shows that social media platforms are causing “context collapse” and inattentive processing of news source information (Pearson, 2021). For us, this is one manifestation of the collapse of boundaries as newly produced content flows frictionlessly through the internet platforms. Our findings suggest that technological (data and algorithms) systems could reverse this collapse by adding more layers of domain specific intelligence to algorithmic processing, especially for content from cultural industries like journalism. Drawing from authentic and domain-specific vocabularies in journalism ethics to create datasets and signals is thus a step in that direction.

### **Limitations and Future Work**

Our feature importance analysis is currently done for a smaller set of sites. We plan to expand to increase the number of sites with labels by cross-tabulating data from our news site related dataset sources. We plan to increase all sites to the 500-article or 1,000-sample bootstrap.

To explore more advanced feature analysis, we will apply association rule mining, which can discover interesting associations and correlations between item sets in a large database. We will also utilize clustering algorithm and dimensionality reduction to identify meaningful patterns in an unsupervised learning manner.

A criticism of our approach could be that disinformation sites could invest in making up quotes, longer quotes, etc. Our dataset includes top quoted persons. From a “disinformation-superspreader” perspective, it is possible to convert the extent to which specific people gain prevalence in quotes. By cross-tabulating a site’s top-quoted persons with published disinformation super-spreader lists (for prevalence) the quality of the boundary signals can be enhanced. The extent of speaker plurality could also be an additional area of exploration.

Since summer 2022, our system includes Race/Ethnicity detection system (Shang et al., 2022) for quoted speaker names, with an accuracy of 81% for the White vs. non-White macro classification. We are now able to add a new source-diversity proportionality feature to necessarily complicate the analysis and make it richer.

Finally, video- and audio-only news sources (YouTube news shows and podcasts) are not included in this study.

## **Conclusion**

Source-diversity and quotes data show promise as a basis to identify boundaries between news sites. We reiterate that this is because of the possibility that journalistic sourcing routines are deeper in the reporting practice, and their manifestations may be harder to game by inauthentic journalistic and/or news actors. An absence of specific journalism ethics routines in site actors producing news-like content may be discernible through its corresponding lack of manifestation. Even when present, the degree of manifestation of this behavior may be different enough — in a pattern, across types of journalistic organizations — that it is detectable.



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## **Appendix: More on Methodology**

### **Appendix A1: More details on how we created the dataset**

As noted the paper we used three corpora of news archives. Of these, the Webhose.io and Lexis Nexis corpora have very few “fake news” or known “dis-information sites”, that are listed in the NewsQ sites database. The Github Fake News corpus has over 700 sources cross-listed in NewsQ. A combination of the three corpora is represented in our final sites dataset. We examined the corpus formats (JSON text files) and built software routines to pull the news articles into a local filesystem. We designed customized jobs for large scale extraction (1K, 10k, 20k, 100k, 300k, and 2M articles). Our tactical goal for the study was also to complement NewsQ’s U.S. sites dataset that already has around a 100 properties per site, with new site-level properties around journalism ethics and quotes (Vincent, 2019).

### **Appendix A2: More details on processing pipeline to deliver quotes data**

**1. Extraction:** We used corpora that have been derived with different methods of crawling and extractions. Lexis Nexis is a proprietary system whose extraction routines (from the web) we have no visibility into. We processed the archive feeds files of 3TB size spanning 92 days. The Fake News Github corpus uses Scrapy, a well-known website crawler. Webhose.io uses its own crawlers. Reviewing data for the same news source from different corpora makes our validation of the annotation system more robust.

**2. NLP annotation for quotes data:** We used Stanford CoreNLP 4.0.0 release along with several of its built-in annotators for ingesting articles. The named entity recognizer (NER), quote, quote attribution, and key relations annotators are the critical ones.

**3. Database setup:** We used a Postgres SQL Server to store and process all extracted data. We also used the server to configure, store, and control massive parallel computational jobs.

#### **4. Preprocessing:**

a. We eliminated quotes less than five words long to increase overall accuracy of speaker resolution. (See property 29 in the dataset section for more.)

- b. We also eliminated open quotes (quotes where the closing ‘ ‘ was missing).
- c. We excluded very small articles — typically video only articles which often don't have any other reporting — using a 30-word minimum length filter.
- d. We used a maximum paragraph length limit of 500 words to eliminate rare crawling errors or HTML format errors which would confuse the CoreNLP annotation system.
- e. Photo captions have names in them and we found that would increase the inaccuracy of quote to speaker resolution when the quotes were coincidentally too close to the captions. We used a photo caption pattern match to eliminate caption text less than or equal to 50 words in length. (Patterns: "PHOTO:" "Photo:" "Image:" "Image source:" "Gettyimages" "Video:" "Picture::")

## **Appendix B: List of per-site properties for the dataset**

Below are the final list of 29 source-diversity, quotes and article related properties we created at the news-site level in our dataset.

1. `article_num`: Total number of articles processed for a particular proportion calculation job (e.g. 500 articles from each site).
2. `prop_named_author`: Proportion of articles with byline (named author) vs. without. This property has substantial promise for consideration in future work, but we did not use it in for our current analysis because of inconsistent meta-data about author naming across the news archive formats.

For the rest of the property definitions below, valid quotes are quotes of length > = five words. Short or dropped quotes are quotes of length less than five words (property #29).

3. `article_num_with_quotes`: The number of articles in analyzed sample which has at least one quote.
4. `avg_quotes_per_article`: total valid quotes number/total articles.
5. `prop_article_with_quotes`: `article_num_with_quotes`/the number of total articles.
6. `article_len_distr`: Mean, media and standard-deviation of article-word-lengths in article sample.
7. `article_quote_len_distr`: Mean, media and standard-deviation of quote-word-lengths in article sample.

8. `prop_unique_speakers_simple`: (Total unique quoted-speakers-all articles/the number of total valid quotes with speaker) x (`prop_article_with_quotes`).

Definition of unique = SIMPLE: Just the same full names, identical match.

9. `prop_unique_speakers`: (Total unique quoted-speakers-all articles/the number of total valid quotes with speaker) x (`prop_article_with_quotes`).

Definition of unique: Two full names are identical, AND BOTH organization and title are above our similarity threshold.

10. `top_quoted_persons_simple`: Top #n quoted Persons in the source's article samples.

Definition of unique = SIMPLE: Just the same full names, identical match.

11. `top_quoted_persons`: Top #n quoted Persons in the source's article samples.

Definition of unique: Two full names are identical, AND BOTH organization and title are above a similarity threshold (algo).

12. `prop_quotes_with_title`: the number of quotes where speaker has title/the number of total valid quotes with speaker.

(The title related properties starting at 12, and going down, are in a category called Known vs. Unknown in journalism ethics [Gans, 2004]).

13. `prop_quotes_without_title`: the number of quotes where speaker has NO title/the number of total valid quotes with speaker.

14. `prop_speakers_with_title`: the number of unique speakers with title/the total number of unique speakers.

15. `prop_speakers_without_title`: the number of unique speakers without NO title/the total number of unique speakers.

16. `prop_quotes_gender_female`: the number of quotes which gender is female/the number of total valid quotes with speaker.

17. `prop_quotes_gender_male`: the number of quotes which gender is male/the number of total valid quotes with speaker.

18. `prop_quotes_gender_unknown`: the number of quotes which gender is unknown/the number of total valid quotes with speaker.

19. `prop_quotes_known_gender_female`: the number of quotes which has title and gender is female/the number of total valid quotes with speaker and with

title.

20. `prop_quotes_known_gender_male`: the number of quotes which has title and gender is male/the number of total valid quotes with speaker and with title.

21. `prop_quotes_known_gender_unknown`: the number of quotes which has title and gender is unknown / the number of total valid quotes with speaker and with title

22. `prop_quotes_community_gender_female`: the number of quotes with NO title and gender is female/the number of total valid quotes with speaker and without title.

23. `prop_quotes_community_gender_male`: the number of quotes with NO title and gender is male/the number of total valid quotes with speaker and without title.

24. `prop_quotes_community_gender_unknown`: the number of quotes with NO title and gender is unknown/the number of total valid quotes with speaker and without title.

25. `prop_quote_orgs`: the number of quotes which has a related organization/ the number of total valid quotes with speaker.

26. `top_quoted_orgs`: Top #n quoted Orgs in the source's article samples.  
Note: Not used in our analysis for this paper.

27. `prop_quotes_no_speaker`: the number of quotes which has NO speaker/the number of total valid quotes.  
Note: This is experimental/noisy, may include anonymous quotes and unresolved quotes.

28. `prop_quotes_coreNLP_doubtful_speaker`: the number of quotes which has doubtful speaker/the number of total valid quotes with speaker.

“Doubtful speaker” data: In our ground-truth experiments, we discovered that some CoreNLP diagnostic values (`mention_sieve`, `speaker_sieve`, [Muzny et al., 2017]), the canonical/speaker name status, and our detection level for quoted (paragraph level or article level) fell into a combination of four particular patterns every time the speaker for a quote was wrongly resolved. We create four mini-rules for this, `RULE1` or `RULE2` OR `RULE3` OR `RULE4`. In our at scale computations, quote-to-name resolution matching one of these rules are flagged as “doubtful speaker”. We used these rules to eliminate such quotes and increase accuracy for name and title resolutions. This is a diagnostic property only. It may only usable for boundary analysis if very large swings of this value are present

across news sources or if advanced data analysis methods indicate the features are important.

29. `prop_quotes_dropped_too_short`: the number of quotes less than five words in length/(the number of total valid quotes + total quotes less than five words in length).

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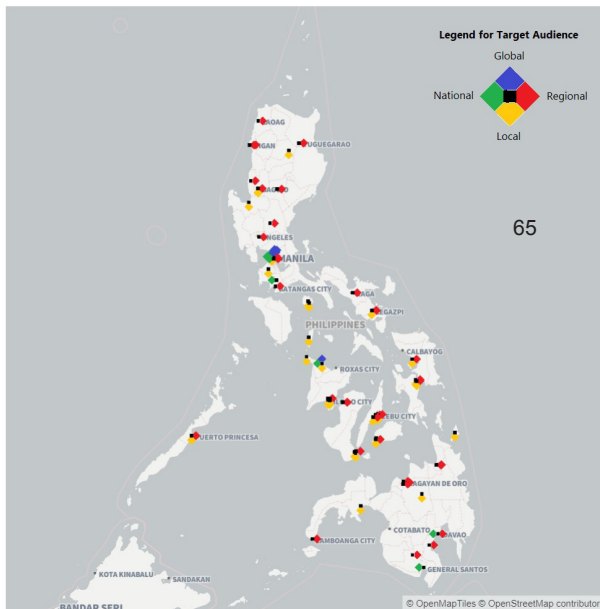
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## Of Media Shifts and Crises: Mapping Digital Journalism and Online News Deserts in the Philippines

*By Maria Raizza Renella P. Bello, independent journalist and researcher, and Robbin Charles M. Dagle, Ateneo de Manila University*

Philippine News Sites Mapping



Source: Ads For News Philippines Project

Image 1. Preliminary mapping of the vetted Philippine News Sites

*To cope with disruptions and challenges to Philippine journalism, the Asian Center for Journalism and Internews collaborated on Ads For News, a pilot research seeking to create a nationwide index of credible Philippine News Sites (PNS) potentially ripe for advertising support. The project manually vetted over 100 PNS and found that PNS are mostly based in urbanized areas. The vetted PNS*

*were then mapped to determine regions considered as news deserts. Preliminary mapping revealed no PNS was based in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, and is thus identified as a major online news desert. The study also revealed existing gaps in Philippine online journalism such as content publication and sourcing, political/corporate influences, and transparency issues on editorial and advertising practices. The paper concludes with a call to localize the concept of news deserts in the context of the Global South.*

The Philippine media has perennially faced targeted attacks from the government and online harassment in the past six years (Reporters Without Borders, 2022), including broadcasting giant ABS-CBN's franchise non-renewal during the height of the global pandemic in May 2020 — greatly impacting the public's access to information, the industry's landscape and media workers' welfare (Inocencio, 2020).

These unprecedented challenges rapidly forced the digital transformation of news organizations as news audiences also moved online (Cabaero, 2021), with 73.9 million internet users or 67% of the country's total population going digital in January 2021 — a 6.1% increase in internet users from a year prior (We Are Social and Hootsuite, 2021).

To cope with this massive online media shift, the Asian Center for Journalism at the Ateneo de Manila University and Internews collaborated on Ads For News (AFN), a pilot research initiative seeking to create a nationwide index of credible and trustworthy Philippine News Sites (PNS) potentially ripe for operational support via an advertising funding model.

The 10-month study manually vetted over 100 PNS and found that it is mostly present only in urbanized areas, while social media — particularly Facebook, which is vulnerable to disinformation (Article One, 2021) — has emerged as a news platform in the localities and regions (Asian Center for Journalism, 2022). The research also surfaced existing digital journalism gaps from the national to the regional and local levels such as content publication and sourcing, political and corporate influences, and transparency issues on editorial and advertising practices of various news websites around the country.

Given these baseline findings, this paper attempts to provide a preliminary mapping of PNS (see Image 1) and identify possible news desert areas that have little to no access to these digital news platforms. It also discusses conditions of the potential news desert communities, dissecting the factors, characteristics, and steps necessary to develop a more exhaustive media landscape mapping and to localize the concept of news deserts from the context, perspectives, and lived experiences of a Global South nation.

## Literature Review

Scholars have generally defined news deserts as a specific geographical area that has limited to no access to a dedicated local newspaper or media service and lacks robust sources of news and information about its community (Ferrier et al., 2016; Ferrucci & Alaimo, 2020; Napoli et al., 2018).

Given journalism's role in informing discourse in the public sphere, Abernathy (2020) sees news desert communities as having "significantly diminished access to important local news and information that feeds grassroots democracy" (p. 1). More concretely, other studies have dwelled on the effects of media closures in the community. Mathews' (2022) study of Caroline County, Virginia, residents found that the closure of their 99-year-old local paper *Caroline Progress* had diminished the people's sense of community and had made their life "harder" (p. 1250). Matherly and Greenwood (2021) observed an increase of federal corruption cases filed in areas where a major newspaper had closed. In Brazil, almost half of the violations against local media practitioners happened in news desert communities (Artigo 19, 2018, as cited in Da Silva & Pimenta, 2020).

Identifying news deserts is inevitably a geographic and cartographic exercise (Ferrier et al., 2016). Abernathy's U.S. News Deserts project is among the more consistent initiatives, mapping the emergence of news deserts by county based on their tracking of more than 9,000 local newspapers cross-checked from various sources. The project has produced at least four reports since 2016, the latest of which was released in 2020. In Brazil, a similar project called Atlas da Notícia, first released in 2017, identified news deserts in 4,500 municipalities, home to around 70 million people (Da Silva & Pimenta, 2020).

Normative definitions of what constitutes a local newspaper is also a crucial determinant in projects seeking to map news deserts. For instance, Abernathy only included local newspapers that provide public service journalism. This entailed relying on industry lists, as well as analyzing several print and online editions for its coverage of local government proceedings and topics that constitute critical information needs, namely emergencies and public safety, health, education, transportation, environment and planning, economic development, civic life, and political life (Friedland et al., 2012). The aforementioned Atlas da Notícia also relied on state and industry databases to identify local media outlets that cover "civic local issues, such as policy making, public spending, law making, health, education, security, mobility and the environment" (Da Silva & Pimenta, 2020, p. 49) similar to those identified by Friedland et al. (2012). However, the project's definition of a local news outlet — one that publishes at least two local journalistic pieces per month — was tailored to the Brazilian experience because monthlies are more common in remote areas (Da Silva & Pimenta, 2020).

Succeeding studies have sought to expand and deepen the study of news deserts. Ferrier, et al. (2016) had proposed the term “media deserts” (p. 221) to include “conduit layers” (p. 221), such as broadband internet connection, which allows access to news content. In Kenya, Owilla et al. (2021) mapped news deserts by accounting for the number of accredited journalists, television and radio stations in each county, as well as each county’s distance to the nearest news bureaus. Finneman et al. (2022) highlighted the need to consider the historical, economic and racial contexts that have hindered a community’s access to journalism.

## **Financial Viability**

Given this crisis of news deserts, scholars have looked into the revenue streams that support local newspapers’ viability and sustainability.

Diminishing financial support for local newspapers and journalists is seen as a major factor for the emergence of news deserts (Smethers et al., 2021). In the United States where the concept was first introduced, the decline in print advertising revenue amid the rise of digital media has led to massive layoffs and the closure of entire newsrooms, especially in small communities outside of the populous metropolitan areas (Ferucci & Alaimo, 2020; Miller, 2018). Buy-outs of local newspapers by large investment companies and corporations are presumed to diminish the quality of coverage (Reader & Hatcher, 2020). These entities usually consider profitability above the public interest, which entails less investment in hiring local journalists and in other resources needed for local news to thrive (Abernathy, 2018). According to Reader and Hatcher (2020), these “industry-wide” cuts in local news coverage are thus seen as the cause of the “local news crisis” (p. 207).

Drawing advertising revenue has been particularly challenging for local newspapers. While most local outlets in the United States are already on Facebook (Holcomb 2018, as cited in Mathews 2022), monetization using social media still proves to be a “challenge” (Cornia et al., 2018, as cited in Mathews 2022, p. 1252). Several alternative funding models have emerged to support community journalism, such as government and non-government organization (NGO) funding, memberships, sponsored content, philanthropic investment and profit-sharing schemes (Reader & Hatcher 2020).

Hyperlocal journalism — a loose term that describes “online local news and information services, normally independent from large media owners” (Barnett & Townend, 2015, p. 336) — has attempted to address the vacuum left by traditional/legacy media in news desert communities. However, hyperlocal sites “often suffer from small, inexperienced staffs, unsustainable revenue streams (many launch with one-time start-up grants), and small, niche audiences unrepresentative of the larger communities” (Reader & Hatcher, 2020, p. 207). And

given their reliance on digital networks, hyperlocals are not seen as sustainable in low-income and rural communities where broadband access is lacking (Napoli et al., 2018, as cited in Reader & Hatcher, 2020).

## **The Philippine Situation**

Data on local journalism is scarce in the Philippines (Estella & Löffelholz, 2019), much less the study of news deserts. As of 2022, the newspaper association Philippine Press Institute (PPI) has 63 members, 56 of which are based in the provinces. Not all provinces and administrative regions, however, are represented in the PPI. Most are based in provincial capitals, as Maslog (2014) had previously noted. However, newspaper readership in general is low, with only 2% of Filipino adults reading newspapers daily (Social Weather Stations, 2019). The pandemic has exacerbated this problem for local papers, also called community newspapers (Maslog, 2014). At least 12 community newspapers ceased printing at one point due to the economic crisis (Bautista, 2020).

As audiences have continually shifted towards digital sources — with Facebook as the most popular platform (Chua, 2022) — national news outlets have established their digital presence by maintaining websites and accounts across various social media platforms. The digital space, however, is not new for national dailies, having maintained presence on the internet since 1995 (Maslog, 2014). Community papers received a boost in online publishing in 1999, when PPI launched the Globalization of Island Community Newspapers (Globicom) project, which provided an online portal where provincial newspapers could post their articles (Maslog, 2014).

But traditional news outlets face stiff competition in social media, which has become fertile ground for massive and effective political disinformation campaigns focusing on historical denialism and the discrediting of independent journalism (Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Ong et al., 2019; Ong et al., 2022).

Despite the Philippines' growing online economy (Google et al., 2021), it is still difficult to ascertain how much news outlets receive in revenue as the public continues to redefine and expand their trustworthy sources of information (Asian Center for Journalism, 2022). As for community newspapers, Opiniano et al. (2015) previously noted that “community-level advertising” is still their primary source of revenue, with the amount depending on the community's “level of economic growth, [...] and the aggressiveness of community newspapers' advertising and marketing personnel” (p. 33). Alternative models to support struggling major local papers have also emerged, including digital subscription tie-ups with national dailies (Chua, 2021; Chua, 2022).

It is in this context that the AFN project was conceptualized. The project originally aimed to identify and build a database of credible news sites around the

country for the perusal of advertisers who may be interested in supporting these news outlets. Incidentally, due to the salience of the collected data, the researchers have decided to use it as a starting point in mapping and understanding the characteristics of Philippine news websites. The qualitative data collected also provides preliminary insights on the existence and nature of news deserts in the country. This paper thus seeks to answer the following research questions using the vetted data from AFN:

**RQ1:** What is the regional distribution of online news sites in the Philippines?

**RQ2:** What are the common characteristics and issues of these vetted online news sites?

**RQ3:** Which regions may be considered as online news deserts?

With these inquiries, the study hopes to primarily define some challenges and gaps in Philippine online journalism, and to contribute to the conceptualization of news deserts in the Global South context that may have significant divergences from those in the United States and the rest of the Global North (Orwilla, et al., 2021).

## **Method**

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were utilized by 16 local researchers and Internews from June 2020 to April 2021, namely: the manual listing and profiling of the PNS, an automated website analysis, and the manual vetting of the PNS with the guidance of a refined and localized AFN Code Book (see Appendix A), a matrix detailing the credibility criteria, scoring and assessment instructions for the online news sites.

To initiate the research, a startup team created a database of around 180 PNS by manually listing and profiling various news websites nationwide through online and offline search methods. Some of the factors discussed and considered by the researchers in profiling these online news sites include the general information (i.e. location and ownership), evidence chain (i.e. headline accuracy, legitimacy of business, and fact-checks), reputation network (i.e. political bias, contact details, authors, online presence and reach), and the nature of content of the websites as information were available.

This baseline data was then submitted to Internews for an automated website analysis to determine which online news sites were receptive to programmatic advertisements. After the technical analysis and acquiring additional PNS, 118 online news websites passed for the human vetting phase.

In preparation for the human vetting, the researchers conducted dry runs to re-

fine the AFN Code Book, and to create the research vetting process (see Image 2) and tools that will help efficiently record, check, and manage the collection of data. All the researchers (see Appendix B), which comprised college students, communication academics, and media practitioners across the four Jesuit universities nationwide, then underwent a structured training session to discuss the criteria definitions, assessment instructions, and possible issues when vetting online news sites, as well as to familiarize themselves with the research vetting process and tools. These measures, including establishing communication channels and timely feedback mechanisms, were done to ensure a common understanding on the parameters and goals of the manual vetting of the online news sites.



*Image 2. PNS human vetting process*

During the human vetting proper, team pods or subgroups of the whole research team which were then grouped per university, were assigned a set of PNS for vetting based on their geographical location. After which, the team pods delegated the assigned news websites for vetting among their group members. Each PNS underwent two rounds of vetting, with each pass being conducted by a different researcher to ensure reliability of results. In a few instances wherein the scores given by the two vetters for a criteria on one news website have a large gap (e.g. zero and four), implying inconsistencies in vetting the PNS, the assigned researchers discuss their scoring process and settle a final score.

At the end of the vetting, 108 of the 118 PNS were eligible for assessment and inclusion into the final index. The news websites that did not make it to the list were due to being inaccessible at the time of the vetting or being flagged as an active purveyor of disinformation and lacking credibility as a news site.

Given the specific focus of the project, the researchers acknowledge that there may be some legitimate news websites still not included in the list due to staff

limitations and the criteria bias towards PNS capable of hosting programmatic advertisements. It is possible that several online news sites plotted in this PNS mapping would not be working today too, as researchers observed that there was a quick turnover on a number of the sites' accessibility in between rounds of vetting. For purposes of this paper, the researchers will only be sharing the qualitative findings on the 108 vetted PNS that reached the final stage of the vetting.

The following section presents the geographical distribution of the vetted PNS, and some qualitative observations regarding audience, content and ethics. From the data, the researchers are able to identify an administrative region that can be considered an online news desert.

## Results

### **RQ1: What is the regional distribution of online news sites in the Philippines?**

*[Embed interactive PNS mapping - [link to live map](#)]*

The pilot research found that 62 PNS, a great majority of the identified online news websites, were based in administrative regions within Luzon. Out of this number, 34 PNS or almost one-third came from Metro Manila — the country's capital and where national media outlets have more resources and the widest reach.

This displays a large gap in terms of the PNS geographical distribution across the Philippine regions, with the Visayas having 24 PNS and Mindanao having 17 PNS. Despite the presence of PNS in Mindanao, no single news website was based in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao or BARMM. Meanwhile, five other news websites' locations could not be identified.

From these data, most PNS are city-based or are from urbanized areas. Researchers, however, noted that regional and local media organizations — such as in the provinces of Bicol and Zamboanga — use social media, particularly Facebook, as a news platform more than websites.

### **RQ2: What are the common characteristics and issues of these vetted online news sites?**



### Philippine News Sites Mapping in Metro Manila

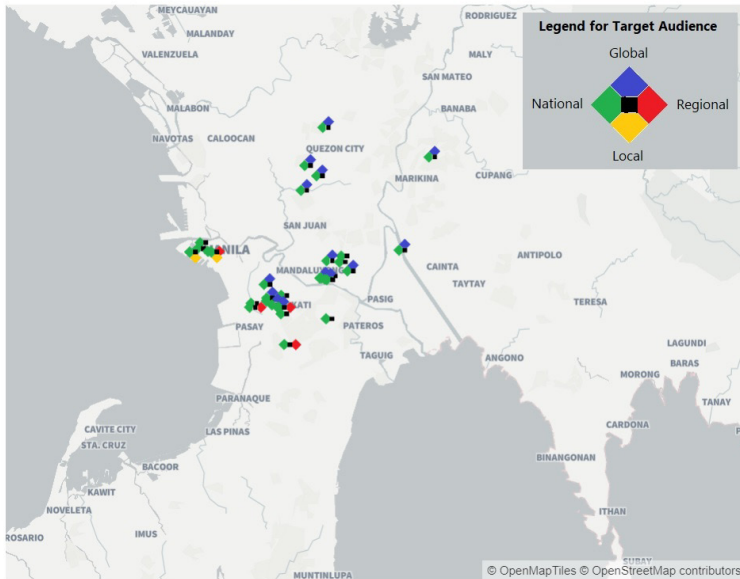


Image 3. Map of the vetted Philippines News Sites in Metro Manila

The 108 PNS also appear to have multiple target audiences based on their location and the content they publish. Majority of the PNS, especially in Metro Manila (see Image 3), published articles catering to national (43) and global (20) audiences. Visayas and Mindanao news websites largely focused on regional (44) and local (37) reporting.

While the researchers have identified the target audiences of the PNS, data on the news websites' overall online and social media reach is yet to be gathered to further understand the viability of these digital media outlets.

The vetted PNS from Metro Manila, with well-known national outlets like *ABS-CBN News*, *GMA News*, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, *The Philippine Star* (PhilStar), and *Rappler*, have been found to do more original reporting with diverse sourcing for stories. This included having clear authorship on various reports that mainly covered national issues, showing greater accountability for the news websites' published works.

Some of the PNS in the area are also subsidiary outlets of legacy newspapers such as *Agriculture Monthly*, published by *The Manila Bulletin*; *Wheels.PH*, powered by PhilStar; and *Nolisoli*, published by Hinge Inquirer Publications,

Inc., which is a part of the Inquirer Group of Companies. Other PNS, particularly *Bombo Radyo Philippines* and *SunStar Philippines*, serve as an amalgamation of a news outlet’s different stations and coverages across the country.

In Luzon provinces, researchers noted that topics tackled by news reportage have been unique and responsive to the community’s needs, tackling issues on local crimes, business and politics. The PNS in the Ilocos region, specifically *Bombo Radyo* in Baguio and Vigan, had niche reporting — having its stories delivered solely in the communities’ vernacular and focusing on local issues.

Researchers have observed, too, that some PNS within the whole of Luzon seem to publish highly-targeted and political stories, suggesting bias for certain political entities or personalities like in the case of *The Manila Times* and *Barako* where many reports leaned towards former president Rodrigo Duterte and his ally and close confidant Senator Bong Go.

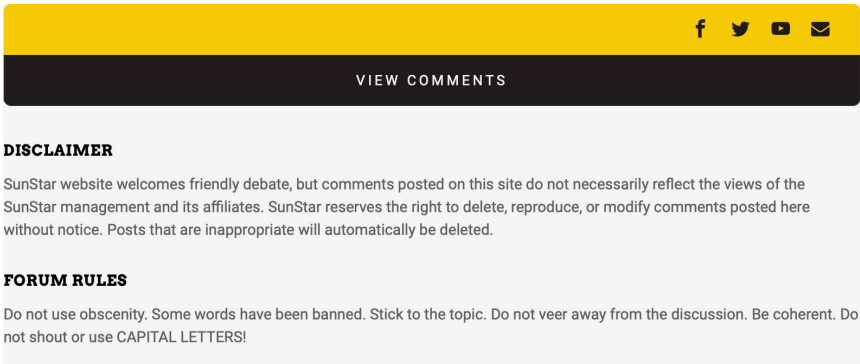


Image 4. Screenshot of SunStar Cebu’s Opinion Section Disclaimer and Comments Section

In Visayas, the PNS content has also been geared towards the local situation in their respective communities. Noticeable in some news websites are explicit efforts for audience engagement and moderation such as *SunStar Cebu’s* disclaimer and comments section for opinion articles (see Image 4), *Dumaguete. Info’s* comprehensive [“Terms of Use”](#) section, which includes detailed information on content usage and audience ethics, and *Negros Now Daily’s* [“Write Us And We’ll Get Back To You”](#) section for inquiries on advertisement and press releases.

In Mindanao, emerging or startup digital news websites that have gained some local following seem to have strong dependence on social media pages, especially Facebook, for sourcing of information. Some of these PNS also still struggle in establishing their identities, as there are lifestyle websites doubling as a news outlet.

Questions on ownership, politics and conflict of interest arise on some news websites, too, such as the *Northern Mindanao Daily Source* and *South Cotabato News*, which both feature a handful of government-related content from local tourism to positive stories on specific politicians. Additionally, researchers observed that some PNS in the Zamboanga Peninsula framed stories in a sensational manner and relied on crime reports or police blotter for their articles, and the Davao region-based PNS had news heavily linked to national personalities and entertainment figures.

An example of this is the *Sonshine Media Network International* (SMNI) website that is assumed to be owned by Apollo C. Quiboloy, a controversial pastor who is close to Duterte and is facing labor and sex trafficking charges in the United States (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). SMNI, which had been taken off by the research team in the PNS list after the rigorous vetting, is now considered to be part of the propaganda machinery of President Ferdinand “Bong-bong” Marcos Jr. (Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, 2022).

Amid these challenges, long-standing and credible news outlets like *Mindanao Gold Star Daily* and *MindaNews* have established their online presence to cover issues across the region, including the Muslim-majority BARMM, which did not have a PNS based in the area after the final vetting.

Overall, the local and regional PNS have tended to generally publish more lifestyle content, press releases and political propaganda than “hard” news. Although these news websites have been observed to not necessarily contain original reporting, these PNS reported on the communities’ daily stories — especially on local crimes, business and politics — while using a variety of languages understood by the general community and in the people’s vernacular like English, Filipino, *Bikolano*, *Waray* and *Bisaya*. These sporadically published reports have appeared to be usually single-sourced, lifted from social media or other websites, and have unclear, repetitive or general publication bylines across its articles. National stories reported on these province-based PNS are also either aggregated or are grounded on the local and regional affairs of the area.

Throughout the rounds of vetting, researchers recognized three main issues across the PNS: the lack of transparency on media ownership, the absence or inadequacy of code of ethics and privacy policies, and the difficulty in identification of advertising and sponsorship content.

Most of the news websites often have sections stating the names of editorial board and staff members of the media outlets. However, many of the vetted PNS lacked transparency on ownership details, especially the local and regional PNS. The online news sites that declared ownership largely only had the names of the companies and corporations that run or own the media outlet.

This reflects the state of media ownership in the country wherein majority are commercially-owned (Vera Files & Reporters Without Borders, 2016), especially the PNS situated in Metro Manila. Researchers have noted that gathering this ownership information from the news websites was also a challenging task, as these details were not easily accessible and could only be found through other online sources and verifiable documents.

The vetted PNS also exhibited insufficient (or non-existent) code of ethics, privacy terms and policies in its websites. This pattern was most apparent with the regional PNS which, at times, had clickable links for these sections that only led to empty or error pages. But it is worth noting that several national news websites such as *CNN Philippines*, *News 5* and *The Manila Times* were also found to be lacking code of conduct sections relaying the outlet’s editorial standards and practices.

In terms of advertising and paid content, the vetted PNS from the national to the regional levels have adopted the use of advertorials, wherein a product or a brand information is shared in a style of a journalistic report. Researchers observed, however, that such content and other similar sponsored stories are generally confusing and challenging to identify in the news websites — especially in the lifestyle and business sections. This is due to most of the PNS having no to little dedicated pages for advertisements and some articles having unclear or small labels for paid content. There were even instances where some reports that seemed like a press release or a brand story were “packaged” as news and lacked advertisement labels.

Additionally, researchers observed that some PNS appear to have been established primarily for profit, like an advertising platform, suggesting that these led the news websites to have poorly written articles or that the news items exist “to create an illusion of legitimacy” as a media outlet.

### **RQ3: Which regions may be considered as online news deserts?**

Based on this PNS mapping, the most significant online news desert in the Philippines can be found in the Bangsamoro Region or BARMM, the lone administrative region among the country’s 17 with no recorded PNS in the final database. At the time the study was conducted, the region covers the provinces of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao (split into the provinces of Maguindanao del Norte and Maguindanao del Sur after a plebiscite in September 2022), Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-tawi, as well as the capital Cotabato City and six other municipalities in Cotabato province that opted to join the region after a series of plebiscites in 2019. The region has a population of about 4.4 million as of 2020 and covers an area of more than 12,700 square kilometers.

BARMM was officially established in 2019 following nearly two decades of

peace talks and the signing of a 2014 peace agreement between the Philippine government and the secessionist Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Its establishment aims to end almost 50 years of armed conflict within the region, which had become a hotbed for violent extremism due to state-sanctioned atrocities, warring factions and historical neglect, among others (Abuza & Lischin, 2020). Such troubled history continuously affects the region's human and socio-economic development. While the region has made significant strides in reducing poverty, BARMM is still the poorest region in the Philippines as of 2021, with a poverty incidence of 37.2% (Mercado, 2022). This context hews closely to previous studies linking the presence of news deserts in poorer, more rural areas away from the nation's political and economic centers (Da Silva & Pimenta, 2020; Owilla et al., 2020). The region's lack of visibility and representation in the online news space underscores the Bangsamoro region's marginalization in the national news.

The researchers reiterate, however, that this mapping only pertains to online news sites that successfully passed both the automated and human vetting process. As mentioned, there are some news sites considered to be legitimate outlets, such as *Bulatlat* in Metro Manila, *The Freeman* in Visayas, and *Davao Today* in Mindanao. They were not included in the final list because they did not meet the standard for automatic vetting partly based on programmatic ads.

## **Discussion**

While this Philippine news website mapping is only preliminary, the gathered qualitative observations may potentially contribute to expanding and even challenging assumptions on the concept of news deserts. For instance, project researchers found that Facebook pages, sites and groups run by either journalists, local media outlets or other non-news media personalities have figured prominently in the provinces as sources of news and information. Some traditional news outlets post on Facebook rather than maintaining a website. These are usually not included in news or media desert mapping projects but are considered forms of hyperlocal journalism (Turner, 2021). While social media-based channels may be difficult to monitor due to factors such as volume and frequency of posts, high turnover or challenges in traceability, the researchers see that including these channels will be important in accounting for a more comprehensive mapping of both online news and media deserts, given the growing popularity of these platforms over traditional channels. The code book and vetting process should be modified if it will be used for purposes specific to the mapping of news deserts. Other media platforms such as print, television and radio are also not accounted for, given the limitations of the project's scope. Including these platforms is crucial because of their reach and popularity in the Philippines, and it would provide a more complete picture of the country's current news media landscape.

It is also noteworthy that a few legacy news outlets and a majority of provincial outlets did not meet certain crucial components of the AFN credibility criteria, including ethical and transparency practices disclosing ownership and revenue generation. As demonstrated in previous studies on news deserts, ownership is an important factor that contributes to the quality of local reporting (Abernathy, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). The preliminary qualitative data seem to reveal potential conflicts of interest arising from ownership by an influential political and business clan or corporate entity — whether on the local or national level — obscured by the absence of corporate information. In addition, the small number of PNS, which clearly distinguish paid content/advertorials, show that normative ethical practices ascribed to journalism elsewhere are not necessarily adopted universally. What are seen as conflicts of interest regarding advertising are nothing new to the Philippines at the national and local levels. For example, radio and television anchors of national and top-rated newscasts regularly advertise products ranging from detergent soap to fast food, with little uproar from the public (save for a few media observers). Do these ethical issues affect quality of reporting, contributing to the emergence of news deserts? The often-blurry dynamics between the newsroom and the business office in Philippine journalism need to be reflected in, and articulated further in, succeeding studies explicating the qualitative characteristics of news deserts.

The identification of BARMM as a significant online news desert tracks closer with Owilla et al.'s (2021) study characterizing the lack of media resources as the main concern of news and information deserts, rather than an industry-wide trend of limiting local coverage as observed in the Global North. While mapping and analysis of other platforms are still needed to get a fuller understanding of the Philippines' news deserts, the qualitative data points to possible lines of inquiry regarding current discourse on news deserts. This includes examining the increasing role of hyperlocal journalism — observed in this study as Facebook groups, for example — in delivering a news desert community's basic information needs. And while the mapping of news deserts is important in identifying possible gaps in the delivery of critical information to community life, the unique realities of journalism in the Global South require an expansion and interrogation of the very concept of news deserts. For instance, given news desert scholarship's emphasis on traditional and digital news platforms, how can indigenous forms of community news and information dissemination figure in the wider discourse about news deserts, prominently featured during climate-induced disasters such as typhoons (Ponce de Leon, 2020)? How do the varied and often lax ethical practices in local journalism affect the delivery of news and information in the community? To what extent can these communities also be considered "news deserts?"

Given the research's rich baseline findings, the researchers recommend three main projects to further map and understand the Philippines' diverse news media landscape, especially the dynamics of the digital media space and local

communities or the lack thereof, and to define the concept of news deserts in the context of a country from the Global South.

First, the researchers suggest an extensive mapping of various platforms of news media, including print, radio, television and online, be explored to more accurately determine the possible news desert hotspots nationwide. While the AFN project has produced pivotal initial findings on this subject, its methods have been limited to only identifying digital news websites and, in the process, may have excluded legitimate PNS due to the study's scope. A main suggestion, however, to improve the PNS mapping involves significantly developing the vetting process and tools towards adapting the contexts and needs of the Philippine media, especially those residing in the local and regional communities where news outlets and journalists have meager resources (Shafer, 1990) yet face greater dangers for their reporting (Aguilar Jr., et al., 2014). The online news websites may also be informed and invited to participate in this study in order to gather more substantial qualitative and quantitative data that can sharpen the characteristic findings on the Philippine digital journalism space.

This redirection requires hiring local researchers representative of all the regions to better capture the nuances of the journalism practices and landscapes across the localities. In terms of the criteria restructuring, accounting for factors such as the news outlet's language use, overall online and social media reach, and other forms of advertisement — apart from programmatic advertisements — is necessary to become more inclusive of the digital news media spectrum, considering that province-based PNS may be built and functioning dependent on its immediately available resources and/or access to its primary audience or community.

Besides acquiring online advertising revenue as envisioned by the AFN initiative, developing alternative and transparent funding support for community journalism is timely and vital, too. As the preliminary research findings show, some media outlets are owned by political entities and business organizations, a setup that may compromise independent reporting and merits a study on its own. This contributes to existing inquiry on the role of ownership in the emergence of news deserts (Abernathy, 2016). To address these financial challenges perennially faced by the local news media, hybrid and multi-layered funding models can be experimented. This may mean sourcing grants, spearheading crowdfunding campaigns, reviewing policies and innovating subscription-based news products and services tailor-fit to the communities' interests and needs.

Second, the researchers recommend using a more expansive media desert approach in mapping the Philippines' critical news and information gaps. This includes mapping not just the location of traditional media, but also the conduit layers such as fixed broadband and mobile data internet access, as well as related telecommunications infrastructure that are crucial to communities' ac-



cess to their critical news and information needs (cf. Da Silva & Pimenta, 2020). Through this method, external factors such as the available technology are also examined in characterizing news desert areas.

Lastly, the researchers propose conducting a study that would provide an in-depth profile of supposed news desert communities in the Philippines. This would help in localizing and nuancing the prevailing news and information ecosystems, including the presence of various hyperlocal and indigenous sources. Such a study could also rearticulate what the critical news and information needs and behaviors of a community are, similar to the U.S. FCC's study, and whether these are aligned with the perception of those in the news industry.

With these developing research insights and potential future work in mind, it is vital to constantly challenge the gaps in Philippine digital journalism — especially in relation to local communities — so that the media can adapt and evolve amid the growing public distrust and volatility in the practice. As journalists and newsrooms navigate the ever-changing media space, these initial findings may act as a springboard for creating audience-based solutions that would not only respond to the media's existing work perils, but also to the needs of the transforming public that journalism intends to serve.

## **Conclusion**

The research sought to map Philippine news sites and identify potential online news deserts using data from the AFN project, which aimed to create an index of credible PNS for advertisers' perusal. Quantitative and qualitative observations of the vetted sites revealed prevalent trends in Philippine online news sites, including the lack of transparency in editorial leadership and ownership, absence of a publicly-accessible code of ethics, insufficient or questionable sourcing in stories, and local/regional PNS' preference in publishing lifestyle features, press releases or even propaganda over hard news. These trends add further depth to articulating and localizing the conditions, which allow for the emergence of news deserts in the Philippines.

Researchers also observed the diversity of online news sources besides websites — most prominently, those that are based on Facebook. While some of these social media-based pages may be earnest in providing accurate, timely and relevant information to their communities as hyperlocal sources of news, some inevitably are primarily partisan, profit-oriented and even active purveyors of disinformation. This mirage of a seemingly abundant source of stimulating information online deceptively masks the reality of communities that are severely lacking sources of reliable and well-vetted information.

Through this PNS mapping, BARMM — a special administrative region of 4.4 million people borne out of peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the secessionist MILF — has been found to be a significant online



news desert. In contrast, the greatest concentration of online news can be found in Metro Manila, almost 900 kilometers away by air to Cotabato City, the Bangsamoro region's capital.

This preliminary identification of Philippine online news deserts, as well as the contemporary challenges and characteristics of digital journalism, seeks to serve as baseline data for future efforts to determine the extent of news and media deserts in the country, which could help address critical gaps in communities' news and information ecosystems.

### **Disclaimer**

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## Appendix A

### Ads For News Project - Philippines Code Book Overview for Vetting Philippine News Websites

General Criteria	Description
<b>Original reporting</b>	The news website produces original content, featuring unique topics, angles, local perspectives, and/or sources that cannot be found in other news websites.
<b>Reliable news and information in the public interest</b>	The news website reports accurate, fact-based, and culturally-relevant information and/or opinion regarding issues of public interest. It also utilizes multiple sources in verifying facts for the stories.
<b>Ethics</b>	The news website clearly expresses the code of conduct policies it follows, including its audience feedback mechanism.
<b>Transparency of ownership</b>	The news website discloses information on organizational ownership and leadership such as editorial staff and publisher.
<b>Clear disclosure of advertising and sponsored content</b>	The news website clearly labels paid content, allowing users to differentiate it from news and editorial content.
<b>Clear privacy policy and terms and conditions</b>	The news website details its privacy policies, data policy, and terms and conditions when a user is accessing the website.
<b>Positive site user experience</b>	The news website allows users to easily navigate the site, without intrusive advertising density, sticky pop-up advertisements and automatic playing advertisements.

## Appendix B

### Ads For News Project - Philippines Research Team Pods



## About the authors

**Maria Raizza Renella P. Bello** is a freelance journalist covering in-depth and investigative stories on environment, peace and conflict, and human rights issues. Bello is also a researcher and development practitioner focused on leadership, media, and community work. She was the research supervisor of the Ads For News Project Philippines, and is a co-convenor of Campus Journalism Lab.

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## **Five Stars Because They Tell It Like It Is: A Parasocial Examination of Mainstream, Conservative and Far-Right Reviews on Apple Podcasts**

**By Marcus Funk, LaRissa Lawrie, and Burton Speakman**

*Podcasts routinely engender loyal communities of fans and listeners based on emotional choices and perceptions; those decisions reflect parasocial phenomena, or perceived personal interactions and relationships between media producers and consumers. A mixed-methods analysis of Apple Podcast reviews indicate frequent parasocial interactions and relationships among reviews of mainstream news podcasts, conservative news podcasts and far-right podcasts; qualitatively, the frequency and intensity of those emotions were strongest among far-right reviewers. Quantitatively, a computerized content analysis (CATA) of roughly 21,000 Apple Podcast reviews indicates that reviewers of mainstream news podcasts express emotion, connection, praise and loyalty significantly less frequently than reviewers of conservative and far-right podcasts, as well as true crime, sports and business podcasts. Findings suggest mainstream podcast journalists within the United States solicit parasocial phenomena and emotional bonds less frequently, and with less intensity, than listeners of a variety of other podcasts, including conspiracy-driven far-right podcasts.*

Successful mainstream podcasts often feel very personal and intimate. Listeners consider hosts friends with shared interests, experiences, communities and histories, and base listening choices on those emotions (Adler Berg, 2021; Florini, 2015; Lindgren, 2021). Those behaviors reflect decades of scholarship on parasocial relationships (PSR) and parasocial interaction (PSI) illustrating mediated emotional bonds between content creators and audiences (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin et al., 1985; Rubin & McHugh, 1987). While most analyses rely on surveys and interviews (Liebers & Schramm, 2019), reviews on Apple Podcasts provide an intriguing opportunity to study PSI and PSR, as well as parasocial breakups (PSBU), among a highly-motivated group of listeners. It also offers important comparisons across a diverse spectrum of podcasts, including mainstream news podcasts, conservative and far-right podcasts as well as true crime, business and sports podcasts.

Journalists and academics routinely debate how journalists should behave on public-facing media, including how social and personable they should be on podcasts and social media (Bossio & Sacco, 2017; Funk, 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Munslow, 2021). Identifying PSI and PSR trends in Apple Podcast reviews provides needed insights for mainstream journalists. For instance — do five-star reviews focus on the personality and relatability of the journalists hosting the programs, given that five-star reviews are written by their most avid fans? Conversely, do one-star reviews criticize their personality, their professionalism or their perceived biases? When and for whom do audiences have notions of neutrality and objectivity?

Conservative news podcasts frequently camouflage their text-based content, such as episode descriptions, to resemble mainstream media (Funk & Speakman, 2022) while simultaneously condemning mainstream journalism as biased enemies of a silent conservative majority (Calhoun, 2019; Hemmer, 2022; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Typically, an audience's perception of a media performer's authenticity and self-disclosure increases message acceptance (Nah, 2022) which could also apply to far-right podcasts that spread disinformation and conspiracies. Parasocial phenomena also help motivate listening for other genres, like true crime (Perks & Turner, 2019). It could also apply to fringe and far-right podcasts, which share themes of victimhood and persecution with center-right podcasts (Speakman & Funk, 2020). Findings contribute to a better understanding of audience preferences, as little scholarship has been done on podcast reviews or on reviews of journalism products generally.

This mixed methods analysis studies Apple Podcast reviews in two phases. First, an in-depth qualitative analysis of daily news podcasts from mainstream journalists, conservative news organizations and far-right media explore if, when and how expressions of parasocial phenomena manifest in Apple Podcast reviews. Are fans reviewing the show and its content, or the hosts and their personalities? Daily news podcasts are often short and direct; documenting parasocial phenomena in reviews of such podcasts could be telling, and offers potential comparisons between mainstream, conservative and far-right podcasts with similar formats and production schedules. Every review written between September 30, 2021, and October 21, 2022, was downloaded and inductively studied.

Second, computerized content analysis (CATA) explored rhetoric and word choice in roughly 21,000 Apple Podcast reviews of 48 podcasts in six podcast journalism genres: mainstream news, conservative news and far-right news, as well as true crime, sports and business. CATA measured and explored word choice and rhetoric to determine the tone of every review. Were Apple Podcast reviews of mainstream news written with more personal, familiar or inspirational language than reviews in other categories? Quantitative exploration allowed a broader understanding of how parasocial phenomena manifest in Apple Pod-

cast reviews.

## **Literature Review**

Journalists often negotiate their professional and personal online behavior to navigate professional, organizational, and institutional pressures (Bossio & Sacco, 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Munslow, 2021). Because journalism is not a credentialed profession in the United States, internal and external actors influence journalism boundaries and determine what counts as reputable news and credible news makers (Lewis, 2012). The audience is a legitimate actor in critiquing and determining journalistic boundaries, legitimacy, and procedures (Kananovich & Perreault, 2021).

Some of the most long-standing ideals that delineate the boundaries of acceptable journalism to both external and internal actors include objectivity, neutrality and transparency; these standards often indicate professionalism and are associated with perceptions of journalistic credibility (Hellmueller et al., 2013) and can lead to higher audience perceptions of credibility (Tandoc & Thomas, 2017). However, audiences also tend to believe that there is a bias against their ideological views by most of the news media (Eveland & Shah, 2003).

### **Journalism and Podcasting:**

One notable dimension of research into journalistic transparency is sociable behavior, authenticity and likeability among journalists (Peifer & Meisinger, 2021). Social media audiences have “a presumption of personal authenticity and connection” (Marwick & boyd, 2010, p. 129), leading many journalists to share “light-hearted content, images of their everyday lives, hobbies and activities” or to avoid neutral and detached language (Bossio & Sacco, 2017, p. 538). So-called “ambient transparency” offers asides, hyperlinks and personal opinions on social media and is separate from news gathering (Karlsson, 2020), but there are also indications Gen Z news consumers value authenticity and personality embedded in news content, particularly short-form videos (Munslow, 2021).

Podcasting offers fertile ground for journalists to share personality, either ambivalently or directly concerning their journalism. The medium has a well-documented focus on authenticity and personality (Florini, 2015; Meserko, 2015; Sienkiewicz & Jaramillo, 2019), often leading listeners to base choices on feelings of intimacy and parasocial relationships (Perks & Turner, 2019). Podcasting encourages “chipper and sincere conversation,” including personal discussions of perspectives, narratives and even feelings from hobbyist and professional podcasters (Funk, 2017). Yet, conservative media differ from traditional journalistic brands which often attempt to tamp down individual personalities to focus on brands (Holton & Molyneux, 2017).

In some cases, transparent self-disclosure becomes “metajournalistic performance” emphasizing a reporter’s persona to reaffirm journalistic culture and authority (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2021); in others, journalists are often “central characters” in their own reporting, “self-reflexively sharing how they think and feel” (Lindgren, 2021, p. 12).

### **Parasocial Interactions, Relationships and Breakups:**

Analyses of personality and transparency in podcasting overlap with analyses of parasocial phenomena, a concept originally described as a “simulacrum of give-and-take” between media audiences and media personalities (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). Despite knowing a person or character inside a television cannot speak to them, and in the case of fictional characters is not even real, media users often perceive an “intimate reciprocal social interaction” (Dibble et al., 2016, p. 23) between them and the media persona. It is a “type of intimate, friend-like relationship” (Rubin & McHugh, 1987, p. 280) that can be “experienced outside of the viewing time, role adoption, non-mutual and non-dialectic communication” (Ingram & Luckett, 2019, p. 148).

The phrase “parasocial phenomena” is a blanket term covering three distinct but related sensations: parasocial interaction (PSI), parasocial relationships (PSR) and parasocial breakups (PSBU) (Lieber & Schramm, 2019). When specifically defined, PSI is confined to the viewing episode. Some scholars argue it is defined by feelings of mutual awareness and perceived dynamic conversation between audience and persona (Dibble et al., 2016; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011); others consider face-to-face communication one part of a multi-dimensional understanding of PSI (Ingram & Luckett, 2019; Tsay & Bodine, 2012) or argue that a literal sense of reciprocal immersion is not necessarily required (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008).

PSR, conversely, refers to longer-term bonds that are not restricted to in-the-moment emotions and perceptions (Chung & Cho, 2017; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Tukachinsky, 2011). PSRs offer a stronger parallel to traditional in-person relationships (Rosaen & Dibble, 2017); sustained PSI can evolve into a PSR (Wong et al., 2017). PSI “limits itself to the interaction between a media character and the audience ... PSR exceeds this limit and leads to or encompasses cross-situational relationships between the audience and media characters” (Lieber & Schramm, 2019, p 5). PSBU highlights the conclusion, end or even the emotional death of a parasocial relationship (Cohen, 2003; Daniel & Westerman, 2017; Gregg, 2018). Such studies have long histories; at least 261 empirical studies on parasocial phenomena have been published since 1956 (Lieber & Schramm, 2019).

### **Conservative and Far-Right Media:**

Conservative audiences tend to believe that most news media are biased

against their ideological views (Eveland & Shah, 2003). In response, conservative media help cultivate social identity among the political right by offering a sympathetic shelter from mainstream media they believe opposes conservative values and individuals (Vultee, 2012). Right-wing media often use anger to spark strong emotional reactions (Hawley, 2017; Hemmer, 2016; Woods & Hahner, 2019) and encourage feelings of victimhood and persecution (Bauer & Nadler, 2020; Bebout, 2019). They have been instrumental in guiding and influencing Republican supporters and politicians, particularly Rush Limbaugh (Hemmer, 2022) and Fox News (Cassino, 2016), and partisan media aided a rightward shift and feelings of victimhood and persecution among American conservatives (Nadler, 2022).

Right-wing media and politics function much more cohesively than other parts of the American political system (Meagher, 2012), with conservative media actively supporting partisan beliefs (Waisbord et al., 2018) and encouraging highly partisan falsehoods (Robinson, 2018). Conservative media users frequently encounter mainstream news or oppositional narratives through happenstance on social media, not because they actively sought out that information (Bennett & Lyengar, 2008).

Lines between the center-right and far right have become blurrier in recent years (Speakman & Funk, 2020), as fringe conservatives have become adept at exploiting social media algorithms and manipulating what journalists consider news (Caplan & boyd, 2018). Far-right movements share appeals to emotion as one of their dominant rhetorical devices (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). Those emotional appeals are shared much more openly, and woven more directly into conservative content, than the “ambient transparency” (Karlsson, 2020) and “metajournalistic performance” (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2021) often employed by mainstream journalists.

## **Research Questions**

This mixed methods analysis begins with an inductive, qualitative analysis of Apple Podcast reviews of daily news podcasts from mainstream, conservative, and far-right news organizations. RQ1 explores PSI and PSR in those reviews; RQ2 considers PSBU in the same collection. Quantitative, computerized analysis for RQ3 explores personal and familiar language in Apple Podcast reviews of mainstream news podcasts, conservative and far-right news podcasts, as well as a collection of other nonfiction and journalistic podcast genres of podcast journalism.

**RQ1:** Are PSI and PSR expressed in Apple Podcast reviews of daily news podcasts from mainstream, conservative and far-right news media? If so, how?

**RQ2:** Is PSBU expressed in Apple Podcast reviews of daily news podcasts from

mainstream, conservative and far-right news media? If so, how?

**RQ3:** Are there significant differences in the use of parasocial language in Apple Podcast reviews of mainstream news podcasts, conservative and far-right news podcasts and/or other journalism podcast genres? If so, what differences?

## Method

This mixed methods analysis sits at an intriguing intersection of scholarship on parasocial phenomena (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Liebers & Schramm, 2019), perceived emotional bonds between podcast hosts and audiences (Lindgren, 2021; Perks & Turner, 2019; Sienkiewicz & Jaramillo, 2019) and center-right and far-right media encouraging feelings of persecution and solidarity among conservatives (Nadler, 2022; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018).

The majority of parasocial analyses are quantitative surveys of user behavior (Liebers & Schramm, 2019); qualitative analyses of podcast listener motivations found parasocial trends focused on interviews (Boling & Hull, 2018; Perks & Turner, 2019). Those methodologies restrict researchers to willing participants; given right-wing animosity toward both journalists and academics, it seems unlikely those listeners would participate in good faith. Those approaches also risk missing the breadth and diversity of expressions of parasocial phenomena among podcast listeners. Instead, this mixed methods analysis employs an inductive, qualitative approach for RQ1 and RQ2 and a quantitative computerized analysis for RQ3.

Researchers approached data collection in three steps. First, researchers identified podcasts that fit appropriate practical and ideological dimensions for RQ1 and RQ2. To be eligible, podcasts must be available in Apple Podcasts and have at least 500 reviews in Apple Podcasts; all but one had considerably more. Apple Podcasts offers separate categories for “Daily News,” “Politics” and “News Commentary,” but there is considerable overlap between each group. Apple Podcasts also does not tag, sort or categorize podcasts by ideology. The “Politics” category, for example, includes podcasts from the conservative Daily Wire, mainstream NPR and *The New York Times*, progressive Crooked Media, and far right (Steve) Bannon’s War Room. Even apolitical genres like true crime are categorized unreliably (Sherrill, 2020). Establishing the ideological lean of a podcast simply by their presentation in Apple Podcasts can be extremely difficult (Funk & Speakman, 2022), particularly given rhetorical overlap between right-wing and far-right podcasts (Speakman & Funk, 2020).

This study used the Ad Fontes Media Bias Chart as a guide (Muller, 2022). Scores for bias and reliability were used to help categorize and balance podcasts in mainstream, conservative and far-right categories; while individual scores could be disputed on the chart, it serves as a valuable tool for broad

categorization.

## **Phase I: Qualitative Analysis for RQ1 and RQ2**

Qualitative analysis for RQ1 and RQ2 considers short, daily news podcasts intended to summarize essential news for early morning publication. Given their short lengths and direct approaches to news, parasocial attachments to hosts would have considerably less time to develop per day than longer analytical programs; their presence in Apple Podcast reviews would be particularly intriguing. Daily news podcasts from mainstream journalists are plentiful, but the market on the right is dominated by The Morning Wire podcast, which was created by Ben Shapiro's Daily Wire organization in part to compete with mainstream morning news podcasts. When analysis began in October 2022, The Morning Wire had more than 21,700 reviews on Apple Podcasts; the few other conservative daily news podcasts lagged far behind. The Morning Wire has clear formatting similarities to Up First from National Public Radio and Axios Today from Axios. Axios Today's bias and reliability scores were similar to The Morning Wire; Up First was rated slightly more liberal and reliable than both, and had more than 49,300 reviews on Apple Podcasts. To compensate, researchers added the Fox News Rundown podcast, which had a similar bias score (on the right) to Up First (on the left) but also had a slightly lower reliability score and far fewer Apple Podcast reviews. Far-right podcasts are generally longer and opinion-driven. The fairest comparisons were the Breitbart News Daily Podcast, which is longer than the others but also focused on daily publication, and Human Events Daily with Jack Posobiec, which claims a focus on breaking news but was created by the far-right activist group Turning Point USA. Most podcasts had one or two regular hosts. (See Appendix 1 for a full list of sampled podcasts.)

Next, researchers located Apple Podcast reviews for each selected podcast. The other most prominent podcast platforms, Spotify and YouTube, do not include reviews. Not every review on Apple Podcasts includes a written review; many, if not most, reviewers simply select between one and five stars and submit a review without commentary. In all but one case, every podcast had a review average above four stars. Researchers began by copying all Apple Podcast reviews with comments from October 21, 2022, (when analysis began) to September 30, 2021, from Apple Podcasts into Microsoft Word documents. Copied reviews included the title and first 30-40 words of the review commentary; to continue reading longer reviews, pressing a MORE button was necessary and logistically prohibitive. In most cases, that included thousands of reviews; in others, fewer reviews were written during the same period, requiring researchers to copy the entire body of Apple Podcast reviews. In every case, there were enough reviews to achieve saturation, or the point in qualitative analysis where no new themes or ideas manifest (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

Qualitative analysis was conducted with Microsoft Word and NVivo qualitative



analysis software. Inductive analysis considered diverse expressions of PSI, PSR and PSBU. For PSI, researchers considered expressions of individual events, episodes or moments in a podcast; they explored if and how reviewers cited individual moments or exchanges, and if/how reviewers expressed reactions and responses to those moments. Expressions of feelings or emotions to particular moments were also included.

For PSR, expressions of sustained familiarity or behavior were included. Reviewer expressions about long-term listening, deep knowledge, familiarity or intimacy with the host and/or history also qualified. Expressions of in-group solidarity with podcast hosts were considered to reflect PSR, so long as it was expressed in personal terms. For PSBU, personal expressions of breakup, disillusionment or abandonment were included. Whenever a reviewer claimed a podcast host “lost them” or they “gave up” it was considered PSBU, so long as it was expressed in personal terms.

The research began with an approach based in grounded theory; researchers did not have a fixed methodology in mind when starting the project, instead employing open-ended and inductive analytical strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, 1997). The research began with a qualitative analysis that indicated the frequency and intensity of parasocial phenomena in RQ1 and RQ2 were considerably higher in reviews of far-right podcasts than reviews of mainstream news podcasts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Researchers hypothesized that computerized content analysis (CATA) could measure such differences on a much broader scale; initial quantitative inquiries snowballed into RQ3 and a mixed methods approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

## **Phase II: Quantitative Analysis for RQ3**

CATA analysis for RQ3 built on qualitative findings from RQ1 and RQ2, as well as subsequent quantitative hypotheses. Qualitative findings indicated the frequency and intensity of parasocial language was higher in Apple Podcast reviews of far-right podcasts than in mainstream news podcasts. Researchers adapted a CATA approach and software used by Funk and McCombs (2017) to measure parasocial language and rhetoric used in Apple Podcast reviews of mainstream news podcasts, conservative and far-right podcasts, as well as three other genres of podcast journalism. That process utilized several steps.

First, researchers selected eight podcasts from three distinct groups: mainstream news podcasts, conservative news podcasts and far-right news podcasts. The selection procedure mirrored the process for RQ1 and RQ2: podcasts needed to appear in the top 200 shows in the “News” category of Apple Podcasts; they needed at least 500 reviews in Apple Podcasts (although the show with the fewest reviews had roughly 1,100 reviews); podcasts needed to represent different organizations and corporate owners; and they needed appro-



appropriate categorization in the interactive Ad Fontes Media Bias Chart. Mainstream news podcasts reflected reliability scores between 43.78 and 49.17, and bias scores between -1.4 and -9.44. Conservative news podcasts reflected higher bias and lower reliability scores; far-right podcasts presented much higher bias scores and much lower reliability scores. The vast majority of podcasts had one or two regular hosts. (See Appendix 2 for the full list of podcasts.)

Researchers also collected eight podcasts from three other genres of journalism podcasts: true crime, sports and business. All were at or near the top of their respective Apple Podcast categories, all had far more than 500 reviews, and each represented a different news organization. Including other genres of podcast journalism allowed a fuller, richer analysis; it also presented intriguing comparisons to mainstream news podcasts that could not be reduced to political ideology.

On average, mainstream news podcasts had fewer Apple Podcast reviews than other genres; collecting a full year of reviews could lead to a quantitatively imbalanced analysis. Instead, researchers copied Apple Podcast reviews into Microsoft Word until the document reached 60 pages, or roughly 480 reviews each; in some cases, the full corpus of Apple Podcast reviews fell short, but the majority of podcasts met this requirement. Researchers then used a programmable macro in Microsoft Word to split those 60-page documents into individual one-page documents with roughly eight Apple Podcast reviews each.

Researchers used Diction, a CATA program designed to measure themes and rhetoric in bodies of text by counting individual words associated with particular “word dictionaries,” or collections of terms associated with established rhetorical themes and past scholarship. Diction maintains an ongoing list of published academic studies that utilize the software (Diction Software, 2021).

To measure parasocial phenomena, researchers identified word dictionaries in Diction that reflected PSI, PSR and PSBU. Researchers identified six dictionaries that measured language closely shared by expressions of parasocial phenomena: *human interest*, *self-reference*, *satisfaction*, *inspiration*, *optimism* and *commonality*. Each, in different ways, reflected perceived personal connections and shared experiences and relationships. The following operationalizations are pulled from the Diction software (DICTION: The Text Analysis Program, 2010).

### ***Human Interest***

An adaptation of Rudolf Flesch’s notion that concentrating on people and their activities gives discourse a life-like quality. Included are standard personal pronouns (he, his, ourselves, them), family members and relations (cousin, wife, grandchild, uncle), and generic terms (friend, baby, human, persons).

## ***Self-Reference***

All first-person references, including I, I'd, I'll, I'm, I've, me, mine, my, myself. Self-references are treated as acts of indexing whereby the locus of action appears to reside in the speaker and not in the world at large, thereby implicitly acknowledging the speaker's limited vision.

## ***Satisfaction***

Terms associated with positive affective states (cheerful, passionate, happiness), with moments of undiminished joy (thanks, smile, welcome), and pleasurable diversion (excited, fun lucky) or with moments of triumph (celebrating, pride, auspicious). Also included are words of nurturance: healing, encourage, secure, relieved.

## ***Inspiration***

Abstract virtues deserving of universal respect. Most of the terms in this dictionary are nouns isolating desirable moral qualities (faith, honesty, self-sacrifice, virtue) as well as attractive personal qualities (courage, dedication, wisdom, mercy). Social and political ideals are also included: patriotism, success, education, justice.

## ***Optimism***

Language endorsing some person, group, concept or event, or highlighting their positive entailments.

## ***Commonality***

Language highlighting the agreed-upon values of a group and rejecting idiosyncratic modes of engagement.

Researchers then imported each Word document into Diction and conducted a computerized content analysis. Diction counted each instance of every word in every dictionary in every document. Findings were then exported to Microsoft Excel and SPSS, where podcasts were grouped based on genre (mainstream news, conservative news, far-right news, true crime, sports and business). In SPSS, ANOVA analysis with a Tukey HSD-post test measured statistical differences for each dictionary across all six categories, all 48 podcasts and all 2,672 data points, representing roughly 21,000 Apple Podcast reviews. This methodological and statistical approach was adapted from a past study using Diction, ANOVA analysis and Tukey HSD post-tests (Funk & McCombs, 2017).

## Results

**RQ1:** Are PSI and PSR expressed in Apple Podcast reviews of daily news podcasts from mainstream, conservative and far-right news media? If so, how?

Overall, inductive qualitative analysis indicated that almost every review presented a presumption of conversation and direct (mediated) interaction between the reviewer and either the podcast hosts or other reviewers. Apple Podcast reviews strongly emphasized personal pronouns, identities and personal opinions; personal emotions were regularly shared and highlighted. Reviews were also clearly written *to* and *for* a captive and interested audience, not an abstract algorithm or computer program. These are clear characteristics of PSI.

Very few reviews focused entirely on professional content; most that did were brief declarations like “great podcast.” Instead, almost every review was grounded in personal experience. Reviews like “I listen every morning to start off the day,” “I don’t miss a single episode” or “Been listening to this podcast since they launched” reflect routines and habits developed over time and in conjunction with personal familiarity with the hosts and shows. These are hallmarks of PSR. Typically, reviews emphasized both their personal feelings and individual histories with the podcasts; very few expressed a dispassionate or impersonal opinion about the news or content of the podcast. “Love” was the optimal term for many reviewers.

Personal affection and criticism were also expressed for many hosts, including “I love Ayesha!” and “it does seem like the reporters have become old friends, and I enjoy their daily visit” in reviews of Up First and Axios Today. Criticism was also largely expressed personally, particularly regarding the sound or character of individual voices, including words like “guffawing” or “screechy.”

Reviews of the conservative The Morning Wire were presented personally, with a focus on the reviewer’s ideology and personal pronouns (PSI), as well as long-standing listening habits and affection for the show (PSR): “After a morning devotional, this podcast is the best way to spend 15 minutes in the morning.” Hosts were individually praised less, however. Personal criticism of Chris Wallace on The Fox News Rundown was especially vocal, including a review that he is past his “use by date.”

Personal praise and flattery were *much* more common in reviews for the far-right Breitbart News Daily and Human Events Daily; those hosts were “amazing” with “clear eyes and a sober mind” and a “one of a kind brilliant” host who “brings receipts, both jokers, the deuce & Ace to the table!!” The intensity of that personal affection was also considerably higher than in mainstream or conservative podcast reviews. Reviewers did not simply “love” the shows; the show “gets the truth out” and represents “the current AND future voice for conserva-

tives.” Reviewers also routinely emphasized the “enormously valuable” passions and contributions made by the far-right podcasts, as well as emphasis for the “facts” and “professionalism” presented on the shows.

**RQ2:** Is PSBU expressed in Apple Podcast reviews of daily news podcasts from mainstream, conservative and far-right news media? If so, how?

Frequently, the ending or conclusion of a parasocial relationship is a painful experience (Daniel & Westerman, 2017; Gregg, 2018) that feels like losing a friend (Cohen, 2003). Evidence of emotional parasocial breakups (PSBU) was found throughout Apple Podcast reviews for daily news podcasts. PSBU generally followed one of three formats: complaints about audio quality or voice tone, criticisms of lengthy focus on a specific news topic, and complaints about perceived liberal or conservative biases. In each case, reviewers typically spoke directly to hosts, presuming direct interaction and personal conversations reflecting PSI; PSBUs seemed to presume that technical or ideological choices were made directly by hosts.

PSBU motivated by audio concerns was less common, but almost always presented in personal terms. Comments included “I love NPR, but why are y’all tryna come through like someone’s sleeping in the next room” and “Jack, your content is great but the volume is all over the place. Please fix this.” Reviews also highlighted or criticized specific names and voices by name. Such commentary could have been written abstractly — “this podcast has poor audio quality,” for example—but reviewers instead cast perceived audio issues as personal problems, not professional obstacles. In some cases, personal criticism was aimed at the sound and tone of speaking voices of particular journalists.

Reviews of specific editorial decisions occasionally reflected repetition or tediousness; some reviewers expressed exhaustion with continued coverage of the war in Ukraine or investigations into riots and the coup attempt on January 6, 2021. Typically, however, objections about particular news events were coupled with accusations of media bias.

Reviews of mainstream podcasts frequently commented on accepting or acknowledging that the podcast (or mainstream news generally) had a left-wing bias, at times condemning how far the show had shifted to the left. Such criticism was typically couched in personal terms identifying the reviewer as a Democrat or independent and often presented as though they accepted those biases begrudgingly; in many other cases, perceived biases were characterized as “too much” or cause to abandon the podcast due to personal ideological incompatibilities. Reviews included “Sad to say I’m giving up on NPR after six years. . . . it has become clear the programmers have Trump Derangement Syndrome (TDS),” “Awful partisan show. Completely antiwhite,” and “The host of the podcasts is blatantly biased and non-objective in presenting stories and

asking (leading) questions of the interviewees.”

In other cases, mainstream podcasts were deemed compromised by advertisements from oil companies or other large corporations. Most commonly, reviewers accused the podcasts of biases regarding climate change coverage, including “Lost all credibility on climate issues once the Exxon ads started.”

PSBU was also expressed very personally in reviews of conservative podcasts, particularly the Fox News Rundown, and routinely focused on perceived progressive biases. Reviewers frequently accused Fox of becoming too “soft” or progressive, often while emphasizing the personal conservative credentials of the reviewer and longstanding support that was being withdrawn due to perceived progressive biases. Shows were deemed insufficiently conservative often due to reporting and discussion on the January 6, 2021, coup attempt or other instances of being unsupportive of former President Donald Trump.

Other reviewers, particularly for The Morning Wire, acknowledged and defended perceived conservative biases as plainly evident and “fair” given perceived progressive biases in mainstream media. “Definitely a conservative view, but presented in a very balanced and fair way.” Praise and support for conservative values in far-right podcasts was stronger.

Some critical reviews on the right and far right did not reflect parasocial relationships or breakups. While one-star reviews called far-right hosts “crazy” in personal terms, they did not emphasize a personal attachment to the show or shared ideological values; they seemed more likely written by motivated ideological critics who had listened to only one or two episodes, if any at all. Those reviews also seemed to speak more to readers of Apple Podcast reviews, not the hosts themselves; this also reflects a presumed direct interaction and qualifies as PSI, but of a different style and intensity, as PSI expressed elsewhere in Apple Podcast reviews. “This is not news. This is propaganda” and “emotionally ill religious people,” for example, do not reflect PSBU.

**RQ3:** Are there significant differences in the use of parasocial language in Apple Podcast reviews of mainstream news podcasts, conservative, and far-right news podcasts and/or other journalism podcast genres? If so, what differences?

Quantitative CATA considered parasocial language and rhetoric in mainstream news podcasts, conservative news podcasts and far-right news podcasts, as well as true crime, business and sports podcasts. Researchers identified six-word dictionaries in the Diction computerized content analysis software that reflected parasocial phenomena. Each category had similar average reviews on Apple Podcasts: mainstream news (4.3 stars out of 5), conservative news (4.6), far-right news (4.7), true crime (4.6), sports (4.6), and business (4.7).

CATA indicated significant differences regarding parasocial language and expressions between groups. ANOVA analysis indicated that language reflecting *human interest* ( $f = 108.270$ ,  $p < .001$ ), *satisfaction* ( $f = 121.350$ ,  $p < .001$ ), *optimism* ( $f = 50.290$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and *commonality* ( $f = 14.847$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was significantly less common in mainstream news reviews than every other category.

Put another way: language giving discourse “a life-like quality,” “positive affective states” and the “shared values of a group” was significantly *less* likely to appear in Apple Podcast reviews of mainstream news podcasts when compared to reviews of conservative news podcasts, far-right news podcasts, and three other genres of journalism podcasts. Language reflecting *inspiration* ( $f = 78.921$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and *self-reference* ( $f = 119.949$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was also significantly less common in reviews of mainstream news podcasts when compared to conservative news podcasts and most other genres. Tukey HSD post-tests indicated significant differences between groups. (See Figure 1.)

			Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Self-reference	MSM	Right	-2.78513*	0.50888	0.000	-4.2364	-1.3339
		Far Right	1.92616*	0.50075	0.002	0.4981	3.3542
		True Crime	-8.23751*	0.48853	0.000	-9.6307	-6.8443
		Sports	0.60099	0.48853	0.822	-0.7922	1.9942
		Business	-3.86992*	0.49502	0.000	-5.2816	-2.4582
Satisfaction	MSM	Right	-3.047*	0.284	0.000	-3.86	-2.24
		Far Right	-1.204*	0.279	0.000	-2.00	-0.41
		True Crime	-6.226*	0.272	0.000	-7.00	-5.45
		Sports	-2.849*	0.272	0.000	-3.63	-2.07
		Business	-3.062*	0.276	0.000	-3.85	-2.27
Inspiration	MSM	Right	-2.07882*	0.14062	0.000	-2.4798	-1.6778
		Far Right	-1.68549*	0.13838	0.000	-2.0801	-1.2909
		True Crime	-1.59501*	0.13500	0.000	-1.9800	-1.2100
		Sports	-0.27140	0.13500	0.337	-0.6564	0.1136
		Business	-1.67363*	0.13679	0.000	-2.0637	-1.2835
Human Interest	MSM	Right	-13.58582*	0.64430	0.000	-15.4232	-11.7484
		Far Right	-10.17040*	0.63400	0.000	-11.9784	-8.3624
		True Crime	-9.27237*	0.61853	0.000	-11.0363	-7.5084
		Sports	-4.98528*	0.61853	0.000	-6.7492	-3.2214
		Business	-7.02361*	0.62674	0.000	-8.8109	-5.2363
Optimism	MSM	Right	-2.03543*	0.20958	0.000	-2.6331	-1.4378
		Far Right	-1.20031*	0.20623	0.000	-1.7884	-0.6122
		True Crime	-2.72641*	0.20120	0.000	-3.3002	-2.1526
		Sports	-2.23418*	0.20120	0.000	-2.8079	-1.6604
		Business	-2.52710*	0.20387	0.000	-3.1085	-1.9457
Commonality	MSM	Right	-.66844*	0.09572	0.000	-0.9414	-0.3955
		Far Right	-.61416*	0.09419	0.000	-0.8828	-0.3456
		True Crime	-.56955*	0.09189	0.000	-0.8316	-0.3075
		Sports	-.65924*	0.09189	0.000	-0.9213	-0.3972
		Business	-.60952*	0.09311	0.000	-0.8750	-0.3440

## Discussion

Journalists remain unsure how to balance personality, transparency, likeability and objectivity in mainstream news content; past studies and discussions have considered “ambient transparency” (Karlsson, 2020), “internal community” (Funk, 2017) and light-hearted sharing of hobbies and personal interests unrelated to politics or news (Bossio & Sacco, 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Scholarship also indicates parasocial interactions and relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Liebers & Schramm, 2019) help motivate podcast listening choices (Boling & Hull, 2018; Perks & Turner, 2019) and reflecting feelings of shared community and authentic experiences between hosts and audiences (Adler Berg, 2021; Florini, 2015; Lindgren, 2021).

Results here indicate that parasocial phenomena manifest in the Apple Podcast reviews of a variety of journalism podcasts. Qualitative analysis indicates reviews of daily news podcasts rely largely on presumptions of direct interaction and conversation, long histories of listening and shared experiences, routines built around listening and clear personal familiarity with hosts. Reviewers could briefly and objectively review podcast content; instead, almost every Apple Podcast review is a personal expression and presumed conversation between the reviewer and either podcast hosts or readers. When listeners abandon a podcast, they typically characterize that decision in personal terms reflecting their own personal values and individual experiences.

These parasocial phenomena were clearly evident in reviews of daily news podcasts — short, direct programs with little time for personal discussion or deep sharing. This suggests PSI, PSR and PSBU are common throughout podcasting and motivate listener choices and habits.

The frequency and intensity of those parasocial feelings, however, was qualitatively much stronger in reviews of far-right podcasts. Such shows are riddled with conspiracy, extremism and bad faith condemnations of mainstream media and society. They are also readily available in the same catchall “News” category in Apple Podcasts, near (or occasionally beside) daily news podcasts from professional mainstream journalists.

Inductive qualitative findings suggested a quantitative, rhetorical comparison between Apple Podcast reviews of mainstream news podcasts, conservative news podcasts and far-right news podcasts, as well as apolitical journalism podcasts on true crime, business and sports. Despite similar high overall ratings on Apple Podcasts, quantitative CATA found that reviews for mainstream journalism podcasts were significantly less likely to use language emphasizing “a life-like quality,” “positive affective states” and the “shared values of a group.” Reviewers of mainstream podcasts praised significantly less frequently, were inspired significantly less frequently and expressed joy, respect and shared



values significantly less frequently than reviewers of conservative and conspiracy-driven far right podcasts; such language was also significantly less common in mainstream reviews when compared to podcasts covering other, apolitical journalism topics.

Quantitatively, reviewers of mainstream journalism podcasts simply do not use personal language, or express personal feelings, at the same rate as reviewers of other podcasts seemingly failing to build the same type of relationship. Qualitatively, those reviewers do express those feelings and do build relationships with podcasts, but with less frequency and emotional intensity than reviewers of far-right podcasts. There are at least two ways of interpreting these findings.

On the one hand, journalists and academics could argue that mainstream journalism podcasts should still reflect objectivity and traditional journalistic values of detachment and professionalism. The presence of parasocial phenomena in reviews of short, professional, daily news podcasts could be considered an affirmation of journalistic strategies that recommend sharing only a little personality, and only in the margins, with limited changes to the news product itself. This perspective could also argue that conservative and far-right podcasts are fundamentally different products with more personality-driven business models, more ideologically close-knit communities and different standards and expectations for both hosts and audiences; the same could be said of true crime, sports, business podcasts and journalism. This approach argues the current study is effectively an apples and oranges comparison.

On the other hand, given how frequently journalistic transparency is discussed and how central parasocial phenomena and emotional connections are to podcasting and digital communities, findings could be interpreted to recommend stronger efforts to build emotional bonds and communities between mainstream news podcasts and listeners in generating connection. This perspective argues traditional journalism norms concerning detachment and impersonal objectivity are less effective (and potentially a liability) in podcast environments. Mainstream journalists not only elicit fewer emotional bonds than conservative and far-right podcast hosts, they engender fewer emotional bonds than other genres of mainstream podcast journalism. If parasocial phenomena are significantly more common in a wide variety of other news and journalism podcasts, are daily news podcasts hamstringing their own ability to build audiences and report the news? Are they failing to cultivate emotional bonds among listeners at equal rates to other types of podcasts, and could that failure limit their reach or effectiveness?

Furthermore, there is clear conflict between conspiracy-driven far-right podcasts and mainstream news. The oranges are effectively attacking the apples, routinely condemning their coverage, undermining their credibility, and attempting to eliminate their audiences. If a listener attempts to choose between main-

stream and far-right news content in the “News” category of Apple Podcasts, and they are motivated by parasocial phenomena, then mainstream journalists risk losing that listener to conspiracy-driven content.

The authors of the current study are inclined toward the latter perspective. Parasocial phenomena appear to be an essential part of podcast loyalty and listening habits; reviews of mainstream news podcasts overall express that loyalty with less frequency and emotional intensity than reviewers of a spectrum of other nonfiction podcast content, including far-right podcasts that are deeply toxic. Encouraging stronger emotional bonds and parasocial phenomena among mainstream news podcast listeners and reviewers seems a wise strategy for those shows.

### Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

This study presents at least three limitations and opportunities for future research. First, most analyses of parasocial phenomena utilize surveys or interviews (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). While this approach could be challenging for podcast listeners of conservative and far-right podcasts, it could be an illuminating approach for listeners of mainstream news podcasts, as well as podcast listeners of other genres.

Second, scholarship on left and far-left media is relatively rare. Researchers considered including those categories in this study; like previous scholarship, however, researchers worried that a lack of scholarship on modern progressive media could complicate direct comparisons between left wing and mainstream news media (Funk & Speakman, 2022). An inductive analysis of left and far-left podcasting is warranted.

Third, this study was conducted within the contexts of the United States media and politics. These findings may not be applicable in other national contexts with different political, technology and media environments.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Owner</u>	<u># of Reviews</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>Bias</u>	<u>Reliability</u>
Up First	NPR	49.3K	4.6	-7.57	47.92
Axios Today	Axios	1.8K	4.4	-1.92	45.08
Morning Wire	The Daily Wire	21.7K	4.9	2.11	43.89
The Fox News Rundown	Fox News	1.3K	3.5	7.6	42.42
The Breitbart News Daily Podcast	Breitbart	717	4.8	21.6	15.79
Human Events Daily	Turning Point USA	4.7K	4.9	24.62	15.22

<u>Name/Type</u>	<u>Owner</u>	<u>#of AP reviews</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>Bias</u>	<u>Reliability</u>
<b>MSM:</b>					
The Daily	New York Times	88K	4.4	-6.33	43.78
Up First	NPR	49.3K	4.6	-7.57	47.92
The Journal	Wall Street Journal	3.8K	4.3	-0.5	49.17
The Economist Podcasts	The Economist	3.2K	4.4	-1.66	44.36
Apple News Today	Apple News	4.8K	3.7	-6.03	44.5
Start Here	ABC News	5.2K	4.6	-1.4	46.27
Axios Today	Axios	1.8K	4.4	-1.92	45.08
Post Reports	Washington Post	4.2K	4.3	-9.44	44.67
<b>Conservative:</b>					
The Ben Shapiro Show	The Daily Wire	140.5K	4.4	20.83	24.81
The Will Cain Podcast	Fox News	1.7K	4.7	15.11	29.33
The Victor Davis Hanson Show	Victor Davis Hanso	4.2K	4.9	17.5	31.44
The Megyn Kelly Show	SiriusXM	24.8K	4.7	10.14	36.47
Ruthless	Bobcat Media LLC	3.7K	4.7	11.78	34.56
Bill O'Reilly's No Spin Zone	Bill O'Reilly	10.5K	3.6	16.07	26.29
Newt's World	Gingrich 360	5.8K	4.6	17.4	32.92
The Dennis Prager Show	Salem Podcast Netw	1.7K	4.8	18.83	27.58
<b>Far Right:</b>					
The Dan Bongino Show	Cumulus Podcast Ne	52.2K	4.7	29.19	15.1
Tim Pool Daily Show	Tim Pool	6.2K	4.6	22.13	15.85
Human Events Daily	Turning Point USA	4.7K	4.9	24.62	15.22
Bannon's War Room	WarRoom.org	13K	4.6	27.97	10.27
Louder with Crowder	Blaze Podcast Netw	35K	4.7	30.75	10.11
The Michael Savage Show	Michael Savage	10K	4.4	28.47	11.95
The Stew Peters Show	Stew Peters	1.1K	4.7	23.33	10.47
The Jesse Kelly Show	iHeartRadio	2.1K	4.8	23.89	17.67
<b>True Crime:</b>					
Dateline NBC	NBC	29K	4.5		
Crime Junkie	Audio Chuck	327K	4.8		
Morbid	Wondry	76K	4.5		
My Favorite Murder	Exactly Right	155K	4.6		
Sword and Scale	S&S +PLUS Light	58K	4.1		
Murder with my Husband	MWMH	9.7K	4.8		
True Crime Garage	True Crime Garage	31K	4.7		
Casefile True Crime	Casefile Presents	30K	4.7		
			4.6		
<b>Sports:</b>					
Pardon My Take	Barstool Sports	78K	4.9		
The Dan Le Batard Show with Stugotz	Lebatard & Friends	30K	4.8		
The Bill Simmons Podcast	The Ringer	27K	4.4		
The Fantasy Footballers	Fantasy Football	24.7K	4.8		
The Pat McAfee Show 2.0	Pat McAfee	18K	4.9		
The Herd with Colin Cowherd	iHeartPodcasts	8.9K	4.1		
Skip and Shannon: Undisputed	FOX Sports	3.6K	4.2		
Dale Jr Download	Dirty Mo Media	7.2K	4.9		
			4.6		
<b>Business:</b>					
The Ramsey Show	Ramsey Network	29K	4.5		
Planet Money	NPR	28.6K	4.6		
Marketplace	Marketplace	7.1K	4.6		
Jocko Podcast	Jocko DEFCOR Ne	28K	4.9		
How I built this with Guy Raz	Wondry	28K	4.7		
The Ed Mylett Show	Ed Mylett	11K	4.9		
The Prof G Pod	Vox Media Podcast	2.3K	4.6		
Bigger Pockets Real Estate Podcast	Bigger Pockets	15K	4.8		

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## **Architects of Necessity: BIPOC News Startups' Critique of Philanthropic Interventions**

**By Meredith D. Clark, Ph.D. and Tracie M. Powell**

*If journalism entrepreneurs are “agents of innovation,” (Carlson & Usher, 2016, p. 563) then the color line compels BIPOC publishers to become architects of necessity, balancing the constraints of digital news production with the information needs of the communities they serve and the demands of the philanthropic support that make their work feasible. In this study, we analyze data from 100 BIPOC news media founders and publishers to focus on the relationships between BIPOC founders/publishers and their sources of revenue, particularly journalism foundations, and examine how policies for obtaining funding replicate normative frames of deficiency and deviance among non-white journalism startups. The study offers a critically informed analysis of journalism philanthropy and the race question designed to articulate the needs of BIPOC media publishers from their own sousveillant position in the built media environment while challenging journalism funders and their partners to make race and difference central to their strategies in equitable ways.*

Journalism philanthropy — and with it, journalism entrepreneurship — has a race problem.

While a robust body of scholarship on the viability of news startups offers lessons on the trial and error of building viable nonprofit journalism outlets around the world (Bunce, 2016; Heft & Dogruel, 2019; Usher, 2017), much of the research on similar outlets in the United States remains either indifferent to or ignorant of the needs of news media startups developed by journalists of color, or those who identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC). Additionally, scholarship on the impact of philanthropic investment in news media is relatively scant; focused inquiry about how news organizations with non-white leadership even more so. This is reflected in the disparate reporting on how race figures in journalism entrepreneurship and in philanthropy. Attempting to collate data that illustrates the relationship between the two is incredibly difficult. After several years of racial justice protests during the Movement for Black Lives (2013-2016), U.S. news media was particu-

larly primed to be receptive to messages about its implications in racialized violence (Tameez, 2022). It is within this context that we examine the experiences of journalists of color (JOC) as entrepreneurs navigating opportunities and obstacles in obtaining funding for their projects.

This article draws on quantitative and qualitative survey data collected by The Pivot Fund to present a preliminary needs assessment of BIPOC-founded news media startups following the so-called “racial reckoning” of 2020 (Bora, 2022). This research highlights the intersection of two fields — journalism and philanthropy — that have struggled with racial and ethnic diversity, and how colorblind ideologies in both areas further complicates the terrain for entrants from structurally marginalized communities. Our analysis begins with a brief explication of Critical Race Theory’s utility in unpacking the linkages between the two subfields. We offer a literature review that discusses the dearth of research on race in entrepreneurial journalism, and include cursory review of works that detail the philanthropic sector’s struggles with racial inclusion to further contextualize the problem. We provide a brief discussion of our methods, and then present findings that incorporate in vivo reflections from the open-ended survey questions. We conclude by discussing insights gleaned from the survey data, and offer suggestions for the philanthropic sector as it works to improve its understanding of the resources and support that JOC-led organizations require in order to become efficient, sustainable contributors to diverse media environments in the digital age.

## **Theory**

This research is undertaken through Critical Race Theory (CRT), a framework derived from legal studies scholarship used to critique systems of power for evidence of racial bias. CRT is specifically useful in examinations of policy and normative practices that assume whiteness as the default existence, as it address the silences and erasures in hegemonic approaches to academic research by using the perspectives and experiences of marginalized people to develop field-specific approaches that highlight how race and other identity-based characterizations (gender, ability, national origin, etc.) are used as tools of subjugation that attempt to force non-white actors into experiences that conform to whiteness as the norm. Where these attempts fail, the non-white actors and their experiences are considered non-normative and/or deviant. While CRT was initially developed by legal scholars, its application in education, history, business ethnic studies and gender studies and has demonstrated its relevance to interdisciplinary scholarship. For example, LatCrit (Diaz, 2023; Iglesias, 1997) complements the initial developments of CRT by offering five tenets for its application in education research, which we find relevant to this work, as our inquiry similarly challenges the assumptions of American meritocracy and fairness that underpin “imperial scholarship,” which focuses on, cites and reproduces the work of white authors often to the exclusion of PoC. We draw from Malagon

et al.'s (2009, pp. 256-257) memo on the utility of combining grounded theory, critical race theory and LatCrit1 to form a theoretical and analytical framework to contextualize both literature and our findings.

1. Identify the intersections of racism and other forms of subordination. This exploratory research seeks to highlight the interplay of race and ethnicity between the aims of BIPOC media founders and those of the philanthropic organizations they solicit.
2. Challenge dominant ideology and its assumptions. As a bedrock of entrepreneurship scholarship, approaches that focus solely on the political economy of news assume — correctly — that funding is a concern for all startups, yet most fail to acknowledge the historic wealth gap between people of color and whites in the United States. CRT prompts researchers to consider the impact of racial capitalism, a theory that describes “the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person [or group]” (Leong, 2013, p. 2153) and racial hierarchies in contemporary settings via lack of financial capital directly (operationalized as eligibility and feasibility) and indirectly (operationalized as viability and desirability) available to BIPOC founders. This tenet prompts researchers to consider the obstacles and opportunities different entrepreneurs face along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, class, ability and the like, rather than assuming equal access for all.
3. Commitment to social justice. Ultimately, the goal of this analysis is not to shame, but to describe and diagnose critical disconnects that threaten the success of racial justice initiatives in journalism philanthropy. The analysis includes suggestions for concrete actions that may be taken to address systemic issues that plague chronically underfunded initiatives led by BIPOC journalists.
4. Experiential knowledge: As a tactic for assessing the return on their investments, journalism philanthropic organizations invest heavily in program evaluation, thus replicating systems of racial capitalism that force BIPOC founders to “prove” their worth according to a priori measures of success. Without the perspectives of founders, intended audiences and even “missed” audiences, these measures reflect artificial efficiencies rather than authentic impact. Responses to this survey indicate that BIPOC founders’ double-consciousness presents a dilemma on how to report the efficiency of their initiatives: they must show demonstrable influence in their communities and the field, but risk losing or alienating potential funders if they are candid about the difficulties that

funders do not see because of their myopic focus on performance indicators.

5. Transdisciplinary perspective: Finally, the application of CRT in this study is interwoven with grounded theory analysis of our survey data, creating an analytical bridge for examinations of how race and racial hierarchies link common issues in journalism, philanthropy and entrepreneurship (in theory and practice).

From this context, we apply CRT in our review extant literature about journalism entrepreneurship and the data voids (Golebiewski & Boyd, 2019) surrounding issues of resource allocation for JOC/BIPOC-led news startups.

### **White Normativity in Journalism Entrepreneurship Literature**

Sources of revenue significantly shape the entrepreneurial journalism efforts, from nonprofits to venture-backed news outlets, to subscriber-supported operations. Domestic or international, all journalism startups face a common challenge of establishing financial viability. With a few exceptions, as Ekdale (2021) notes, the hegemonic influence of U.S. and European perspectives characterizes journalism entrepreneurship studies (e.g., Carlson & Usher, 2016; Heft & Dogruel, 2019; O'Brien & Wellbrock 2021; Porlezza & Splendor, 2016; Wagemans et al., 2016). Among the limited number of studies of such outlets that extends to the Global South, race is often omitted as a constructed category with the potential to shape an outlet's mission, scope or sustainability (Harlow & Chadha, 2019). Since the early 2000s, scholars (Costa, 2013; Miel & Farris, 2008; Schiffrin, 2019; Usher & Kammer, 2019) have used business models to build typologies mapping the ever-evolving terrain of digital media startups, including:

- Advertiser-based
- Subscription-based
- Membership models
- Mixed models (featuring a combination of at least two: sales, subscriptions, public funding, sponsorship, membership)
- Venture capitalist
- Philanthropic

Although the digital news era has enabled more journalists to become publishers, either individually or as part of collectives and/or startups, "Silicon Valley ideology," (Schradi, 2015, p. 67–68) underpins an assumption of colorblind neutrality among founders, funders and audiences — that is, a failure to consid-

er how the social construction of race influences everything from funding acquisition to the positioning of “desirable audiences,” who are willing and able to pay for/sponsor news products. This myopic view of the field doubly marginalizes non-white entrepreneurs in both domestic and international media economies, as it fails to account for the historical foundations through which such ventures become and remain viable.

Entrepreneurial journalism scholarship that focuses on the modalities and means of funding models often does so without much mention of how each shapes the realities of BIPOC founders’ experiences in the field. Similarly, the dearth of data on charitable giving to news organizations founded and run by journalists of color indicates a demand for a needs assessment to determine how well their entrepreneurial journalism initiatives are faring with the money and support they do receive from foundations and other philanthropic agencies.

### ***Philanthropy***

Interrogating the problem(s) of the color line is also essential to parsing scholarship about journalism philanthropy. While literature on journalism philanthropy is beginning to grow, questions of how race, ethnicity and other markers of identity factor into the disbursement and acquisition of funding are often absent from its analysis. The philanthropic sector has and continues to struggle with its commitment to upholding white normativity (Villanueva, 2021). Ninety-two percent of all U.S. foundation presidents are white, as are 86% of their executive staff and 68% of program officers — yet only a quarter of all U.S. foundations use DEI frameworks as part of their giving strategies (Dorsey et al., 2020).

In 2020, the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity found that of the \$11.9 billion companies and foundations pledged for racial justice work between 2015 and 2020 (during the height of the Movement for Black Lives), only \$3.4 billion was awarded to communities of color, and even less — a mere \$1.2 billion — was specifically earmarked for racial justice projects.

The report did not provide detailed specifics on the sectors in which these contributions were made (Cyril et al., 2021). According to a report from Media Impact Founders, philanthropic organizations gave \$124 million to journalism projects between 2009-2021, representing only a fraction of the \$19.6 billion donated to media initiatives by U.S. foundations in the same time period (del Peon, 2021). As noted above, early research on entrepreneurial journalism is plentiful, though it largely ignores how race (and other markers of difference) impacts funding and sustainability among outlets around the world.

Schiffrin’s (2019) analysis of startups in the Global South unites these two

bodies of scholarship. Three quarters of the 35 media outlets surveyed sought foundation funding to support their operations, several of which mentioned they relied on donations of space, labor and content to survive. Financial viability was the No. 1 concern among the outlets surveyed, most of which were donor-dependent four years after initial inquiry into their operations. Schiffrin describes a desperate situation: “Donors need to embrace the reality of the situation and accept that many small outlets performing vital public service in their communities will die without their assistance,” noting the reluctance among the donor class to pump funds into such entities while clear returns may take years to see, and more specifically, may not be charted in terms of revenues leading to the publications’ self-sufficiency, but more intangible goods including the circulation of credible information, which in turn is thought to nurture civic participation. And despite foundations’ efforts to preserve outlets’ editorial independence, philanthropic investment does appear to have an editorializing influence on the priorities and perceptions of journalists whose work such funding supports. “In the case of non-profit international news, foundations,” write Wright et al. (2019, p. 2035), “direct journalism (both intentionally and unintentionally) towards outcome-oriented, explanatory journalism in a small number of niche subject areas.” While the authors withhold a value judgment, they note that financial support from foundations, and particularly, their desire to measure “impact,” has a mediating effect on both the funder and grantee’s efforts to maintain the outlets’ editorial independence, and the gestures they take to signal that sense of autonomy to other stakeholders.

Returning to Schiffrin, we note one key observation that may be reflected in the BIPOC media startup ecosystem in the United States: There are some organizations that are likely to always need donor support (2019, p. 10), a precarious state emphasized by the critical function of philanthropic sources of funding for entrepreneurial news ventures, particularly those created by and for people of the global majority — i.e., people of color.

### **Creating the Other: Integration and Ethnic Media**

In addition to being overlooked in literature on news startups, “ethnic” media is often positioned by scholars as the creation of Other/outside looking inward (Husband, 2005), rather than the production of news media that acknowledges how its lenses reflect its core audiences as part of a multi-racial, multi-ethnic society (Yu, 2018). Yu’s extensive examination of “accessible” (i.e., published in English or bilingually) ethnic media outlets in the United States identifies 746 outlets with an online presence. Of these, 30% are published by Black Americans, 23% do not specify a particular racial or ethnic affiliation and 16% are coded as “Asian.” Native American and Hispanic/Latino publications each comprise 9% of the outlets, 7% are coded as European, while Middle Eastern and “other” comprise another 3% apiece (Yu, 2018, p. 1984).



The racial formation of “ethnic” media is further complicated by the adoption of “BIPOC” as a term adopted as shorthand to describe Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Deo (2021, p. 118) argues that “centering particular groups only in name ultimately furthers their marginalization because they remain excluded in fact though referenced in the term, erasing the power that comes from participation and inclusion.” While the fair criticism is fraught with complexities that cannot be adequately detailed in this paper, a CRT critique acknowledges that “BIPOC” is a flawed attempt to signal the significance of how the systematic enslavement of kidnapped Africans and the attempted genocide of Indigenous Americans has been doubly exploited in the U.S. system of white capitalist hetero patriarchy to measure the “progress” of immigrants of color who come to the United States voluntarily and substantiate the mythology of the American dream by assimilating into the “rightful” norms of society. Applied to this study’s attempt to map the population of journalism entrepreneurs of color, the BIPOC journalist/founder label is evidence of what Yu refers to as “the instrumentalization of ethnic media” (2016, p. 344). Its use affirms foundations and outside actors that their work is antiracist by virtue of targeting and engaging with journalists of color, while alleviating the burden of having to disentangle racial hierarchies constitutes a determinant of access to capital among different racial and ethnic groups.

Although constructed categories of mainstream, alternative and ethnic media (often further reduced via racial, linguistic and cultural labels) re-inforce notions of difference among journalistic publications, both white, corporate-owned, for-profit media and ethnic, JOC-owned, entrepreneurial and/or nonprofit news outlets have a common goal: communicating with and for the people (Deuze, 2006). The media outlets also share the problem of maintaining financial viability, an issue that has been explored via multiple funding models and in different regions of the world. Although ethnic media outlets may individually struggle to maintain financial stability, the need and demand for perspectives from outside the mainstream is an enduring fact that links every BIPOC-founded outlet from Freedom’s Journal to the digital news media startups of today — a 200-year-old reality periodically revisited by scholarship that has included historical surveys of the ethnic press (Gonzalez & Torres, 2012) and one that demands further recognition in light of news media’s so-called “racial reckoning” of 2020 (Clark, 2022).

## **Method**

Our data, collected between November 2021 and March 2022, are drawn from a survey of 100 journalists of color operating news startups across the country. Select demographic data, and responses to close-ended questions, are included in our findings as they were reported to us. The study presents inquiry on the relationships between these founders/publishers and their revenue sources, particularly journalism foundations, to examine how policies

for obtaining funding replicate deficiency and deviance frames of non-white news media among the emergent class of journalism startups. The overarching question for our research is:

**RQ1:** How does the intervention of philanthropic funding impact the health and sustainability of BIPOC-founded news organizations?

We analyzed the qualitative data using a grounded-theory approach informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT-GT), recognizing the interplay of race and structural power situating funding bodies as racialized organizations (Ray, 2019), and analyzing the data via the application of racial capitalism. We completed two cycles of coding for the narrative responses to open-ended questions (Saldaña, 2009), examining responses for evidence of how race factors into the dynamics of applying for, receiving, and using funding from philanthropic organizations. In the first round, we searched for language indicating a sense of disparity between the BIPOC founders' experiences and those of non-POC journalists/institutions. We included statements of perception in our analysis as these speak to experiential knowledge, which is particularly valuable in the tradition of Black Feminist Thought, as the framework holds that members of subjugated groups use such knowledge to cultivate practices that help them resist oppression (Collins, 1993). In our second round of coding, we developed overarching themes to describe how BIPOC journalism entrepreneurs process their experiences with grant funders to identify barriers to access, unnecessary complications and potential remedies. Our findings offer a critically informed analysis of journalism philanthropy and the race question designed to articulate the needs of BIPOC media publishers from their own *sousveillant* position (Mann & Ferenbok, 2013) in the built media environment while challenging journalism funders and their partners to make race and difference central to their strategies in equitable ways.

Ray (2019) articulates four tenets for a critical race theory of organizations, offering a structural critique for identifying and labeling how racial formations exist within organizational formations and practices. Following Bonilla-Silva (1997) and Sewell's (1992) arguments on race as a significant indicator of how cultural practices influence the distribution of resources, Ray argues that:

- (1) racialized organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups;
- (2) racialized organizations legitimate the unequal distribution of resources;
- (3) Whiteness is a credential; and
- (4) decoupling is racialized.

These arguments are essential for challenging the notion of colorblind philanthropy by recognizing its influence at the micro- and meso-levels of analysis, where ingroup preferences and racialized tracking influence the resources allotted program officers (micro-level) and initiatives (meso-level) designed to specifically target outlets founded by people of the global majority. As our respondents' initial comments suggest, journalists of color, through their familiarity with racial formations in their previous media roles, are sensitized to these stipulations and special affordances, and recognize how racial difference predicates inequitable treatment.

## **Results**

Journalists of color who work as publishers (39.4%) and/or editors in chief (22%) of their operations comprise the majority of respondents in our survey. They represent outlets in more than 19 states and U.S. territories, and are largely concentrated on the East and West Coasts, as well as in the Southeastern U.S. Sixty-one percent of the outlets represented are for-profit; another 29% were identified as nonprofits, while 10% identified as operations that did not fit either of these categories. The average number of employees among BIPOC-founded outlets is 7.75, which respondents broke down as an average of 6.49 full-time employees (both paid and unpaid), and 5.05 part-time employees.

Respondents were asked about the support they received from 12 organizations that provide capital and/or material support (personnel, technology, etc.) to journalism nonprofits and startups, and whether they would recommend the funding agency to other BIPOC founders.

Source of support	Recommend without caveat	Recommend with caveats	Do not recommend	Total number of respondents (n =)
Facebook Accelerator	25 %	75 %	0	12
Google New Initiative Labs	58.55%	33.33%	8.33%	13
Institute for Nonprofit News	100%	0	0	4
Local Media Association's Word in Black	75%	25%	0	4
Race Equity in Journalism Fund	81.82 %	18.18%	0	11
Queer Collaboration	No responses	No responses	No responses	No responses
LION Publishers	83.33%	0%	16.67%	6
TableStakes	100%	0	0	1
NewsPack	20%	80%	0	5
NewsMatch	85.71%	14.29%	0	7
News Revenue Hub	66.67%	33.33%	0	3
Report for America	70%	20%	10%	10
Tiny News Collective	50%	50%	0	2

Table 1. Sources of philanthropic support among BIPOC-founded news outlets.

### Balancing Act: Serving Information Needs and Funding Demands

If journalism entrepreneurs are “agents of innovation,” (Carlson & Usher, 2016, p. 563) then the color line compels BIPOC publishers to become architects of necessity, balancing the constraints of digital news production with the information needs of the communities they serve while attempting to meet the demands of the philanthropic organizations whose funds extend their capabilities. Seventy-nine percent of BIPOC-founded news organizations that responded to our survey stated that current funders are not meeting their primary needs. Most cite the lack of direct, substantial funding that is not tied to burdensome reporting or training requirements. Some of the more pointed critiques came from individuals who had previous experience in journalism, and found requirements to participate in training as a condition of receiving funding paternalistic.

Several respondents indicated that they do not have dedicated staff members, such as grant writers, who can focus on the revenue side of the business, which ultimately sacrifices their ability to report and produce news to the reporting demands required to obtain funding and maintain relationships with foundations. The chief complaints among respondents who disclosed caveats and costs that outweighed benefits on recommending designated funding sources were training and reporting requirements that drained staff time,

particularly among organizations that lacked capacity to assign a dedicated team member to complete the funders' obligatory tasks. One respondent said they would only recommend one of the funders "... if the team has at least two full-time employees whose sole responsibility is revenue. Otherwise, you just won't have the bandwidth to do the work." Another voiced a similar concern: "Candidates need to have enough people in the organization to participate; this is not for small newsrooms. Participants have to have a membership program already in place and ... do the accelerator to improve it." These comments indicate that news organizations run by sole owner-operators and/or operations with fewer than four or five staff members experience operational difficulties as an early barrier to fulfilling funders' intentions.

Echoing Schiffrin's (2019) observation about news startups in the Global South, the data also make it clear that BIPOC-founded news organizations are in precarious financial positions. Twenty-three of the 42 respondents (54.76%) who answered questions about the health of their organizations indicated that they had cash on hand to sustain operations for three months or fewer, and nearly 17% (16.67) said they didn't know how long they would be able to sustain their operations at all. Only about 12% of respondents indicated they'd be able to maintain their organizations for one year or more.

### **Perceptible Inequities**

Dorsey et al. identify four boundaries that founders of color face as they attempt to attract philanthropic support: getting connected, building rapport, securing support and sustaining relationships (2020), which corresponded with our data. Eighty-three percent of respondents indicated a belief that white-owned startups are granted more funding through a combination of factors. We refer to these beliefs as perceptible inequity, illustrated through a series of comments about how perceptions of racialized homophily shapes founders' attitudes about the philanthropic sector's expression of confidence in white-led initiatives. One respondent, for instance, made explicit comparisons of how whiteness construes a sense of competency among startup founders:

I think white-hype permeates our society and filters down into well-meaning funding organizations. Having white and light skin assigns positive qualities to a person. They are trusted more to deliver on an idea. Whites get more plumb assignments in the news business, which better positions them for high-profile assignments or jobs with big-name media. Name recognition is tied to funding. Those making funding decisions are often white. Whites get used to seeing whites succeed. B1POC (sic) journalistic success isn't elusive; they aren't legitimized and promoted in the same way as non-POC.

This reflection illustrates Ray's assertion that whiteness (and proximity to whiteness) is a credential. In their experience, white identity is a marker of trustworthiness and competency among white journalists and funding organizations. In their previous roles, white peers benefited from in-group status and were rewarded with additional responsibilities, allowing them to develop prominence and familiarity within the field. When white journalists leave legacy organizations to start their own outlets, they leverage the social capital they've accrued to initiate, build and strengthen relationships with potential funders, who can in turn point to their track records of success and productivity in corporate settings as qualification and rationale to support their startup efforts. This trajectory echoes at least three of Dorsey et al.'s insights about the four barriers to funding, particularly getting connected, building rapport and securing support (2020). This insight might be further substantiated through a critical-race examination of news media startups that have entered the field in the last five to 10 years, particularly those created or led by journalists previously employed at high-profile legacy news media outlets.

Our organization has been rejected for funding by foundations, or received a tiny fraction of funding relative to "general audience" (white-dominant audience) news outlets, even after winning numerous awards and recognition from peers. This has even been the case when it comes to funds to support reporting on the communities that our organization has a uniquely strong relationship of trust with. Often the reason funders provide is that we are not established or large enough (when history shows that those same funders do not have the same standards for white-dominant news outlets). Occasionally the reason from white program officers has been that they don't think our reporting will have an impact if it is only reaching low-income communities of color. Other times, it is because journalism funders are focused on sustainability, and they cannot see how a newsroom focused on a low-income audience will be sustainable. Of course, this is just the reality when it comes to foundations.

This respondent's comments about receiving a fraction of the funding made available to outlets that serve white audiences confirms the first two tenets of Ray's theory of racialized organizations. The founder acknowledges that whiteness is a credential of relative value, as the "general" or dominant audience is thought of as white — and whiteness is understood as a proxy for wealth and vitality. These assumptions are part of what Feagin terms the white racial frame, "an overarching white worldview that encompasses a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate" (2013, p. 3). Interrogating the white racial frame in media and philanthropy through the experiences of journalists

of color is essential, as foundations and their personnel are unlikely to profess openly racist sensibilities. Yet, as Feagin argues, the most significant impact of the white racial frame is that it ignores, downplays, and otherwise diminishes racial realities (2013). The white racial frame is a more explicit articulation of the hegemonic forces that define the “general audience” as one that is white and wealthy enough to support news production through subscriptions and purchases of items that would attract wealthy advertisers. It is the same hegemonic force that is at work when journalists assume that an “objective view” is one that doesn’t take race, gender or other markers of difference that have been used to oppress non-white Others into account (Said, 1978; Wallace, 2019).

Indeed, the respondent identifies their target population as “low-income communities of color,” indicating a relationship between a lack of material resources and non-white ethnic or racial identity. The respondents note that program officers position the community’s lack of capital as a fatal liability. Justification for diminished financial support from foundations is legitimated by the community’s (in)ability to pay for news, even when the media outlet has developed a reputation for serving an otherwise disenfranchised segment of the public.

Two additional respondents spoke of “whiteness as a credential,” the third tenet in racialized organizations theory, highlighting how the colorblind racism inherent to U.S. cultural expectations manifests as ingroup preference for whiteness:

I’ve been told numerous times during the entrepreneurial journey by experts in the field that a lot of the journalism funding world comes down to “who you know.” That itself is a huge barrier and highly demoralizing. For many news entrepreneurs who are first generation in this country, there is no road map. This is the first time that our generation even has office jobs in the U.S. Figuring out how to penetrate the mysterious funding world is a very foreign concept.

This comment comes from a journalist of color who refers to immigration and class markers as proxies for race, and presents a critique of how whiteness is embedded in expectations of social capital (Risam et al., 2022; Royster, 2003). American-born children of immigrants who are the first in their families to have “office” or white-collar jobs are subjected to expectations of cultural competency that are aligned with experiences limited to whites and non-whites whose elders successfully assimilated into the dominant culture. The logic follows that of post-Reconstruction era “grandfather” clauses (used to prevent Black Americans from voting) requiring that an individual’s grandfather had to be eligible to vote in order to qualify (Browning, 2022). While less formalized, the expectation of “who you know,” is a preference that journalists and other professionals of color be well-socialized with cultural expectations

of white-collar work and its workers, demands that require a college education and familiarity with the norms of office work (Feagin, 2013).

Everyone wants to know who else is funding you. I used to think they asked because they didn't want to fund well-funded orgs. Actually, they want to be in good company.

This comment from another respondent bolsters the argument that funders uphold a culture of inclusion/exclusion by relying on informal networks — the approval and literal buy-in of other foundations — as informal qualifiers to engage with organizations seeking aid. Being “in good company,” as the respondent describes it, means that philanthropic peer groups are relying on one another’s approval as an indicator of an outlet’s worthiness. Taken together, these three statements help illustrate how philanthropic organizations reify practices that contribute to the continued marginalization of organizations owned and run by journalists of color. As the potential of return on investment trumps need and efficiency in providing information to poor, underserved communities, the rationale justifying such practices doubles down on the use of constructed obstacles including demands for cultural competency that extend from hegemonic expectations of socialization in college and/or professional settings and culminates in valorization via the approval of peer organizations. These practices perpetuate inequality in access to the financial resources philanthropic bodies offer to those in need (Bird & Ainant, 2022), replicating them along lines of race, ethnicity, and class — under the guise of performance potential and socio-cultural savvy.

### **Coping with Scarcity**

BIPOC-funded outlets face difficulties with funding scarcity even after they earn grants and other forms of revenue. This theme provides perspective that funders are often seeking in their evaluation activities — how are grantees using the money, and how effective is it in promoting the health of their organizations? Unlike self-reports and compliance documents that may be influenced by the recipients’ needs, the nature of our data collection (i.e., from a researcher with no bearing on foundation activities) provides additional context about how even minimal funding serves crucial operational purposes, even as it creates complexities of stopgap approaches to supporting entrepreneurial news ventures.

I haven't received significant funding (more than \$5,000) yet. Getting startup funding is my biggest barrier to operating the way I would like because I'm having to juggle full-time freelance work while trying to launch my venture. Getting a funding boost would be the most helpful to me in this stage, to allow me to build an audience and put out high quality work which would then allow me to attract more funders



and individual supporters to make my project sustainable.

Schumpeterian economics (1934) position the entrepreneur as “visionary, optimistic, uncertainty tolerant, rational, confident, self-centered and motivated by power and need for achievement,” a description that remains relevant when applied to entrepreneurs in the digital age and space (Steininger et al., 2022, p. 8). Yet this economic model also emphasizes access to financial resources including cash and credit, and other indicators of favorable social distinction (Foss et al., 2019). As this respondent indicates, infusions of cash into their enterprise would serve as a mechanism for building a profile and producing “high quality work,” which they believe would attract additional funders. These calculations rest on an assumption that the audience is of interest to funders and potential individual investors, and underscores an earlier theme: the ability to attract substantial philanthropic funding is inextricably tied to the ability to be seen/positioned as “worthy” to wealthy, attractive audiences, which, if our earlier respondents’ comments are any indication, are white and/or acceptable to white-normative cultural expectations. Two additional respondents put it more succinctly: “Funding helps you pay off the bills and also function in the current space that you are in,” said one. “The additional resources help us to stay alive a bit longer,” added another, pointing to the limited nature of incremental investment. Yet respondents indicated that small donations and grants are in many cases insufficient to provide the critical support publishers of color need to hire and retain sufficient staffing levels, identifying yet another obstacle:

After receiving funding, we are in a better position than we were before, however, the funds received were not sufficient to cover all operating expenses proposed. There has never been an issue with being able to identify the necessary talent that is needed for our organization’s growth. The issue has been the ability to compensate said persons accordingly. Yes, the funding will be useful to build upon what we have started but it will also take much more additional funding to achieve a full staff and sustainability.

Equitable development — “public and private investments, programs and policies in neighborhoods that meet the needs of residents, including communities of color, and reduce racial disparities, taking into account past history and current conditions” (Curren et al., 2016, p. 1) — is essential to addressing needs among startups created by journalists of color. As the respondent notes, the problem isn’t human capital, it’s access to sufficient financial capital in order to pay people for their work. Perceptible inequality isn’t limited to who receives funding — it also poses problems of how to use said funding. When startup founders are attempting to address day-to-day needs, they are unable to dedicate themselves to projects that take a significant investment of time,

such as investigative work:

If we were to receive a significant amount of funding at one time, we will be able to be sure that we will have funds in the bank to pay salaries and other operating expenses that are crucial to maintain our news organization functioning well. ... Instead of focusing all the time in raising funds to keep our lights on, we will focus on finding ways to produce more high-quality journalism on an everyday basis, do more enterprises and investigative reports to respond to the news and information needs of our audience.

These comments lead us to conclude that without sufficient financial backing from funders and/or advertisers, startup news organizations become another realm for wage inequality along racial and ethnic lines. Additionally, the piecemeal approach of small grants can sometimes contribute to a perpetual cycle of performing productivity rather than providing sufficient support for publishers to dedicate adequate time to actually producing and distributing the news, a theme we discuss more in the next section.

### **How Grant Reporting Drains Resources**

As part of the “coping with scarcity” theme, we also include comments that reference how qualification demands (in accelerator programs, training, reporting requirements, and the like) create conditions of scarcity in terms of time/human resources. As several respondents noted, completing tasks related to reporting on the funding sources often detracted from the work the publications were ultimately able to do. One comment from a respondent provided a point-by-point articulation of this reality:

We’re better off in that the funding allows us to continue operations, but what would be better than stretching limited staff even thinner would be general operating funds to hire an additional employee who could make the most of the accelerator training. Our organization has participated in two accelerator programs that, on balance, required far more of our small team than the relatively small amount of money was worth. For example, in one instance my team spent more than 60 hours writing and rewriting a single interim grant update because the funder did not know what it wanted and kept changing the requirements.

Another respondent further operationalized the time/money/experience equation in their critique of an accelerator program. Such initiatives are again reminiscent of a type of benevolence that assumes deficiency rather than identifying and supporting assets among recipients (Gladden & Daniel, 2022):

I gained valuable information and a wider network and some funds to pay certain expenses (less than \$5,000). However, I do wonder if I would have been better off using the nine weeks to listen to readers and bank a bunch of stories. It's the reporting that has the real value. After posting several stories, the accelerator folks would have had more meat on the bones to react to and help mold into the next phase. The funding was so far below what I expected that I am now spending huge amounts of time searching and applying for money as well as writing a backlog of stories. I'm exhausted and wished I had saved my energy for either solo-reporting or finding money to pay a freelancer.

This respondent seems to suggest that while the accelerator program did allow them to navigate some of Dorsey et al.'s (2020) "barriers to funding," namely getting connected, building rapport and securing (initial) support, the time value of the small grant creates sunk cost in comparison to spending the time doing actual reporting. Their conclusion, "I wish I had saved my energy," suggests that the funding had an inverse impact and actually reinforces the fourth obstacle, sustaining relationships. The frustration of having invested precious time for nominal support sours the respondent's experience, which may in turn lead them to opt out of efforts and interventions. The respondents above note that funding is often not enough to make sustainable or short-term hires within a strategic plan that moves an outlet toward greater self-sufficiency, the ideal end goal for philanthropic investment as intervention. Another counters that their inability to apply for similarly limited funding functions as a de facto means test:

I noted that accelerator requirements are overly burdensome not because I wouldn't want my organization to participate in an accelerator but because to participate in them requires having staff members that can dedicate their time to it. ... I've had to turn down — or have not been eligible for — many opportunities that I wish we could take advantage of (and that in some cases we've been specifically invited to apply for), including accelerators, reporting grants, collaborations, and business training — because we simply don't have the staff. A grant of \$10K or even \$25K for a short-term program does not allow us to bring on staff to take advantage of that program. ... While on the whole our org is better off after receiving funding, I've had to be more judicious about the funding we receive to make sure that is the case. Short-term grants, I've learned, can simply add to burnout, as it's one more project — and potentially, one more part-time contractor — for a tiny team to manage. The catch-22 is that for many funders, having a moderate-sized team and a sizable budget is itself a prerequisite for funding.

Time is money and these insights illustrate how funders' good intentions can actually compound founders' troubles with maximizing access to both resources. This cycle is an example of what Morrison (1975) described as the function of racism: distraction that keeps marginalized folks from doing their work. While reporting requirements are arguably essential for foundations to track the impact of their investment, without a clear consideration of recipients' contexts — particularly grantees' time constraints — they can create obstacles that ultimately overwhelm publishers and their staff, causing them to question the true value of philanthropy.

### **The Upside: Self-determined Needs**

Despite the perceived inequities in funding and feelings of scarcity, respondents reported that, on the whole, funding from philanthropic organizations had a positive impact on their operations. Broadly speaking, such investments help cover equipment, freelance/contract-based labor, and invest in training. Additionally, those who found the programming requirements “not very burdensome” or “not at all burdensome” identified intangible benefits — such as the ability to learn how to pitch to more/different funders, and recognizing the buy-in that comes from having a particular foundation's support for their operations. A number of respondents also expressed gratitude for training on skills related to improving their capacity for fundraising. One respondent said that “the accelerator program we attended gave us a roadmap to avoid obvious mistakes,” while another said that the opportunities to connect with similar organizations was most useful. As another respondent said:

Things like training, and learning best practices from other BIPOC organizations, has been extremely important, and a learning lesson for us. We are learning that much smaller organizations are doing several things we aren't doing, including digital wise. The money helps, but what we learn is just as important.

Across the board, BIPOC founders said what they need most from philanthropic organizations is sufficient funding to support capacity-building. Our close reading of their comments highlights this common theme, thus we present a round-up of comments salient to this theme that emphasize repetition of key terms like sustainability to underscore this need, before presenting our final analytic comments at the end of the section:

We are bootstrapping it — managing with volunteers and honorarium. We are unable to offer salaries and benefits.

We are getting a little bit here for reporting, a little bit there for digital development and sustainability, but together it doesn't add up yet to

make the hires we need to pursue our vision and achieve the work that funders want to support (and which is integral to raising more funds and building more funding strategies).

[We] Require a lot more funding to remain sustainable long-term.

We need more funding and we need more multi-year funding so we can plan better for the future.

We have one major funder who has consistently been a champion of our organization and has increased their grant each year. They generally meet one aspect of our primary need, however, the funds provided are only enough to keep us afloat in the same capacity. We need funding that allows room for growth and sustainability.

Journalists of color who move into entrepreneurship as digital publishers encounter “Silicon Valley Ideology” (Schradie, 2015, pp. 67–68) as another barrier to participation in both the news environment and philanthropic overtures specifically designed to support their projects. Such ideology assumes individuals are able to freely participate in democratic activities — including media-making — through digital media use. Yet these assumptions are based within the white racial frame, and ignore historically entrenched barriers to participation that still exist for those outside the dominating culture. And while digital technologies have and do offer those with access the ability to publish counter-hegemonic media narratives, as the subjects of this research aim to do — the assumption ignores the actual costs of participation. As Schradie warns: “people without resources fall through the digital cracks. The question is ... who is left out?” (2015, p. 68). Our respondents’ stories are an indication not only of who, but also how. For our participants who have chosen to serve structurally marginalized audiences, certain prerequisites to securing adequate funding (i.e., having a particular number of staff; completing pre-validation processes) uphold exclusionary logic with consequential stakes. Philanthropic organizations have positioned themselves as consequential actors in newsmaking as an element of Western democratic processes. Through their financial influence, they replicate tests of worth for inclusion. Ultimately, journalists of color who must meet arbitrary thresholds for inclusion into their programs are inadvertently burdened by them, and those who do qualify are further taxed in terms of time as they re-certify their worthiness through reporting requirements. As our respondents note, some of these qualifications and reporting practices often outweigh the benefit of access to philanthropic funders, dollars, and other forms of support. Thus, ultimately, philanthropic organizations’ assumptions may actually do more to stymie participation than they do to encourage it.

## Discussion

Our initial survey of BIPOC journalism entrepreneurs/founders maps a nationwide network of individuals and micro-organizations working to provide timely and relevant information to the communities they serve while attempting to garner sufficient resources to fund and power their endeavors. Philanthropic support is essential for these organizations, as BIPOC-led organizations — of any kind — receive less than 1% of all funding provided by venture capital (Houser & Kisska-Schulze, 2022), have been historically passed over and are now competing against tech giants for advertising revenue (Bora, 2022), and share in mainstream media's struggles to attract paying subscribers to support their products (Chen & Thorson, 2021). Yet philanthropy has long struggled with racial disparities of its own, including the creation and maintenance of structural barriers to inclusion that leave BIPOC-led organizations out of critical decisions about which projects to fund, at what level, and for how long (Ho-Sang, 2014). BIPOC founders seeking institutional support find themselves at the crux of these problems, even as they look toward an industry that has again pledged to recommit itself to racial justice work. This study begins to address the need for data that makes the reality of insufficient funding mechanisms legible to foundations so that they might reconsider their approaches to supporting BIPOC-led news organizations, as well as to BIPOC journalism entrepreneurs themselves, giving them insight on some of the difficulties that lie just beyond an initial influx of philanthropic cash.

Our research assumes a *sousveillant* position to assess the impact of philanthropy as an intervention in the health and sustainability of ethnic news media. The responses indicate that BIPOC-led news organizations are keenly aware of how they are being positioned in the reputation management schemes of philanthropic organizations attempting to engage in racial justice work through their donations. Our results indicate that the ethnic news media outlets represented by the BIPOC founders who responded to the survey are effectively instrumentalized by foundations (Yu, 2016). As stakeholders in the broader news media ecology, foundations are able to use the visibility of their grants and gifts to ethnic news media to advance their own agendas of engaging in anti-racist work, even if the donations are not substantial enough to truly meet the outlets' needs (Bora, 2022). These actions ultimately create unfavorable conditions for BIPOC journalism entrepreneurs, who recognize the inequalities between their operations and those founded and run by non-POC journalists. Further, the requirements for funders to undergo extensive training and reporting as a condition of receiving microgrants creates a double burden for these journalists, many of whom are often working as single owner-operators or supervising a bare-bones staff and have little time to dedicate to these revenue-generating activities.

Although BIPOC founders recognize the rationale behind specific reporting requirements, foundations and other funding organizations should carefully examine these stipulations to determine whether these demands are proportionate to their perceived benefit. The overwhelming responses about a need for substantial support in the means of operational capital suggests that small, project-size grants may have an unintended consequence of extracting labor that detracts from the news outlet's actual mission, which can negate the funder's intended impact. If funders are unable to provide larger, more sustainable awards that actually meet the expressed needs of funders, they may consider reconfiguring their own teams in order to provide material support for collecting and analyzing the data they request from the outlets they aim to support. These findings are important because they underscore the undervaluing and underfunding of community news outlets that provide critical news and information to persistently underserved communities. These findings also highlight the hurdles BIPOC news outlets face, even for small amounts of money that impart more harm than help to communities and news organizations led by and for people of color.

Notes: <sup>1</sup>LatCrit is a complement to Critical Race Theory developed from Latinx perspectives. It holds similar goals to CRT while challenging the Black-White binary through which CRT was developed. See: Elizabeth M. Iglesias, *International Law, Human Rights, and LatCrit Theory*, 28 U. MIAMI INTER-AM. L. REV. 177-213 (1997).

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