JOURNALISM IN A FRACTURED WORLD

Scott A. Eldridge II

Journalism in a Fractured World addresses the fractured nature of journalism as it has developed online. Engaging with theories from journalism studies and politics, it bases its findings on the study of peripheral journalistic media from the US, UK, and Netherlands. It addresses the pronounced animosity that has become a feature of peripheral, political, digital news. Focusing on the metajournalistic discourses produced by peripheral actors, it develops a framework to distinguish between peripheral antagonists and agonists. Antagonists blur lines between news and politics and foment societal divisions through narratives of backlash, fragmentation, and grievance. Journalistic agonists, on the other hand, are also political and critical, but offer a constructive vision of what journalism and society can become. *Journalism in a Fractured World* presents theories and frameworks for engaging with these actors with a clear-eyed message about the challenges journalism faces and how we might find our way forward, even in our fractured societies.

"How do we forge societies that tolerate pluralism? And what role does journalism play in this pursuit? These are the animating questions of this theoretically and empirically rich book. The fracturing we see around us challenges existing normative visions of a single journalistic voice capable of accommodating the full range of perspectives and experiences in complex modern societies. This is evident in the range of new voices at the periphery, clamoring to be heard and, just as importantly, to be recognized. This book maps out two visions, one of agonistic media voices where differences are respected as constitutive of society and one in which divisive antagonistic media voices stave off any hope of pluralism. This timely work is essential reading for anyone trying to make sense of where society – and journalism – is heading."

—Matt Carlson, *Professor of Journalism, University of Minnesota*

"In this brilliant book, Scott Eldridge eloquently combines Bourdieu's field theory and Mouffe's theory of agonism to enhance our understanding of the core and the periphery in journalism. The book expands our knowledge of how (ant)agonistic actors construct and question journalistic identity through different discursive approaches. With impressive conceptual clarity, Eldridge provides an analytical framework that I am convinced will be of use to everybody concerned with the plurality of news actors and what they mean in our fractured societies."

—Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk, *Professor in Journalism, OsloMet University*

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FRONTIERS IN JOURNALISM STUDIES

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Journalism in a Fractured World

Frontiers in Journalism Studies

Scott A. Eldridge II
Series Editor

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Scott A. Eldridge II

Journalism in a Fractured World

PETER LANG
Open

For Sandra.
Zašto? Zato.

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Preface

This book is among the first in the *Frontiers in Journalism Studies* series with Peter Lang. The aim of the series is straightforward: journalism as a field, and journalism studies as a way to make sense of it, both face the challenge of trying to keep pace with a range of developments. Both journalism and journalism studies have been buffeted by new and mostly digital changes in content, journalistic production, media technologies, business models, political pressures, and audience interest. There are also still unfolding challenges around algorithms, data and privacy, and platforms that need to be made sense of. The challenges facing journalism are many, and the changes have been significant. But changes can be made sense of, and even the most novel challenges come from somewhere.

The *Frontiers in Journalism Studies* series embraces this as an opportunity to understand journalism's place in society as we try to make sense of its future. Some titles will revisit foundational theories and ideas we have held close, examining old ideas through new lenses, while others will introduce new ways of thinking about journalism for the coming decades. As a collection of ideas, the books in this series will engage with different challenges that journalism scholars need to consider as they continue to make sense of journalism's place in our societies, so we are better equipped to explore these in journalism's uncertain digital futures.

Journalism in a Fractured World embraces this ambition by drawing from established theoretical and conceptual lenses that have guided journalism studies

research for many years, building from these to introduce new ways of thinking about what journalism is, and what it might become. The discussions here expand on arguments I have explored in previous work considering the journalistic field, its changing boundaries in a digital age, and the role of discourse in shaping our ideas about what journalism is. Here, I use these to situate our discussion of a fragmented journalistic field within a society that is being actively fractured, where political divisions and a sense of disconnect found in society are being replicated in our thinking, and talking, about journalism and its place in our increasingly fractured worlds.

Acknowledgments

Writing this book was far more difficult than I thought it would be, and it would not be in front of you without the support of those who saw potential in the idea and encouraged me to develop and finish this project.

In New England, where I'm from, there's something called the "dooryard visit" to describe a chat between one person standing at their front door and the other standing next to their parked car, some distance away. These brief chats give meaning to fleeting moments, forcing a pause that allows you to collect your thoughts. My thanks go to Frank Harbers for so many of these conversations—me standing at the threshold of his office, Frank at his desk—that helped focus my ideas as I developed this book. And to Rik Smit, who comes at these discussions from another angle. To Marcel Broersma, who has continued to be a welcome sounding board for ideas and a source of well-placed encouragement, thanks for poking holes in ideas that need to be improved upon and boosting those that deserve attention. And to Marc, who in the final moments of revision helped me refine a narrative around fracturing and fragmentation in the context of polarization. Of course, colleagues are not simply ideas factories, and Joëlle, Rob, Susan, David, Bart, and so many others have made it all the easier to take pauses in the all-consuming process of writing. My thanks also goes to Giulia Trentacosti with the University of Groningen Library. The library's Book Fund supported the Open Access publication for this book, allowing it to reach a wider audience.

Beyond Groningen, my thanks go to Martin Conboy both for his long-standing support of my own work, and for pushing me to think about how novel developments in journalism sit within longer trends of history, culture, and societal change. Much the same can be said about John Steel, who introduced me to key thinkers I continue to engage with and whose work has helped me structure my thinking about political theory and journalism's connection to political projects. I also want to thank Henrik Bødker for his convivial friendship and his sharp questions about my work, and Bob Franklin for opening doors to an even wider world of digital journalism research with his trademark generosity and good nature. In recent years I have also benefited from working with Kristoffer Holt, Lena Frischlich, Stephen Cushion, and Tine Ustad Figenschou on alternative news media, with Patrick Ferrucci on the changing institution of journalism, and with Oscar Westlund, Kristy Hess, and Edson Tandoc, shaping and promoting research in Digital Journalism Studies. I would especially like to thank Matt Carlson for our conversations at conferences and over email on the nature of metajournalistic discourses, and to Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk for her engagement with the ideas and arguments in this book, and thank both of them for their endorsements of this effort.

At Peter Lang, I would like to acknowledge the efforts of Lizzie Howard, who took on the *Frontiers in Journalism Studies* book series and has been a strong advocate for journalism studies scholarship as we've worked to build this series. The ease with which she took on projects that were already underway, and the understanding with which she supports what I hope to do in this project have been incredible. My thanks go as well to Niall Kennedy, who first approached me to develop the *Frontiers in Journalism Studies* book series for Peter Lang.

Books are lonely processes, or at least the writing can be. But they are made far less lonely when you at the end of the day there is someone to pull you out of your spiral of ideas, and talk through them to better identify what needs attention. For me, that someone has been Sandra Banjac, whose probing questions in those conversations has helped me strengthen my arguments, and whose support has helped carry me through putting them together in the book in front of you now.

Acknowledged contributions

This book is the culmination of more than five years of thinking, trialing, erring, and developing ideas. If you attended a conference or research seminar where I have presented, you might have seen preliminary analysis, early findings, or half-baked ideas that have since developed into the arguments here. Initial research that appears in whole or in part in this book was presented at the Future of Journalism conferences in Cardiff (2021, 2023), at ECREA conferences in Utrecht (2022) and Aarhus (2022), at the Media and Emotional Mobilization conference in Kalmar Sweden (2023), and at the Dutch Research School for Media Studies (RMeS) conference in Amsterdam (2023).

Given that long trajectory, I want to acknowledge those who assisted with data gathering and analysis on related projects that have benefited this book.

- Nathalie Fridzema was a research assistant on an earlier study, Interrogating Antagonists, funded by a Faculty of Arts start-up Grant at the University of Groningen. She transcribed interviews with Paul Staines and Ashley Feinberg that are referred to here, and supported an interactive audience study on audiences of peripheral journalistic actors as part of that project.
- Ane Mestvedthagen was a research assistant on a separate project and helped construct the sample of *PJ Media* content analyzed in this book.

I would also like to acknowledge informal contributions:

- Kun He's PhD research examining online populism in China, which I supervised with Prof. Marcel Broersma, broadened my thinking about populism.
- Klára Smejkal's PhD research at Masaryk University on trust, populism, and public service media in the Czech Republic, on which I was a supervising consultant, offered opportunities to expand my thinking around cultural backlash and polarization.
- Preliminary discussions with Declan McDowell-Naylor for a separate project that never quite took off led to the inclusion of some aspects of discourse analysis utilized here.
- Working with João C. Magalhães, who approached me in May 2022 to develop a project on populist journalists in Brazil and the United States, benefited my thinking about intersections of populism and journalism.

While every effort has been made to fully acknowledge the work of peers whose work I draw on, ideas can flow quickly and furiously within the socialized spaces of our field. I hope I have not left unacknowledged any ideas that have emerged out of conversations at conferences in front of panels, over drinks at symposia, in the hallways of our institutions, via tweets, email exchanges, and all the other places where paths cross. If I have done so, please reach out.

Our fractured worlds

We live in fractured societies, and it is hard not to notice.

At any given moment during the past several years, it would not be unusual to step outside and find the roads and city centers in the places where we live filled with groups of protesters waving banners and shouting slogans as they stall traffic and block pedestrians. Their reasons for doing so cut across politics, cultures, generations, and ideologies, and for that reason these disruptions have come to represent differences between people who hold polar opposite views of one another. They have come to represent the fractures in our societies.

This is certainly apparent in the Netherlands where I live and where over the past few years farmers have taken their tractors from farms in the North to the Hague in the South, bisecting the country as they drove down the highway to protest what they and their supporters see as an overreaching government trying to implement policies that demand farms curb nitrogen emissions and curtail agricultural pollution. Protesters have also dumped hay bales and manure along their routes and in front of the government buildings they assembled around, decrying what they see as a widening divide between rural communities and those in power, a fracture that has left farmers feeling overlooked and angry.[1]

From initially disrupting the flow of traffic on highways and in city and town centers, these protests grew into a populist political movement and gave voice to a new political party—the BoerBurgerBeweging, or BBB (Farmer-Citizen

Movement)—that took the largest share of the upper house in the Dutch parliament in the Spring of 2023 and is now part of the right-wing coalition leading the Dutch government. Recently, in Germany, similar tactics were being used by farmers blocking border crossings and gathering in parking lots and public squares, behind signs that remind observers that without farmers there would be no bread, butter, or beer.[2] There too farmers' messages are being amplified by the extreme-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD), which has seized on farmers' discontent in an effort to amass political power.[3] As I finish writing this book, these protests have spread further across Europe, as farmers seek populist support and as populist politicians back them.

At the same time and in the same countries, highways are also being blocked by climate activists who hold politically opposite positions. Linking arms and gluing themselves to roadways, these protesters have taken to the streets in an effort to shake up what they see as a complacent society paying too little attention to the warming planet, prodding governments they see as doing too little to be more ambitious. Extinction Rebellion and similar movements have been buoyed by progressive and left-wing politicians attending their rallies, including Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, the New York Democrat, who spoke to a September 2023 protest in language invoking unity: "We are all here for one reason: to end fossil fuels around the planet."[4]

Like the farmer protests, climate protests also signal a widening chasm in society between those who see climate change as an urgent concern and those who don't, often depicted as a division between younger and older generations. Since 2018, students have been leaving schools on Fridays to make a statement about the future of the planet they will be left with after the rest of us have moved on.[5] For these protesters and those who support them, blocking highways, walking out of schools, and disrupting city centers is seen as a necessary tactic to get people to pay attention to a shared, global, challenge.

Despite their appeals for people to come together in defense of either farmers or the planet, these protests and protesters have not been universally well-received. In 2020 in the UK, then-Home Secretary Priti Patel called climate protesters criminals; in 2023, Dutch far-right populist Geert Wilders labeled them the "Extreemlinkse vriendjes [extreme-left friends]"[6] of the Dutch Green-Left Party, GroenLinks; and in 2024, in the United States, Republican Florida Governor Ron DeSantis scoffed at climate protesters who interrupted his faltering presidential campaign, labeling them with the epithet "numbnuts."[7] While not in nearly as antagonistic terms, farmer's protests have been criticized as well. In 2022, the Dutch premier Mark Rutte said their tactics of dumping manure on highways was unacceptable—"Dat is ver over alle grenzen heen [That is far beyond all limits]."[8]

German chancellor Olaf Scholz said that while he took seriously the concerns raised by farmers, he warned of a "toxic mixture" of protests and political extremism "poisoning every democratic debate."[9]

As visible signs of societal fractures, protests playing out across Western societies signal several things. They reflect frustration with the state of politics and with the state of society, and convey protesters' feelings of being ignored by those who have been responsible for paying attention.[10] They target governments that are seen as either overreaching or woefully inadequate in their actions. They also play into concerted efforts by politicians and political actors who repeatedly suggest through their rhetoric that our societies are arranged into two groups—and only two groups: those standing for, and those standing against, specific agendas. When seen as the eruptive expression of distance that different segments of society feel between themselves and others, protests for farmers and against climate change are concrete manifestations of the polarized and fractured politics we find in our societies. While these interpretations of protests are not the only way to understand them, and the picture of society they reflect is not a complete one, they are the ones being advanced by the protesters themselves and they are the ones being reinforced by the alternative, political news media that support the same agendas. They are the pictures we are being offered of our fractured worlds.

News of a fractured society

We live in fractured societies, and the news reminds us of this.

If you regularly consume mainstream television or print news in Europe, you are likely to know of climate and farmer protests taking place across the continent and through that coverage you are reminded of the divisions they amplify. Protests have been the subject of regular, brief updates on the evening news as well as longer, explanatory pieces in national newspapers.[11] Such stories identify the rift between climate change deniers and environmental activists, but even then that coverage does not encapsulate the full story of how these protests are being communicated. If you are among those who read or watch right-wing populist political media or left-wing activist news sites, you are likely to gain a much different picture, one that intensifies the sense of societal divisions these protesters are themselves amplifying.

This is never them more apparent than when comparing different news stories coming from different news sources within an increasingly fractured journalistic field. There, a separate, widening division between traditional legacy media and an emerging set of peripheral digital journalistic actors is reinforced by stark contrasts

in coverage of these protests. You can see this in the Netherlands in the content from the right-wing *Ongehoord Nieuws* (*Unheard News*), where the boerenprotests (or, farmer protests) are a regular feature of their news and commentaries broadcast by Ongehoord Nederland, or Unheard Netherlands—the broadcaster of *Ongehoord Nieuws.* Often referred to simply as *ON!*, *Ongehoord Nederland* and *Ongehoord Nieuws* frame Dutch society as divided and describe Dutch culture as under attack. Their reports on the farmers protests describe farmers not only as angry, but as engaged in a "oorlog [war]" against the government and on behalf of Dutch society.[12] However, if you read the Groningen-based alternative, local news site *Sikkom,* you will likely develop a different impression of the farmer protests. *Sikkom* has covered these protests consistently, and has earnestly acknowledged farmers' feelings of being ignored. They also have not shied away from exposing when farmers accuse others of lying about climate measures while their own placards and signs also spread lies.[13] In early 2024 they pushed back against protesters claims of representing all farmers, highlighting the small numbers of tractors showing up to protests compared to the total number of farmers in the province, and they continue to poke holes in spurious claims the protesters have been making.[14] Where *Ongehoord Nieuws* describes farmers as representatives of the people, pushing back against government elites, *Sikkom* challenges their claims of populist appeal and widespread support. In their differences, we see signs of the fractures in Dutch society.

When it comes to climate protests, coverage has been no less divided among news media that are no less different. These protests are also featured on the evening news broadcasts and the homepages of mainstream newspapers, and from these stories anyone could become aware of activists' advocacy for stronger environmental policies. But online and among alternative media they are amplified as existential challenges in coverage of highly necessary protests. The progressive nonprofit news site *Common Dreams* and the Left-wing UK site *The Canary* present a picture of society split between those fighting for a better future, and the corporate and political interests they fight against. *The Canary*, for example, endorses protesters' disruptive efforts: "if we're serious about tackling the climate crisis, then XR [Extinction Rebellion] is bang on the money in taking its action."[15] Of course, there are also right-wing media opposing these protests in their coverage. In the UK, *The Conservative Woman* insists: "Extinction Rebellion is criminal and must be curbed."[16] *The Gateway Pundit*, a right-wing U.S. site, dismisses these protesters as "lunatics" who are "extremely annoying."[17] The Dutch site *GeenStijl* splits the difference, offering this sarcastic take: "Boeren nog boos, milieugekkies gaan ook snelwegen blokkeren [Farmers still angry, environmental lunatics move to block highways too]."[18] Within a fractured society, we are presented with

fractured narratives, especially when we look online and in the politicized media that cover these protests and their politics each from their own angle to suggest the differences between each of us cannot be resolved.

Journalism in a fractured world: The failure to build a pluralist field

Whether we witness the physical blocking of highways and city streets by protests ourselves, or come to know of them by engaging with the media narratives about them, our attention is being drawn to a bubbling up of divisive political dynamics that have been building over the past decades and now seem to surround us.[19] These differences are rooted in political disagreements and are further reflective of entrenched cultural and ideological differences that have grown over time. But the media that cover these ideological battles are also implicated in how we understand such divisions.

The salience that political, cultural, and ideological differences have in each of our minds is at least in part a product of our engagement with different news narratives, especially when protests and politics are covered in ways that channel difference and amplify polarized, politicized rhetoric. When this occurs, our picture of society and the narrative of widening differences can diminish the opportunity for people to engage with the diversity of perspectives that might be in front of them. This is especially the case when alternative news media that cater to specific political and politicized audiences describe different sides of a debate as warring and their differences as steeped in animosity.[20] In these instances, media narratives widen rather than resolve the divisions in our societies, feeding into ongoing political trends of populism and polarization.[21] This points to a faltering in what many had hoped would be a more pluralist democratic society that could be served by a pluralist democratic and digital news media. It is this context that this book explores, trying to make sense of how things have gotten to this point.

The failures of a pluralist, digital, journalism: Glut and grievance

Journalism in a Fractured World takes the emergence of a more interactive web at the turn of the century and its promise of a reinvigorated, pluralist field of journalism as its point of departure. As the internet developed, it was imagined that competing

viewpoints could coexist online and that citizens would have more access and be able to engage with this array of voices to orient themselves within democratic societies. The rise of citizen journalism sites like *OhMyNews* and the movement-backed citizen journalism of the *Independent Media Center,* better known as *IndyMedia,* suggested journalism might become a field open to a global network of activist journalists and citizen voices.[22] Individual and collective ventures, such as those within progressive networks of citizen journalists at *Firedoglake* in the United States and more right-leaning ones at *De Jaap* and later *ThePostOnline* in the Netherlands, hinted that a new approach to political news—one that pushed particular agendas through the news they produced—might also be conceivable.

In a digital age, different approaches to practicing journalism and publishing news could also now appear alongside more traditional approaches to journalism, and the initial hope was that both digital and traditional actors together could re-shape the field into something more dynamic and diverse.[23] In the United States, bloggers like Josh Marshall at *Talking Points Memo* and Duncan Black at *Eschaton* saw this as a chance for reporting on politics by embracing an interactive, subjective style of the emerging digital culture, one that stood in contrast to mainstream media's down-the middle embrace of objectivity. They capitalized on this opportunity to become small but powerful voices in political journalism.[24] They saw in digital media and in the affordances of the internet new opportunities to do journalism differently, for example breaking from traditional reporting conventions by "piggybacking" on other news content, using hyperlinks and quoted segments to add their own reporting to mainstream content. They moved away from the traditional inverted pyramid story structure to present short, dynamic, content in incremental posts, or by publishing "live" blogs that provided a chronological narrative to unfolding news events.[25] In an online era, these new actors saw a glut of opportunities for reimagining journalism in a digital age.

For understanding how the nature of journalism was changing online, it was hoped that these opportunities would allow for more voices who could help upend a top-down, one-to-many approach to journalism that had developed in the mass media era, one that audiences had grown disillusioned with by the end of the twentieth century. Their aim was not only changing the power centers of the field but also introducing a more ground-up democratic approach to journalism.[26] On the one hand, seeing the opening up of the digital web as a pathway toward greater journalistic pluralism was always (knowingly) optimistic. New actors were pushing up against decades-long professional and ideological constraints that any new imagination of journalism would have to contend with, and it would have been naive to suggest that the emergence of new types of journalism and new types of journalist would, on their own, upset these dynamics.[27]

Nevertheless, for both emerging digital journalists and scholars studying digital journalism, the idea that there could be a more diverse set of news media was alluring, and a more nuanced understanding of journalism started to develop as researchers grappled with various new approaches to doing journalism online.[28] Quickly, these efforts came to address not only those citizen ventures and digital native startups that sought to augment the field but also those who adopted more confrontational and critical journalistic identities, identities that seemed—at least on the surface—to run in opposition to journalism's traditional norms, seeking to challenge and confront journalism with their approaches to newswork.

This development led to the conceptualization of peripheral journalistic actors, which I outlined in 2018 as a way to capture the emergence of outspoken, often political, journalists who embraced new digital opportunities as a means to offer their specific vision of what journalism could be. These actors challenged the boundaries of the journalistic field by insisting they were journalists despite working outside traditional news institutions, they challenged established journalistic routines in their reporting by introducing new digitally informed journalistic practices, and they challenged journalism's existing norms by embracing subjectivity, activism, and a sharp, critical journalistic voice.

By publishing news that is both informative and critical of mainstream journalism, these peripheral actors have made their claims of journalistic belonging in ways that simultaneously push back against a traditional mainstream media "core" and seek belonging to the journalistic field.[29] This peripheral, critical dynamic was apparent on news sites like *Gawker*, a progressive U.S. news site that covered technology, politics, and culture, and where journalists mixed views on politics and an understanding of a changing digital culture to develop a style of news that was at once honest and sensational, but also rude and committed to holding power to account. They offered a digital evolution of the tabloid press.[30] While few would expect a local newspaper to cover corruption in small towns under the tagline "Big Time Small-Time Dicks," the *Gawker*-affiliated U.S. news site *Jezebel* used this tagline for its investigations of political scandals and corruption in ways that, crass language aside, are perfectly aligned with what we expect of local journalists fulfilling a watchdog role.[31]

On conservative blogs like *Guido Fawkes* the same peripheral, critical, digital approach to journalism was also apparent. Its founder Paul Staines showed the potential for a rapid, "drip, drip, drip" approach to covering British politics through frequent, incremental updates, while also challenging the Westminster lobby's more traditional approach to coordinating political reporting.[32] While any one post might not shake London politics, as each new post added something to the previous item, they built toward bigger stories that were then picked up by

other journalists, all of which demonstrated what peripheral actors and alternative approaches to journalism could offer to the wider journalistic field.[33] While these sites started small, seen as secondary actors in the field, they gained traction by offering a more liberated approach to journalism, including at sites like *GeenStijl,* which responded to a shifting political and social climate in the Netherlands by offering a more engaged form of journalism that prioritized political accountability and pointed commentary.[34] To this day, it is among the top sites that people in the Netherlands go to for news.[35]

To say these peripheral actors offered alternative and digital approaches to journalism that appealed to an audience eager for a new type of journalism is only one version of this story, but it is one that was bolstered by the successes of early innovators in this digital space. In particular, their successes were marked by the way they challenged perceived allegiances between journalists, including and those in power, and when they exposed news media they saw as failing to live up to journalistic ideals. Matt Drudge's *The Drudge Report* made a noteworthy play at this when in 1998 it broke the story of Bill Clinton's sex scandal, castigating *Newsweek* for its timidity in reporting (*Newsweek* had investigated and confirmed the story, but was holding off in publishing it). *Guido Fawkes'* founder Staines placed himself in the same tradition, seeing himself as a compatriot of Drudge, with a willingness to take risks and expose what they saw as corruption in UK politics and complacency among its journalists.[36]

While the internet certainly helped open up opportunities for sites like these, it would not be unreasonable to argue these sites were able to establish themselves as critical, honest news voices because they arose during a period when there was a public appetite for a new approach to journalism that would deal more openly with the challenges of our time. This draws our attention to the societal conditions in which progressive sites like *Common Dreams* and *IndyMedia* launched and found success. They were founded in the late 1990s, responding to anti-globalization and pro-environment movements through digital news that saw an appetite for progressive, activist, alternatives to mainstream news. Though now largely dormant, its reputation having been largely sullied, sites like *WikiLeaks* picked up on a similar fervor. They captured attention in the early 2010s in no small part because they emerged in the wake of the global financial crisis and as two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq dragged on, presenting themselves as a new type of journalism to societies that had felt they weren't being given the full story, whether about banking in Iceland or military action in Iraq.[37]

Challenging these narratives, however, something also needs to be said for sites like *Breitbart* and other ardently conservative news sites. *Breitbart* started in 2007 as a news aggregator—Andrew Breitbart's conservative response to the progressive

sites that were gaining attention in the first decade of the 2000s. It promised to break away from journalistic gatekeeping that was seen, then and now, as limiting audiences' access to news. While functional early Internet Archive records of *Breitbart.com* dating to 2005 are fairly bare-bones, beginning in 2010, an "About" page describes *Breitbart* as offering a new approach to providing news: "While some news sites select stories for the user and others allow users to rank favorite news stories, Breitbart emphasizes user access to the raw news feeds—kind of an organized grocery store of news."[38] On all these markers it echoed the same motivations as other peripheral journalistic actors and other digital new sites looking to shake up the journalistic field.

Then, in 2012, Andrew Breitbart died and Steve Bannon took over. By 2013, *Breitbart's* "About" page had been removed, and in its place there was a link to a content area titled "Big Journalism," where every story offers an explicit, conservative, critique to perceived liberal biases in traditional and mainstream journalism. Quickly, the site started to reflect a strong rightward and even populist shift, mirroring what was happening with other conservative digital media at the time. The now far-right, conservative *PJ Media* started in the United States around the same time (2004) as an effort to counteract what they saw as a prevailing left-wing orientation to online news and commentary. Ostensibly, so did *ThePostOnline* in the Netherlands in 2009. But, as I will demonstrate throughout this book, both have since shifted from their ground-up challenge of journalism towards a more overtly political focus in the years since, blurring lines between a politics of grievance and journalism in the process.

This is not something that can be said for all conservative, digital media. In 2001, Charles Johnson founded *Little Green Footballs* where he published news with a rightward lean, supporting the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. By 2009 Johnson had distanced himself from the conservative movement, which he saw as having grown too extreme. He also distanced himself from *PJ Media*, which he had cofounded, saying it had become "just another right-wing parrot organization"[39] that had strayed from its path—its "original vision was to be 'post-partisan' and feature news and opinion from all sides of the political spectrum." [40]

Whether from the left or the right, what these sites have in common is that they promoted a version of journalism that challenged those in power, whether referring to powerful government actors or powerful media institutions. They pushed forward an agenda that society's institutions were poorly serving the public, whether this was in terms of not doing enough to protect the environment or to defend traditional values. Yet, in their differences and if we reframe these same developments, another version of this story emerges, one that finds these digital news outlets tapping into political and societal shifts that were already underway, and which have

become all the more evident in the decades since. The same narratives of using the web to "do journalism" differently on sites like *Guido Fawkes,* introduced an opportunity to do journalism through political lenses. Sites like *Breitbart* saw in a growing populist and right-wing politics a chance to go a step further, presenting news laced with divisive and extreme political narratives of grievance.[41]

This latter shift encourages us to also look at more recent developments, where broadcast upstarts like *Ongehoord Nederland* in the Netherlands or *GB News* in the UK have found success in part because they were able to emerge alongside the rise of a particular brand of anti-media conservativism in the UK and in the context of an anti-elite populism in the Netherlands. They were also entering a media environment where lines between right-wing and populist politics and journalism were no longer as distinct. The amplification of politics is not only a feature of conservative sites, though. Similar to how *Guido Fawkes* reflected a growing dissatisfaction in politics that accompanied the end of the Tony Blair years,[42] when *The Canary* launched in 2015 it was responding to a dissatisfaction with the Conservative governments that followed and with the media that they saw as "an echo chamber to mainstream ideas and practices."[43] Both were also able to work within—and some would say widen—already partisan divisions within the UK media and society; *Guido Fawkes* from the right and *The Canary* from the left.[44]

Beyond politics—but not fully separate from them—these same trends of declining trust in political and media institutions have been invoked by sites that saw digital opportunities to expand the culturally and politically adroit style of tabloid cultures online.[45] Blending politics, popular culture, and sensationalism, *GeenStijl* and *Gawker* (before it closed) have framed their contributions as providing news that is informative, while remaining unabashed in the ways they challenge society's political and cultural institutions, courting controversy while also demonstrating a particular adeptness at breaching previously distinct lines between news and informative commentary.

Taking these developments together, we can see that the technological developments that opened the doors for a range of digital actors to engage with journalism in new ways allowed them to find footing in no small part because they arrived at moments when societal, political, and cultural shifts made their success all the more possible, in an environment where people were eager to see some of the traditional strictures of journalism loosened. But they also saw in the same opportunities to do journalism differently there were ways to challenge the boundaries of journalism through hyperpartisan and political content. The emergence of digital peripheral journalistic actors introduce into our discussion of journalism new questions of how to account for their irreverent ways of commenting on politics, news, and culture, adopting a style that was more familiar to digital

cultures than to journalistic ones.[46] They also force us to consider how we can make sense of these new approaches to journalism in the fractured and polarized societies where they operate.

Key concepts

Journalism in a Fractured World addresses these dynamics and explores their nuances through a discussion of democratic theory alongside theoretical and conceptual approaches to understanding journalism. It uses a social constructivist lens to study news as a discourse about society, one that is shaped by competing political and societal forces. To help guide our thinking, I will briefly address key concepts and theories that are returned to throughout this book.

Agonism. Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonism describes a model for democratic society that values dissensus—or, disagreement—in such a way that allows different viewpoints to coexist.[47] Crucially, it does not insist upon rational deliberation toward consensus and for this reason it is sometimes summarized as "agreeing to disagree." Agonism is often placed in contrast to Jürgen Habermas' advocacy of deliberative democracy, explored further in Chapter 2. To entertain an agonistic society, we need to confront critically and consistently the antagonism that would undermine such ambitions. We also need to confront the active fracturing of society that agonism would seek to overcome.

Peripheral journalistic actors.[48] Also referred to as peripheral journalists or peripheral media, these are nontraditional media actors, often working on digitally native news sites, independent blogs, and similar online platforms. Peripheral actors are defined by the challenges they pose to the dominant journalistic field. They insist that their media work is journalism, and that what they report is news. They are described as peripheral because traditional media (found at the "core" of the field) downplay or dismiss peripheral journalists' claims of being journalists, drawing boundaries of distinction—of belonging and non-belonging—between "core" and "peripheral" journalistic actors.[49] They are dismissed for being too aggressive, not objective enough, or too political in their approach to news for other journalists to accept. However, their unique voice and digitally adept approaches to report news stories has proven to be successful. However, not all peripheral actors who claim to be doing journalism operate in the same way, and these actors can be divided into two categories, *agonistic* and *antagonistic*.

Agonistic journalism.[50] Agonistic journalism and agonistic journalistic actors are developed in this book as a subset of peripheral journalistic actors who disagree with traditional ways of doing journalism and critique failures of mainstream

journalism. As *agonists*, peripheral actors demonstrate an overall end-goal of journalistic ambitions, but differ in how they think that goal should be achieved.[51] They reflect a shift in considering how journalists should present news from a focus on the deliberative, rational model of the twentieth century, toward something more *agonistic* (see the discussion of agonism in Chapter 2).[52]

    Antagonistic actors.[53] Antagonism sits in contrast to agonism. Antagonism, and antagonistic actors who present their work as journalism in particular, refers to a form of media work that uses the appearance of journalism to disguise polarizing, divisive, politics. This categorization reflects Mouffe's distinction between productive disagreement and destructive antagonism. Antagonism is a means of difference-making that divides society and foments distrust within narratives that refuse to entertain counterarguments or the coexistence of other ideologies or beliefs.[54] Antagonistic media actors are often (but not always) aligned with right-wing politics and ideologies. They portray their political opponents not as adversaries but as enemies for whom there is no reasonable answer other than defeat.

    Pluralism.[55] Pluralism describes a society in which a diversity of viewpoints coexists and where these diverse perspectives are made available to the public for their consideration. When availed of these many perspectives, citizens in a pluralist society should be better able to engage with multiple ideas while trying to decide for themselves which vision of the world is the one they want to strive for.[56] Pluralism, the argument goes, offers the best-case scenario for democracies. Within such a society news media play a key role in facilitating a pluralist debate. We often see this in practice. Even if you yourself, haven't been confronted by farmers protesting with their tractors or climate protesters clogging roads, you might have been made aware of these disruptions by reading or watching the news. In that awareness you might have also been reminded of the different agendas of farmers and climate activists, deciding for yourself where you stand. Whether you come to associate these disruptions with the more populist narratives espoused by farmers or the push for progressive environmental policies from climate protesters might also come down to the politics you already hold, or the different types of news media you already engage with.[57]

    To hope for pluralism is to strive for a normative vision of what a democratic society could be. But like all normative ideals, the ways in which pluralism is achieved is not always straightforward, and the forces working against pluralism are not to be underestimated. Some liberal political theorists argued pluralism can only be found in some form of total *individual freedom*, where all ideas should be shared regardless their extreme nature or foundation in reality. Others have argued pluralism requires a dispassionate *deliberative* approach to democracy that

prioritizes consensus. For what these approaches leave out, *agonistic pluralism* has tried to do better, allowing for disagreement and encouraging dissensus as a fundamental component of democratic societies. In this book, I will explore these three approaches to pluralism in order outline how an agonistic journalistic field that embraces dissensus rather than consensus is reflected in the emergence of politicized, digital news media on the edges of the journalistic field.

Polarization.[58] There are many ways in which polarization is understood, including as a widening left-right political divide, or a widening class division. This book engages primarily with affective polarization, outlined below, which refers to the widening divide between people who hold different political, cultural, or ideological worldviews, and how these are increasingly steeped in animosity. Under polarization, societal divisions have become so ingrained in the ways we orient ourselves and our relationships to one another that the term "fractured" has become a short-hand descriptor for our current, polarized state of affairs, often said without qualification.[59] So strong are the ideological divisions in our societies, and so polarized our politics, that political scientists have moved beyond describing our politics as simply polar to now argue that voters have been "calcified" into unmovable positions, and that they are likely to vote the same way in the next election as they did in the last.[60] Increasingly, these voting decisions reflect a further populist disenchantment among voter and an affective disdain toward those in power.[61]

To discuss polarization in terms of societal fractures, Chantal Mouffe describes how societies have been segmented by profound ideological differences into a "type of extreme post-modern fragmentation of the social that refuses to give the fragments any kind of relational identity."[62] For Mouffe, recognizing fragmentation is a first step towards pluralism, and it is only by embracing the necessity of disagreement that social actors can understand their own position and each other's to then work toward the best outcome for society.[63] Mouffe is more critical toward what we might describe as the *active fracturing* of society—the process of cleaving people from one another, when differences of politics or ideology are pitched in terms of winners and losers. Mouffe describes this as *antagonism,* defined by "interests [that] cannot be reconciled."[64] This irreconcilability has permeated not only our politics, but how we see ourselves and our disagreements in profoundly affective and personal terms.

Affective polarization.[65] Affective polarization is also a reference to the distance between different perspectives, but it is not built around a difference in policy positions or political agendas so much as it is derived from a feeling about whether or not any alternative policy or politics will do. While polarization emerges differently in different countries and contexts, affective polarization has been widely observed in the ways that people with different perspectives see their differences as

irreconcilable, and when political and ideological adversaries are seen as enemies rather than opponents. This can lead politically engaged people to see their own position as unimpeachably correct, and their opponents as morally wrong.[66]

Disenchantment is also an outcome of affective polarization. So loud are the polarized, political voices in contemporary societies, that large swathes of the public avoid poking their heads above the parapet at all, avoiding news entirely as a way to avoid politics and the heated political invectives, anger, and sense of detachment they would otherwise experience should they opt to engage.[67] As Krupnikov and Ryan have found, the widest differences among people are found between the highly engaged, highly politicized followers of news and politics, and those who are largely disengaged and follow news less closely, if they follow it at all.[68] The average disengaged reader will remain disengaged, turned off by news that stokes conflict, and the uniquely engaged reader or viewer will only see their worldviews reinforced in the politicized, polarized content they consume.

For those who do engage, *affective polarization* describes a circumstance where people hold more favorable views of politicians and policies they agree with, regardless their other shortcomings, and where they hold increasingly negative views of those whose politics they disagree with, regardless any other points of common ground.[69] The rise in affective and political polarization has fed into a worried debate about the health and future of electoral democracies.[70] These dynamics have developed to differing degrees in different countries. They have become pronounced in the United States, but are also evident in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.[71] In each of these settings they have been tied to the support that populist political actors have garnered, as they root their political appeals in a defense of those who feel aggrieved, dividing society between the people, as those who are worthy of voice and defense, and the corrupt elite who have kept them down.

Populism.[72] There are many definitions of populism, but for our purposes this term is used to refer to any political movement or ideological orientation that divides society between a group of "us" and another group of "them." In many forms of populism this is a distinction between the people and the elites, but how these labels are used differs. Sometimes "the people" refers to the common people and the working classes, and "elites" are those in higher economic strata. In other cases, the elites are those affiliated with corporate, government, or international institutions. In particularly virulent forms of populism, like nativist populism, "us" represents the traditional citizens of a country, and "them" refers to immigrants and other people marginalized based on their ethnicity, background, or country of origin. For a more detailed understanding of populism, the work of populism scholars demonstrate how societies have been divided into two intractable camps,

where you are either with "us," or you are part of "them."[73] In this book, I lean on this scholarship, but do not offer a full recitation of its findings. For understanding journalism and its intersections with politics, populists divisions are addressed and made apparent when political actors cast those who offer different policy prescriptions as "enemies," and when they lob that same charged epithet at journalists who would dare to scrutinize their statements. They also emerge when media actors invoke the same dichotomy between "the people" and "elites"—and between "us" and "them"— that populism depends on. This is explored extensively in Chapter 7.

The microcosm and the macrocosm: The field of journalism

Taking these concepts into our thinking, we can return to the examples at the outset of this chapter. On their own, protests and disruptive blockades do not rule out the potential for pluralism, and they are not inherently populist or polarizing in the most extreme sense of those concepts. However, some of the forces behind these actions and the societal divisions they represent do indicate an inclination toward anti-pluralist, populist fervor. Rather than signaling disagreement, political actors that foment division on both the left and the right undermine pluralism by suggesting society is divided by either/or criteria of belonging, where disagreements between different political positions are not competing but intolerable. While both ends of a left-right spectrum, and their representative media actors, engage in "us versus them" division-making, the ways they do so are not equivalent. As Gandesha and others have argued, we need to distinguish between populist political and media actors who display a destructive animosity that seeks to tear down institutions, social cohesion, and democratic comity, and a more constructive critical response that looks to push back against corrupt power in order to restore democratic promise.[74] This can be further clarified by distinguishing between a left-wing populism that pushes back against those who reinforce structures of power (e.g., corporations, and the powered political class), and right-wing populism that defines its appeal to the people in opposition to the "other," which often devolves into an animosity toward a "cabal" of powered interests, and in nativist strains of right-wing populism the "immigrant other."[75]

At the societal level, the developments I have briefly outlined here are seen as proof positive of a level of fracturing that is likely to disrupt the ordered arrangement of democracies. At the level of the journalistic field, they have been

implicated in the politicized attacks on journalism, and the blurring of erstwhile journalistic media with media that merely present themselves as news. In reference to the latter, audiences are more likely to trust media that support their politics—regardless the journalistic acumen of those behind these media—than they are the long-running and professional media that, for decades, defined what it is to "do journalism" in Western societies.[76] Not only that, they are also more likely to distrust mainstream media simply for being "too mainstream."[77]

Regarding the former, politicized attacks directed toward traditional journalists and news institutions by politicians and their campaigns have become a worryingly commonplace feature of our societies. This was apparent when the former (and future) U.S. president Donald Trump labeling journalists as "enemies of the people" and any news he disagreed with as "fake news." This rhetoric has been exported widely, where now the Dutch public service broadcaster NOS is regularly derided as such, with people affixing "NOS = Fake News" stickers to car bumpers, streetlights, and rubbish bins around the country. Geert Wilders has opted for the Dutch colloquial epithet "tuig van de richel [scum from the ledge]"[78] to describe journalists. He has done so for years, and after his party's success in November 2023 election supporters of Wilders' PVV party—seemingly following his cue—described journalists as "communist scum."[79]

Insofar as these dynamics have developed into specific democratic challenges, they also pose normative journalistic ones. In that light, this book carries forward an agenda that myself and others have outlined for seeing pluralism within the context of a more diverse news environment online.[80] This is developed here by building out from an earlier conceptual framework for thinking about agonistic journalism, where I pointed out how bloggers describe their approach to reporting as a journalism performed with "sharp elbows" in a way that reflected journalistic ambitions.[81] They embrace being outsiders, seeing their lack of access to institutional spaces as a measure of their autonomy. When Timothy Burke reported for *Deadspin* on the political pressure being placed on local news outlets, explored further in Chapter 6, he did so in a uniquely digital way by stitching together footage from these news outlets into a montage that both revealed and mocked the political pressure being applied. Not only that, his efforts prodded other journalists to follow up on his coverage.[82] He showed that peripheral journalistic actors could shape the field of journalism *agonistically,* challenging traditional assumptions about what it is to do journalism. By "bringing the undiscussed into discussion," peripheral journalistic actors have shown where traditional journalistic norms could be critiqued and their practices reimagined, forcing a public conversation about journalism's place in our societies.[83]

Alongside this encouragement to recognize *agonistic* peripheral journalistic actors for their positive contributions, I argue we need to confront critically and consistently the *antagonism* that undermines such a democratic ambition and hopes for a pluralist, agonistic field. When bloggers mask political campaigning by adopting a rhetoric of journalism, they are as likely to deceive their readers as they are to inform them. By describing these media actors as antagonists, I argue they reveal how journalism as a field cannot be insulated from the larger societal and political forces at play, and in doing so I draw heavily on Bourdieu's understandings of fields and how they are shaped by external and internal forces that engage in contests over the shape of the field. Following Bourdieu, journalism as a field and fields in general are guided by their own dispositions and rules, but they are not fully insulated or autonomous in determining these. At best, a field is a microcosm of the larger societal macrocosm.[84] As will be explored in Chapter 3, societal fields might not mirror the larger forces at play in society directly, but they are also not able to entirely remove themselves from their influence.

Treated in isolation, these developments of a changing journalistic field can be seen through the concepts of boundary work, and as challenges to the primacy of a more mainstream and traditional journalistic core agonistic peripheral journalistic actors prod us toward one of two reactions. We can respond to new approaches to journalism introduced by peripheral actors by either expanding the boundaries of the journalistic field or by battening down the journalistic hatches, disregarding these newcomers as "pretenders" to journalism's lofty goals.[85] But we cannot treat these developments in isolation, and in the chapters ahead I will argue that these digital, peripheral journalistic actors need to be seen in the context of the more fractured world that they are also a part of, considering the forces of politics, ideology, and culture alongside changes to the journalistic field.

If we are able to do so, we can then see that the same opening up brought about by the internet, the same technologies and motivations that allowed *Guido Fawkes* to shake up the journalistic field with its approach to political journalism, also provided avenues for hyperpartisan news sites like *Breitbart* in the United States to foment political divisions by steeping news in extreme political narratives and a hardened sense of right-versus-left and populist us-versus-them divisions.[86] The same affordances of technology that allowed Julian Assange and *WikiLeaks* to mix primary source material and analysis as a form of "scientific journalism" to hold powerful state actors to account—to the acclaim of progressive activists—also led to its publication of information that was wittingly or otherwise supplied by state actors with malign intent, much to those same progressive activists' chagrin.[87] For all the promises of diversifying and democratizing the journalistic field that the internet initially offered, its first quarter century has also revealed these cannot

be disconnected from the push-and-pull of politics, and the ideological forces that have driven divisions in our societies.[88]

Beyond complicating our picture of journalism, these developments reveal the complex nature of journalism and its place in our societies. They have shown that journalism, as a field, is a messy one intertwined with politics, culture, and technology, aligning its arguments with Conboy's recent intervention to account for journalism, across its long history, as an effort that is "complicated by the range of activities and diversity of participants claiming to contribute to it."[89] In order to engage with *agonism*, we need to also account for the *antagonism* that has undermined our hopes for a more diverse and dynamic journalistic field. In order to account for journalism, we need to consider it more fully within the messy societies in which we find it.

Settings

The arguments in this book could probably find purchase in a number of Western societies, but they are situated within three national settings: The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The research in this book is not comparative *per se*. Rather, each of these settings offers different advantages for making sense of how journalism has developed on the edges of the field and in a digital age since the turn of the century, when the advent of a more accessible digital media landscape allowed for the emergence of alternative and politically oriented news media.

For the developments explored in this book, the United States serves as a forerunner, where beginning in the late 1990s with the emergence of news blogs and small journalistic websites, we can locate the development of a pronounced political, alternative, digital media environment in which independent, interloping digital journalists from across the political spectrum broke news, and set mainstream news agendas.[90] A short while later in the United Kingdom sites like *Guido Fawkes* found traction covering news from their "inside Westminster" perspective, and by forming relationships with political actors and newspapers alike they were able to develop a brand of journalism that covered politics, gossip, and news from a partisan perspective.[91] Turning to the Netherlands, there has certainly been space for independent and digital media voices since the turn of the century as well, demonstrated by sites like *De Jaap* and later *ThePostOnline* and *GeenStijl*.[92] More recently, extreme and controversial media like *Ongehoord Nederland* have captured populist and irreverent approaches to political news, stoking an anti-institutionalist sentiment through their content.[93]

To more narrowly focus on dynamics of fracturing in politics and fragmentation in journalism, we can look to 2016 both for what it offers in the form of exceptional examples of societal fragmentation and for what it masks in the way outsized examples can suggest political anomalies, rather than trendlines. Admittedly, and while productive, choosing such a recent moment can distort the fuller picture, so it is worth considering these dynamics in light of their longer histories. The short version of this history is that trends of polarization, populism, and societal division are not altogether new, and even to the extent that digital media have made them more obvious, more amplified, and more widespread, the role of media in politics is also not new. Populism can be found in agrarian and farmers-based populism in the United States and Europe in the 1800s, and its anti-immigrant and nativist threads share equally long histories.[94] These have had both right-wing and left-wing dynamics throughout that history, and while to speak of problematic aspects of populism today is primarily to focus on right-wing, authoritarian, nativist versions of populism, even today we continue to see progressive worker-based populist movements in Latin America, in activist movements globally, as well as in the national settings where this book focuses.[95] News media have also been involved in building and reinforcing these larger historical and political trajectories, where to try and suggest that what we are seeing now is novel would be both naive and ahistorical.[96] But this history does not negate that what we are now seeing is something different, whether in terms of a fractured politics or fragmented digital news media conveying these politics to the public. We can nevertheless contextualize our current moment further to see how we got here.

Since 2016 in the United States, trends of populism and societal division have often been ascribed to Donald Trump's particular brand of nativist populism, traced to his rise and election in 2016. But the rise of Trump as a divisive political actor is particularly interesting for how he sharpened *existing* divisions in society, divisions that were amplified in the culture wars and identity politics of the 1990s. These divisions were projected by conservative talk radio and television, and came to be reflected in differences between political media that had become pronounced on commercial television, in print, and have since become entrenched online over the past 25 years.[97] For those harboring a sense that the society was already breaking up in a way that left them isolated, the 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign reinforced that feeling, but it was not their genesis. Rather, we can tie both a dissatisfaction with politics and with mainstream media further back, to the establishment of the Freedom Caucus and to the Tea Party movements that amplified populist dissatisfaction, including in news media that reinforced these feelings.[98] While these movements were ostensibly about small government and pro-business policies, they were potent vehicles for cultural and identity politics

that had used fear and cultural difference to define conservative politics and policy dating for decades.[99]

These dynamics are not only apparent in the United States, and in 2016 a similar narrative played out in the United Kingdom over roughly the same time period, the culmination of a long campaign by "Brexiteers" who mounted a referendum campaign to separate the UK from the European Union. Amid policy debates, Brexit was marked by its own mélange of nativist populist retrenchment, promoted through an already partisan press system in the lead up to a referendum in June 2016.[100] When looking at how a more ardently British political online news media built up toward Brexit, turning to the alternative online space one finds a set of media actors who were more partisan than the already politically-aligned British press.[101] There too peripheral journalistic actors were telling readers and viewers that their political disappointments were shared by others, whether in narratives from the left where peripheral actors decried conservative media owners or when conservative peripheral journalists pushed back against (so-called) liberal institutions like the BBC. As with the United States, online political media in the UK did not create societal divisions. They did, however, speak to these divisions and re-circulate media messages that reinforced these fractures in ways that intensified the sense of distance these divisions suggest.

Societal fractures and media's reflection of societal divisions extend further, and in 2016 they were certainly apparent in the Netherlands. Any discussion of Dutch societal divisions has to consider the rise of populist support among the electorate, and in 2016 this was specifically linked to the emergence of Thierry Baudet and his party, Forum for Democracy (FvD). The following year Baudet brought his brand of vitriolic, nativist populism into the Tweede Kamer, the Dutch parliament, riding a wave of distrust in government and a narrative that the EU had no business intervening in Ukraine following Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea. However, Baudet is only the latest in a series of populist, right-wing Dutch politicians who have found a foothold in parliament.[102] He was seen as a more camera-ready version of his reactionary message than similarly-oriented politicians, like Geert Wilders,[103] and his populist politics were normalized by mainstream media.[104] But they found their strongest support in alternative news media spaces, including on *Ongehoord Nederland,* where they have been aired unchecked online and later on the public airwaves.[105] While *ON!* has faced scrutiny for failing to adhere to media standards, it is likely *because* of this scrutiny that they have been able to argue they speak to the unheard portions of Dutch society by catering to those in society who back populist parties and seek out media that do so as well.[106]

To be certain, each of these countries and each of these examples is in many ways unique. They reflect the specific nature of the countries and the contexts

from which they emerged, and each is limited in their explanatory power for that reason. They are also unique in terms of prominence; while Trump and Brexit are well-known and fairly unambiguous references, Baudet has less name recognition outside the Netherlands. At the same time, none of these cases are, truly, isolated. Trump did not invent divisive politics and enthusiasm for him continues to grow on one side of those divisions. Brexit was not at the vanguard of country-first political movements led by politicians railing against the EU, whether within or outside the UK, and the polar differences between "Remainers" and "Leavers" have not subsided since. Within the Netherlands, Baudet is typically considered the third in a series of politicians who have embraced populism in their pursuit of political capital.[107] But the ideas he has expressed live on—since starting this book project he has arguably slipped down a peg in standing, as Wilders' PVV (Party for Freedom) has seen electoral resurgence, earning the most votes of any party in a November 2023 election and as of late 2024, the PVV was part of a right-wing coalition government.[108]

A word on normativity, and considering place

The research in this book (and my research in general) does not approach journalism in overly idealistic terms, but tries to consider how the field of journalism is being shaped by evaluating what's in front of us, warts and all. I tend to adopt a "big tent" view of journalism that builds on a premise that journalism is a product of our societies, and that it is neither insulated from nor unaffected by societal, political, and ideological forces. Second, in this approach, I take Bourdieu's description of the field as the microcosm within the larger societal macrocosm as a guide when correlating dynamics of societal change and rupture within a study of journalism. Third, I recognize that while the journalistic field is not fully beholden to a public, journalism and journalists are nevertheless indebted to a public's acknowledgment.

This book approaches society and journalism through a social constructivist lens, and through that lens it sees news content as offering a story about society, and a story about journalism as well. For journalism scholars, a social constructivist approach to news encourages seeing news as something that can give people a sense of their worlds, their place in them, how they should understand aspects of identity and power, and how these compete; it is not determinative, but it is guiding.

Through this lens, we can ask: What kind of a society do news and journalism reflect, and does the society we see constructed within news media resonate with our own understanding of the world around us? What are the strengths and

weaknesses of a pluralist journalistic field that engages more openly with different ideologies and political alignments in its content? And, how can we also align the reality of our contemporary worlds with the normative ideals that we might strive for in a democracy, or hope for in a journalistic field? These questions present a series of resonant challenges for both society and for journalism particularly in a digital age and on the periphery of the journalistic field where the fractures in our societies have been made visible. In this book I take up these challenges, using theories of journalism alongside theories of populism and polarization, and theories of democratic society alongside theories of cultural backlash and identity politics, in order to navigate the difficulties they present.

Taking this into my own work, and through this epistemological lens, I argue that neither scholars nor journalists can foist upon society a vision of journalism they are unwilling to accept, and we should not try to separate journalism from the mess we see around us. This has become all the more necessary in our current time, when the most objective version of journalism will be objectionable to those who see neutrality as cowardice, and the most opinionated will be equally dismissed by those who see rational deliberation as key to an ordered society.

Adopting such a perspective can also engender caution, beginning with a caution against privileging certain types of news over others, or using traditional and historical models as the standard of what journalism should be going forward. For long-standing reasons, this can tend toward defining all journalism according to an idealized, often U.S.-inspired, interpretation of what journalism should be, one that privileges a Western conception of journalism and knowledge production.[109] These biases are difficult to avoid, and this book will nevertheless draw many of its examples and ideas from the United States and European contexts. This is not only a reflection of where I am from (the United States) and where I have studied and work (Europe), it is where my research has been focused. For that reason, the arguments in this book can certainly be understood as confined to these specific settings, however I will aim to broaden our discussion of journalism from something that is linked too tightly to these U.S. and European legacies and histories. While they can offer a compelling vision of what journalism can do in democracies, it is only one such vision, and it can be made more complex.

For this to work, we need to also be careful to avoid scholarly wish-casting that would outline the field of journalism as one that is inherently normative and democratic, and one that is able to correct societal ills. This can result in a smoothing over of what might be productive studies of differences between highly traditional journalism and iconoclastic alternative news media. Bourdieu refers to these as complicities that mute the nature of the contests between different actors at the boundaries of the journalistic field. As we will see, no amount of muting

these contests can fully eliminate them, and the provocations posed by peripheral journalistic actors only intensify the call for scholars to consider these outspoken counter-cases to journalism's normative core, in order to study alternative forms of journalism as expanding, rather than undoing, journalism's place in our worlds.[110] In this pursuit, it bears repeating that journalism cannot save democracy any more than academics can save journalism. Journalists and journalism scholars, compatriots as they often are, work in fields that are sometimes at odds, and sometimes complementary, but each carries different agendas. Each draws on different resources, and where we might hope that our influence carries over as scholars to shore up a version of journalism that we would want to see (or want to read, or want to listen to), we are best served when we work with our own best resources as scholars to highlight societal trends, and not shy away from their worrying signs, in order to build knowledge around them and point to their risks as well as their potential in the hopes these are then acted upon by others. This comes with a second, sometimes challenging, approach I take in my work that acknowledges the development of a journalistic field that goes against my own preferred version of journalism, where and when this is a reflection of the societies that we live in. Journalism is messy and contentious. I try as best I can to engage with that mess for what it is.

Now, I still hold a relatively "big tent" view of journalism, and a decade plus of working to make sense of the margins of the field has done little to collapse this awning. Nevertheless, time and context have pushed me to think through the limits of such a wide lens. Such a perspective is productive when it allows us to make this contestation central to understanding societal fields like journalism. But it introduces difficult questions for scholars trying to balance normative and analytical positions, where an idea of what journalism perhaps should be in our best imaginations is not equal to what journalism is when we observe it in practice. Dismissing new types of journalistic actors for failing to conform to a normative picture of journalism ignores the way journalism is constantly evolving, and underplays the contributions new actors make. At the same time, accepting them without also acknowledging the harm they can do within society and what damage they could bring to the field ignores the importance of history and legacy in shaping any societal field, including the field of journalism. This book makes an effort to keep this in mind, and recognizes that while on the surface we might find similarities between one version of journalism and another, there are often-insidious agendas shaping the ways news is presented to us. This is engaged with throughout the book in a way that works to avoid equivalence, or suggest that all political projects are equally interested in the pursuit of democracy or a better society.

Conclusion: A messy, fractured, field

Journalism is not pristine, it is messy, and no amount of theorizing about journalism will clean that up. Nevertheless, by considering how journalism is constituted within society, guided by the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Chantal Mouffe and others, we can show that the divisions within societies, the brokenness so many of us see, are reflected in journalism and vice versa. To make sense of this, this book focuses on how intractable divisions of politics and ideology in our societies are being communicated to us through the news produced by peripheral journalistic actors, both for what they tell us about society and—more directly—how they shape our understanding of journalism.

To the extent this introductory chapter has painted a picture of fractious and fraught societies, where narratives of societal and political difference have been made all the more salient in the work of a fragmented journalistic field, it has done so to raise our attention to the challenges we face. Laid out in front of us, one could be forgiven for throwing their hands up, resigning as many have done to an appetite of less news, less politics, and less attention to these divisions.[111] However, because these developments both pique our interests and trigger our despondency, they call for a certain clarity to be developed around the situation we find ourselves in. It forces us to ask how the interplay between journalism and politics has rendered lines between the two more permeable. It also calls for a wide-eyed understanding that this might reflect a point we cannot turn back from, where the gaps cannot easily be closed between normative imaginations of what journalism was and abundant evidence of what our politics have become. It looks to the examples from the United States, United Kingdom, and Netherlands not because their recent histories offer the best examples about what journalism should be and its place in society, but because they can offer us the clearest warnings of what is yet to come if we don't try and understand them as they are.

With all this in mind, it seems we cannot disentangle journalism from politics, or culture, or history, or the ways we think about the coming together of people and communities in democracies where journalism plays a well-established (if contested) role. Rather, we need to understand how each is a reflection of the other.

Notes

1   Tullis 2023.
2   Seen at a protest in Leer, Germany, on January 13, 2024.
3   Pfeifer 2024.

4   Leber 2023.
5   Fridays For Future n.d.
6   Here and elsewhere, quotes are translated from the original Dutch by the author.
7   Dodd 2020; Geert Wilders [@geertwilderspvv] 2023; Phillip Sitter 2024.
8   Nieuwenhuis 2022.
9   Moulson 2024.
10 Harrison 2023.
11 Tullis 2023.
12 Ongehoord Nieuws 2022.
13 Sikkom 2022.
14 *Sikkom* (2024) "Tot vier uur de N33 bij Zuidbroek platleggen!?" February 4, 2024, at: https://www.instagram.com/p/C241ZZCtEcy/, accessed March 5, 2024.
15 Norden 2021.
16 Wright 2020.
17 Journal 2024.
18 GeenStijl 2022.
19 Scambler 2020.
20 Krupnikov and Ryan 2022, 15–16.
21 Steppat, Castro, and Esser 2023.
22 Sara Platon and Mark Deuze 2003.
23 Eldridge 2022a.
24 Eldridge 2018.
25 Ibid., 91.
26 Domingo and Heinonen 2008.
27 Chung et al. 2016.
28 Deuze 2003.
29 Eldridge 2018.
30 Eldridge 2021.
31 While finishing this book in November 2023, *Jezebel's* parent company G/O Media announced it would be shuttering its site.
32 Mayhew 2020.
33 Personal correspondence; June 7, 2018.
34 Eldridge 2021.
35 Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2023.
36 The Guardian 2005; personal correspondence; June 7, 2018.
37 Benkler 2011.
38 Accessible at: https://web.archive.org/web/20100601065626/http://www.breitbart.com/about.php
39 Brown 2010.
40 Little Green Footballs n.d.
41 Rae 2021.
42 Perkins 2018.
43 Scott 2015.
44 McDowell-Naylor, Cushion, and Thomas 2023.
45 Conboy 2021.

46 Eldridge 2021.
47 Mouffe 2013.
48 Eldridge 2018.
49 Eldridge 2018.
50 Eldridge 2019b.
51 Eldridge 2019.
52 Maeseele and Raeijmaekers 2020.
53 Eldridge 2019b.
54 This is being developed in forthcoming work by Joao C. Magalhães and myself.
55 Mouffe 2004.
56 Christians 2009.
57 Lorenzano, Moon, and Borah 2023.
58 Krupnikov and Ryan 2022.
59 Yates 2022.
60 Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck 2022; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019.
61 Kenny 2022; Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck 2022.
62 Mouffe 1999, 754.
63 Mouffe 2013.
64 Mouffe 2019, 61.
65 Iyengar et al. 2019.
66 Garrett and Bankert 2020.
67 Song 2017.
68 Krupnikov and Ryan 2022.
69 Iyengar et al. 2019.
70 See perspectives in: Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood 2023; Orhan 2022.
71 Garzia, Ferreira Da Silva, and Maye 2023.
72 Krämer 2018.
73 Mudde 2004, 543.
74 Fuchs 2018; Gandesha 2018.
75 Gandesha 2018.
76 Andersen, Shehata, and Andersson 2023; Frischlich et al. 2023.
77 Phelan and Maeseele 2023.
78 There are different views on the origin of this phrase, one of which argues it refers to a manure-covered ledge found in a barn full of cows.
79 Persson 2023.
80 Ihlebæk et al. 2022.
81 Eldridge 2019.
82 Eldridge 2019.
83 Pierre Bourdieu 1977, 168–169.
84 Bourdieu 2005.
85 Carlson and Lewis 2020.
86 Rae 2021; Wieringa et al. 2018.
87 Eldridge 2020b.
88 Ihlebæk et al. 2022.
89 Conboy 2023, 1.

 90 Eldridge 2018.
 91 Eldridge 2021, 27.
 92 Buyens and Van Aelst 2022.
 93 Hameleers 2020; Harambam 2023.
 94 Borras Jr. 2020.
 95 Otjes and Louwerse 2015.
 96 Krämer 2018.
 97 Bauer and Nadler 2020.
 98 Hochschild 2018; Lepore 2011.
 99 Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019, 212.
100 Norris and Inglehart 2019, 257–258.
101 McDowell-Naylor, Cushion, and Thomas 2023.
102 Norris and Inglehart 2019, 74.
103 Weezel 2023.
104 de Jonge and Gaufman 2022.
105 BNNVARA 2023.
106 According to *AD,* in early 2023, *Ongehoord Nederland's* televised programming averaged 168.000 in viewers when broadcast via NPO1, that is to say, on TV rather than online. This was up from 138.000 viewers on average a year earlier, with their highest viewership of 262.000 coming in March 2022. See: https://www.ad.nl/show/eerste-ongehoord-nieuws-na-winterstop-trekt-168-000-kijkers~a5143dac
107 Among prominent populist leaders, Baudet follows Pim Fortuyn, and the now-resurgent Geert Wilders, and has been followed by the recently emboldened Caroline van der Plas, whose BoerBurgerBeweging (BBB-Farmer-Citizen Movement) has secured the largest share of the upper house in the Dutch parliament. See: van Weezel 2023.
108 Kiesraad 2023.
109 Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2021.
110 Ihlebæk et al. 2022.
111 Damstra et al. 2023; Song 2017.

Liberal, deliberative, and agonistic: Theories for a pluralist democracy

To get a sense of what people think about the societies they live in, ask them. When you do you quickly find that people are convinced their societies are divided, even hopelessly so, as respondents say they have lost faith that the gaps between what they think and what others think can ever be narrowed. Public opinion polling from the Pew Center showed that in 2020 in the United States, eight in ten voters felt their political disagreements were rooted not in policy prescriptions but in genuine differences between themselves and those in the opposite camp. They described these in terms of differences in how they, themselves, understood "core American values" in contrast to those espousing different politics. More worryingly, nine in ten felt that a victory by their political opponents would lead to "lasting harm" because they did not share the same understanding of American values.[1] This has grown into what a 2023 Pew Center study describes a "dismal view" of U.S. polarization, with 86 percent of respondents describing political parties as constantly fighting rather than pursuing solutions.[2] In the UK, a survey conducted in late 2023 by Ipsos found more than two-thirds of respondents saw Great Britain as a nation in decline (68 percent), with seven in ten Britons saying the economy is "rigged to advantage the rich and powerful" and that politicians do not care about the people (71 percent). When considered alongside a growing distrust of elites (66 percent) and experts (64 percent), this signals a growing anti-system and populist sentiment in the UK.[3] The same 28-country survey painted an even harsher

picture for the Netherlands' future, with 71 percent of Dutch respondents saying the Netherlands is a country in decline, and two-thirds (67 percent) describing their society as "broken."[4]

These are not results bounding with optimism, and while differences in how people see the future of their countries are nothing new and opinion polls are admittedly small windows into those perspectives, this current and profound sense of polarized differences and the rising anti-systemic, populist sentiment is a notable dampener to pluralist hopes. It is worrying for democracies on the one hand, and journalism on the other, that divisions like those expressed above are seen as irresolvable. The valence of distrust and animosity reflected in these survey results undermine key tenets of liberal democracy that insist upon discourse and debate to determine future directions. In place of debate, they instead suggest illegitimacy in the very existence of the "other" position. Rather than showing a coming together toward solution-finding, they instead show a groundswell of polar, affective, animosity taking root in politics. Whether this is playing out in the streets as we saw in the previous chapter or in halls of power where elected leaders engage in rancorous debate, the sense of division is unavoidable when it is conveyed to us— when we see these debates play out in news media.

From the perspective of democratic theory, these responses represent a continued shift in how political opponents perceive one another within query societies. No longer as opponents, but adversaries and even enemies. This poses certain risks that undermine not only politics, but also the role of other institutions that have historically engaged with politics within Western democratic societies, journalism chief among them and academia as well. This is where a discussion of journalism becomes intertwined with a discussion of political ideals and the theories and philosophies that anchor how we understand disagreement within our societies.

In this chapter I explore competing theories of pluralist societies, how these have been understood by scholars and in their historical contexts, and how they have been incorporated into our thinking about journalism. I address various interpretations of freedom of expression and freedom of the press that were shaped by democratic philosophies of pluralism, and how these led—at least initially—to an understanding of journalism's role in society through an emphasis on rationality over emotion and deliberation rather than force. This establishes a foundation for understanding how journalism's place in our society developed through the twentieth century by tracing key concepts from classical liberal theory through to the conception of deliberative democracy offered by Jürgen Habermas. In response to this prioritization on rationality, a framework will be developed for understanding the nature of our fragmented societies that builds more substantially on the democratic theories of Chantal Mouffe and the role of contestation within an agonistic

approach to pluralism. While this chapter cannot exhaust the nuances of these theories or histories, it will show where they structure an understanding of how journalism established itself as a distinct institution dedicated to providing information and opinion within democratic societies, and how this is currently being disrupted by peripheral journalistic actors.

Liberal theory

Normative ideas of journalism's place within society have overwhelmingly (if not consistently) been tied to liberal democracies and the need for an independent journalism that serves the public and its newfound emphasis on reason over force, ideas that would eventually legitimate journalism's position in modern democracies.[5] These ideas trace back to the seventeenth century in England and Europe, where liberal and libertarian ideals of how democratic societies could best function outlined a need for reliable information and the space for sharing a variety of opinions on issues of public concern, alongside a need for reliable commercial information in societies shifting from feudal to capitalist systems. These ideas continue to shape our modern thinking about journalism's place in society, and scholars of press freedom including John Steel have traced the liberties we now associate with principles of a free press to Enlightenment-era thinking in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for how these sought to establish principles of free will and free expression—at least for those they saw as suitably civilized.[6]

In this period, to speak of journalism is to mislabel the information and opinions being published, and even to refer to the press—as a catchall precursor to the field of journalism—uses a too-broad description of the work of printers who published information in the newsletters and newsbooks of the seventeenth century as a revenue stream alongside their other work.[7] As societies shifted from feudal systems toward parliamentary systems, printed news initially served a functional informative role.[8] In its earliest forms, printed news was seen as a means to convert the masses, facilitating the dissemination of information to newly, minimally empowered publics in order "to make them fit citizens of a commonwealth."[9] At the same time, news was a valuable tool for merchants, where the latest information from cities around Europe served the needs of an expanding commercial class that depended on having the most recent information to orient themselves within the markets. Printers of early newsletters and newsbooks capitalized on their ability to provide this reliable information and facilitate trade. As Martin Conboy has shown, in many instances it was commercial interests more than democratic ones that fueled a press being established in cities across Europe, with publishers

intentionally branding their output as reliable, offering "true," "credible," "newes" that merchants could use for their commercial operations, and printers could use to turn a profit by printing news with some regularity.[10] However, printers also took advantage of ongoing political upheavals, seeing these as opportunities to further expand the variety of content they could and would dare publish, navigating censorship and regulatory regimes across Europe to further cement both their democratic and commercial contributions.[11] This showed where owning a printing press, or at least having access to one, within a changing political and commercial context helped establish the conditions for a nascent form of journalism to emerge, one that experimented with what news it could print. Sometimes it was more partisan, sometimes more tied to an interest in "gossip," but always turned toward what would sate the commercial interests of readers and printers alike.[12]

Whether you focus on the political or commercial reasons for the emergence of news and the press, the consequences have been significant.[13] Over time, these two motivations allowed journalism to develop as the primary sense-making practice of modern societies, Hartley argues, through a discourse dedicated to fostering "democratic politics and commercial-capitalist culture."[14] The contributions made by news as a form of information in this era allow us to locate a minimal, nascent idea of journalism emerging, one that is predicated on the dissemination of information so that members of society—both as citizens, and as a commercial class—could better understand where they stood on particular debates and better decide how they should act. These eventually coalesce under a liberal theory of the press. However, this concept needs to be distinguished from our more modern understandings of both liberal democratic theory and the later understandings of a journalistic press within representative democracies.

In some of the earliest arguments for freedom of expression and publication in the seventeenth century, writers were not advocating for a robust news media in service of a voting electorate. Rather, freedom of publication and expression were envisaged as necessary for the open deliberation of public concerns by those involved in decision-making, operating under a principle that "truth and reason should not be held back or constrained, and that attempts to control the circulation of ideas was both irrational and un-Godly."[15] From this perspective, liberty of thought and expression were presented as essential components of a society ruled by consensus, as opposed to force, and rationality, as opposed to religion. The freedom to publish was necessary to facilitate this.

This necessity was made explicit by pre-Enlightenment radical thinkers like John Milton.[16] In his anti-censorship treatise, *Areopagitica*, Milton offered a set of philosophies that would later come to be associated with classical liberal theory (or, classical liberalism) and the advancement of liberties of expression and the press.[17]

Like others, Milton seized upon a moment of upheaval in England—the height of the Second English Civil War—and called for doing away with the press licensing regime. In an appeal targeted toward parliamentarians and against royalists, in *Areopagitica* he argued that free expression was necessary for men to be able to act rationally and responsibly.[18] While the ability to engage in these modes of expression at the time Milton was writing was quite limited, restricted to elites in society, the liberties he outlined were consistent with an overall advocacy that power in English society was derived from the populace. For this to work, Milton argued, the ability to circulate ideas and engage in debate over societal concerns acted as a guard against "arbitrary rule" by leaders who might otherwise define their authority as divinely granted.[19]

To be certain, Milton was an imperfect champion of liberty. His advocacy for free expression was limited to the rights of men, and only those men who he considered worthy of such a liberty. This was not extended to Catholics; Wolfe distills Milton's two priorities in government as "toleration of all beliefs except Catholicism, and denial of any single person's rule."[20] Further complicating things, Milton even worked as a state censor later in his life, somewhat watering down the fervency of his positions in *Areopagitica*.[21] Nevertheless, his impeachment of restrictions on speech became foundational for tying press regulations to a harmful limitation on the pursuit of "the truth, not only by disexercising and blunting our abilities in what we know already, but by hindering and cropping the discovery that might be yet further made both in religious and civil wisdom."[22] This pursuit of discovery—of "the truth"—as time and societies advanced, would become an inextricable part of what we now refer to as journalism, and the classical liberal theory that has been a cornerstone of its development in Western democracies as a truth-seeking institution.[23] It also laid the foundation for a normative conception of journalism that is not only free, but devoted toward rational debate and decision-making as a product of this pursuit of truth and reason.

Milton's arguments, though not successful in their time, provided a foundation for freedoms of expression and the press that would later be rooted in classical liberal theory. In addition to his philosophies, it was Milton's approach to relaying these to a public where we can find further links between politics and media that have since driven the development of journalism in democratic societies. For one, rather than deliver *Areopagitica* as a speech, Milton distributed it as a pamphlet, printed in knowing defiance of the regime of prior restraint (where published works had to be pre-vetted before printing) and taunting the censorship regime in the process by couching his critique in a style that, counterintuitively, praises Parliament while defying controls on speech. Contra his own emphasis on rational deliberation, by printing *Areopagitica*, Milton adopted a "confrontational aesthetic"

to his radical advocacy for free expression, intentionally seeking reforms through "vigorous ideological conflict and opposition."[24] Milton also demonstrated where, by using the affordances of the media technologies available to him at the time, he could challenge the status quo by disseminating radical interpretations of society's needs in ways that could reach a wider audience, operating outside the sanctioned and institutionalized systems of information dissemination. Not only that, his use of printing and the subsequent acceleration and expansion of access to printing as a technology, "fed into an expanding appetite among the public to read such material, especially during periods of religious and political turmoil as witnessed across most of the continent from the early part of the seventeenth century."[25]

This joining up of ideas and opportunities, of political thinking and emerging technologies, becomes a throughline not only in the advancement of freedom of expression as a democratic ideal in shaping liberal theory, but in how we must consider contingencies in the developments of journalism as a field and the developments of democracies and democratic societies. Put differently, had Milton not been able to print his tracts challenging institutional norms, taking advantage of a cultural appetite and the technological affordances of that time to inject them into an already heated political environment—a Civil War no less—then they might have represented a different note in our histories.

Liberalism and pluralism: John Stuart Mill

The notions of free expression that Milton outlined and the battles against constraints on the press he engaged with only intensified during the 1700s and early 1800s. Especially in the 1800s, we start to see where the principles of free expression outlined by Milton were being responded to by liberal thinkers who joined an aversion to regulation with a specific interest in protecting individual liberties.[26] Among these writers, John Stuart Mill is perhaps the most notable. Like Milton, Mill argued there should be a diminished role for the state in controlling information that citizens needed. Within a philosophy that saw an informed citizenry as a check on governments, he advocated for knowledge to be published "without restraint."[27] Going beyond Milton, Mill seated his version of free expression in a specific articulation of pluralism that insisted societies should be replete with views and perspectives. In *On Liberty*, he posits this freedom should be rooted in "the 'liberty of the press' as one of the securities against corrupt or tyrannical government"[28] going on to describe the risks of authorities engaging in the "peculiar evil of silencing" those opinions that they disagreed with.

To meet Mill's definition of pluralism, publishers needed to be free to print the widest range of true information possible, regardless of implications, and the state should ensure this is possible. Chantal Mouffe refers to Mill's philosophy as a "comprehensive" pluralism that prioritizes individual liberty and the exchange of a wide variety of perspectives, and specifically this is a vision of liberty that is absent any discussion of what "the good life" should be as a result of these exchanges.[29] For this absence, Mill's version of liberalism is often seen as a presenting a space where ideas can circulate unencumbered in a *laissez-faire* tradition, without state intervention. This overstates the case, as we will return to further, but Mill's philosophy does advocate that opinions, and even poorly formed opinions, should be made public so citizens can engage with them, and through that engagement they can better understand their weaknesses. This eventually became a tenet of libertarianism, both in politics and in civil libertarian advocacies for a free press.[30]

Notably, Mill was not convinced that the sharing of a wider set of viewpoints alone would lead to the best outcomes in society, or that freedom of expression was not without its risks. Rather, he argued that this freedom offers the best chance of the best outcome being reached as it allows for both true and erroneous ideas to be evaluated openly.[31] As Ward writes, Mill advanced a

"liberal theory [that] distinguishes itself, historically and doctrinally, through its enthusiasm for the freedom to speak and to publish. In many cases where press behavior is in question, the liberal theory argues that the freedom to publish trumps other values."[32]

Jill Gordon summarizes Mill's *On Liberty* through the following hypothetical scenario:

As rational consumers of ideas, we choose the "best" among them. In the same way that "bad" products naturally get pushed out of the market because of the lack of demand for them and "good" products thrive because they satisfy a demand, so also "good" ideas prevail in the marketplace and "bad" ones are weeded out in due course.[33]

This freedom to publish is all the more important for those who hold minority viewpoints, and Gordon goes on to argue it is in Mill's defense of airing minority viewpoints where we can later draw connections between how a liberal perspective took hold in Western democracies, how libertarian views of what journalism should be developed, and how these have been advanced online.

To understand this, however, we need to reflect on what it means to ensure liberty for "minority viewpoints" to be heard, as Mill advocated for.[34] We also need to address how Mill goes beyond leaving this up to an unfettered exchange of ideas within an open marketplace of ideas free from intervention, as his version of press

liberty is often reduced to. Rather, Mill argues that the dissemination of minority viewpoints needs to be "encouraged and countenanced"[35] and not left up to the "tyranny of the majority" in order to reach the public.[36] In other words, to Mill it is not enough to build a space for all ideas to compete with one another. For his version of liberalism to persist, Mill argues we need to pay special heed to those "which happen at the particular time and place to be in a minority"[37] and ensure that there is a space for these in our public discourse.

In *On Liberty,* we begin to see a liberal theory taking shape that builds a role for different societal actors, whether political or journalistic, to encourage the airing of minority, heterodox, positions in our democracies. This returns our attention to the two "energies" Hartley identified—democratic politics, and a commercial-capitalist culture. Mill's version of pluralism as one that is based on individual liberty serves both, allowing us to understand the emergence and expansion of a free press and sense of journalism that has continued to this day as something both democratic and commercial. As Ward writes: "A liberal press was a privately owned, self-regulated press that protected individual rights, informed citizens, acted as a watchdog, expressed public opinion to government, and helped oil the economy."[38] Classical liberal theory, and Mill's articulation of this liberty, called for people to be able to interact with a range of different positions and opinions in order to decide for themselves how to act.[39] For this to work, there needed to be a space in democratic societies in which different perspectives could be presented and debated, and the press came to embody such a space. As Sintes outlines,

> what Mill does, especially with *On Liberty,* is to make a decisive contribution towards constructing arguments for a classical defence of freedom of expression and establishing the liberal democratic model of the press and public opinion, a paradigm that would eventually result in the "fourth power" mandate bestowed on the press. It was precisely this model which, besides shaping popular ideas about the nature of journalism, would come to structure and equip the set of professional, deontological and legal norms regulating the relations between the media and the democratic society.[40]

Mill's thinking gave rise to a broader liberal theory of the press that could encourage civic engagement, and his work gives us a further thread that ties the publishing of news, information, and opinion that comes to be known later as "journalism" to the democratic projects being advanced in Europe and the United States in the 1700s. It offers a philosophy that underpins the notion of the "fourth estate" as a colloquialism for the press' power and, specifically, leads to the press being seen as an institution that can ensure minority views are engaged with alongside majority ones.[41] Like Milton, Mill's inconsistencies are worth noting. As Duncan argues, Mill saw civic engagement as something necessitated by the circumstances of the

moment and an aim to integrate members of society into political life. Otherwise, he was "sometimes ambiguous and sometimes hostile" toward heightened levels of engagement.[42] Inconsistencies extend further in the way Mill's philosophies are referred to. As Gordon argues further, describing Mill's liberalism as a marketplace of ideas misconstrues his larger argument for amplifying minority viewpoints. This, Gordon argues, does a disservice to the attention Mill placed on addressing the imbalanced hierarchy of ideas on one level, and downplays his advocacy for encouraging the airing of minority views intentionally on another.[43]

As liberal theoretical ideals of free expression and the need for an exchange of ideas continued to advance in the late eighteenth century, the press became the institution where these ideals were enshrined, whether in absolute terms or with limits (e.g., against incitement and hate speech.) They factored into the development of democratic systems of government as well, where the press was more-or-less embedded in the structures of society, albeit often in an informal way. However, these were not linear developments. Shifts in the locus of power from monarchies toward European parliaments proceeded in fits and starts, often amid civil upheaval and changing nations and empires.[44] To the degree ideas of liberty became represented in the foundation of the United States, there too press freedom and individual liberty were subjected to dynamics of expansion and contraction, as state actors sought to retain power by introducing laws that criminalized criticism against certain authorities.[45]

The establishment of connections between journalism and functioning democracies following these liberal traditions have developed differently in different settings and with different outcomes, mitigated by greater or lesser commercial pressures[46] and confronted by greater and lesser authoritarian tendencies.[47] Even within democracies, the liberal theoretical model of journalism needs to be differentiated from competing communitarian and social responsibility models where deference is encouraged when it serves principles of community cohesion, and the necessity of printing news is evaluated in light of any harm it might induce or any disruptive outcomes it might lead to, such as social unrest.[48]

Nevertheless, as ideals, these liberal philosophies have demonstrated remarkable longevity and continue to shape the rallying cry of the press as an unrestricted voice for liberty in efforts to protect the institution of journalism within democracy. Since they were introduced, they have been employed by those who argued to have journalism without democracy is not only improbable but impossible, leading to a one-to-one relationship between the health of a free press and the health of a democratic society.[49] Not only did liberal arguments for journalism's place in a free society take greater hold in the nineteenth century, these philosophies were embraced by scholars, and their ideals further underscored twentieth-century

scholarship that sought to rectify journalism's role in society as both Western democracies and Western journalism modernized.[50]

This combination of democracy and journalism is perhaps most evident within representative democratic societies, where there are clear divisions between those in formal positions to enact power (e.g., government officials and state actors) and the public, where power is vested but not executed. This harkens back to Milton's advocacy for the people to be informed, as power rests with the populace—"that all the presses might be open; it was the people's birthright and privilege in time of Parliament, it was the breaking forth of light."[51] In these contexts, journalism plays a "facilitative role" meant to prompt and promote citizens' participations in civic and political life and the development of an informed citizenry.[52]

Within these democratic societies, journalists also carry out a dialogic function, through which they provide the means for a debate and exchange between the public and those in power. In the United States, different conceptions for how this dialogue would take place were presented from the early twentieth century, ranging from seeing news as providing knowledge about what was being done by those in power (politically or commercially), to seeing journalists in either more-elite or more-egalitarian positions as mediators between the public and those in power.[53] In Europe, Jürgen Habermas' incorporation of a facilitative role for the media became widespread, reflected in his theory of the public sphere and later work on communicative action.[54] This has shaped decades of scholarship trying to understand journalism as situated between the powerful and the public.[55] It is this theoretical thread that I will now pull on, in order to then consider where we might now revisit some of these prevailing ideas.

Deliberative democratic theory: Habermas' public sphere

We can carry two of liberal theory's premises forward into our discussion of deliberative democracy: First, that journalism (insofar as we associate that term with arguments for freedom of publishing from Mill and Milton) should be minimally restricted, if at all, in its effort to disseminate information freely; Second, that journalism can safeguard democracies by providing a range of information to those who are assembled under liberal, democratic societies. To do so, we need to also examine the nature of the democracies themselves to understand how journalism was envisaged within them. Turning to the work of Jürgen Habermas, we can expand from liberal theoretical philosophies toward a prioritization of rational

deliberation within the public sphere as a space where consensus and an understanding of the common good can be developed.[56]

The concept of the public sphere Habermas outlines is intended, in the broadest terms, to describe the deliberative power of private individuals who come together to discuss matters of public concern. To Habermas, the concept of the public sphere is most salient as an idea, and as something that is not rooted in an institution or even a specific setting. Rather, he argues we find a public sphere in the nature of debate that emerges whenever members of the public are able to "confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest."[57] Like Mill, Habermas envisioned a principle of freedom of expression within this sphere, and insofar as he saw the formation of a public occurring in spaces that extended beyond the formal institutions of power and deliberation (the state and parliament, primarily) he saw the public sphere as a necessary space where the strength of different ideas could be assessed.[58] Our modern conception of public opinion extends from Habermas' conception of a public that is constituted by discussion, where in asking individuals their views on matters of societal concern we can engage in the dialogic formation of a public (to be returned to below). However, his influence has been even more substantive in the way it reflects a particular model of journalism that also developed in modern democracies.

Initially presented as a socio-historical account of the structural transformation of the public sphere in the eighteenth century, Habermas outlines the rise and fall of a domain of public life where, in coffee houses and salons and in small literary journals, private individuals could deliberate about issues of public concern. He saw the exchange of competing ideas in these spaces as a fundamental condition for rational debate. Also, like Mill, he saw this debate as a way to elevate discussions of public concerns from individual concerns, including the private (also economic) interests of individuals or the powerful interests of the state. For these reasons, the public sphere Habermas describes is defined by its disconnection from the actual power of governments, the economic power of business interests, and the personal priorities of interpersonal arrangements.

Chantal Mouffe describes Habermas' outline of the public sphere as "the most theoretically sophisticated"[59] version of this concept, though even in its sophistication it nevertheless has its limits (including those outlined by Mouffe that we will shortly return to). Still, Habermas' ideas have resonated in large part because they offer an ideal to pursue and—from the perspectives of its supporters—the framework for an ordered society. They have also resonated with the ways in which news media and journalists wanted to position themselves in society as they try to

reconcile their sense of social responsibility with necessary commercial priorities, seeking a way to balance these in order to forestall government intervention.[60] For our purposes, we can engage with how Habermas saw an opportunity for public deliberation taking place in mediated spaces, arguing that mass media were the modern-day instruments of the deliberation and information exchange that define the public sphere.[61] As small spaces of public deliberation gave rise to larger and more complicated societies, and as mass media increasingly became the spaces where public deliberation would take place, Habermas' public sphere theory came to underpin a normative and democratically informed role for journalism in democratic societies.[62] As Baker argues, this was a response to a specific need that emerged in more "complex democracies"—which is to say, modern democracies—where time and experience have led people (and journalists, in particular) to grow wary of state and private intervention, and where the advocacy for unfettered and disinterested deliberation that could be facilitated by a free press has grown.[63]

As Nielsen notes specifically, and as many others have demonstrated generally, the public sphere concept has fueled a conception of deliberative democracy that prioritized rational debate and consensus within societies. In these contexts, journalism serves as the engine for democratic deliberation. But it is also a concept that has garnered significant critique, including for being asserted boldly, despite little empirical reinforcement.[64] More to the point, the fact that this concept has persisted so widely has been something of a curiosity to scholars, as Habermas' public sphere seems to persist *despite* and not because of countless examples of its performance. As Douglas Kellner writes, "while it is salutary to construct models of a good society that could help to realize agreed upon democratic and egalitarian values, it is a mistake to overly idealize and universalize any specific public sphere as in Habermas's account."[65]

With these considerations in mind, to speak of Habermas' public sphere requires considering how his work was later interpreted to apply beyond its eighteenth-century setting. In particular, public sphere theory has been implicated in the way principles of rational deliberation that Habermas emphasized were translated into principles of journalistic balance that could facilitate a measured, deliberative, discussion of public concerns. To do so, however, we need to consider the critique of those principles for failing to serve the very public Habermas conceived of, critiques that are embodied in movements like those for "public journalism" and its reform agenda.[66]

To engage further with the concerns that scholars have raised about his arguments for a particular understanding of the public sphere, we can begin by looking to Habermas' prioritization of deliberation in the pursuit of a larger public good. This became a guiding principle for later applications of his theory within

journalistic practices, and within modern democracies it reinforces a focus on providing multiple perspectives within any news account.[67] Whether defined as impartiality or objectivity, narrowly or in the broadest sense, Habermas describes establishing space in society for matters of public interest to be debated rationally with an end-goal of consensus, one which might have begun in salons and coffeehouses but eventually needed to be represented in a different form of deliberative institution—the press.[68] Scholars have further situated this deliberation within the spaces of news media by building on Habermas' contribution, and journalists have largely adopted this deliberative role as their own, taking it on as their unique responsibility as arbiters of both what is rational and what is in the public's interest.[69] For this to work, however, the public sphere Habermas outlines needs to be disentangled from conceptions of the public *sphere* as a public *space*. He moves, instead, toward describing a mediated public sphere built around the circulation of ideas, eventually seeing this circulation taking place through media. In executing this maneuver, Habermas diverges from the metaphor of the Greek agora offered by Hannah Arendt,[70] as Seyla Benhabib describes to Karin Wahl-Jorgensen,

> Habermas disembodies the public sphere from the Greek model by saying that the public evolves into the reading public with the advent of Enlightenment and modernity. This is more a virtual community of authors, readers and writers, and one does not need to be present to one another physically. But this reading public is at the same time also the embodiment of critical public opinion.[71]

By disconnecting the concept of a public from one of people coming together in physical spaces to one that coalesces through the mediated exchange of ideas, Habermas' ideas have been brought more fully into journalism scholarship for how they prioritize principles of freedom, rationality, and deliberation within media that are able to facilitate a dispassionate, rational democratic debate. This is what Blau describes as communicative rationality,[72] which Honneth connects to an emphasis on rationality drawn from Enlightenment priorities of "overcoming dogmatic traditions by means of rational insights."[73] For Habermas, according to Benhabib, rationality should be understood as reason-giving through practices of answering, responding, and interrogating. These same practices are embedded within journalistic routines, and by engaging in these practices, journalists and news media become an extension of the public sphere when they speak truth to power on the behalf of the public, engaging in the deliberation of those matters that rise to the level of public concern.

I am summarizing these discussions in the interests of establishing key threads. In doing so, and in general terms, we can think of the public sphere that Habermas

outlined as (a) an attempt to describe an ordered society in which, (b) individuals set aside their personal interests and quiet their own personal inclinations in order to, (c) pursue the greater good for the greater public. From those three points, a Habermasian model of journalism—if we were to try and speak of one—would likely describe the news as a dispassionate mediator of public concerns, and it is this ideal that became popular in models of journalism built on objectivity and balance. As Schudson has argued, and as Schudson and Anderson expanded on, in the United States in particular this emphasis on rationality describes a version of journalism being promulgated by the profession itself, one that emphasized holding power to account and doing so with the greater good being central to journalism practice.[74] To critics, the same emphasis has stretched the application of Habermas' work beyond its applicability,[75] allowing a dispassionate, objective journalism to became a touchstone even when priorities of rationality and dispassionate concern seem arbitrary or outdated.[76]

While Habermas advocated for a pluralist society, he specifically envisioned one that was devoted toward the pursuit of a rational consensus and, as we will see below, this became the foundation for critiques of his deliberative model, identified as a shortcoming in his understanding of what a pluralist democratic society requires. What a rational, deliberative, model of journalism also struggles to account for, as I will expand upon in the next section, is what is lost when rationality and consensus are prioritized over other forms of deliberation.

Agonistic pluralism: Chantal Mouffe's response to Habermas

Soon after Habermas' ideas were published, and even more so after they were translated to English, scholars began unpacking the implications of such a holistic theory of society built on rationality and consensus, both for who it left out and for how it stifled rather than engendered productive deliberation.[77] Critiques responding to Habermas' ideas gained traction in part because they homed in on counterarguments that were glaring in their absence. Habermas fell foul, according to critics, of conflating ideal types and idealized imaginations of society that in the time he was writing about—and definitely since—fail to account for the heterogeneity of perspectives within democracies. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Zizi Papacharissi argue separately that prioritizing dispassionate rational deliberation ignores the role of emotion and affect (as the intensity and context in which emotion is expressed) in public life.[78] Myra Marx Ferree and colleagues argue

disagreement (rather than consensus) should be seen as productive components of democratic societies, particularly within more radical theories that seek to rectify power imbalances that were inbuilt in many early, deliberative democratic models.[79] Nancy Fraser, Michael Warner, and Robert Asen—whose work I return to in Chapter 7—have argued that missing from Habermas' formulations is a consideration of counterpublics as groups within societies that can be defined by their distance from the dominant public Habermas defines.[80] Finally, critical scholars emphasize how a priority on rational deliberation has served as a mechanism for dismissing those who held alternative understandings of politics, disregarding the voice of the structurally marginalized (often along lines of gender, ethnicity, class, religion, and sexuality) when they express perspectives that make the personal political.[81] More recently, scholars have argued Habermas' thesis is incompatible with modern politics, especially as populist ideologies predicated on joining up private and public interests in the pursuit of particular political outcomes. They argue modern politics have outgrown a rational-deliberative model that would exclude these voices, as it overlooks their dominance in politics and public life.[82]

Among Habermas' most noted foils, Chantal Mouffe positions her criticism within a theory of agonism and an agonistic pluralist model for democracies.[83] Mouffe brings our attention back to the radical thinking of liberal and libertarian thought that started us on this discussion of journalism's place in society, both for what these ideas offer us and for their shortcomings. Mouffe's agonistic model of democracy establishes a place for persistent disagreement and dismisses an insistence on rationality; agonistic pluralism values productive, impassioned disagreement instead, seeing this as central to the performance of politics in democratic societies. She elevates disagreement as a consistent characteristic of human coexistence, and only encourages limited "conflictual consensus" in pragmatic circumstances.[84] She drives this point home by asking:

> What is a "good society"? Is it a society pacified and harmonious where basic disagreements have been overcome and where an overlapping consensus has been established about a single interpretation of common values? Or is it a society with a vibrant public sphere where many conflicting views can be expressed and where there is the possibility to choose among legitimate alternative projects?[85]

There are two ways of reading these queries. One, that rational deliberation is a stricture on true deliberation, and this is certainly something that is reflected in Mouffe's arguments. The second is that we need to recognize that conflict is endemic to our modern societies. However, by situating disagreement within a pursuit of a "good society," Mouffe makes clear that not all conflicts can be seen

as equal. In outlining a theory of agonistic pluralism, Mouffe consistently favors vibrancy, and conflicting views, so long as legitimate choice is facilitated.

In the conception of a good society she proposes, and the model of democracy she offers, Mouffe explicitly argues that certain antagonisms cannot be reconciled and should not be reconciled, especially within "conflicts for which there are no rational solution."[86] By this she means that conflicts which deny the right of the other to engage—which suggest irreducible fractures[87]—or to express their viewpoint, should not be seen as part of a pluralist, democratic, society. Mouffe describes this in terms of a political adversary, in the following formulation of agonism:

> The central category of democratic politics is the category of the "adversary", the opponent with whom we share a common allegiance to the democratic principles of "liberty and equality for all" while disagreeing about their interpretation. Adversaries fight against each other because they want their interpretation to become hegemonic, but they do not put into question the right of their opponents to fight for the victory of their position. This confrontation between adversaries is what constitutes the "agonistic struggle" that is the very condition of a vibrant democracy.[88]

This balance of agreeing on principles and disagreeing on interpretation becomes a key criterion for participating in Mouffe's agonistic democracy, one which we can already foresee certain populist political and news media voices failing to meet when they dismiss the suitability of another's right to speak or when they subjugate their adversary's arguments *a priori* rather than engage in forms of political debate. For example, political arguments that suggest the "other" is incompatible within a given society based on their ethnicity, gender, or sexuality cannot be accepted or even entertained—they violate a shared acknowledgement of liberty and equality for all. Particularly virulent nativist forms of polarized anti-immigrant politics and the extreme speech behind these would also fail Mouffe's test, including those that shape political movements we are witnessing in the United States, UK, and Europe and the news media that amplify these narratives of inhumanity. For Mouffe, agonism requires an overall balance, one that both avoids an overemphasis on individualism (lest it dissuade members of society from finding a pursuit of democratic objectives), while nevertheless allowing for multiple perspectives that reflect these individual passions. As she argues, contra Habermas,

> the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions or to relegate them to the private sphere in order to establish a rational consensus in the public sphere, it is to "tame" those passions, so to speak, by creating collective forms of identification around democratic objectives with the aim of mobilizing them toward democratic designs.[89]

Implicitly, Mouffe is drawing a distinction here between agonism as productive difference and antagonism as destructive animosity, one that becomes all the more important if we are to advocate for a form of pluralism that functions within contemporary democracies[90] and within the journalistic field as it is currently constituted.[91] This is not an all-out pluralist encouragement of all ideas. Rather, Mouffe suggests shaking up stagnant ways of thinking about democracy that imagine "no alternatives." She outlines in her thesis that democracies should bring alternative possibilities into focus, so long as each of these is committed to similar overarching, democratic ambitions:

> The difference is that you respect the right of the opponent to defend his or her point of view. It is an agonistic struggle among different understandings of citizenship. It is not the Jacobin model in which you want to destroy the other in order to establish your point of view and then not allow the other the possibility of coming back democratically.[92]

For our purposes, Mouffe's agonistic pluralism provides a framework for understanding how strongly held viewpoints are necessary components for developing ideologies and for advancing both political and publicly interested agendas within democratic societies. This is a core concern of journalism as well, and Mouffe's formulation of agonism begins to direct our focus back toward how news can facilitate the version of society we live in by presenting and engaging in these disagreements. In doing so, the above qualification Mouffe offers is central to this opportunity: Where disagreement is welcomed, it is welcome so long as passionately held viewpoints do not subjugate others' abilities to hold and express their own perspectives within democracies. This places some parameters on the extent to which we encourage dispute within journalism and its place in our societies.[93]

Making agonism productive

Mouffe's agonism is often summarized as something akin to agreeing to disagree.[94] This is an oversimplification, but it gives us points to address. To do so, however, we need to situate this philosophy within the context of populism and the backlash to cosmopolitanism that populism reflects. This is a challenge Mouffe remarks on across her scholarship, and it is one that has only been made more difficult to rectify in the context of the animosity that we currently see around us. In simple terms, where we see politics not as an engagement with difference but as a battle between polarized, calcified political positions—as a contest not between ourselves and our opponents, but between ourselves and our enemies who must be

defeated—we are likely to lose faith in ideals of productive disagreement. Mouffe's frameworks account for the same societal fragmentation and disagreement that have become commonplace, if not endemic, in Western societies.[95] In order to do so, she departs explicitly from Mill's version of comprehensive pluralism based on individual liberty, to instead offer a critical distinction between those working for pluralist ideals and those opposing such a pluralist democracy:

> If we take pluralism to be this recognition of individual liberty, the kind of society in which we are not going to try to impose a single conception of the good life on everybody but in which we are going to allow for conflict about what the good life is, then this is incompatible with "total plurality." I could make the same kind of argument here that I made before with the question of consensus: the condition of the possibility for this kind of pluralism is at the same time the condition of the impossibility for a total pluralism. Total pluralism would mean that we are going to allow people who are against pluralism to have an equal say. In that case, of course, you are not going to be able to have a pluralist society.[96]

As a prelude to what is to follow, Mouffe's articulation of agonism describes a productive sense of antagonism, one that is inherent to all societies. Within pluralist democratic societies, it offers a framework for considering the constructive role of disagreement. Within the journalistic field, a similar dynamic could be encouraged. In previous work, I have outlined this by drawing a line between an antagonistic *voice* (which is encouraged, so long as it serves journalistic ambitions and does not deceive the public) and an antagonistic *nature* (which would be discouraged, as it leaves out the opportunity for productive disagreement that nevertheless moves society forward). Within the framework of agonism, antagonism can be productive in society and in journalism so long as there is also a foundational agreement on some shared goal. Journalistic agonism would allow us to differentiate between those who approach journalism through alternative means, adopting a journalistic voice that is critical but ultimately working toward shared journalistic ambitions—an *antagonistic voice* espoused by *agonistic journalists*. This is in contrast to anti-journalistic antagonism, adopted by actors who adopt the guise of journalism while, in practice, undermining a conception of society within which journalism has a place, often by those whose ambitions are political, deceptive, and geared towards taking down journalism as a societal institution.[97] In order to better understand how a critical, agonism can be made productive within the journalistic field, it is worth drawing these distinctions further to highlight the insufficiency of rationality in the pursuit of democracy.[98]

Mouffe's agonistic model of democracy responds explicitly to Habermas' vision of a deliberative democratic society built on consensus, and Habermas' and

John Rawls' emphasis on rationality within democracy. Mouffe pushes back against Habermas in particular for his advocacy of a consensus-based rationality as the guiding light of democracy. She argues Habermas fails to account for the role of affect and political passion in democracy by subjugating this to an un-achievable standard of consensus; this was also highlighted by Wahl-Jorgensen and Papacharissi, as previously noted.[99] Her critique goes further to stipulate that advocating a rational, deliberative model of democratic debate constrains debate to the detriment of those who are not already in power. In so many words, it places limits on who can engage, and constrains how they can engage. "Consensus in a liberal-democratic society is—and will always be—the expression of a he-gemony and the crystallization of power relationships,"[100] Mouffe writes, adding that this privileges those who have already amassed significant political capital. In the domain of politics, it constrains debate by limiting the parameters of the possible. Applied to journalism, it sets a normative constraint on how journalism can be enacted by prescribing a distant, objective understanding of journalistic practice.[101] As other critics of Habermas have also demonstrated, consensus only serves to diminish the power of subaltern voices whose perspectives give shape to our democracies, where even if their voices fail to secure power, they can neverthe-less advance debate by being heard.[102] Going back to Mill, if we are to advocate for a liberal society where the free exchange of ideas is to be fostered, this needs to be a society that insists upon encouraging (and countenancing) those ideas held by the minority. Consensus would mute these. Agonism insists upon their inclusion, within reason.

For Mouffe, the substantive flaws in the arguments presented by Habermas (and John Rawls, and Carl Schmitt whose work she also addresses) are not so much the way their models idealize a deliberative society—though, that is cer-tainly a point of critique. It is that they ignore counterarguments they seem to see as inconvenient. For Mouffe, Habermas' deliberative democratic model reinforces an already-artificial separation of personal and public interests that diminishes how public interests are understood individually. Habermas also fails to see how consensus overlooks where the choice not to agree—agreeing to disagree—allows opponents to better know their own standpoint within a democratic society. Frustration at the outcome of a debate is productive, as is seeing a political aim you disagree with come into force. In both cases, seeing your own position struggle to gain acceptance is all the more likely to reinforce your commitment to pursuing a different outcome. By elevating consensus and rational deliberation, Mouffe argues Habermas is not only not presenting a model of society that is not realistic, it is not even something societies should wish to achieve (this goes for liberal, pluralist democracies in particular). Put differently, we are each better able to know what

positions we hold, and how strongly we hold them, if we can see them in contrast and in conflict with other ideas. This identity via contrast drives us in the pursuit of our own sense of what society, and a good society, should be.

If we accept this model for democracy, then task becomes finding a way to engage with these distinctions productively and in a pluralist manner. For our interests, it also insists upon finding a way to envision such a model of society that accounts for all the fissures and fractures that have emerged in society, especially those that have been amplified in recent years. This might not be straightforward, but there are ways to do so and Mouffe's work provides guidance. When situating agonism in the context of rising populism, for example, she has argued that we need to distinguish between situations where political passions are evident in "politics" and where they emerge within "the political," where the former represents the practices and organizations that give order to society, and the latter—the political—describes inherent tensions that affect the process of organizing society. Politics aim toward "domesticating hostility," she writes, but it cannot (and should not, except in moments of temporary compromise) eliminate this hostility entirely.[103]

Toward an agonistic journalistic field

To direct this discussion back toward journalism, Mouffe's critique of Habermas' insistence on rationality and the prioritization of consensus to determine the boundaries of political debate offer us the greatest purchase when trying to understand the challenges facing the contemporary journalistic field. To take a step back, while her work is centered in the domain of democratic theory, connections between a changed journalistic field and Mouffe's vision of democracy have been brought about in interviews and dialogues with Mouffe that bridged political and journalism scholarship.[104] Her work has also been invoked in work that has considered the sort of counter-hegemonic media that have emerged at journalism's periphery, including in my own work, where in making sense of journalism a digital age Mouffe's sense of the distinction between an agonist and antagonist helps to account for different actors' abilities to disrupt powerful institutions within society.[105]

For journalism studies, Mouffe's work provides us a framework for revisiting the emphasis that has been placed on journalistic balance and impartiality derived from Habermas' model, instead providing a path toward considering the productive disagreements that are inherent to society. Mouffe describes this as inherent—"the very condition for the constitution of an 'us' is the demarcation of 'them'"[106]— and

we can extend this sense of difference to include disagreements between a wider array of media actors, whether at journalism's core or its periphery, when they differ in their interpretations of what journalism is and what it should be. An agonistic journalism embraces the *impossibility* of organizing a society without division, and because the idea of coming together in some form of public in fact depends on a certain level of difference-making, it elevates the role of dissensus within debate. Mouffe provides a framework for imagining both society and journalism's place in it through an agonistic lens, seeing both as spaces where passionate disagreement can be utilized in the pursuit of more inclusive democratic outcomes. More concretely, it offers us a way to think about how even unkind impolitic disagreement can advance democratic concerns. These have become commonplace within peripheral journalistic spaces, where disagreement is a feature, not an outlier.

By elevating the types of *productive* dissensus found in digital media spaces, Mouffe's agonism helps us see where digital, peripheral journalism has shown an ability to elevate minority viewpoints—to "countenance" and "encourage" them, to use Mill's terminology. While Mouffe disagrees with Mill's vision of pluralist democracy, her emphasis on inclusion of an agonistic voices aligns with his encouragement of a more diverse array of perspectives and making space for those that might otherwise be pushed aside. For journalism, Mouffe encourages the inclusion of what we might describe as a "critical journalistic friend" who is invested in similar long-term outcomes that other journalists embrace, but simply has a more hard-fought way of getting there. Peripheral actors, by their nature, engage in journalism not by couching their articulation of difference in niceties, but by being direct about where they stand and what they think needs to change about both society and journalism.[107] This goes not only for how these journalistic actors describe their position in society—demonstrated in curt, acerbic, language where they find fault with those in power—but also in the ways they rarely hold back in critiquing other powerful journalists they see as failing to act journalistically; they do so through a pointed metajournalistic discourse, explored further in chapters 5 and 6.

In developing a model for agonism in society, deliberation and the god-value of rationality are seen as a constraint that works against those who see a need for a changed course and go on to advocate for it—whether in journalism, or in politics. This framework can be utilized within our thinking about journalism, specifically, when we consider the way alternative and contrarian news media embrace agonism as a core feature of their content, presenting different interpretations of what journalism can be through the news they produce and the types of journalism they do. Following Mouffe, this remains productive so long as these alternative news media engage these differences within a shared understanding of what journalism

is "for." As Bourdieu argues, and as I will expand on in the next chapter, "even the most irreducible adversaries have in common that they accept a certain number of presuppositions that are constitutive of the very functioning of the field. In order to fight one another, people have to agree on the areas of disagreement."[108] Within the framework of an agonistic field, such agreement remains necessary.

We can see this play out when alternative, peripheral journalistic actors openly engage in conflicts with the traditional field, and an agonistic framework allows us to consider how traditional journalistic actors would in fact benefit from welcoming more voices to the field of journalism, including agonistic voices who strengthen the field through the criticisms they offer. As Carpentier and Cammaerts write for *Journalism Studies*, contextualizing an interview they had with Mouffe:

> To take this one step beyond, it could be argued that the rescue of traditional journalism lies precisely in its acceptance of its pluriform—even contradictory—character, where autocratic gate-keeping is combined with democratic gate-opening, and where a more modest positioning towards its truth-speaking is combined with more courageous claims to truth when necessary.[109]

Put differently, were journalism to build space for agonism, and embrace the same productive disagreements Mouffe sees as necessary for democracy, the whole field could benefit. However, to consider how journalism would develop as an agonistic field, we should return briefly to how liberal theory shaped the freedoms journalism has enjoyed, how these have been drawn on to establish its societal space, and how mainstream news media developed as intermediaries for a public deliberation about public ideas. Habermas described this in terms of mass media performing this deliberative function, but his work also described media as sober and impartial places for deliberation (he primarily spoke of traditional news media in these contexts as a mediated evolution of the coffeehouse; though more recent work has engaged with the internet, this is beyond the scope of this chapter). In one of many descriptions on this dynamic, he said:

> Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion-that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions-about matters of general interest. In a large public body this kind of communication requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Today newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere.[110]

From Mouffe's perspective, this version of media's contributions to democracy is flawed. It ignores how media occupy a largely hegemonic position, one that has allowed mass media to establish the terms of debate and organize for themselves

the boundaries of consensus, limiting democratic engagement in the process. In Mouffe's *agonistic pluralism*, in contrast, she offers a closer approximation to the open deliberation we see now, within a rough-and-tumble digital media environment where peripheral journalistic actors shout their ideas, push back against each other in sharp retorts, and engage not dispassionately but agonistically in order to articulate an idea of how things should be in society. Were there to be more support and fostering of this sharp-edged, dissensus-driven debate both in society and in our media, then both journalism and democracies would benefit. Toward that end, Mouffe sees the role of media in shaping public debate far differently than Habermas does, arguing against their hegemonic power as gatekeeping intermediaries, at least in part, and recognizing their limits. She argues: "The media are basically the mirror of society. If an agonistic debate was available, they would reflect it. There is no doubt that many media outlets are controlled by neo-liberal forces, and this is a problem. However, they are far from being all-powerful."[111]

To be certain, Mouffe's work is in service of a different agenda than ours in some ways and her description of news media as a mirror of society would be met by critique from many journalism scholars. But they align in others. They provide a way to tie together the normative perspectives advanced by scholars who argued you cannot have democracy without journalism (and vice versa), going on to show that this equation needs to be more nuanced. Mouffe then gives us a way to do so, by suggesting you cannot have an agonistic democracy without an agonistic journalism. She also encourages scholars to rethink the elevation of a particular style of dispassionate journalistic discourse and a particular prioritization of something more deliberative in public debate by countenancing a type of journalism that is deeply invested and even aggressively agonistic in shaping modern societies through a passionate debate that takes place within the spaces of news. Indeed, the benefit of thinking about journalism through an agonistic lens is that it allows us to see a shared end-goal—functioning democratic societies—by building within them a space for different understandings of what makes them function.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the pursuit of the two "energies" of journalism's modernizing discourse—democracy, and commercial capitalism—have shaped specific understandings of what journalism should do within democratic societies. These priorities of democracy and capitalism have been fairly constant in journalism's history, underpinning its claims of a special status as a democratic institution that is essential for navigating the cacophony of voices competing to shape our modern

societies. Scholars have gone so far as to argue that were journalism not already an institution, it would nevertheless be created in a fashion similar to what we already have—an institution that combines democratic ideals and commercial incentives to aid citizens in navigating the flood of information that define our busy worlds.[112]

Taking its presence in modern society as inevitable is not the same as saying that the ways in which journalism has been established are fully agreed to, nor does it suggest that the histories and philosophies that have informed how we understand journalism have been entirely consistent across different media systems and in different societies. For one, understandings of both journalism and society have a historical predisposition toward a consolidated field of journalism that served a (largely) consolidated public, even when such a picture of unity runs against prevailing evidence.[113] Political and class divisions that are more or less apparent in different democracies have also shaped different understandings of what journalism should do, and differences between journalists adopting either a more egalitarian or a more elite voice have shaped how they do what they do.

Different perspectives on how journalism serves to inform democratic societies and how news can be used by people to orient themselves within their social worlds are certainly not without their merits. In the best cases, these were based on how journalists demonstrated their independence and their ability to build a profession that was regarded for its democratic contributions as an independent voice in democracies.[114] But even at its zenith, such a positive assessment of journalism's contributions to democracy has been offset by those who saw a growing closeness between journalists and politicians as crimping journalism's independence.[115] Further accusations that newspapers catered to specific, elite, segments of society over others led to a sense of frustration and disillusionment during the mass media era, well before the internet gave rise to more avenues for expressing this frustration. In the UK, the mile (or so) between Downing Street and the traditional home of newspapers on Fleet Street became an on-the-nose analogy for the closeness between publishers, editors, and politicians that belied normative claims of being a "watchdog" toward those in power.[116] In the United States, as A.J. Bauer and Anthony Nadler have shown, even at their reputational highpoints newspapers were advocating and nearly orchestrating divisions in societies. Broadcasters—particularly on radio—found commercial success by offering conservative news and commentary that reinforced existing political divisions.[117] Histories of alternative media throughout the twentieth-century point to perceptions of mainstream news as a handmaiden of political elites, rather than a voice for the people, fueling the rise of a political, independent, alternative news media ecosystem in the twentieth century, where an alternative narrative about journalism could be found within independent newspapers and magazines.[118] Online, and in a digital age, the

same critiques are apparent in an outspoken narrative of journalism and society found within peripheral news media that seek to push back against commercial, political, and entrenched structural and societal power.[119]

These trends have led to competing and sometimes contradictory elements of more liberal and more illiberal traditions in the news we see in front of us nowadays, contradictions that are further reflected (if not entirely resolved) in an agonistic model of democratic society that would suggest a need for a different kind of journalism. The political theory engaged with in this chapter was drawn upon for how it shaped the establishment of journalism as a modern institution in our societies with these liberties of expression and scrutiny in mind. This developed first within a liberal theoretical model that encouraged a wide range of perspectives, later expanded within a deliberative democratic model that prioritized rational deliberation of matters of public concern with an optimal end-goal of consensus. However, through Chantal Mouffe's agonistic model of democracy, we are able to better approximate the distances between ideological and political positions that have become a feature of contemporary societies, and how these have led to audiences seeking media that reinforce their political beliefs and media catering to the same, seeing difference as opportunity. This has led to a dynamic where alternative media are sought out by users who engage in what Peeters and Maeseele describe as "affective sense-making" to navigate feelings of (mis)representation and (dis)connection felt by those users, and reinforced by these media.[120]

Situating this knowing disconnect from society within Mouffe's approach to agonism and an understanding of journalism as a field from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, developed more fully in the next chapter, a theoretical framework can be established for further discussion in the chapters ahead. These show where the promise and pitfalls of ideals of consensus and rationality toward an overarching common, public, good run head-first into the dissensus and affective creation of counterpublics in the fractured news environment we regularly encounter.

Notes

1 Dimock and Wike 2020.
2 Nadeem 2023.
3 Ipsos 2024.
4 Young 2024.
5 Gade 2011.
6 Steel 2012, 29.
7 Conboy 2005, 4.
8 Nerone 2013.

 9 Raymond 2005, 75.
10 Conboy 2004, 16–17; 23.
11 Ibid., 28.
12 Conboy 2004, 23.
13 Ibid., 9.
14 Hartley 1999, 26.
15 Steel 2012, 29.
16 Dabhoiwala 2022.
17 Gatti 2012.
18 Milton 1644.
19 Wolfe 1936, 254.
20 Ibid., 260.
21 Steel 2012, 29.
22 Milton 1644, 5.
23 Schudson and Anderson 2009.
24 Loewenstein 1988, 77.
25 Conboy 2023, 21.
26 Ward 2014.
27 Mill 1947, 37.
28 Ibid., 15.
29 Mouffe 2009, 23.
30 Capaldi 1983.
31 Mill 1947.
32 Ward 2014, 3.
33 Gordon 1997, 236.
34 Mill 1947, 47.
35 Ibid., 47.
36 Ibid., 4.
37 Ibid., 47.
38 Ward 2014, 7.
39 Christians 2007.
40 Sintes 2016, 192.
41 The phrase is often attributed to eighteenth-century British parliamentarian Edmund Burke, according to a history written by Thomas Carlyle; Carlyle 1891.
42 Duncan 1969, 67.
43 Gordon 1997.
44 Rea 1961.
45 Berns 1970.
46 Hallin and Mancini 2004.
47 George 2019.
48 Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956; Hanitzsch 2018.
49 Carey 2016; Lerner 2021.
50 Christians et al. 2009, 67–68.
51 Milton 1644, 37.
52 Christians et al. 2009.

53 Champlin and Knoedler 2006; Kleis Nielsen 2017.
54 Habermas 1989; Habermas 1984.
55 Christians et al. 2009; McIntosh White 2012.
56 Habermas 1989.
57 Habermas 1974, 49.
58 Baum 2001, 501.
59 Mouffe 1999, 746.
60 Press 1947.
61 Habermas 1974.
62 Benson 2009.
63 Baker 2001, 187.
64 Nielsen 2017, 1254.
65 Kellner 2000, 267.
66 Ahva 2011.
67 Raeijmaekers and Maeseele 2017.
68 Benson 2009.
69 Glasser 1995.
70 Canovan 1985.
71 Wahl-Jorgensen 2008, 963.
72 Blau 2022.
73 Honneth 1987, 692.
74 Schudson 2001; Schudson and Anderson 2009.
75 Fraser 1990; Warner 2002a.
76 Overholser 2004.
77 Calhoun 1992.
78 Papacharissi 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019.
79 Ferree et al. 2002; Mouffe 2009.
80 Asen 2000; Fraser 1990; Michael Warner 2002.
81 Asen 2000; Fraser 1990; Furlanetto and Mehring 2020.
82 Korstenbroek 2022.
83 Mouffe 2013; Mouffe 2000.
84 Mouffe 2013, 3.
85 Mouffe 2004, 42.
86 Mouffe 2013, 130.
87 Mouffe 2019, 61.
88 Mouffe 2016, n.p.
89 Ibid.
90 Mouffe 2000.
91 Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006.
92 Worsham and Olson 1999, 180.
93 Mouffe 2013.
94 CITSEE 2013.
95 Carpentier 2018.
96 Worsham and Olson 1999, 174.
97 Eldridge 2019.

 98 Mouffe 2013, 55.
 99 Papacharissi 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019.
100 Mouffe 2000, 49.
101 Carlson 2017, 14.
102 Weisser 2008.
103 Mouffe 1999, 754.
104 Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006.
105 Eldridge 2019.
106 Mouffe 2013, 6.
107 Eldridge 2019, 15.
108 Bourdieu 2005, 36.
109 Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006, 969.
110 Habermas 1974, 49.
111 Mouffe 2013, 143.
112 Schudson 2002, 2.
113 Bourdieu 2005, 42.
114 Hallin 1992.
115 Brants and van Kempen 2002.
116 Petley 2004.
117 Bauer and Nadler 2020, 2.
118 Hamilton and Atton 2001.
119 Eldridge 2018.
120 Peeters and Maeseele 2024.

Agonistic journalism: Making sense of a fractured field

In 2018 I interviewed the journalist Ashley Feinberg about her approach to journalism, exploring why she did what she did in her reporting. At the time, Feinberg was a journalist at *HuffPost*. Her reporting focused on politics and internet culture, developing a journalistic style that would "mix a lot between the two." She had previously worked for *WIRED, Slate,* and various Gawker Media sites, including *Gizmodo* and *Gawker*, where she demonstrated a special knack for uncovering politicians' would-be anonymous social media accounts, and going down amusing rabbit holes, such as investigating whether Donald Trump's hair was in fact a weave.[1]

In her work, Feinberg established a reputation for challenging politicians and powerful officials, but also for confronting traditional journalists who she called out in her reporting and on Twitter when they were reporting in ways that seemed to be geared more toward maintaining access than to challenging power. She recognized that this did not make her many friends among these journalists, but accepted this as a worthwhile trade-off: "I think once you have sort of resigned yourself to the fact that you will never have the access to certain people or certain places, then you can be a lot more honest in what you are doing."

Reinforcing this perspective for Feinberg was the way journalists like her were routinely dismissed as less-than journalists. Journalists who cut their teeth working online have been derided for adopting a style that was reflective of the digital culture they had grown up in, for using social media in their reporting, and for investigating what others saw as obscure online topics. Feinberg, however,

saw her approach to journalism as emblematic of a changing media environment that tolerated and even encouraged using sarcasm and humor in reporting. Where some saw unserious novelty, Feinberg saw a public service in reporting that political leaders who talked about privacy risks online—who emphasized the value they placed on their *own* privacy—were using "anonymous" social media accounts that could be easily found.[2] This was not reporting meant to embarrass these officials. Rather, Feinberg wanted to show that "they don't necessarily know much more [about the internet] than we do." She could hold them to account, and when targeting those who were involved in regulating the very internet technologies they struggled to make sense of themselves, this type of reporting served an important public interest.

However, the same sort of scrutiny Feinberg placed on politicians was also directed toward other journalists, and she pulled no punches. She routinely critiqued reporters in mainstream media through reporting that reflected on their adoption of dominant political narratives. This was part of a give-and-take and a media critical voice she had adopted in her work since Trump's 2016 election, one that acknowledged that, "the lines between things are not clear, the norms we are used to have sort of shifted." While she admitted that this criticism sometimes got out of hand, Feinberg saw a role for herself and other journalists who used their journalistic voices to point out the ways other journalists were not living up to their own ideals. "Journalists seem to have a complete inability to take criticism and consider it seriously … so to the degree I find it important to criticize, [I also find it important] to accept criticism myself and not be sensitive about the way a lot of people are," she said.

What Feinberg is describing is what I have developed as an agonistic approach to doing journalism. It is newswork that is sharp in its criticism but which otherwise reflects traditional journalistic ideals of scrutiny and independence. She sees her work as, "basically, a way of punching up." It follows a journalistic ethic of holding power to account, with Feinberg asking herself whether the criticism within her reporting "is going to [say] something about someone who has actual power," and whether it can remain independent by resisting dominant news narratives when emerging facts contradict them. In demonstrating how alternative approaches to journalistic practice enabled by the internet can serve the public, Feinberg sees where it also allows scrutiny and criticism of traditional journalists as a means of showing where other journalists miss the same opportunities—an implicit critique of the rest of the field. Responding to the challenge that journalism is now facing as a field caught between change and complicity, she said:

> The traditional ways of covering things have become completely not applicable now and it is just kind of figuring out how to navigate this bizarre environment we are in and I think some people are adapting, or trying to adapt at least, while others are very consciously refusing to admit that anything is different.

Feinberg's approach is caustic and sarcastic and clearly different from that of other journalists. It rankles a traditional sense of the field's boundaries and norms for that reason. But if we focus on similarity, rather than difference, it is not difficult to see a journalistic ambition within her commitment to scrutinizing power and underscoring her efforts to reveal information that would be otherwise kept from a public that could make better decisions with that information. Her nontraditional approach could be rooted in the liberal, pluralist sense of what journalism should do, if we choose to focus not on her differences in style and tactics, but on the substance of what she reports and the criticisms she levies against journalistic peers while doing so. She does her journalism agonistically, as a critical friend.

Agonism and field theory

This chapter expands on the discussion of Mouffe's agonistic pluralism in the previous chapter to offer a more substantive framework for understanding how the journalistic field has been changing. It presents the outlines of a more agonistic journalistic field to show how we can differentiate between *journalist agonists* and other, *antagonistic* media actors. It does so by accounting for the role politicized journalistic discourse has played in shaping the journalistic field and its boundaries. In describing the field as agonistic, my aim is to account for both the constructive (*agonistic*) differences and destructive (*antagonistic*) animosities that have emerged as the field's boundaries have been challenged. This draws primarily on Bourdieu's outline of a journalistic field, joining it to Mouffe's frameworks for democracy. Bourdieu and Mouffe differ in their points of emphasis within their scholarship, however both are aligned in a commitment to making sense of the functions of political discourse and its role in shaping our societies. Both place attention on disagreement, and both value how differences in ideologies and identities shape and are shaped through discursive interactions.[3] Both the political philosophies of Chantal Mouffe, especially in her work with Ernesto Laclau,[4] and the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu in his development of field theory provide us with frameworks for considering the way discursive interaction reflect an exchange of ideas over the direction of society. Both address language as a type of action, and in their analyses of speech-acts, both show how discourses can be understood in terms

of the competition between different perspectives over the direction of society broadly, or the journalistic field more narrowly. Bringing both scholar's work into conversation, Lane argues we can take Bourdieu's "emphasis on the material and institutional limitations placed on discursive construction, provided these were understood precisely as *limitations* and not absolute determinations" and combine this with Mouffe's and Laclau's "insights into the dynamic and ultimately arbitrary nature of political discourses with an assessment of the extent to which such discourses' performative force is conditioned or constrained, but never wholly determined by the workings of habitus and field."[5]

With these considerations in mind, allegiances between Mouffe's agonistic pluralism and Bourdieu's understandings of fields can help us develop a framework for understanding the role of conflict and agonism in democratic societies and in journalism, one that rests on two main considerations:

From Bourdieu, we can understand that language employed within news texts is never neutral.[6] Rather, we should approach news language as something that is enabled and constrained by the larger forces shaping the journalistic field.[7] These forces are enabling in that they imbue language with the authority and autonomy that journalism has developed, and they are constraining in that news and journalists are expected to follow certain rules that bring order to the journalistic field as a social domain. These forces guide discursive activity, but they are not determinative of its output. This allows us to weigh both journalistic discourses that reflect long-standing institutional norms, and those that push back against these norms.

From Mouffe, and from Laclau and Mouffe, such discourses emerge as performances of power—either hegemonic power, that further constrain any degree of difference in how journalism is performed, or subaltern agonistic power that pushes back against the limits that journalism's history and legacy would suggest. This gives us latitude to consider where language breaks from the dominant vision that the field would prescribe, were it fully able to do so.

This is not the first time I have brought Mouffe's and Bourdieu's work together for making sense of peripheral journalistic actors in particular, and in the conclusion of this chapter I will expand on this earlier argument for an *agonistic journalistic field* that can be evaluated through a study of metajournalistic discourses emerging from peripheral journalistic actors.[8] Doing so allows us to address the nature of political disagreement, including its agonistic and antagonistic characteristics, and lays the groundwork for examining where they are embedded in peripheral news content. This attempts to bridge key differences in approach between these scholars. It also sees their complements. Mouffe and Laclau devote little attention to the role of mass media in developing their theories of political

discourse and its place in democracies, though as we saw in the previous chapter Mouffe was not silent on this topic. In interviews and public discussions of agonistic pluralism she draws clear links between her emphasis on disagreement and the role of mass media in conveying a realistic picture of society back on itself.[9] Bourdieu, on the other hand, does address the role of media in our societies broadly,[10] and the journalistic field specifically.[11] He bases his conceptual work on extensive empirical and sociological study, seeing material aspects of media as paramount to addressing journalism's place in society.[12] It is for their contributions and within these complements where these thinkers benefit one another and provide a structure for interpreting the discursive interactions that take place within news, between journalists, critical agonistic peripheral journalistic actors, as well as destructive problematic antagonistic actors who are undermining journalism's legacy and ambitions.

A powerful, socialized space

Bourdieu's concept of fields provides a framework for understanding how individual actors see themselves and their place in society, and how this is shaped by different forces of socialization. When Bourdieu describes journalism as a field, he invokes this socialization process in outlining how journalists find their footing within "a field of forces." These forces are evident in actions and reactions "aimed at either conserving or transforming the structure of relations that is constitutive of the field."[13] They guide individuals within fields, showing how they are meant to act in accordance with the rules of their field internally, while also understanding that the field is being shaped by an expectation of how these actions will be perceived externally. These socialization forces give shape to all fields, but my aim here is to draw attention to specific dynamics of action and interaction when it comes to understanding the journalistic field as a discrete socialized space in general, and as a field of power competing with other fields of power within contemporary societies specifically.

First among these dynamics is the journalistic *doxa*. Described as a set of tacit presuppositions, journalism's *doxa* refers to an unspoken but nevertheless widely agreed to set of understandings of what it is to be a journalist. It is narrower than a societal-level sense of common, unquestioned, truths, but the field-specific doxa of journalism follows the same set of assumed general acceptance the same overall characteristics that Bourdieu offers in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* when he describes the *doxa* in terms of what appears "self-evident and undisputed."[14] For journalists, the *specific doxa* refers to an assumed sense about what journalism

is (how it is assumed-to-be within society), and how journalists should act in line with that positioning (the assumed, taken-for-granted, ambitions and aims of their work). It assumes, most of all, that journalism's place in society is natural, and that its contributions toward democracy do not need to be proven again and again; it "goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned."[15] Over time, journalism's specific *doxa* becomes implicit to each journalist, embodied as a sort of "gut feeling" about what it is to be a journalist.[16] In this way, being a journalist becomes such an assumed, natural state, it drives aphorisms like, "once a journalist, always a journalist," a pat phrase that captures the natural embodiment of the otherwise-unique aspects that make someone a journalist and the taken-for-grantedness of the *doxa*.

As *doxic values* are embraced and embodied over time through the ongoing processes of socialization that shape the field, attention turns to considering how one develops this sense of what it is to be a journalist. These vary, but in line with Bourdieu's larger argument they need to be understood as the product of both formal and informal socialization processes, including those that first shaped individuals' interests in becoming journalists, and also those that continue to take place throughout their careers. This can come through formal education, but also within a newsroom where editors and other journalists continue to informally teach by example.[17] These interactions allow someone to understand what it is to be a journalist, and refine their sense of how to act journalistically.

Through these socialization processes, a journalist also develops a journalistic *habitus*—an embodied understanding of what it is to belong to the larger journalistic field. This is what Schultz describes as a "feel for the daily news game," or what we might simply describe as a sense of knowing what is newsworthy and what is valued within the field. Taken together, the *doxa* and *habitus* guide how a journalist acts as a journalist, towards certain practices that distinguish themselves from other actors in other societal fields and away from others. This distinction is referred to as the journalistic *nomos,* calling attention to how the journalistic field is guided by a dominant vision of what it is to belong to the field (its values, its priorities, its norms) and how this differs, by contrast, to the values, priorities, and norms of other fields—a sense of vision and division that makes the journalistic field distinct.

However, not all journalists share the same processes of socialization, and in a digital age we need to also recognize that the field is being shaped by a more expansive set of actions and reactions, within a more expansive arena in which this socialization takes place. This can lead to a more expansive understanding of journalism and a more expansive set of journalistic practices as well. We can begin by thinking of where formal and informal education about what it is to be a journalist—the journalistic *doxa* and *habitus*—now takes place, and where the

sense of distinction, the vision and division of the journalistic *nomos*, is now articulated. It is certainly not constrained to newsrooms or schools, and in online media spaces, journalism itself has become a topic of considerable discourse. For those interested, engaging in or even just witnessing the debates *about* journalism allow for a social actor to hone their journalistic "gut feeling," and seeing the public-facing conversation of good journalism and bad journalism on independent news sites, interactive forums, and on social media, can define define at least a sense of the field's *nomos*. It might result in a different understanding of what journalism is than what has come before this moment, but that shold not be unexpected. Fields are dynamic, not static, and the actions and reactions that shape the journalistic field are not constrained to specific spaces or outcomes. In short, engaging with media criticism in digital spaces offers its own education about what journalism is, informal as it might be, and seeing and discussing shortcomings in journalism online can provide individuals a more concrete sense of what journalism should be. For all these reasons, we can look to the digital content produced online, where different actors engage in a discussion of journalism, as spaces of socialization and orientation that give journalists—including peripheral journalists—an understanding of their place in the field.[18]

While this context of change is worth noting, I introduce it here as a spur to wider debates. These more expansive aspects of socialization that we see in online, interactive discourses found in digital media can still be understood within a core understanding of how the journalistic *doxa* and *habitus* are shaped, drawing on dynamics that predate the internet. However, this calls on us to recognize that any sense of identity and belonging that previously shaped journalism was also built on informal processes of socialization that occurred outside formal institutions, and that these took place outside formal journalism education or newsroom experience that journalists might receive, and that even though these processes now extend beyond a traditional understanding of the journalistic field's domain, the same dynamics of socialization are still at work online, and are still evident in the interactions between more traditional and more agonistic journalistic actors found within news texts.

In order to expand our consideration of what counts as socialization to the field and to better account for these wider, digital, contexts, two differences need to be made explicit.

First, online and absent the barrier to entry of being hired to join a newsroom, a wider array of social agents are able to engage with the practices of journalism, and those who are inclined to do so can become aware of the field's structures and how its *habitus* has been shaped within the interactive spaces of the internet.[19] At least in part, by observing journalism as it performs its role publicly (in news) and

as it is discussed (online, via social media, and in different media spaces), these individuals can also develop their own, embodied, sense of journalism's *doxic* values.

Second, independent, online journalists who come to their identities in this way are not only able to embrace this ambition, despite not having any formal qualifications as journalists, they are able to act on it by engaging in reporting and publishing online, demonstrating their understanding of the journalistic *habitus*.[20] They develop an awareness of the values that guide journalism (or *doxa*) by engaging with news online, including by interacting within digital spaces. These further shape individuals' ideas about how journalism's practices might be improved upon (its *habitus*), as well as an understanding of how the journalistic field is situated in society (its *nomos*), even if they come to that realization from outside the traditional path toward becoming a journalist.[21]

We can already see some of these developments addressed in research rethinking different variables of *capital*, another Bourdieusian term of art that defines the field through the economic and symbolic recognition that denotes something as good journalism (e.g., the steady revenue that reflects on a news organization doing good work as a form of *economic capital*, or the prizes and accolades that reinforce that work to peers and society as forms of *symbolic capital*). These studies have argued that, online, new forms of journalistic capital like virality could offer better markers of digital journalistic success.[22] To the extent these new markers of capital are adopted as a worthwhile capital within the field, they reflect how the journalistic field is not static, but dynamic, shaped by constant processes of socialization that develop in each new era. With this reminder, we can better refine our understanding of the journalistic field, its key concepts, and the ways in which peripheral actors reflect these concepts, in order to map these concepts onto a new, digital media environment.[23]

This research broadens our scope for understanding the journalistic field a bit further, but it does not resolve persistent tensions between traditional journalism situated at the "core" of the field and emergent, digital, and nontraditional approaches to journalism found at its "periphery."[24] These tensions are rooted in a difference found between dominant *orthodox* understandings of what journalism is, or should be, and alternative *heterodox* positions that suggest what the journalistic field could be. To the traditional members of the field, an orthodox position might be tied to objectivity and traditional news values, whereas a heterodox position might advocate subjectivity and a more activist approach to journalism. More importantly, among established members of the journalistic field, these orthodox positions are treated as natural and beyond question, and anything otherwise—anything reflecting a heterodox position—is treated as heretical, and

blasphemous.[25] This underscores the severity of the tensions between journalism's core and periphery, and the challenges that difference and novelty can provoke.

This divergence is also reflected in the labels scholars apply. Describing a newspaper or public service media as "traditional" or "legacy" journalism reinforces their approach to journalism as the natural state of journalism. When we qualify journalism with labels of "digital" or "online," especially when describing alternative, peripheral journalistic actors, it immediately draws attention to their difference, their novelty. The language journalists use, and the language we use as researchers, reinforces the power we associate with journalism's legacy and, in this context, these choices are powerful. They reinforce a dominant vision of journalism in terms that echo its preferred arrangement, through a naturalized discourse that reaffirms journalism's own sense of distinction.[26]

These dynamics are difficult to change, as the way we talk about journalism is shaped by journalism's history and legacy and reinforced by its traditions. The dimensions of the journalistic field over time, however, are not fixed. While the dominance of history cannot be discounted, it also cannot be treated as determinative. In other words, journalism's own history cannot narrowly prescribe how journalism will be understood and enacted by different social agents over time, because these dynamics inevitably change in each new era. As Benson and Neveu argue,

> Fields cannot be understood apart from their historical genesis and trajectory; likewise, individual agents' actions are not simply determined by social position, but are the result of a complex, always partially contingent interplay between one's social and educational trajectory and the position one finds oneself at any given moment.[27]

For this reason, we see journalism as "a field of struggles in which the stake is the power to transform the field of forces."[28] These struggles take place "between the familiar and the new, between tradition and alternatives, and between exogenous and endogenous forces within and without the journalistic field."[29]

These are not minor disagreements. The struggles to either preserve the field's status, or transform the field by introducing new interpretations of the field's *doxa*, *habitus*, and *nomos*, are treated by Bourdieu as existential. He describes the field's natural resistance to change as a fight by established members of the field interested in maintaining their authority by differentiating themselves from amateurs, and for the field—for journalists—"nothing is more threatening than the lookalike who dissolves your identities."[30] To fall into undifferentiatedness, Bourdieu writes, to fully dissolve the lines between journalism and other social fields, "means losing existence."[31] This formulation around difference mirrors the concern Mouffe engages with when countenancing disagreement within her model of agonistic pluralism. Under the auspices of agonism, we could see the competition between

those within the journalistic field and those outside of it as an ideological battle, one that allows journalists to better know themselves by drawing a contrast between themselves and the position others take. But these differences are often utilized in ways that reinforce traditional journalists' supremacy and a hegemonic constraint over the boundaries of the field, dictating the limits of what is possible, rather than encouraging journalistic diversity and being open to alternative possibilities. When this occurs, the boundaries of the field are re-drawn by those already in power, those already holding journalistic authority, and those interested in maintaining that authority for themselves.

Journalism's socialized discourse

For understanding journalism as a field, we can turn our attention to how performances of journalism are embedded within news itself. It is within news, and through these performances, that a wider understanding of journalism is communicated to the public, and where the public gains an understanding of journalism's societal position and authority, both on its own terms and in relation to other actors in society. News content offers a discourse within which we find performances of field belonging, and an understanding of the field's priorities. When we see a journalist interview a politician—whether on television as Bourdieu posits, or in printed news—we are not watching two individuals interacting with one another. We are witnessing the field of journalism interacting with the field of politics. To simplify Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, in these moments both the journalist and the politician act according to how each of them has learned to act within their specific fields, and their actions are representative of their respective fields. Guided by the invisible structures that socialized them into the field, both the journalist's and the politician's interactions demonstrate and preserve what is at stake for each field (e.g., showcasing journalistic independence and truth-seeking on the one hand, or the ability to represent a specific worldview and reinforce a political message on the other). In Bourdieu's words, the journalist and the politician are engaging in "the actions and reactions, performed by social agents endowed with permanent dispositions, partly acquired in their experience of these social fields."[32] They are following the rules of the game that each of them has learned from being socialized within their fields, and the news that comes out of these interactions represents that socialization in action.

Field theory has proven to be particularly productive for studying a changing journalistic field because it does not insist on someone being designated, in any formal sense, a journalist. Rather it looks to the way different individuals might

espouse a journalistic disposition and follow journalistic ambitions by emphasizing the social forces that define these.[33] In a manner akin to Mouffe's approach to pluralism, it gives at least the leeway to embrace alternatives, so long as they also agree to the field's dominant vision. We saw this in the examples from Ashley Feinberg at the start of the chapter, where her alternative approach to doing journalism nevertheless sought to speak truth to power and hold that power to account. This is a conceptual departure from the material conditions that Bourdieu studied in developing his picture of the journalistic field (e.g., for journalists working online, rather than in a newsroom), but it is both a necessary one given the developments in media and technology since and a productive one that shows the extendibility of field approaches when we look to news and news discourse as performance of power from Mouffe and Laclau.

Bourdieu's field theory also parallels Mouffe's own description of the productive nature of agonism and conflict in society. Both understand the contrasts drawn between the different positions social actors occupy as necessary components for understanding where one stands, and both recognize where different social forces can affect the strength of the ideologies and beliefs one holds. Both have also provided frameworks for understanding how these forces become embedded in the discourses of politics and journalism, each from their own angle. Laclau and Mouffe focus on how discourses, and political and politicized discourses in particular can "mobilize different philosophical and ideological assumptions about the social world."[34] Bourdieu describes this in terms of discourse as a form of interaction between fields. But taken together, each allows us to see how social meaning is derived in part through the ways discourse is used by social actors to pursue particular agendas, to enact power, and to achieve political outcomes.

Both Mouffe and Bourdieu argue that, when considering discourses, we need to weigh these within the contexts in which any given discourse emerges. We will return to this point later, but for now it allows us to see where the agonism Mouffe refers to—the disagreement inherent to democracies, and reflective of ideological battles—provides scope for engaging with alternative interpretations of what journalism should be, what journalists should do, how this should be understood, and how this is reflected in the symbolic power and discursive interaction embedded in news.[35] Before taking up this focus, however, we need to address an observation that fields are somehow both stable and fluid, both malleable and resistant to change.[36] Journalism has shown itself to be adaptable to change when new formats can be integrated into familiar news routines, and it has been open to new ways of enacting journalistic ideals through new technologies and social sensibilities when given space to do so. News blogs offered traditional journalists new ways of reporting news, when blogs' truncated, familiar style of newswriting could be

combined with an interactive digital format to report on breaking and ongoing events.[37] Social media platforms, at least initially, afforded traditional journalists new ways of interacting with their publics, enhancing rather than contradicting journalism's intermediary function.[38] The list of examples could extend on for some distance, but central to these is that each shows where there is a quicker adoption of new practices and new media technologies when they reinforce journalism's *existing* sense of its legacy and historic purpose, and resistance to those that would introduce wholesale change to what the field stands for—those that seem too unnatural.[39]

Resistance is especially pronounced when it comes to new journalistic values, when journalism is asked to revisit its norms or when confronted by new ones introduced by new actors. When it has been pushed too hard to reject objectivity or to embrace the activist approaches favored by peripheral actors, the field has responded by leaning heavily on journalism's historical value and purpose to resist any change that might suggest a crack in its normative foundation. Journalists with backgrounds in "traditional" news bristle at being compared to journalistic bloggers, pointing to their institutional track records as a greater demonstration of their journalistic belonging.[40] They have been hesitant to acknowledge alternative approaches to newswork proposed by digital journalists, especially when these are framed as a response to journalistic "failures."[41] The field suggests, instead, that criticisms are focused on the wrong problem and the practices being proposed offer the wrong solutions.[42] To the extent members of the field are open to new journalistic propositions introduced by new peripheral actors, they are more likely to be incorporated when they come from "inside the house," or are proposed by journalists who have worked in traditional or institutional newsrooms. In these cases, we see adaptation achieved through practices that normalize-by-appropriating new routines and practices, naturalizing these within the journalistic *doxa* and *habitus* rather than resisting them outright.[43]

The microcosm and the macrocosm

To better understand the breadth of forces affecting the journalistic field, Bourdieu's description of fields as a microcosm of the larger societal macrocosm offers us a direct analogy to Mouffe's agonism and its commitment to pluralism. In making this point, Bourdieu describes how fields echo those larger and smaller enactments of power found elsewhere in society. He describes field as guided by their own set of rules (the microcosm), but not fully separate from the larger societal macrocosm in which they operate; a field is, "somewhat apart, endowed with its own laws, its

own *nomos*, its own law of functioning, without being completely independent of the external laws."[44]

From this argument, it follows that where we find tensions and tears in our larger social fabric, we can expect to find these reflected in the field. These proceed in two directions: from the outside in, and the inside out. When looking *from the outside in,* when we find disenchantment with institutions and social norms and antagonism and antipathy toward those with different viewpoints in society at large—something we currently find—then, following Bourdieu, we should expect to find echoes of these dynamics in journalism as well. Mouffe described this in the previous chapter in saying, "the media are basically the mirror of society."[45] But a field is not fully reflective of society, and not fully beholden to societal forces. It has autonomy, and so Bourdieu describes the journalistic field instead as a "small universe" within the larger social universe. It is ordered by its own set of rules, but these cannot be not fully disconnected from the rules of society or the political, economic, or other forces that shape these.

When we look *from the inside out*—when we consider where the internal rules of the field collide with the outside forces in society—our attention is drawn to the field's boundaries. It is at the field's edges where contests over belonging are the most heated, and it is on the field's edges where there is the greatest vulnerability to belonging. Put simply, the journalistic identities of actors found on the field's boundaries—peripheral actors who are not affiliated with journalism's legacy institutions—are less certain. Because their approaches to journalism are novel or because they have simply been around for less time, these actors present a risk to the field, the risk being that if the field expands its boundaries, they are taking a gamble that they will either embrace a new journalistic actor whose novel approaches will enhance journalism, or, alternatively, that they will inadvertently accept a non-journalist into their fold who will damage journalism's reputation and authority. For the peripheral journalist, they risk losing status and public recognition if rejected by the field, but they also risk their perceived independence if they are seen as too similar to the mainstream journalists they once critiqued, or seen as "sell outs" to commercial media owners. *From the outside in*, it is also at the boundaries where we see political tensions and societal upheavals that are at play in society reflected in the discursive interactions that journalists engage with. We see the influence of these forces within news content that either adopts or resists wider political and societal narratives. In short, it is at the field's boundaries where the microcosm of the field interacts with the macrocosm of society, where journalists try to resist incursions on their autonomy—whether these are mounted by political actors who threaten to undermine journalism's independence or found in response

to politicized and peripheral journalistic actors who seek to expand the field to include their work.

Whether starting from the outside or the inside, we can find journalists and would-be journalists engaged in contests over the field's boundaries as part of an ongoing struggle over belonging and what it means to belong to the journalistic field, with each looking to either preserve the field as it is or transform it to be more in line with their own dispositions.[46] At the time Bourdieu was writing, these boundaries were primarily being contested between a smaller set of traditional media actors, and the outcome of these contests was largely based on how effective mainstream journalistic actors were in dictating what is and isn't journalism. The prominence that traditional journalistic actors had in the mass media era was measured in terms of their prominence in the media market. Whether in large national newspapers or on television, this gave them significant weight in determining imagination of what journalism is to the public. Benson describes this in terms of traditional media having a specific weight that can be understood in terms of visibility (prominence on the newsstand, the broadcast spectrum, etc.) and market share (circulation, viewership, etc.), but also in less tangible characteristics of legacy and widespread recognition.[47]

Given these resources, prominent news media quite naturally become cultural markers of what journalism is, and their prominence granted them a certain measure of journalistic authority.[48] This shaped a dominant vision of journalism as a guiding idea not only of what it is to be a journalist but also what it is to act journalistically and to describe ones work as journalism. However, like so many culturally embedded products and socialized practices, the strength of their signification has limits, and "journalism" and "journalist" can operate as what Laclau might call empty signifiers. Their status is always being revisited and redefined through specific frameworks of political, identity, or cultural values—valued by some for their contributions to the public, seen with wariness by others as elite institutions.[49] This leaves an idea of journalism somewhat open to interpretation.

This openness was once seen as an asset for a journalistic field that could maintain its own distinction and adapt to changing societal circumstances. Recently, it has become a point of tension as digital developments at the edges of the journalistic field have forced us to discuss "explicitly what has always been true: that journalism is best understood as an amorphous set of activities where participants are not equal or even similar in terms of status, influence, work tasks, and working conditions."[50] It is an openness that has been jumped on by antisystemic and populist critiques of news, raised by right-wing politicians and right-wing alternative media alike, who challenge the boundaries and understanding of journalism's knowledge practices by confronting those who practice them.[51] In

a period when animosity towards institution has become widespread, and when populist movements describe prominent members of the media as part of an elite cabal, any sense of stability the journalistic field might have enjoyed seems fleeting.

Put simply, for those upset at the status quo or who feel left behind by news that doesn't speak to their own experiences, being a prominent example of journalism—having the *specific weight* to shape a wider public impression of the field—is as likely to make you a target for critique as it is to provide society with a sense of what journalism offers. When considering new, emergent, and peripheral journalistic actors, that same prominence no longer offers a guide toward a vision of what journalism should be. It has become a point of contrast, highlighting an opportunity for a different approach to journalism that might better serve a disaffected public.

A diverse, agonistic, field

In this context, Mouffe's advocacy for agonism offers the study of journalism a set of concepts that we can use to unpack the nature of disagreement in our societies, showing how contestation structures our societies, and how this is then reflected in the journalism around us (the macrocosm, and the microcosm).

First, there is its prioritization of disagreement rather than consensus, as "proper political questions always involve decisions that require making a choice between conflicting alternatives."[52] For Mouffe, it is both unproductive and reasonably impossible in a pluralist world to try and mute such differences. Second, the presence of a certain degree of antagonism can fuel understanding within an agonistic pluralist democracy (here, Mouffe is referring to the agonistic nature of disagreement, rather than a more destructive form of "antagonism" as a subjugating force that deprives others of the right to their positions). Third, and relatedly, are the ways in which dissensus is resistant to hegemonic power. In both *The Democratic Paradox* and *Agonistics*, Mouffe argues that insisting on a rational pursuit of consensus, as the deliberative models of democracy advocated by Habermas would have it, imposes a restrictive order on democracy that only serves to replicate existing power dynamics. Rational consensus silences diversities of opinion, and deprives individuals and groups of representing their viewpoints fully. The ones insisting on a rational-deliberative approach are often those who have already benefited from that structure, and are setting the terms for those who follow. This leaves out the marginalized, the radical, and the subaltern voices in society.[53]

Importantly, Mouffe outlines a key requirement for what it is to disagree within an agonistic model, one that we need to carry into our discussion of an

agonistic journalistic field: You can disagree, and even be disagreeable, but the right to hold an alternative viewpoint is not the same as the right to subjugate someone else's viewpoint to your own, or strip away their right to disagree. In other words, everyone needs access to the spaces of disagreement. But to exist agonistically, everyone also needs to provide access for others to disagree. Mouffe opposes *extreme* interpretations of this perspective, arguing against differences being "constructed as relations of subordination"[54]

This becomes a quite clear if nevertheless difficult distinction to maintain, and it is one that resonates with the views on journalism I am advancing here. But if agonism is difficult to maintain, an agonistic journalistic field is just as difficult to make sense of. After all, journalism is something we each see differently, and these differences make it challenging to distinguish between one person seeing any particular news media as informative and publicly interested, and another seeing it as oppressive and in service of elites. Moreover, the subjectivities and dispositions carried into journalism can lead any individual social agent to see any individual interpretation of journalism as too extreme, or too traditional, too alternative to be called journalism, or too institutional to be considered independent. In part, these either-or positions are reflected in scholars no longer arguing that there is one singular journalism that can serve one singular public, just as we are encouraged to recognize there are many publics, and encouraged further to consider where these publics are being served by many news media, each of which might embrace journalism and its ambitions in different ways. This makes our field and our societies more diverse and more interesting, but it also gives us fewer shared criteria with which we can consider something as falling *within* or *outside* the agonistic framework that we might apply to journalism in the chapters that follow.

To try and resolve some of these challenges, below I draw on the discussions thus far to present a framework for thinking about agonism and journalism, built around five parallel aspects of agonism that we can bring into our considerations of the field of journalism.

First, we can see in the full breadth of journalistic content being produced online and in a more diverse media environment that there is a protracted amount of disagreement in the journalistic field over what journalism should do, and how it can improve its practices and how it serves the public. This is particularly apparent in the work of peripheral journalistic actors and, especially, politically attuned media actors who make media criticism central to their newswork generally and their coverage of journalism specifically. *Agonistic approaches to journalism disrupt the field by highlighting failures of mainstream and traditional forms of journalism, implicitly disagreeing with traditional practices.*

Second, to be a journalist is to be considered as having the epistemic authority to "do journalism." We will see in the research on journalistic boundaries in chapter 5 that this is a point of contestation between traditional and peripheral journalistic actors, with boundaries being drawn based on difference rather than similarity.[55] By drawing distinctions around identity, or in terms of different routines that different actors follow, journalists position their identities in contrast to the identities and practices of those they see as non-journalists. This goes in the other direction as well, with peripheral actors emphasizing their alignment with norms of journalism and arguing that they represent fuller embodiments of journalism's *doxic values*, in contrast to "mainstream media," because they are more independent, more honest, more truthful, more hard-hitting, etc. *Agonistic approaches to journalism align themselves to journalistic ideals and norms, reflecting a new imagination of journalism's place in society.*

Third, while for traditional journalists it might be their organizational belonging or their professional credentials that allow them to separate themselves from peripheral journalistic actors, for peripheral actors these same factors work in the other direction. Agonistic journalists' distance from institutional belonging and the commercial interests that might accompany them has consistently been raised as proof of their journalistic autonomy, and their "lack of professionalism"—reflected in their use of humor, or acerbic commentary alongside news reporting—offers a "more honest" approach to journalism.[56] Agonistic journalists also demonstrate this in their approach to news through a style that resonates with a specific audience, providing them with a level of distinction and public value. *Agonistically, peripheral actors adopt the inverse of institutional markers to reinforce their journalistic identities as a specific alternative response to hegemonic media and their power.*

Fourth, in terms of hegemonic power, the boundaries around the journalistic field are seen as being drawn in the interest of preserving a certain entrenched vision of the journalistic field (the "dominant vision" that has been established by tradition and norms). These boundaries are not only not neutral, they serve the interests of those already power, supporting the journalistic "core" in opposition to its "periphery" in a way that contravenes Mouffe's outline of democratic agonism.[57] *For agonistic journalists, their approach to journalism and the ways in which the challenge journalism's boundaries are defined by an explicit resistance to perceived, institutionalized, hegemonic power.*

Fifth, we can also find failures in meeting Mouffe's core requirements of agonism from the perspective of traditional journalism. Rather than agreeing to disagree, traditional journalists often engage in a form of muting-by-nullifying within their newswork, discounting any journalistic contributions made by peripheral actors based on their going against normative, traditional, and otherwise "mainstream"

and long-standing approaches to what journalism should be. *Agonistic journalists operate from a subaltern and diminutive position in relation to traditional journalists, and must insist on their voices being heard.*

These five points highlight key tensions between emerging peripheral journalistic actors working as agonists and the traditional journalistic field that they are challenging, and they give us anchor points to explore in the rest of the book. They connect our thinking around agonism with an understanding of the push-and-pull of societal forces that define the journalistic field, and give us ways to think about the ways power and identity are implicated in shaping the field and reflected within news content. They help us identify the societal tensions that might be embedded in news, and how these make the nature of our societies all the more apparent. News, including news from agonists, present a vison of society for all to see and a vision of journalism for the public to appreciate—presented "for the eyes of the common sense," as Bourdieu would describe.[58]

News discourses convey the ongoing tensions that Mouffe identifies in politics, and by framing politics and the concerns of the polity in their coverage, news represents choices being made in society. News can emphasize deliberation and the airing of various perspectives as the means to pursue consensus, and can do so in serve of agreement as the ultimate goal of democracy. These can be found in narratives that highlight the normative obligations journalists embrace, including in the long-standing (and long-debated) reliance on impartiality and objectivity. Or news can emphasize difference, and sharp disagreement between different people and groups holding polar opposite positions. In doing so, it might foreground the role of journalistic scrutiny, challenging hegemonic power.

Bringing together Mouffe and Bourdieu we can see where tensions between consensus and dissensus burden us with contradictions. If we are incapable of escaping disagreement in an agonistic democracy, and in fact if disagreement is what allows us to know ourselves and where we stand on matters of politics, then we might struggle to find a dominant vision of a journalistic field that gives journalism distinction that enough people agree to. At the same time, if we negate difference in the interest of consolidation and consistency and consensus, there is a harm done if this goes so far as to suggest the field is static and unmovable. If we "present the institutions of liberal democracy as the outcome of a pure deliberative rationality", then we might inadvertently "reify them and make them impossible to transform."[59] Looking more narrowly at journalism, Bourdieu argues similar tensions emerge in the promotion of an idealized, normative, journalism when set against the perception that this performance is, in fact, restrictive and hegemonic, and in service of those in power. He outlines this as a contradiction between a,

positive image that journalists continue to propagate (against all the evidence), with the theme of journalism as countervailing force, a critical tool (no democracy without journalists), etc., and the opposing vision which sees journalism as a relay of the structure of oppression, etc.[60]

Conclusion: Embracing agonism in journalism

To the degree we might have previously seen consensus and an idealized pursuit of agreement and political comity as the reigning order of democracies in the arguments from Habermas in the previous chapter, Mouffe argues this was not only not the case, but that we will always fall short in striving for consensus. The insufficiencies of agreement and consensus have certainly been exposed by the rise and persistence of a more extreme politics since the turn of the century and the more extreme discourses they espouse. In our political climates, within our societies, and in the news we engage with, disagreement rather than agreement seem to define our current moment. Its reverberance within our societies brings a discussion of agonism in our politics into an understanding of the field of journalism, and the development of a more dynamic, but also more fractured, journalistic field.

For Mouffe, disagreement is something we should welcome, and not fear—at least to a degree. But there are ways of disagreeing—being more agonistic (critical and constructive) or more antagonistic (subjugating and destructive)—and Mouffe's theories of democracy make this distinction a key concern.[61] However, efforts toward advancing a model of pluralism that allows for dissensus and disagreement are now running head-first into the rise of far- and extreme-right political parties in Europe and North America. These developments have not only exposed the insufficiency of rational deliberation to counteract extreme politics, they also pose challenges for agonistic, pluralist models of democracies, where to hold ones position means allowing others to hold theirs, too. In the either/or narratives of populism, and the demonization of the political opponent that has come from these political trendlines, the more antagonistic and destructive extreme politics of right-wing parties fall short when they do not agree to the structures of democracy itself or accept the validity of their opponents.

In short, not all modes of disagreement are democratically valid or productive. But neither is consensus. As Mouffe argues in *Agonistics,* consensus is something pursued by those in power in a way that preserves their power. It is hegemonic and sets the rules for engaging in democracy according to those who have already

accrued the power and the capital to dictate the dominant vision of what democracy should look like and how it should operate. Consensus perpetuates "a competition among elites"[62] by setting the terms for debate, for engagement, for contributing to a dialogue about what is in "the common interest" according to a constraint of discourse.

Thinking in line with Bourdieu's field theory, an emphasis on consensus and rational deliberation can be seen as the rules of the democratic game, and similarly hegemonic in the way these rules are largely determined by those already playing it. While not saying so explicitly, Bourdieu and Mouffe offer us parallel encouragements to instead think about contestation, the contests that shape our social worlds, and the imbalances in power between different actors and their abilities to affect change. Whether thinking broadly in terms of democratic societies or more narrowly in terms of belonging to the journalistic field, both guide us toward reflecting on the forces that are implicated in their formations.

So far, I have outlined theories and theorists that provide ways of understanding society and journalism. Field theory gives us a language that we can use to describe how it is we distinguish one field in our societies—such as journalism—from others. Furthermore, it helps us relate an understanding of the contests shaping the field to the ideas put forward by Mouffe; fields are constantly shaped by social forces, and by different actors seeking to promote their vision of what it is to belong. Fields are not static, nor is society, and the constant engaging in disagreement over what it is to belong to the field of journalism is integral to shaping the field, just as disagreement shapes society.

These two theories have been around for many years, and both give us a rich way of considering the social dynamics shaping the field. They will ground our discussion of journalism in the chapters ahead as something we can only make sense of if, and when, we place it alongside thinking about society at large— as a microcosm of the larger social macrocosm. In short, where in the world we find polarization, infighting, dissensus rather than consensus, and other aspects of divisiveness that seem to mark our common era, we should also expect, and not be surprised to find, similar dynamics in a field such as journalism's.

These perspectives allow us to think through the tensions that were already emerging in the first years of this century, tensions that have only become more pronounced in the years since. To try and make sense of both society and journalism, it seems a good starting point is to explore whether the elevation of consensus has masked fundamental disagreements that have been bubbling for decades for how they shape our understanding of journalism and society. In short, they give us a starting point to engage with the divisiveness that has marked politics and journalism in our current era.

Notes

1 Feinberg 2016, 2019.
2 Feinberg 2019.
3 Blommaert 2015; Lane 2023.
4 Laclau and Mouffe 1985.
5 Lane 2023, 107.
6 Blommaert 2015, 4.
7 Bourdieu 2005.
8 Eldridge 2019.
9 Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006; Worsham and Olson 1999.
10 Bourdieu 1999.
11 Bourdieu 2005.
12 Phelan 2011.
13 Bourdieu 2005, 30.
14 Bourdieu 1977, 164.
15 Bourdieu 1977, 166.
16 Schultz 2007.
17 Schultz 2007.
18 Cheruiyot 2018.
19 Lindblom, Lindell, and Gidlund 2022.
20 Eldridge 2017b.
21 Eldridge 2017b.
22 Lindblom, Lindell, and Gidlund 2022.
23 Maares and Hanusch 2022; Maares and Hanusch 2023.
24 Eldridge 2019b.
25 Pierre Bourdieu 1977.
26 Laclau and Mouffe 1985.
27 Benson, and Neveu, 2005, 18.
28 Bourdieu 2005, 44.
29 Eldridge 2022b, 9.
30 Bourdieu 2005, 40.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 30.
33 Örnebring et al. 2018, 407.
34 Lane 2023, 99.
35 Bourdieu 1993; van Dijk 2009.
36 Anyone who has played (as a child, or adult) with oopleck—a suspension of cornstarch and water that flows when allowed to be poured, but resists pressure like hardening clay when hit with any force—might see a similar metaphor in this description.
37 Thurman and Walters 2013.
38 Schmidt and Loosen 2016.
39 Eldridge 2022b.
40 Ryfe 2019.
41 Ferrucci and Canella 2023.

42 Bicket and Wall 2016; Cecil 2002; Hindman 2005.
43 Eldridge 2018; Eldridge 2019; Waisbord 2013.
44 Bourdieu 2005, 33.
45 Mouffe 2013, 143.
46 Bourdieu 2005, 33.
47 Benson 1999.
48 Broersma 2007.
49 Laclau 2005.
50 Örnebring et al. 2018, 404.
51 Holt 2018.
52 Mouffe 2013, 3.
53 Fraser 1990; Laclau and Mouffe 2019.
54 Mouffe 1996, 247.
55 Ryfe 2019.
56 Eldridge 2018, 128.
57 Eldridge 2019.
58 Bourdieu 2005, 31.
59 Mouffe 2009, 32.
60 Bourdieu 2005, 42.
61 Mouffe 1999.
62 Mouffe 2013, 9.

News of our fractured worlds: Journalism as societal discourse

Shortly after being named *New York Times* Executive Editor in 2022, Joseph Kahn warned that democracy was facing "its most serious threats in decades," with political candidates positioning themselves so far apart from one another they even "disagree on democracy itself."[1] Kahn then committed his newsroom to a renewed focus on democracy itself. In a letter to *de Volkskrant* in early 2024, a reader worried openly about the newspaper treating as "normaal [normal]" the fact that leading Dutch politicians disagree over constitutional protections. "Hoe ingewikkeld de politieke realiteit er ook uitziet [However complicated the political reality may be]," the letter writer urged, "als hoeder van de democratie vormt de pers een belangrijke factor in wat we als normaal beschouwen en wat niet [as a guardian of democracy, the press is an important factor in what we consider normal and what we do not]."[2] In the pages of the *Guardian*, the esteemed media critic Margaret Sullivan called for newsrooms "to educate their staffs about the dangers of fascism," and treat political threats to democracy and populists' efforts to divide our societies with increased urgency.[3] Each of these accounts offers a vision of society where democracy is under threat, where undermining a national constitution is worryingly being normalized, and where fascism is lurking in the near distance. Each also prescribes a democratic function for journalism to push back and confront these challenges head on.

Threats to democracy are not only stories told in newspapers. In his September 2023 address to the United Nations General Assembly, Secretary General António Guterres said to the gathered leaders that: "Democracy is under threat. Authoritarianism is on the march. Inequalities are growing. And hate speech is on the rise."[4] No less dire, when running for office in 2020, U.S. President Joe Biden reportedly carried around the book *How Democracies Die,*[5] and since taking office, *The New Yorker's* Susan Glasser writes that Biden has been drawing from its scholarship as he sees his presidency as engaged in a fight to save democracy.[6] From each of these worrying accounts, there is also a prescription for institutions—especially democratically inclined institutions—to push back against the political and polarized rhetoric that would otherwise spell their doom. And, ostensibly, all of ours.

Narratives such as these can leave one feeling more than a little despondent when trying to imagine a path forward from our current moment, finding more signs of division and worry than indications for optimism. They have resulted in not unreasonable handwringing, and an equally urgent call for journalism to reassert its place in democracies, somehow.

Accepting for the moment that these accounts and worries of the dissolution of social order, politics, society, and democracy are real—and they certainly feel real to many people[7]—this might be because this is the picture of society told to us through the types of news we encounter and the narratives they offer. News, for all sorts of reasons, can contribute tremendous weight to how we come to understand and navigate our social worlds. This argument goes back more than a century, to observations from Walter Lippmann who saw news as a window to the wider world. He argued that by reading a newspaper's account of world events, one could gain a picture of both those events and better understand their own place in the world.[8] Later, Robert Park described news as a form of public knowledge that, "does not so much inform as orient the public, giving each and all notice as to what is going on."[9] Scholars continue to argue that journalism's contributions to people's awareness of unfolding events and debates, through the news they produce, can have an influence on society—not directly, but by establishing the parameters of democratic debate. To some, this has led to equating journalism with democracy, as James Carey argued, seeing in the institutions of journalism a fundamental democratic role of informing citizenries and holding power to account.[10] To others, journalism's contributions toward understanding society more broadly rest in the power that journalists have to reinforce existing ideologies when news carries narratives of belonging and power, and when news discourses either amplify or challenge dominant hierarchies.[11]

In this chapter I orient our thinking toward seeing how news discourses shape our understanding of journalism, and in doing so examine how different journalistic discourses can shape our understanding of society. Fractured and fragmented, polarized and populist, calcified and recalcitrant; the aim here is to allow us to think about journalism not as something disconnected from trends of division in our political and social worlds, but as something intimately implicated in them.

Where these trends began is important, whether that is found in the rise of a more divisive politics within a polarized news ecosystem, or in the polarized rhetoric of politics that news media are covering. But in our current moment, there seems to be no obvious return from that sense of division. That ship has already sailed, and we now need deal with the news and journalism and society we have in front of us. Rather than think of this in terms of cause and effect, I argue that the ways we talk about journalism end up being mutually reinforcing. Nevertheless, these dynamics present challenges we need to confront now, regardless how we reached this point.

We can do so by focusing on the narratives of society demonstrated within the news in front of us, and the ideological discourses that are embedded within news as a discourse. This approach allows us to understand how the fractures in our society are made salient, and made wider, by news itself. It recognizes, as Van Dijk does, that news exists within a social context, where we can find discourses of power and ideology in the language of news, set within "social situations of interaction and communication."[12] Van Dijk encourages us to approach news as engaged in a discourse that is complex, shaped by different forces at the micro- and macro-level, and to see news discourses as "social practices that play a crucial role in the reproduction of society in general, and of social communities or groups and their knowledge and ideologies, in particular."[13] As discursive practices performed by journalists, news reflects their power to frame social issues in ways that elevate or deny communities their ideologies, argues Anabela Carvalho. Carvalho consolidates the work of critical discourse studies, presenting a comprehensive framework that focuses analysis on the following discursive categories: *Layout and structural organization*; *Objects*; *Actors*; *Language, grammar and rhetoric*; *Discursive strategies*; and *Ideological standpoints*. She notes in particular, that within news, "a text's grammar can reveal many of its underlying (ideological) presuppositions."[14] For our purposes, and given the contexts of the polarized and populist ideological fissures we witness in our societies, both Van Dijk and Carvalho argue we should expect to find these ideologies reflected within news as well.

Discourses of power and politics

As a starting point for a discursive approach to studying news in the context of a fractured society, we can reflect on the initial argument that language is never neutral. The words chosen by journalists and the ways they are conveyed within news texts allow us to derive meaning from studying those words as a discourse, and through this we gain insights into the choices being made in constructing news.[15] To do so, we can adopt the classic understanding of discourse as it relates to media and text, one that goes "beyond the sentence." This understands the words on the page (or the screen, or the words that we hear) as simply the most evident layer of a larger system of discourse, sitting atop and even obscuring a larger set of social forces.[16] In short, there is power at play in words chosen and not chosen, and these choices are influenced by an array of societal factors that seek to reinforce positive attributes of in-group belonging, and reinforce the negative qualities of the out-group.[17] This is apparent in choices made to describe the same group of people as either "undocumented migrants" or "illegal aliens," and in doing so invoking a sense of humanity or of dehumanization, respectively.[18] Van Dijk describes this dynamic in his presentation of the ideological square, captured below (Figure 4.1). This square encapsulates a meta-strategy, which "tells us that group members will tend to speak or write positively about their own group, and negatively about those out-groups they define as opponents, competitors or enemies, if only because the Others are different."[19]
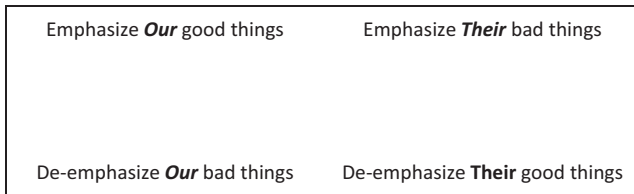

Emphasize *Our* good things	Emphasize *Their* bad things
De-emphasize *Our* bad things	De-emphasize *Their* good things

Figure 4.1: Teun van Dijk's "Ideological Square"[44]

Expanding on this, Van Dijk suggests a range of discursive strategies and structures, including a focus on negative topics that reinforce the moral or ideological deviance of "the other," or emphasizing their inability to perform their stated societal role. He also shows how the use of greater levels of specificity to describe negative aspects of an ideological opponent reinforces these divisions, essentially making a vague "other" more tangible to the recipient of a discourse.

For our analysis, Van Dijk identifies *denomination* as a specific discursive strategy that reflects differences in how different groups are labeled, and in the use of *pejorative* language and ad hominem attacks, ideologies are made profound by

being made personal.[20] Carvalho's frameworks organize scholarship by Van Dijk and others to provide a schema that captures the way discourse can be studied within media in particular. This framework allows us to see news texts for both their *textual* (e.g., grammar, word choice, and semantics), and *intertextual* aspects (e.g., genres, macro-level discourses, and narratives taking place at a societal level), and to analyze them accordingly as engaged in an interactive exchange between the message sender—the one producing the content—and the intended recipient.[21]

Among the arguments for adopting a critical discourse approach for assessing the power dynamics embedded in news texts, a prominent one is that it benefits our assessments of subjectivity and interpretation that is inherent in any encounter with any news discourse. By applying an ideological framework to make sense of news discourses, we are also encouraged to see language as non-neutral, allowing us to identify and unpack the inherent politics embedded in language. Doing so helps us understand where news about a protest against the government might also convey a populist narrative of elites and non-elites, one that reinforces a particular political discourse. Or it might suggest a narrative of grassroots mobilization reflecting a groundswell of activism, depending on how those speaking and those being spoken about are ascribed different positions of power, for example based on who is allowed to speak, and based on those who are merely spoken about.[22]

In this way, the language of news can also be understood as going one step further. The ways news discourses are constructed can resonate with or clash against an audience's existing worldviews, just as it can resonate with or clash against their views of journalism. News discourses can elevate journalists as powerful voices serving the public, explicitly sometimes and implicitly other times. When journalists are portrayed in work that "safeguards" society or serves democracy, the status of journalism is elevated, positively. But, news can also *denominate* journalists as out-of-touch elites who are corruptly keeping "the people" down and failing to fulfill the needs of a democratic society. This, too, depends on how journalists are portrayed, both explicitly but also implicitly in content that frames their contributions in positive or negative ways. How we interpret those depictions is not left only to the words chosen, however. It also depends on the overall context of coverage, and the specific media in which we find them. Describing a journalist as an established, veteran reporter in the pages of their own newspaper means one thing. But as we will see, describing them the same way in a piece of media criticism found on an alternative news site conveys something entirely different. In other words, in any piece of text or discourse there are implications that go "beyond the sentence," which is to say there are substrata that shape how we interpret what we see on the page (or screen), including "a complex substratum consisting of

the world view that author and receptor bring to the text."[23] Nothing can be read as neutral. Nor should it be.

News, a fractured discourse

Given the upheavals in our democracies of late, we have ample reason to start looking for signs of the fractures in our societies for where they are conveyed to us in news discourses, and we have good cause to expect to find them in the non-neutral language of news media that speak to these divisions. News reflects the journalistic microcosm, within which we can find traces of forces at play in the larger social macrocosm.

To better illustrate the ways news media engage offer a narrative of our fractured societies, we can return to the stories of a declining democracy or of a decayed social order that I presented at the start of the chapter. To a one, these were the accounts offered by societal elites. They come from political leaders of supra-governmental organizations (the United Nations), traditional media (*The New Yorker, de Volkskrant,* and *The New York Times*), and academia (the authors of *How Democracies Die* both work at Harvard University). Each of these domains reflects the competing interests of three distinct fields of power—"The Political Field, The Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field" as Pierre Bourdieu[24] has identified—and each contends with the others in an effort to have their vision of society agreed to by the wider public. Academics hope their vision of society and the expertise they use to describe it will be adopted as a form of knowledge about the world. Journalists, in their routines and in the news they produce, hope to be seen as authoritative narrators of the world as well, hoping their audiences will use it to organize their daily, civic, and political lives. Political actors, no less invested and no less involved, offer a vision of society through their political speeches and policies that they hope resonates with the public as well, and—if so—that they will be rewarded by convincing enough of an electorate to confirm such a vision through public support and, ultimately, votes.

But warnings of democratic decline are not only offered in top-down narratives from academics speaking from their learned positions, nor are they limited to the competing visions of society offered by those writing for traditional news media. In news and commentary from alternative and overtly peripheral political news media, the same narratives of democracies' decline emerge, though they are presented quite differently. At the left-wing political news site *Raw Story*, Thom Hartmann warns democracy's death will come at the hands of U.S. Republicans, describing: "How democracy will die the first month of the next

Trump presidency."[25] At the right-wing site *PJ Media*, David Solway argues the exact opposite, saying democracy's current decline is the work of U.S. Democrats.[26] Solway then "quotes" a line that never appears in Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* but one that is regularly invoked in right-wing and alternative spaces and attributed to de Tocqueville—"Americans are so enamored of equality, they would rather be equal in slavery than unequal in freedom"—to imply progressive policies are the real authoritarian threats to the United States:[27]

While both of these stories use the same vocabulary and even the same key figures—both also refer to *How Democracies Die* and its authors—they deliver quite different prognoses. Hartmann warns that a reelected Donald Trump would bring in a fascist regime of censorship and control. Solway says Democratic actors and institutions have an "end-point in a totalitarian dispensation." As two examples of the ways different discourses of news and commentary can present different understandings of reality, both also implicate the divisive politics that texture our current realities, and digital, peripheral news media's role in narrating them.

Entering the discourse: Arena and Information

In the more dynamic spaces of digital news media, peripheral journalistic actors and the news they present have departed from the formal structures Van Dijk outlines, offering us indications of their ideological positions not only through a meta-discourse *of* news but also through a meta-discourse *about* news events. Colloquially referred to as "the discourse," this second meta-discourse offers an explicit framing of the overall context of contestation that shapes our understanding of society through the discursive exchanges that are taking place across news content, within online discussion spaces, and in the back-and-forth "discourse" that take places between media and political actors. Beyond the sentence, thinking of this larger discourse offers us a way to understand news events not by reading, listening, or watching reporting on the events themselves, but by engaging with the debates going on about how these events are being covered by different media.

In these exchanges of competing views *about* news events, we are each being told how we should understand news, how we should react, and—importantly—the political implication of different news stories through a meta-level discourse about the nature of society that also tries to set the acceptable boundaries of debate about a given topic. Describing democracy as "dying" certainly conveys a picture of society. Implying it is due to either one politician or another sets the tenor of the debate. Media are also invested in this debate. They seek to define our understanding of a particular news development not only by offering specific details

about news events—what Van Dijk might describe as granularity or a degree of completeness[28]—but also by commenting on the nature of those events and the coverage they have received.

In broader terms, "the discourse" describes a space within which societal and political narratives circulate. Facilitating that circulation, news media are not only a source of information, but an arena that one can enter or leave (a metaphor I return to below). To enter the discourse, to enter this arena, is to choose to engage in a debate over the larger societal contexts and interpretations of news events, prioritizing these over a discussion of the fact-base of those events.[29] This differentiates between a discourse that shapes our understanding of news events—the facts of a story—and a discourse that shapes our understanding of the meta-story surrounding a news event, informed by the views about the story itself. It separates how we view news of a political scandal for how a discourse is constructed around formal aspects of news coverage (e.g., the who, what, where, when, why, and how of a story), in contrast to a discourse found within content that comments on the news coverage itself (e.g., whether the coverage is too sensational, relevant to citizens, emblematic of modern politics, etc.). In this latter category, we come to news "*via* the discourse," where within a meta-commentary about news coverage of a scandal we are made aware of its basic facts, but we are also guided toward seeing these facts within a specific interpretive framework, one that might be politically biased or ideologically filtered.[30] In fractured societies, it is often that latter aspect that gets our attention.

These two types of discourse are apparent in the way Maggie Haberman of the *New York Times* tweeted in 2018 about lies from then-president Trump, saying "Trump told two demonstrable falsehoods"[31] and the way Rebecca Fishbein, writing for *Jezebel,* shot back with a critique of moderate language in journalism under the headline "So Should the Media Call Trump a Lying Liar Liarface, or Nah?"[32] Where Haberman describes the insufficient fact-base for claims made by Trump, Fishbein engages in a conversation around Haberman's coverage — a meta-level discourse about the news itself, one that conveys an evaluation of "mainstream" political journalism.

This dynamic, between reporting news and reporting about the debate surrounding news, is important for understanding the types of discourses that we can expect to find on the edges of the journalistic field, where irreverence and critique shape journalistic identities and inform peripheral journalists' newswork. Both Haberman's and Fishbein's work carries meaning that goes beyond their explicit narratives, and in their framing of a larger debate of political journalism, each shapes our understanding of different journalistic actors. Each also shows the back-and-forth between those whose contributions to the field revolve more

acutely around the heated discussion of a topic, and those involved more directly in reporting news events. This sense of contestation reinforces Van Dijk's assertion,

> that ideological analysis can never consist of only a formal analysis of text and talk: we always need to consider the meanings that express underlying ideological beliefs, as well as the context: who is speaking/writing about what, to whom, when, and with what goal.[33]

Seeing "the discourse" as a descriptor for a mediated space of contestation gives us a way to focus attention on the conversations *about* journalism, but it also complicates our thinking about language with news. It reminds us that not only should we weigh the role of explicit political rhetoric or ideological discourses and how they shape any given news texts, we need to also weigh how news conveys a subtler, implicit rhetoric or ideological discourse reflective of a larger social context. This encourages us to consider where the language of invective on one hand or insincerity on the other becomes one form of discursive currency, when raising or lowering the temperature around specific news topics. Another is found when peripheral actors adopt narrow curatorial roles, amplifying certain news stories and omitting or downplaying others. Whether either decision is made—to amplify a narrative, or smother it—is based not only on whether or not these stories align with actors' understanding of the priorities of journalism, but also whether or not they reinforce their own ideological positions.

For as much as paying attention to this meta-level contestation and how it is embedded in news complicates how we look at news, it nevertheless echoes traditional approaches to studying news as a discourse, including approaches that focus on the socialized nature of news. For understanding new types of peripheral, digital, journalism, it helps us move from seeing these media as novelties born of a digital age, to grappling with their use of politically attuned language within news as not simply conveying information, but also engaged in constructing the ideologies around that information.

This approach bears similarities to the argument put forward by Peter Van Aelst and Stefan Walgrave, who argue politicians see media as having two functions: as a space for exchanging information, and as an arena where political and ideological contests take place.[34] The information function refers to the ways politicians see news as something to monitor for new information (tracking political developments, learning about new events, and seeing what other politicians are up to) in order to actively employ that information in politically advantageous moments. This is tied to media's second function, the arena. In that function, politicians use media as a space for political competition, as a platform for

stand-taking but also for picking ideological fights through divisive rhetoric and attacks on their opponents.

The arena function is especially important in the contexts this book engages with. Given the animosity that has come to define polarized societies steeped in disagreement, it helps us conceptualize the competition over ideology and politics that we are witnessing, whether this is found in the speeches of politicians or the news media that report on them. This competition is not only between political actors and ideologies, but also between the news media that reflect these ideologies, as both "core" and "peripheral" journalists engage in an open competition over the suitability of different journalistic approaches, and a debate over what the field should aspire toward.

For peripheral journalistic actors, there is a further consideration. Van Aelst and Walgrave emphasize how the arena function is embraced in particular by "backbench" politicians in parliamentary settings. These lesser-known and less powerful politicians need to scrap and scrape for attention from news media and within the political arena. They use media to raise their profiles and, by attacking their opponents using aggressive discourse, they gain attention and with it political capital. Populists and extreme politicians like Geert Wilders in the Netherlands make this case for Van Aelst and Walgrave, and their use of insulting language within a combative discourse has proven an effective way to rally supporters and alienate opponents in the years since.

This dynamic is analogous to the status of peripheral journalistic actors. We could just as well look to their outsider status as akin to being a "backbench" group within the field of journalism, needing to fight against their lesser status and make do with the few resources they have. Using a sharper ideological discourse and more insulting language in their battle for attention, they draw focus not only to the stories they cover, but to the way they cover them. Just as the political field is shaped by competition over which political agendas will gain traction and the various forces that shape these contests, the same functions can be engaged by peripheral journalistic actors who depend on courting controversy and garnering attention from both other media and the public by doing so. Online, this attention is valuable—after all, virality and engagement might be new forms of journalistic capital[35]—boosting peripheral actors' standing in the field.

Journalism is all of ours, but is ALL of it all of ours?

To bring together our considerations about language in the context of journalism and news discourses in the context of political and ideological fragmentation, it is

worth reflecting on an *idea* of journalism, and specifically how journalism is an idea formed in the meeting up between the field of journalism and society. Referring to an idea of journalism I am drawing attention to how an idea of journalism— that is, an understanding of what journalism is, or should be—is constantly being promoted in the spaces where news media are engaged with by both journalists and the public. But, as an idea, it depends on articulation—on the idea of what journalism is being outlined, spoken about, and reinforced in news. For that reason, we should think of an idea of journalism as something that is not inherent to any society, rather it is socially constructed and then embedded within news itself. Both what journalism does and what it *should* do are constantly articulated in media spaces, through an ideological discourse that elevates some interpretations of what journalism should be and downplays others, alongside an equally ideological discourse that offers interpretations of what society should be, while downplaying others. News is a forum for public performances of journalism, just as it is a space for the public performance of journalism's place in society. News provides each of us with a feeling for what journalism is, one that builds over time to reassure us or disappoint us, and one that is both reinforced and challenged by developments in society. In other words, events in society shape each of our own understandings of journalism, just as journalism conveys to each of us a picture of what society is.[36] These ideas are made all the more tangible in the ways we encounter them through the media we interact with, but they are often less nuanced than we might hope for. In an age of polarization, they can suggest hardened divisions between different people and groups.

Following the social constructivist epistemology adopted in this book and drawing from Bourdieu, we should see an idea of journalism as something publicly constituted via news and within the spaces where we find news. This builds from a premise that to understand journalism, we should look at how it emerges and appears *in public* for all of us to see. In short, without the public-facing narratives of news, without demonstrating what journalism is in a public space, it is impossible for journalism to exist as a meaningful field in society. This focus allows us to think through the several things we are referring to—news as a product, journalism as a practice, and journalism as a larger societal field—and understand these as related to the same social processes of bringing information to a public that generally regards such things as "journalism."

It also informs how, where as scholars we might seek nuance, for many people—including many journalists— there "idea of journalism" is far less specific. People talk about journalism in sweeping generalizations as "the media," and implicate many of its best and worst actors in the same narratives of journalism's value, and more often in highlighting its shortcomings. We can see this broad-brush

treatment in a meta-discourse about "the media" in the wake of a $787.5 million settlement between Fox News and the Dominion Voting Systems.[37] Commenting on this outcome, the journalist Max Fischer reflected on the way people amalgamate media and journalism:

> I don't like the fact that people think of the media as a monolith and think of journalism as a monolith, but they do. And their perception of whether journalism as a concept works and can be trusted is tied up in how they perceive some of the largest actors in the media.[38]

This, Fischer argued, has been one of the challenges for news media trying to stand apart in the dynamic spaces of the internet, where lines between different types of news media—those we might consider "better" and those we might consider "worse"—have blurred into all-or-nothing categories. He prefaced the above comment, raised within a conversation about the risks and limits of suing media companies such as Fox, as a question of balancing freedoms and constraints: "If you are concerned about the future of journalism in this country and faith in journalism as an institution, maybe you want some harder guardrails to come up in the form of higher threats of liability." But implementing these guardrails, what we will later address as boundaries, has societal implications. Given our fractured politics, putting guardrails in place to separate Fox News from CNN, for example, is as like to spark grievance among Fox News supporters, for whom these boundaries would feed into an existing populist sense of elite control over information, as it is to build trust among others who might disregard Fox's claims that they are doing journalism. The same limits that promote good journalism to one audience, impinge upon independence and implicate a "cabal" of powerful actors to another.

Populist, journalist? Antagonistic journalism

From a discourse approach, we can look at how journalism and society have developed as interconnected ideas in part because they have concrete aspects to them. The analog newspaper, the digital podcast, or even the sight of a journalist doing their job (appearing on TV or seeing them reporting out in a city) give heft to the idea of journalism, just as lines painted on roads signal who drives where and the orderly way people in some societies automatically form a line establishes the order of whose turn is next at the service desk. Such behaviors and the physical and technological indicators that guide them give us a concrete sense of how society is ordered—or at least, they suggest how it is meant to be ordered.[39]

However, tangible examples such as these and what they convey have proven to be impermanent, and the meaning they embody is constantly being shaped and reshaped as they are interpreted within the different settings where we engage with them, including by different societal actors. An orderly queue can represent an ordered society, but in a different context it becomes a symbol of someone in power trying to control their people. Speed limits can be read as a practical reminder of safety within an ordered society, or they can be seen as a constraint on individual liberty and an overreaching government hand (for example, in 2024, the incoming right-wing Dutch government promised to raise highway speed limits back to 130 km/hour, in a populist retort to previous regulations).

Similarly, a newspaper can represent journalism to some, but its history and status can also be seen as the oppressive voice of "elites" to those who see the traditional press as serving those already in power. For every accusation that there is no daylight between the Republicans and Fox News in the United States, someone else will suggest a collaboration between the Democrats and CNN. The same can be said in the UK where the BBC is somehow both too conservative and too liberal, depending on who you ask. These examples are familiar to the point of cliché, but they are not the only examples of skepticism and mistrust in how citizens view their media. In the Netherlands, the public service news broadcaster the NOS has been under a barrage of right-wing and populist invective.[40] In 2020, NOS journalists were subjected to physical threats, harassment, and violence, so much so they started removing NOS logos from their vans to avoid unwanted attention.[41] BBC journalists have also been subjected to harassment and violence, with one reporter being attacked while preparing to report on air—an attack the European Federation of Journalists tied to heated political rhetoric directed toward the BBC.[42]

Even if these seem like extreme examples of journalism and politics colliding, what we need to carry with us is that these instances of violence in the extreme, and anti-institutional skepticism at least, haven't emerged from a vacuum. They are inseparable from the wider contexts of our fractured societies, and need to be reflected in how we think about journalism as a field that is socially constructed. This calls on us to consider the shape of society when considering the shaping of journalism. When it comes to reckoning with change and division, it should focus our thinking on how these ideas take hold, and whether they are strongly held. Whether ideas like a robust field of journalism or a functioning democratic society are seen as something either worth fighting, or worth fighting for.

This attention is reflected in Bourdieu's descriptions of the field as a "microcosm set within the social macrocosm,"[43] where if we find populism, division, animosity, and antagonism in society, we should expect to find it reflected

in journalism as well. And, for that matter, were we to find in society prominent narratives of community and coming together, or of pluralism rather than polarization, we would and should expect to find that in the field of journalism as well. Not in equal measure, but certainly in traces. And not always with the same effect, but also not insulated from the effects that divisive politics have had on a more fractured society.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the approach to studying news as a discourse about society and a discourse about journalism. As such, it offers its own discourse about journalism and its place in society. News discourses carry power because they play out in public, but news discourses also reveal how that power is constantly being negotiated. In the coming chapters, we will unpack this further, working through three propositions that, on the one hand, seem straightforward but, as I hope to highlight, also allow us to engage with an uneasy complexity for making sense of journalism in our contemporary societies as demonstrated through news.

First, journalism is a field that establishes its place in society through a public discourse. By speaking of journalism, journalism comes more fully into being. *This is reflected in how our very thinking about journalism is constantly being constructed through the ways we talk about it, including through news texts.*

Second, the journalistic field's authority and its boundaries are maintained through the ways journalists use discourses to both appeal to and construct their relationship with their publics. *This includes a public of other journalists, addressed through discourses of both critique and camaraderie within metajournalistic discourses.*

Third, when we extend this idea to explore how discourses of power and ideology are enacted on journalism's peripheries, we can find not only predictable reflections of a journalistic field in flux but also indications of how this can be understood alongside fragmentation in society. *Peripheral news discourses can reinforce pluralist and agonistic approaches to journalism, or populist and antagonistic ideologies that work against democratic and journalistic norms.*

Throughout the rest of this book, these three propositions will allow us to better understand how the same fractures that are rending our society can be found in the journalistic field. News, Lippmann suggests, offers our best window into that world. Within news, a discourse of society fractured along populist and polarized divisions can be conveyed to us, steeped in profound animosities between elites and the people. As they are engaged in a narrative of "who we are," constructions of journalism and of society all take place. Because news is inherently public, so

too is a news discourse that is shaped by these forces, and it is in news where these divisions, animosities, and senses of belonging are made public further shaping society.

For this reason, news can be approached as a space where we find the meeting up of journalism and the public. With that perspective, I turn now to look at news as the places *where* we talk about journalism to better understand *how* the ways we talk about journalism shape our understanding of what it is, but also shape our understanding of the society we live in and journalism's place within it. Speak highly of the field, of peers, of a group of journalists devoted to informing citizenries, and an idea of journalism as a normative good stands a better chance of being taken up. Critique or even malign the field, and it's far more likely that the fractures that have divided a sense of journalism online will widen, and a fragmented journalistic field will stay fractured.

Notes

1 Kahn 2022.
2 Redactie 2024.
3 Sullivan 2024b.
4 United Nations 2023.
5 Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019.
6 Glasser 2021.
7 Pew Research 2021.
8 Lippmann 1922.
9 Park 1940, 677.
10 Carey 1993.
11 Van Dijk 2011.
12 van Dijk 2009, 192.
13 Ibid.
14 Carvalho 2008, 168.
15 Blommaert 2015.
16 van Dijk 1988.
17 Fairclough 2016.
18 Ekman 2019; Krzyżanowski and Ledin 2017.
19 Van Dijk 2011, 397.
20 de Leeuw et al. 2020.
21 Fairclough 1992, 194.
22 Wodak 2015, 71.
23 Kaplan 1990, 202.
24 Bourdieu 2005.
25 Hartmann 2023.
26 Solway 2019.

27 There is a debate as to whether de Tocqueville's work, in its various editions, contains this line or a close approximation. The consensus is that it does not. For our purposes, that is less important than how it is being used here to re-cast the responsibility for any democratic decline, by asking whether democracy itself is an agent of its own undoing. However, it certainly does not appear as quoted in the Project Gutenberg digitization of *Democracy in America*, found here that was referred to in order to explore this discrepancy: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/815/815-h/815-h.htm.

28 Van Dijk 2013.

29 Smith 2015.

30 Eldridge 2021.

31 Maggie Haberman [@maggieNYT] 2018.

32 Rebecca Fishbein 2018.

33 Van Dijk 2011, 199.

34 Van Aelst and Walgrave 2016.

35 Lindblom, Lindell, and Gidlund 2022.

36 Lippmann 1922.

37 Dominion sued Fox News and its parent company for defamation after Fox News journalists and commentators for falsely accusing Dominion of election fraud in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. The case was settled before trial.

38 Crooked Media 2023.

39 Latour 1990.

40 Geert Wilders [@geertwilderspvv] 2020.

41 NOS Nieuws 2020.

42 EFJ 2020.

43 Bourdieu 2005, 32.

44 Ibid., 396.

Metajournalistic discourses: Expanding the aperture

Consider these four stories. The first, from *Columbia Journalism Review* is headlined "The mess at G/O Media: *Deadspin* edition."[1] In it, Jon Allsop details the challenges faced by the site *Deadspin* as it tangled with the editorial director of its parent company, G/O media, who admonished *Deadspin*'s journalists to "stick to sports" and to tamp down their political coverage and commentary.[2] The article goes on to discuss how media owners "imposing targets that have little to do with journalistic quality" had constrained the potential of sites like *Deadspin*, sites that had established their reputation in a digital space as honest, unflinching journalistic voices.[3]

Writing on a similar theme at *The New Republic*, Alex Pareene offers an obituary for sites like *Deadspin* and a similar venture, *Splinter*, under the headline "The Death of the Rude Press."[4] Pareene bemoans the "culling" of alternative news sites bought up by venture capitalists and details the fate of several similar ventures. He argues the shuttering of *Splinter*, *Deadspin*, and other digital news media that mixed an abrasive voice and a rude style deprived the field of journalism of an important voice. Or as I would argue, the lack of rude, abrasive, and critical voices deprives the field of the constructive agonistic and constructive critique these journalists offer. These sites showed Pareene—a former *Gawker* journalist and editor himself—that "writers whose insufficient deference to power rendered them unemployable by *The New York Times* still had, until recently, hope of finding

employment elsewhere." In his description, we see echoes of Ashley Feinberg's rec-
ognition of the lack of access to "certain people and certain places" that this style
of journalism engendered, as explored in Chapter 3.

Over at Harvard's *Nieman Lab*, this development is captured in a quote from
the departing editor-in-chief of *Deadspin*, Megan Greenwell, who wrote in her
farewell post that "The tragedy of digital media … is that the people posing as
the experts know less about how to make money than their employees, to whom
they won't listen."[5] Writing for *Nieman Lab,* Christine Schmidt describes these
decisions as choices made by owners interested in profit, "without having an actual
plan for quality journalism."

The fourth article comes much later, from Drew Magary. Writing on *Defector*,
in a piece headlined "We are living in the shitposter economy," Magary argues that
once-respected critical journalistic voices like Andrew Sullivan and Matt Taibbi
have diminished themselves by turning toward reactionary posts, in order to fill "a
massive online power vacuum in a country where the line between being a leader
and being a public shithead is indistinct."[6] More to the point, Magary describes
how prominent voices who first showed there was potential for a new emboldened
form of journalism online—the types of news found on *Deadspin,* but also in Matt
Taibbi's previous financial reporting and Glenn Greenwald's reporting on poli-
tics and transparency—had lost their way. In a biting critique of the development
of political commentary and newsletter journalism, he describes these writers as
betraying their audiences, audiences that will only become more isolated and in-
sular as a result:

> every souring writer who makes the leap from a newsroom—where they were subject
> to oversight and at least exposed to the thoughts and viewpoints of their colleagues—
> to their own one-person publishing fiefdom will end up inevitably pulling their paying
> (and thus dedicated) readers further into their increasingly nonsensical world.[7]

Each of these examples reflects the sort of public conversation taking place on an
almost daily basis in the many spaces where journalism is being talked about. They
offer the meta-narrative around news and represent the discursive arena in which
journalistic actors engage in a contest over what good journalism is, and what bad
journalism is too. They come from a traditional news magazine, *The New Republic*,
and from two trade publications that make journalism their "beat," *Columbia
Journalism Review* (CJR) and *Nieman Lab*. *CJR* has been doing this since 1961
from their base at Columbia University, and *Nieman Reports* (with which *Nieman
Labs* is affiliated) has done so since 1947 at Harvard University.

The last one, however, is clearly different in both tone and approach. Magary's
commentary appears on *Defector*, a writer-owned cooperative and news site that

primarily covers sports and culture. Not only is *Defector* in line with what *Deadspin* itself presented (and what is being lost in the "death of the rude press" as Pareene eulogizes). *Defector* emerged out of the ashes of the Gawker Media group and a mass resignation from the *Deadspin* sports site,[8] carrying into this new iteration the same critical reflections on media that had been a feature of *Deadspin*'s reporting.[9] For the average sports fan who might stumble across *Defector* when looking online for coverage of their favorite sports, they might not expect to also find a commentary on journalism. Regular readers might not be so surprised. For understanding agonism, these commentaries are crucial. It is through them that we gain an understanding of journalism and how journalists understand journalism. In their diversity, they also show how journalism is understood differently by both mainstream, traditional journalists and emerging, critical, peripheral journalistic actors.

Yet, as the analysis below will make clear, journalism scholars who study these sorts of public conversations about journalism have largely overlooked media like *Defector* or *Deadspin* or their journalists, not to mention any number of other peripheral news sites. For trying to assess the public-facing conversations being had about journalism and its status in our contemporary societies, perhaps they should. After all, for regular readers of *Defector* (and *Deadspin* previously), Magary's commentary is not only not unusual, it is a recurring feature. When he and others comment on the news, they mark these stories with the article tag "JOURNALISMISM."[10] Journalism about journalism—a metajournalistic discourse.

Metajournalistic discourse

Metajournalistic discourses are often and straightforwardly described as journalism about journalism.[11] Conceptually, metajournalistic discourses provide a framework for addressing the ways journalism *content* engages in a discourse about journalism *practice*.[12] This could be a media criticism column in a newspaper that reflects on the performance of political journalists covering populists, or an editorial reflecting on the challenges in reporting on the presidency in an age of social media, or even an "explainer" that outlines the work being done within investigative reporting projects. They can be celebratory, highlighting the accomplishments of journalists.[13] They can also be exculpatory, demonstrating in detail the rationale for controversial choices made in publishing news.[14] They can also be defensive, highlighting the positive contributions journalists make in the face of undue criticism, including politicized attacks.[15]

Functionally, metajournalistic discourses are a means for journalists to reflect on the work of themselves and others.[16] It is through these discourses that journalists

position themselves as working in line with journalism's dominant vision, and how well they see others fitting that same vision.[17] They are directed toward the public, where in discussing what journalism does and why they emphasize how journalists contribute to society. They have been located in specific "narratives of newswork," where journalists outline in their reporting the challenges that they overcame to report big investigative stories.[18] They have been found in coverage memorializing shuttered newspapers, and remembering former colleagues.[19] They have also provided a space for understanding journalists' reactions to changes that the field has faced, including technological changes.[20] Overall, metajournalistic discourses provide a means for journalists to present an idealized understanding of what journalism is, hoping others will also understand journalism in these same ideal terms, within a sender-receiver communicative relationship between the journalists and their public.

Matt Carlson, who published his landmark conceptualization of metajournalistic discourses in 2016, argues these discourse can be understood within three complementary theoretical and conceptual perspectives: the discursive construction of journalism as a community of practice,[21] field theory and the journalistic field,[22] and boundary work, including its role in defining a journalistic core and periphery.[23] In each of these perspectives, language plays a critical role. First, insofar as we see journalism as a community, it is one that is built around the expression of shared practices, the articulation of shared routines, and the reinforcement of shared norms through language that elevates journalism's social status. These are made apparent through language that defends certain practices as legitimate, reinforcing community belonging among those who adopt these practices, and distances others.[24] Second, the formation of fields in general and the journalistic field in particular rests in part on how this definition via contrast is established, where the field's *nomos* is reinforced through the articulation of belonging and non-belonging to the journalistic field. From a field theory perspective, we can see principles of journalistic vision articulated through the discursive interactions embedded in news itself, where principles of division between journalism and non-journalism are further reinforced through the discursive choices made in describing journalists and non-journalists and their practices.[25] Third, in service of journalistic boundary work, metajournalistic discourses provide the means for journalists to make clear their acceptance or rejection of new types of journalist, journalistic practice, or journalistic propositions through the language they use to describe these novel developments.[26] Describe a digital journalist as a blogger, and this lessens the likelihood their work will be seen as journalism.[27] Describe their use of subjective, opinionated, language as sensationalist, and it's less likely these practices will be understood as acceptable.[28] However, describe these

media as sharing the same journalistic ambitions as more traditional journalists, and that similarity signals a shared sense of journalistic belonging to the public.[29]

These three perspectives also allow us to consider the role that news discourses can play in uniting and dividing publics, and further give us a structure to understand how the narratives about journalism being conveyed to those publics might shape how they can understand journalism; they convey the range of possibilities, and the possible alternatives, that the public can navigate when trying to evaluate journalism and its societal standing. More importantly, due to their public-facing nature—appearing in the spaces where news is consumed and where journalism encountered—they show how metajournalistic discourses provide space for both praise and critique of journalism's status in our society. By "bringing the undiscussed into discussion," they render a conversation about journalism all the more visible.[30]

A metajournalistic community

To begin with how metajournalistic discourses establish a sense of belonging to a journalistic community, we can focus on how news serves an important bonding function within a coterie of journalists that is "united by its shared discourse and collective interpretations of key public events."[31] Carlson draws on Zelizer's notion of "interpretive communities" to make this point, outlining the role of discourse within news texts as a space of validation and legitimation for and by journalistic peers. In this focus, news texts become spaces where reporting practices are validated, and spaces where journalism's societal contributions are legitimated.[32] This largely points to the way an in-group of journalistic peers build their community around shared practices of legitimation. However, more recently research has also found metajournalistic discourses in the reporting of traditional journalists whose own reporting was based on the groundwork laid by peripheral journalists (for example, following up on a leaked dossier on *BuzzFeed News*, or a story about corporate intervention in local news on *Deadspin*).[33] When journalists at the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* followed up on these initial news stories, they also legitimated this peripheral newswork within the larger journalistic community, signaling their contributions as valid, acknowledging peripheral actors' journalistic performances as, in so many words, *legitimate journalism*.

The impact of these discourses goes in two directions. Journalism scholarship has often understood news as a discourse directed toward two audiences—an audience of journalists, and a general audience. As discourses that address the first of these, metajournalistic discourses can be read as speech-acts directed toward

other journalists. Vos and Thomas, and Zelizer before them, describe these as key processes of journalistic identity formation.[34] They argue journalists are highly attentive to this audience of peers, for whom news itself is a forum for demonstrating their in-group, peer belonging. This is all the more evident when we look at spaces where journalists are both peers and public, including trade magazines such as *Columbia Journalism Review* in the United States or *Journalist* in Germany.[35] In these spaces, metajournalistic discourses convey the stance the "speaking" journalist takes on a particular news development or journalistic controversy so that the "listening" journalist can understand how they are being addressed, and how they are meant to react. Through these discourses, journalists present "explicit interpretive processes justifying or challenging these practices and their practitioners."[36] However, these carry greater weight depending on how they are voiced, and who voices them. When the highly regarded journalist and media critic Margaret Sullivan criticizes journalists for covering politics as a "horse race" in the *Guardian*,[37] it is both more likely to be heard and more likely to be listened to by the journalistic community than when this is raised by the lower profile, but well-regarded, journalistic blogger, Brian Beutler, who makes a very similar critique.[38] Even if both have established journalism identities, and both convey the same points, the difference in their potential impact seems apparent.

However, beyond trade magazines and media criticism columns, metajournalistic discourses address both their audience of peers and their public audiences at once, and even the most widely oriented "general" news that is meant for a broad, general public audience is also one that is directed toward a narrow, specific audience of journalistic peers. As such, when journalists engage in community-building narratives for one another (noting what is "good" or "bad" journalism), the same descriptions of "good" journalism simultaneously can help define journalism for the general public. Put differently, as a community-building discourse that is carried out publicly—within news, itself—metajournalistic discourses reaffirm a sense that news is the collective work of journalism for both peers and publics. This includes in coverage that seek to rebuild a sense of journalism's service within the community; for example, when it comes in the wake of shortcomings and journalistic failings that have marred the reputation of journalism itself.[39] It is in consideration of these larger forces where we now turn to reflect on metajournalistic discourses within the interactive forces shaping journalism as a field.

Metajournalistic field dynamics

Within the framework of field theory, metajournalistic discourses should be seen as trying to achieve two goals: demonstrating journalists' autonomy in determining the shape of their own field in the face of challenges to that authority, and demonstrating journalists' competence as members of the field. This is achieved by journalists showing their ability to incorporate the field's societal contributions within their work.[40] From a field perspective, metajournalistic discourses provide a way for journalists to construct a dominant vision—or *nomos*—of the journalistic field, both for themselves and for their publics. Here too these discourses are approached as speech-acts imbued with power and performed in ways meant to draw distinctions between "dominants" within the field, and "pretenders" seeking entry.[41] Within news texts that emphasize normative journalistic values, metajournalistic discourses emerge as a public performance of journalism's specific *doxa*[42] and a further performance of the *habitus* journalists have been socialized into.[43]

Similar to their community-shaping function, for the journalistic field it is the public-facing nature of metajournalistic discourses that make them more impactful than private discourses between individual journalists would be. While a round-table discussion or even a one-to-one conversation among journalists could develop productive responses to the challenges journalists face when covering problematic politics, these discussions are inherently limited to their participants and audiences. Metajournalistic discourse found in spaces of print or broadcast news make that conversation both wider and more robust, directed toward both the audience of journalistic peers and the wider general public.

For both of these audiences, the publicness of a conversation about what journalism is and what it should be offers a guide to interpreting the nature of the journalistic field. First, these discourses orient other journalists toward the prevailing norms and practices of the field, and the values that are considered in-line with its *nomos*. When news texts outline the importance of certain journalistic values such as serving democracy, elevating these in laudatory discourses such as "democracy dies in darkness," they reinforce journalism's normative ideals and offer these as a beacon for other journalists to follow.[44] Second, within discourses that warn journalists of the risk of failing to live up to this dominant vision, the *nomos* is more firmly established by communicating a sense of *division* and offering audiences an interpretive framework for navigating what is journalism and what is non-journalism in a more complicated digital media landscape. For example, in a BBC story that profiles the hyperpartisan website *Breitbart* as "Donald Trump's

favourite news site," by the second paragraph they have already qualified its head-line description of *Breitbart* as a news site by pointing out it "has been accused by some as being a hate site."[45]

Metajournalistic discourses directed toward preserving the field also do so by elaborating specific practices and norms that fall outside the field's dominant vision, such as deception or privacy violations.[46] When this occurs, key tenets of field belonging are emphasized in discourses that reinforce journalism's otherwise-unspoken *doxic* values, including by demonstrating—to both their audiences, peers and public—which practices can be seen as journalistic, and which cannot. Conceptualizing field-formation processes as forms of discursive interaction between journalists and others allows us to think more fully about the ways in which talking about journalism gives us purchase when trying to understand an otherwise-abstract idea of what journalism is, and how the journalistic field is being shaped, including how it is being fractured.

Metajournalistic boundaries

Within journalism studies, the third conceptual framework to address here is very much tied to the second. For a field defined in large part through the contests and conversations that shape its boundaries and how (and whether) these are confirmed by others in society, metajournalistic discourses provide the public a window into those conversations. They also provide an opportunity to agree or disagree with their outcomes. These become all the more profound in moments of internal and external pressure. Internal pressures include scandals such as instances of sexual harassment or plagiarism, failures to follow journalistic ethics, or when a journalist goes against the prevailing norms of practice.[47] Any one of these might lead someone to see the field's boundaries as in need of reinforcement, not only for the field (to rebuild order) but also for the public (to rebuild trust). In these moments, metajournalistic discourses offer a means for members of the field to reinforce belonging by marginalizing "bad actors."

Carlson and Lewis describe expansion, expulsion, or protection of autonomy as three practices that journalists engage in when evaluating whether or not new or deviant journalistic practitioners, journalistic practices, and journalistic propositions (or norms) fit within the field's boundaries (Table 5.1). To put this simply, when a new actor describes themselves as a journalist, others in the journalistic field respond to that description. When their reaction is positive, the field expands its boundaries to welcome the new actor. When the response is negative, the field expels the would-be newcomer. This has become a frequent occurrence in a digital

Table 5.1: Typology of Journalistic Boundary Work[104]

	Expansion	Expulsion	Protection of Autonomy
Participants	*Actors accepted as journalists*	*Actors rejected as journalists*	*Actors outside of journalism perceived as threats*
Practices	*Actions accepted as journalistic*	*Actions rejected as journalistic*	*Actions outside of journalism perceived as threats*
Propositions	*Norms/beliefs/ideas accepted as journalistic*	*Norms/beliefs/ideas rejected as journalistic*	*Norms/beliefs/ideas perceived as threats to journalism*

age, with bloggers dismissed as keyboard warriors, transparency activist-journalists labeled hackers, and digital tabloids described as gossip and rumor mongers—all of which expel these media actors from the field.[48] However, journalism's boundaries are not fixed, and discourses about journalism are not determinative. Bloggers can join elite traditional newspapers, journalist-activists can lead international investigative journalism networks, and journalists from digital tabloids can go on to write for major news magazines.[49]

As with field formation, under the concept of boundary work metajournalistic discourses engage in a public-facing dialogue between the journalist(s) producing a piece of news and the multiple audiences of that content. Boundary narratives can raise (or engage with) journalistic concerns at three levels—who among the newcomers counts as a journalist, what about their approach to journalism counts as legitimate journalism practice, and which of their news values are acceptable within the journalistic field.[50] These levels become important conceptually as they provide a means for seeing how journalism (as a field, or set of practices) is understood in a given context, but they bear special significance in terms of journalism's ability to maintain its status in the face of economic and societal upheaval. Faced with those latter two concerns, boundaried discourses offer symbolic demonstrations of journalism's authority, its capacity for self-regulation, and its normative value to society. When drawn narrowly, they limit the scope of who is granted journalistic legitimacy to a smaller set of actors and institutions (often traditional news organizations, such as newspapers, broadcasters, and their online operations).

This constrains journalistic authority to those who already have the greatest claim to journalism's history and traditions, and the legitimacy that comes with

that legacy (this might remind us of Mouffe's concern over setting the boundaries of legitimate, democratic debate to those already invited to the debate). When drawn broadly, however, a broader field and wider set of boundaries diffuse that same authority across a large set of actors (e.g., peripheral actors, independent and entrepreneurial news ventures, and other alternative media). This has the effect of diluting the power that comes with being recognized as a journalist; by sharing it more widely it makes that authority less potent, and makes being a journalist a position with less status. But that same widening also raises the potential for a more pluralistic, diverse, journalistic field that better resonates with the societies in which journalism operates.

Given these not-insignificant implications, we need to consider how metajournalistic discourses that demonstrate journalistic boundaries are—in the traditions of understanding the performative power of discourse—never neutral. More to the point, they are engaged in the contests inherent in defining fields of power in ways that serve those already in power.[51] Rodney Benson draws from Bourdieu's study of the literary field in *The Rules of Art* to frame how such distinctions are established between those who see themselves as legitimate (and who have been afforded this legitimacy by law, tradition, and reputation)[52] and those who are seen outside that history. He invokes Bourdieu to describe these tensions as battles between "dominant" members of the journalistic field and "pretenders" who are seeking recognition.[53]

I return to this point from field theory because it has a strong similarity to Thomas Gieryn's conceptualization of boundary work, specifically in how he describes the way professional scientists distinguish themselves from non-scientists (including both amateurs and charlatans). Gieryn describes boundaries as a form of social shaping, one that takes place within contests over epistemic authority between those who have traditionally held that authority (professionals) and those who would also like access to it (amateurs).[54] In both cases, while history plays a role in these contests (e.g., the legacies of newspapers and other forms of traditional journalism, or the educational and institutional markers of legitimate science) and that history adds greater weight to the dominant's position, history is not prescriptive, and it cannot be seen as a foregone conclusion that a predecessor can keep the newcomer at bay. When joining Gieryn's perspective to Mouffe's and Bourdieu's theories outlined in chapter 3, within boundary work frameworks we should see history as *guiding* the discursive construction of journalism's boundaries, but it cannot be seen as *determining* how journalism is understood or how it will change. Other social agents and other social forces also have a say in its construction.

As Gieryn elaborates, because boundaries are not fixed differences between actors, they should not be seen as doors to a club one either joins permanently

or never at all. Rather, "boundaries are drawn and redrawn in flexible, historically changing and sometimes ambiguous ways."[55] Carlson and Lewis describe Gieryn's vision of boundaries as fervently anti-essentialist, and remind us boundary work is a social process that shapes journalistic legitimacy. Bourdieu recognizes a similar process in his description of *dispositions*,[56] which he uses to describe how micro-level internal factors within the field as well as (anticipated) macro-level societal factors shape a wider understanding of what journalism is.[57] At both micro- and macro-levels, battles take place over who is able to claim the epistemic authority of being a journalist.

Boundary work, therefore, should not be seen simply as a battle between "dominants" and "pretenders" over what journalism is and who is a journalist. It needs to also be understood as a contest between journalists and would-be journalists over who gets to *say* what journalism is and who is a journalist.[58] This dynamic is apparent in studies that have located metajournalistic commentary in practice, if not always adopting this label, in the boundary-challenging discourses of peripheral actors like *WikiLeaks*. Though the orientation of critique is essentially reversed, within "media-to-media discourses of belonging" digital journalists like those working with *WikiLeaks* have insisted they are doing journalism and push back against boundaries that would exclude them (asserting their right to *say* they are a journalist, in contrast to those who would say otherwise).[59] Metajournalistic discourses function in a similar manner to what we have seen in other processes of boundary work, including paradigm repair, when digital journalists critique traditional ones for excluding their contributions, showing where these mainstream news media draw boundaries to exclude news emerging from peripheral actors simply because they are not traditionally defined as journalism, despite operating with similar ambitions.[60]

To summarize this third focus, journalistic boundaries are constructed within metajournalistic news texts when we see different actors engage in contests over who and what counts as journalism. The boundaries articulated in these moments should be seen as a public manifestation of ongoing socialization processes that shape the field, influenced by an array of contingencies that factor into how we think about boundaries as contests for epistemic authority. These considerations include whether boundaries can be clearly and permanently demarcated (which Gieryn would reject), and how changes within society including technological developments need to be considered when reevaluating boundaries (which Gieryn would encourage).

For journalism, this involves acknowledging that the field's boundaries can expand when new actors and new practices make valid claims on journalism's epistemic authority, while also recognizing that expanding the field's boundaries has

implications for journalism's existing "experts." It also calls on us to recognize that any reallocation of journalistic authority affects those who have long enjoyed that authority (i.e., traditional journalists), and we should expect a degree of backlash from traditional journalists who, understandably, double down on what makes their work distinct from these newcomers.[61]

As we observe these discursive processes, the anticipated reaction to losing power should not be seen as the same as a substantial distinction over journalistic acumen. We also need to remember that past outcomes of boundary contests are indicators but not predictors of future results. Traditional journalists have a leg up in the competitions defining the field's boundaries, but they do not have the final say. Returning to the ongoing processes that shape the field, this means that in each historical moment these battles must play out, over and over again, to confront each new "pretender" that emerges to contest the dominance of the existing field and claim journalistic credibility.[62]

Finally, for journalism as a field in society that is publicly constituted, it is crucial for its social positioning that these contests play out in a public arena—in the spaces of news. This is not only because news itself is as a conversation about the world that takes place in public rather than private.[63] It is also because it *depends* on that conversation being paid attention to, and that it is seen as the work of a set of actors who have specific expertise and authority.[64] Ambiguity over what journalism is, if that ambiguity were to become widespread among the public, would present significant risk to a journalistic field. It is on par with other political threats or the harm done by its own failures.[65] Crises of viability—where declining trust, eroded legitimacy, and weakened economic position—are amplified by public crises of legitimacy, where a blurred boundary that fails to distinguish between cavalier gossip bloggers and substantive reporting by journalists, for example, pose a risk to journalists' information and news authority. Open the boundaries too widely, and there are too many journalists, each with a little less power. Faced with this prospect, journalists are incentivized to have a public contest—sometimes a *very* public contest—over the boundaries of journalism, one they hope will be seen by the very audiences they hope to retain.

Gaps in metajournalistic research

To understand how these public-facing contests over journalistic belonging have been understood, we need to address step into the existing literature for a snapshot of how scholars have understood the role of discourse in constructing the journalistic field. This helps us grasp the foundation that has been built so far and whether

there are gaps in our understanding of the socialized, discursive, construction of the field that need our attention.

On the one hand this is an obvious next step toward refining the analytical frameworks that follow. On the other, it is a reaction to what became apparent while developing the arguments within this book. In reading and writing around these topics, it quickly appeared, at least anecdotally, that scholars' efforts to understand the construction of the field of journalism through metajournalistic discourses—including my own—had overlooked where these discourses appear in the work of an outspoken and critical journalistic periphery.

To get a firmer sense of this, I conducted a meta-analysis of journalism studies research that uses the metajournalistic discourse concept. Using EBSCOHOST's Communication and Mass Media Complete database, I searched for "metajourn*" and gathered publications up through September 2023. This was not restricted to any particular set of journals, and this initial search returned 162 articles focused on the topic of metajournalism in some fashion. The sample was then reduced to 77 after screening for duplicates,[66] removing articles that were off-topic (e.g., using metajournalistic discourses as a concept to assess a non-journalistic object of study), and removing conference papers that were clear pre-cursors to journal articles, etc.

Basic details were catalogued including year, journal, and keywords. From there, a close reading of each article was used to identify the object of study (e.g., traditional media, newspaper texts, a radio personality, a jury for a journalistic prize), the focus of each study (e.g., whether a study focuses on coverage of a specific news event or a specific debate over new types of journalism practice), the methods being used, and the national setting where the study was conducted. Finally, two key dimensions were identified, based on these close readings. The first of these is the *direction of discourses* (e.g., inward, where the metajournalistic discourses analyzed offer reflections on the state of the journalistic field and its practices for the field itself; or, outward where they respond to external challenges coming from "beyond" its boundaries). The second of these evaluates the *discursive dynamics* that are identified within the analysis or the frameworks used (e.g., boundary work, paradigm repair, community-building, or responding to new entrants/change). This meta-analysis is guided by the following question:

> *RQ:*   *How has journalism studies research engaged with the concept of metajournalistic discourses?*
>
> *SQ1:*   *What media are being analyzed, and by which methods, in studies of metajournalistic discourses?*

> *SQ2:* *In which directions are these discourses oriented within a speaker–receiver relation-ship, and which discursive dynamics do they represent?*

As the meta-analysis below reinforces, a significant amount of journalism schol-arship has addressed metajournalistic discourses that emerge in contexts that re-inforce the traditional authority of established journalistic routines and practices by responding to citizen, social, and other "digital" developments. Sometimes these developments are seen as an existential threat (e.g., when data-driven exposés give the appearance that the work of journalism has been "made easier" by technologies).[67] Other times these developments are seen as muddying the distinc-tion between information-sharing and journalism (e.g., when a metajournalistic discourse of editorial routines or verification is employed to distinguish between "leaking" and the journalistic work that goes into "reporting").[68] Scholars have also asked whether these developments are seen as specter of ominous change or an opportunity for journalistic empowerment.[69]

Findings

To begin with basic descriptions of the sample of 77 articles, the analyzed studies are overwhelmingly found in journals devoted to journalism research (47 articles), with the journal *Journalism Studies* hosting most of this research (25). The overview of articles summarized by publication is presented below, listing all journals that published two or more articles (Table 5.2).

Table 5.2: Articles by Publication

Publication	No. of Articles
Journalism Studies	25
Journalism Practice	12
Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism	10
International Journal of Communication	8
New Media & Society	3
Journal of Media Ethics	2
Journal & Mass Communication Quarterly	2
Total Other (journals with only one article)	15
Total	**77**

As a simple measure of prominence, by accounting for instances when the root metajourn* is used as a keyword or in titles, it was mentioned as a keyword in four of five articles published before Matt Carlson's 2016 *Communication Theory* piece was published. This publication is treated as a threshold moment for analysis, as it was this piece that gave this concept its prominence. Of those five articles, three were written by Carlson himself. After 2106, some form of "metajourn*" was used as a keyword in 58 articles. While metajourn* does not appear in titles before Carlson's 2016 piece, some variation of the term is found in 25 article titles thereafter.

Objects of study

Within each article, the first point of analysis is the *object of study*. This refers to what is being analyzed for the presence metajournalistic discourses, determined based on the content, text, or other material that is being sampled and analyzed within the article. The *objects of studies* are cataloged in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3: Objects of Study

Object of Study	Occurrences
Newspaper articles/online news texts	23
Trade Press (e.g., *Columbia Journalism Review, Nieman Lab*)	16
Journalists (e.g., interviews, personal narratives)	7
Editorials/Opinion Writing	6
NA (e.g., conceptual; non-empirical work)	3
Journalistic Field (e.g., studies of journalism within nations)	3
Blogs/Digital Forums (e.g., GitHub)	3
Radio Personalities, Broadcasts, or Podcasts	3
Popular Television, TV Talk Shows	2
Media History: Archives	2
TV News Broadcasts	2
Social Media Posts/Comments	2
Audiences	1
Legal Documents (e.g., Amicus Briefs)	1
Documentarian's Work (Case study)	1
Newsrooms (ethnography)	1
Journalism Prize Juries	1
Total	77

Right away, there is a clear dominance of research that looks to understand how traditional journalistic voices engage in metajournalistic discourses. Within the sample, 23 studies base their analysis on newspaper articles or discourses found in online news texts from traditional news sources (i.e., the web presence of established news organizations like newspapers or broadcasters). A further 16 articles focused on metajournalistic discourses in the pages of the "trade press," including *Columbia Journalism Review* and *Nieman Lab* (whether referring to their print or web versions). As publications devoted to writing about journalism and the pressures the traditional field faces, these are fruitful and obvious points of attention. However, this also reinforces my initial perception that our understanding of metajournalistic discourses has been developed within a narrow focus on texts produced by journalistic actors who have already amassed significant power in society to define the field according to their own terms.

To go further into this observation, 39 of the 77 analyzed studies look at articles from traditional and trade media, and a further 19 look at either other forms of traditional news content (e.g., 6 editorials) or engage with traditional journalists themselves (e.g., from interviews, observations, and studies of broadcasts and archives). A far lesser amount of attention is paid to nontraditional spaces. Even more notably, some of these objects of research do not seem especially in line with the concept of metajournalistic discourses and its attention to "*public* expressions evaluating news texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their reception."[70] Within studies using interviews, ethnographic, and focus group methodologies for example, these analyze private and semi-private perceptions of journalism from journalists by asking them directly, from audiences as expressed in small group conversations, and within newsrooms as observed. Their publicness is minimal, and while the insights offered are a productive approach to understanding the nature of conversations about journalism, because they are made in a less-than public forum the impact they have on wider understandings of journalism is lesser and the opportunities for expanding beyond traditional definers of the field is also lesser.

Even as an initial snapshot of the overall picture of this research, these observations reflect clear limitations to our understanding how the field is being formed in the context of digital expansion and through metajournalistic discourses. By centering an understanding of metajournalistic discourses as a form of community, field, or boundary-defining practice primarily on Western, traditional, and established voices within the field, it overlooks where these same discourses might be engaged with by nontraditional actors—not only peripheral journalists, but also other societal actors who engage in a public debate over the practitioners, practices, and norms of journalism outside the mainstream media spotlight.

Looking further into the selection of objects of studies, there is also a glaring absence of research addressing discourses emerging from born-digital media, including social media or websites unaffiliated with traditional or trade media. Of the 77 articles, only two look at social media comments or posts; one of these looks at how Kenyans used Twitter to critique CNN's representations of Kenya in the news,[71] the other at prominent Ghanaian social media actors' Facebook commentary on journalistic shortcomings.[72] Other studies that look at digital content—blogs and forums—focus, instead, on how these are being used by traditional actors or by "intralopers," as a category of boundary spanners who work within and for newsrooms (e.g., metrics, data, and analytics software specialists hired by newsrooms).[73] It is worth noting as well that the sample is dominated by research examining media from the United States or focusing on journalism in the United States, with 50 studies addressing metajournalistic discourses in U.S. news media or newsrooms. Another ten studies focus on journalism within countries in Europe. While on its own a dominance of research studying how traditional journalists discuss their field is not problematic, nor is a U.S. focus inherently flawed, it reveals a second clear blind spot in our scholarly attention.

Methodologies

Assessing methodologies used, it becomes clear and perhaps unsurprising that metajournalistic discourses are primarily analyzed through qualitative methods focused on texts. The dominant methods used are textual (21), discourse (14), and content analysis (9), comprising nearly two-thirds of the total sample (a total of 47 articles). Curiously, despite metajournalistic discourses being a fundamentally critical discourse that constructs journalism's place in society by outlining the societal role and power of journalists, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is only explicitly applied in three studies—the reasons for these could vary, from methodological familiarity to epistemological considerations that CDA insist upon, and such motivations are not made explicit in the articles (Table 5.4).

Table 5.4: Methods

Method	Occurrences
Textual Analysis	21
Discourse Analysis	14
Content Analysis	9
interview analysis	7
Case Study	5
Qualitative Content Analysis	4
Close Reading	2
Conceptual	3
Thematic Analysis	3
Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)	3
Discussion Analysis	1
Document Analysis	1
Impressionistic Analysis	1
Ethnography	1
Natural Language Processing	1
Discussion Groups/Reception Analysis	1
Total	**77**

Direction

In terms of direction, I am concerned with the discursive interactions these forms of speech-act are engaged in. If we are assessing metajournalistic discourses as an essential dialogue between different social actors, then the orientation of those discourses either toward other journalists or toward perceived "outsiders" becomes

Table 5.5: Direction

Direction	Occurrence
Inward (e.g., examining the field, journalistic performances, scandals)	50
Outward (e.g., responding to "threats" and/or technological change)	18
Reflective/Case Study	5
Conceptual	3
Historical Reflection	1
Total	**77**

instructive. This level of analysis also allows us to see how often within extant research these discourses are being studied for how they are oriented outwardly toward perceived threats (e.g., social media companies challenging journalism's business model, but also political actors attacking journalists).

Direction is understood within a speaker-receiver relationship, and as the orientation of dialogue between the discursive subject (the "speaking" journalist/m that is understood as the source of the discourses being analyzed) and the object of those discourses (the journalist/m being "spoken about," or the threat/pressure being addressed). These are outlined below (Table 5.5).

Analysis reinforces the initial observation that a high degree of attention is paid to how traditional members of the journalistic field are talking about themselves—this is likely a correlate of the initial choices to focus on traditional and trade media as objects of study. That said, these are not (always) navel-gazing conversations. Rather, the findings in research show these inward dialogues reflect a natural outcome of metajournalistic discourses that are devoted to community formation, an expected engagement in the discursive construction of journalistic boundaries, and the public performances of the field's *doxa* and *nomos*.[74]

Inward-facing metajournalistic discourses reinforce the field's structures and preserve its dimensions. Of those articles analyzed, 50 show how traditional news media are adapting to *internal* threats, such as industry or field-level challenges like financial challenges,[75] or to instances of reputational harm caused by other journalists.[76] Where metajournalistic discourses are oriented outwardly, as is the case in 18 of these studies, they are made in response to external threats, including extreme, politicized peripheral media,[77] and political developments that threaten the freedom that institutional journalistic actors have to practice journalism.[78]

Dynamic

Direction becomes all the more salient when turning to the final aspect of analysis: The dynamic of metajournalistic discourse that is most apparent in each of these studies. Shown below in Table 5.6, the prevailing dynamic across this research is boundary work, found when metajournalistic discourses directed toward external actors or non-journalistic practices police the edges of the journalistic field.[79] This was followed by paradigm repair (17), a concept closely related to boundary work.[80] From there, dynamics of community-building and field construction were found in nine and five studies, respectively, as the other two conceptual foundations for metajournalistic discourses.

Table 5.6: Dynamic

Dynamic	Occurrences
Boundary Work	27
(Paradigm) Repair	17
Community (building)	9
Field Construction	5
Memorialization	5
Reflection (on internal challenges)	5
Reflection (on external challenges)	2
Other (fewer than two instances)	7
Total	77

This reflects a large degree of conceptual clarity within the scholarly community, as the dynamics studied are clearly rooted in the three conceptual spaces in which Carlson locates metajournalistic discourses. Further dynamics that surface are more reflective in their nature; ruminating on internal challenges the field has been navigating (5) or external challenges it is facing (2). A number of studies also look at metajournalistic discourses as a form of memory work (5), when journalists memorialize colleagues who have died[81] or newspapers that have closed.[82]

Discussion

This meta-analysis offers a snapshot of research, and an overview of extant journalism research focusing on metajournalistic discourses. It has its limits; it only looks at research where the root "metajourn*" appears (e.g., metajournalism or metajournalistic). This leaves out research that focuses on similar dynamics under different terms being developed around the same time as Carlson's conceptualization, such as those focusing on "narratives of newswork."[83] It also prioritizes journal articles, in full awareness that books have also addressed these dynamics.[84] Finally, it is narrow insofar as it is interested in certain understandings of how metajournalistic discourses are studied, and does not cross-compare findings or results in any significant manner that would allow for a deeper assessment of the state of this area of research.

However, it does help us understand both the dominant focus that researchers have adopted in their studies, and blind spots that need to be addressed. In terms of focal points, the most obvious of the findings is that journalism studies research

into metajournalistic discourses has overwhelmingly focused on the perceptions of the traditional news media on their own and their peers' performances, how the boundaries of the field are being defined and defended by these traditional media, and how traditional media perceive changes that the field has encountered. In studies that have explored traditional news media's reactions to new actors and technologies, these are seen as exogenous pressures on the field. Within studies that emphasize how traditional news discourses draw boundaries, they show that traditional actors consistently reinforce an understanding of journalism as they have already defined it, and according to their own institutional dimensions. In other words, traditional journalists define journalism according to the version of journalism they are most familiar with, discounting and dismissing the unfamiliar.

I want to make clear that studies of traditional media content or the intra-journalistic dialogue within the trade press and industry media are neither surprising nor unproductive. The dominance of the traditional members of any field in setting their boundaries is difficult to overcome, and should be expected. These media have significant weight in determining what a socially shared idea of journalism will be—what Benson describes as their "consecrating power"[85]—where the more visible and prominent you are, the more likely it is that other journalists will associate your content with an idea of what journalism should look like, and the more likely they will associate the way you describe your work with how it should be practiced. To that point, numerous studies have shown alternative media and peripheral journalistic actors recognize this power, as they adopt a "familiar journalistic lexicon" to describe themselves as journalists and editors, describe their work as reporting news that is in a public interest, and align their norms with traditional journalistic values.[86]

My argument here is that prominence alone is not a predictive indicator for how other journalists, other media actors, and the public will interpret metajournalistic discourses, nor can it determine how they will consider journalism's place in the wider political and social context in which news is encountered. Benson offers just such a warning, cautioning against focusing on a specific media's commercial or cultural dominance without *also* studying how that media is seen and understood (to be prominent is not the same as being praised). This warning is especially important in the context of this book, when trying to understand how forces beyond journalism's own dimensions are affecting the field and its boundaries. To better assess this, we need to devote attention to understanding how those beyond the field's mainstream core engage in similar processes of discursive interaction.

We can do so by addressing two concerns emerging from the analysis above—the dominances and the omissions in our current body of knowledge. By dominances, I refer to the large number of studies—39 out of 77—that

analyze traditional metajournalistic discourses that are found in traditional media sources and trade press. These present us, overwhelmingly, with traditional journalism's perceptions of journalism, and force us to ask whether that attention has come at the expense of research that could provide insights into counternarratives that would offer a different understanding of journalism, including those that would show how different actors engage in the contests for journalistic belonging, including from those operating at the edges of the field. Following Bourdieu, it is in the contests between insiders and would-be outsiders where the field is co-created, through contests over "what is at stake in the struggle in the field."[87] By understanding metajournalistic discourses primarily from the perspective of traditional media, we gain a one-sided understanding of the competitions over the field's boundaries and dimensions, depriving ourselves an opportunity for expanding our understanding of the discursive interactions that shape the field. In short, if we study traditional media as the primary definers of metajournalistic discourses, we will find boundaries being tightened, while overlooking where they might otherwise be expanded.

This relates to a second concern—the omissions within our current scholarship. Attention placed on traditional media overlooks the way many peripheral media have made metajournalistic discourses central to their news work, embedding in the content they produce both a critique of mainstream journalism's shortcomings and failures, and their own perceived corrections (more independent, more honest, more reactive) as substantive contributions to building up journalism's place in society. Even as we have accepted as scholars that journalistic boundaries have blurred and that new entrants performing journalistic roles have demonstrated themselves as capable journalists, the analysis above shows scholars' attention has leaned toward a traditional understanding of journalism within the public-facing performance of the field's boundaries.[88] This leaves the discursive interactions demonstrated by new actors un(der)accounted for.

In that under-accounting, I argue we leave ourselves at a loss for a fuller approach toward seeing journalism in all of its dynamic constructions, how claims of journalistic belonging emerge from various sources, and how these feed into the fissures we see in our societies. We also introduce several intellectual risks. First, this risks perpetuating a core-periphery distinction, one that scholars have criticized for prioritizing legacy media over new and alternative media.[89] Cojoining a traditional media bias with a geographic bias, selecting objects of study within the United States reinforces an already prevailing U.S. bias in journalism research. This limits our understanding of where discursive interaction is shaping the field's boundaries beyond the United States, as well as where it is emerging from within alternative, peripheral news media.[90]

Revisiting metajournalistic discourses: Messy, and contentious

To address these omissions and structure the analysis in the following chapters, we can revisit the core concepts that shape metajournalistic discourses and adapt these to better study peripheral journalistic actors and the ways they have contested the boundaries of the field through metajournalistic discourses.

This begins with understanding that all journalists are able to engage in a very public discussion of political news and journalism within the news they produce, and peripheral journalistic actors have made this a feature of their journalistic identities.[91] For peripheral actors, it is the public nature of a mediated conversation about journalism and the opportunity to present critical metajournalistic discourses that provides them traction in claiming their identities and challenging the field. These conversations reveal how peripheral actors themselves as journalists and how they situate themselves in relation to other journalists, but also how they craft these identities, often in political terms and in ways meant to resonate with specific audiences. Recentering an analytical emphasis on publicness—on mediated discourses as spaces of interaction—allows us approach news, both traditional and peripheral, for narratives about journalism that are likely to be read, interpreted, and responded to by members of the public, including other journalists.

This forms part of a social contract that journalists engage with when addressing their publics, and is,

> a characteristic of journalism presented by journalists towards audiences that suggest they (the journalists) are in service to the audience and their interests (the public). When this proposition is agreed to, publicness allows journalists to consolidate power around their roles as specifically skilled arbiters of information for the public.[92]

When assessing metajournalistic discourses found in the spaces where agonistic and antagonistic journalists operate, as this book does, attention to publicness gives added weight to efforts by these actors when they engage in discrete practices of field formation that reflect their own interpretations of the journalistic *doxa*, *habitus*, and *nomos*.

However, these discourses always need to be considered from the perspective of the media doing the "speaking," the power they hold, their political and economic incentives they have (e.g., promoting certain worldviews, and gaining and securing audience attention), and the limits of their power (given that many of these media are small in market share and audience size, compared to more traditional actors.) These power dynamics need to be accounted for within any analysis of these

discourses, and it follows that when we see peripheral journalistic actors engage in boundary-oriented metajournalistic discourses they are working from a historically disadvantaged position (at least as it regards journalistic authority). This differential between the dominant and dominated should be considered within any analysis of alternative types of journalism in relation to traditional ones. In these contests, journalistic authority is best seen something that can be "claimed by some people ... but denied to others,"[93] in a struggle that is all the more likely to emerge at "moments of contestation when taken for granted practices come under fire, which then spurs efforts to define appropriate practices while dispelling deviant or outsider actions."[94] In the boundary contests between traditional journalists and peripheral actors., journalistic authority is not something to be shared, but to be seized.

Given these power imbalances and the contests they enflame, when we turn our attention to widening our aperture to making sense of metajournalistic discourses from agonistic and antagonistic peripheral journalistic actors, we are not likely to find a journalistic field that is neatly parceled. Rather, following Gieryn, we should expect to find discourses that reveal contests for power, and divisions between different "camps" over what journalism should be. They are far more likely to reveal disputes over competing visions of the journalistic field than they will any sense of certainty over what journalism is. The result will be messy, and the boundaries will go on being contested. But this should be unsurprising. Within studies of boundaries in general, and journalism in particular, the borders that differentiate one field from another are never fixed lines which you can cross over with the right credentials, but rather "objects for sociological interpretation."[95] In that effort at interpretation, disputes and uncertainty should be the norm.

Nevertheless, this makes understanding boundaries challenging. It pushes us to consider the many forces that define what counts as journalism and what doesn't. However, it also allows us to recenter our understanding of journalism as a fundamentally social field. By seeing it as a microcosm of the larger societal macrocosm, we should welcome the latitude to engage with the competing forces that give the field shape, accepting these might be more impactful in some moments than others, and that they are likely to change over time as they ebb and flow in society at large.

With that consideration, I advocate for an approach to understanding metajournalistic discourses that shifts our attention from a prioritization of traditional journalism as a center point, toward one that recognizes that heated contestation over belonging and legitimacy are fundamental to field formation. In doing so, I will show in the coming chapters that these discourses can be approached in

ways that "recover their messiness, contentiousness, and practical significance in everyday life."[96]

This embraces Gieryn's aim of "recovering messiness" when studying boundary work, with a similar interest in recognizing the field of journalism is both messy, and laden with practical significance for everyday life. We can certainly find that messiness in metajournalistic discourses within mediated spaces where these contests play out, in all their contentious significance. It is messy in that the journalistic field, as a field that is left to its own definitional devices, must contend with competing interpretations of what it is to do journalism. There is no "rulebook," and even if there were, written rules can be rewritten. It is also contentious in that these disputes over what "counts" as journalism, and who can be a journalist, have implications for the authority and legitimacy all journalists hold, and how widely this is shared. And while these disagreements might seem like internal squabbles, they are significant to a wider public and in everyday life. These contests take place in public, for all to see, and shape a wider understanding of journalism's place in society, including an understanding of what people can and should expect from journalists, whether online and peripheral or analog and traditional.[97]

In practical terms, this guides us toward three considerations for expanding our attention on metajournalistic discourses to consider agonistic, antagonistic, and other peripheral journalistic actors:

First, we should look to a wider range of journalistic texts for different performances of journalistic identities and ideologies, and expand our attention to include how journalistic identities are being expressed and interpreted differently by different journalistic and media actors representing different viewpoints. This draws on an approach to studying journalistic discourse that sees the field of journalism "coming into being" whenever journalists demonstrate their professional identities within the content they produce, laden with performances of journalistic identity.[98] It recognizes that peripheral journalistic actors engage in a similar performance when they invoke a shared lexica of journalistic belonging (e.g., calling themselves journalists, and their work reporting, investigating, etc.) in their efforts to demonstrate their journalistic legitimacy.[99]

Second, we can understand that these discourses are never neutral, and as such they reflect the sometimes-intense disputes that emerge at the boundaries of the journalistic field, between those who reflect tradition and status and those digital newcomers whose novelty prickles the established order of things.[100] These discourses reflect the contests between "dominants" and "pretenders" to the journalistic field, and as such should be read as representing the power these actors hold. In that light, we can see where discourses are angled toward preserving existing power centers, or broadening legitimacy and therefore power to new actors.[101]

Third, these discourses should be seen as part of an interactive, if asynchronous, dialogue that takes place within the journalistic field between different journalists, and between journalists and their publics. This dialogue is part of an ongoing process of field formation, representing the actions and reactions that shape the field.[102] They are interactive in the sense that they are never expressed in isolation, but always with expected audiences in mind. Put differently, metajournalistic discourses reflect how any particular journalist understands their own position within the field, and how they have been socialized into that position. This socialization can guide journalists toward a more traditional understanding that aligns with journalism's historic purpose and legacy. But it can also resist that history, and experiences of frustration and disillusionment with the field can lead different actors to distance themselves from that dominant ideology, seeing their distance as a measure of their journalistic independence as they chart a new course.

Conclusion

The discussion of metajournalistic discourses and the meta-analysis offered in this chapter tell us something about how discursive interaction helps to construct an idea of journalism in public and in our societies. They tell us a whole lot more about how scholars understand this construction. When these discourses are primarily sought and found in traditional media and in the trade press, nuances for seeing discourses in field construction are smoothed over. This is reflected in the four examples from the top of the chapter. The first three emerge in spaces where such a conversation about journalism is to be expected, in the pages of traditional newspapers and magazines, and in trade outlets like *CJR* and *Nieman Lab* where the discussion of journalism is their primary focus. These are also among the most studied outlets when scholars look to understand metajournalistic discourses, and each outlet has also been featured in research examined in this meta-analysis.

Drew Magary's commentary in *Defector*, on the other hand, is an example of a metajournalistic discourse that we might (more or less) stumble across when we look outside traditional spaces. It certainly doesn't carry with it a traditional level of established authority that a similar conversation found in a newspaper might. But it does carry with it the prominence and legacy of *Gawker* and their affiliate sites, who have challenged traditional journalism to do better, including through their own approaches to doing journalism differently. This has played a significant role in determining what journalism could be in a digital age and in the United States, as Pareene outlines in their *New Republic* piece. When attention is paid to assessing how these peripheral news sites engage in a steady stream

of conversations about journalism, we are able to see their value. If we choose to study it.

This has been a missed opportunity for scholars hoping to build richer understanding of the edges of the journalistic field. It also misses an opportunity for understanding what metajournalistic discourses emerging from non-traditional media spaces can reveal about the fractures between different journalistic actors, and where these resonate with or at least signal fractures in society. Taking this encouragement to look further at these peripheral spaces, alongside an attention to the political, cultural, and ideological forces that might underpin these divisions, we can gain a fuller picture of journalism's place in our fractured societies.

As we will see in the coming chapters, this allows us to move past normative interpretations of journalistic identities and roles that have become key aspects of contestation in the discursive interactions fracturing the field's boundaries. This is not only because they offer a narrow version of what journalism is, but also because they tend to do so by articulating a top-down vision of what journalism should be that is no longer welcome in a more fractured world. Rather than reinforce an unambiguous idea of journalism, this top-down narrative of journalism is seen as hegemonic, providing both critical-constructive agonist journalists and destructive antagonistic actors with something to seize upon when challenging traditional journalism's boundaries. This has allowed peripheral actors to frame traditional news media as working only for the elite, and being self-interested.[103]

As will also become apparent, this seen-as-hegemonic narrative of what journalism *is* has emerged as a primary point of contestation that has been adopted by peripheral journalists who appeal to their specific publics by describing their own work as a more honest, more unflinching, version of journalism, and one that better represents their own public's interests. It is also apparent in those who take advantage of a populace dissatisfied with traditional journalism, who see declining trust in mainstream news an opportunity to build their own profiles, foment further division, and challenge the foundation of the journalistic field while doing so.

Notes

1 Allsop 2019.
2 In what is becoming an eerie, repetitive occurrence, *Deadspin* was sold and essentially shut down while finishing this manuscript. It joins *Jezebel* and *BuzzFeed News,* shuttered earlier in the writing, and *Gawker*, which was bankrupted while I was finishing my previous book, in the graveyard of peripheral journalistic actors that has been established in my footnotes.
3 Serazio 2022.
4 Pareene 2019.

5   Christine Schmidt 2019.
6   Magary 2021.
7   Ibid.
8   Defector (2023) "About Us," at: https://defector.com/about-us
9   Eldridge 2019; Eldridge 2021; Serazio 2022.
10 Defector (2023) "Journalismism," at: https://defector.com/category/journalismism
11 Carlson 2016.
12 Similar dynamics referred to as "metacommentary," "journalistic metadiscourse," and "narratives of newswork" will be discussed collectively here, as these are broadly similar concepts, developed in the same time period under different names.
13 Lough 2021.
14 Carlson 2014.
15 Koliska, Chadha, and Burns 2020.
16 Zelizer 1993.
17 Bourdieu 2005, 36.
18 Eldridge 2017a.
19 Avital-Benatar 2020; Gilewicz 2015.
20 De Maeyer 2016; Ferrucci 2020.
21 Carlson 2016; Zelizer 1993.
22 Benson 1999; Bourdieu 2005.
23 Carlson and Lewis 2015; Eldridge 2019.
24 Garcia-Blanco and Bennett 2021.
25 Eldridge 2019, 14.
26 Carlson and Lewis 2020.
27 Ryfe 2019.
28 Tandoc and Jenkins 2017.
29 Eldridge 2019.
30 Pierre Bourdieu 1977, 168.
31 Zelizer 1993, 219.
32 Carlson 2016, 349–350.
33 Eldridge 2019; Eldridge and Bødker 2019.
34 Vos 2018; Zelizer 1993.
35 Engelke 2023.
36 Carlson 2016, 350.
37 Sullivan 2024a.
38 Beutler 2024 (Note: This is not a critique of Beutler's work, but rather a recognition of these power differences).
39 Hindman 2005.
40 Bourdieu 1993.
41 Benson 2006, 188.
42 Schultz 2007.
43 Eldridge 2017b.
44 Goode 2009; Johnson, Thomas, and Fuzy 2021.
45 BBC News 2016.
46 Ofori-Parku and Botwe 2020.

47 Geertsema-Sligh and Vos 2022.
48 Eldridge 2020b; Eldridge 2021.
49 For example, Ezra Klein went from blogging to becoming a columnist for the *New York Times*, James Ball once worked at WikiLeaks and now is the global editor of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, and Adrian Chen went from *Gawker* to later write for the *New Yorker*.
50 Carlson and Lewis 2020.
51 Blommaert 2015, 4.
52 Eldridge 2014b.
53 Benson 2006, 188.
54 Gieryn 1983.
55 Ibid., 781.
56 Bourdieu 1984, 555, f2.
57 Eldridge 2017b.
58 Carlson and Lewis 2020, 125.
59 Eldridge 2014b, 4.
60 Wahl-Jorgensen 2014.
61 Singer 2003.
62 Bishop 1999, See, for examples, the boundaries constructed against paparazzi and nonprofessionals, as explored here: Schudson and Anderson 2009.
63 Harcup 2014, 148.
64 Carlson 2017.
65 Nielsen 2016.
66 Nearly half of the results were duplicates, as the database query returned both online-first journal articles and their paginated/indexed final versions.
67 Eldridge 2017a.
68 Coddington 2013; Johnson 2020; Lynch 2013.
69 Buozis, Rooney, and Creech 2021; Eldridge 2013.
70 Carlson 2016, 353; emphasis added.
71 Nothias and Cheruiyot 2019.
72 Ofori-Parku and Botwe 2020.
73 Belair-Gagnon and Holton 2018.
74 Perreault, Perreault, and Maares 2022.
75 Creech and Parks 2022.
76 Salkin and Grieves 2022.
77 Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen 2022.
78 Olechowska 2022.
79 Vos and Perreault 2020.
80 Velloso et al. 2022.
81 Avital-Benatar 2020.
82 Carlson 2011.
83 Coddington 2013; Eldridge 2017a.
84 Carlson 2017.
85 Benson 1999, 469.
86 Eldridge 2014b.
87 Bourdieu 2005, 44.

88 Belair-Gagnon, Holton, and Westlund 2019; Maares and Hanusch 2023.
89 Deuze and Witschge 2018; Eldridge 2019.
90 Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2021.
91 Eldridge 2019a.
92 Eldridge 2018, 25.
93 Gieryn 1999, 14.
94 Carlson 2016, 352.
95 Gieryn, Thomas F. 1997, 293.
96 Ibid.
97 Banjac, 2021.
98 Bogaerts 2011; Deuze 2005; Eldridge 2017b.
99 Eldridge 2014b; Eldridge 2020b.
100 Singer 2003; Singer 2005.
101 Bourdieu 1993.
102 Bourdieu 2005.
103 Dowling, Johnson, and Ekdale 2022.
104 Carlson and Lewis 2020, 127.

Unheard, in a noisy world

In 2020, when we were spending the majority of our days stuck inside, a flyer was slipped through the mail slot in the front door of my house in Groningen, in the North of the Netherlands. It came from *Ongehoord Nederland.* At that time *Ongehoord Nederland*—translated as "Unheard Netherlands"—had established itself as an alternative news site, hosting articles, podcasts, and video broadcasts on its website. With this flyer and the campaign behind it, *ON!* was soliciting members whose support would allow them to become a broadcaster, and secure time on public airwaves for its show *Ongehoord Nieuws*.[1] A goal they eventually achieved.

Implicit in its name, *Ongehoord Nederland*, or simply *ON!*, promises to speak to and for the "unheard" in the country. In their campaigns and in their promotions, they say they will publish news and commentary on stories that really matter to those Dutch people who do not see themselves reflected in the national newspapers they read and the news they see on Dutch public service broadcasters. With their show *Ongehoord Nieuws*, they offer an "eigenzinnige duiding van het nieuws [idiosyncratic interpretation of the news]."[2] *ON!* centers its contributions to Dutch media around a refusal to shy away from news they say other media are too timid to report. On the front of this flyer was a picture of the face of *ON!* at the time, its chairman Arnold Karskens[3], telling you that as a former war correspondent, he "bleef ik op mijn post terwijl collega's vertrokken [stayed at his post when his

colleagues left]," and pledges he would do the same as chairman of *Ongehoord Nederland*. Unabashed and unwavering, *ON!* positions itself as speaking out when others didn't dare. A new alternative, because "Het is tijd voor het eerlijke verhaal [It is time for the honest story.]"

Unique in its physicality—a flyer, rather than something more digital—*ON!*'s campaign for recognition resembles a trend we've seen more widely in recent decades, when online alternative and political news media have seized upon the opportunity to stake a claim to be doing journalism in ways that intertwine political speech with news and commentary. Since the turn of the century, at sites like *Talking Points Memo* in the United States, and *Guido Fawkes* in the UK highlighted in Chapter 1, alternative approaches to reporting political news were developed first by individuals and later by small teams of reporters who infused in their coverage a specific progressive or conservative (respectively) tilt.

Alongside their more politically inflected coverage, these media also claimed their approach to publishing news was filling a gap left open by mainstream and traditional news media who were too neutral, and not responsive to rising public concerns. In their initial digital platform, and later in their campaign to become a broadcaster, *Ongehoord Nederland* said it would respond to a public clamoring: "Door het brengen van het ongehoorde geluid op de publieke omproep! [By bringing the unheard voice to public broadcasting!]" They position themselves as a "self-perceived corrective" to mainstream media, which they describe as a "cabal" censoring alternative journalistic voices.[4] This echoes other media, across nations and political allegiances—the left-wing British site *SKWAWKBOX* saw a similar opportunity to "to present information and analysis that will rarely make it into the mainstream media because it doesn't fit their agenda and the narrative they want to present."[5]

However, these self-identifications with journalism appear, at times, to be more of a strategic guise adopted by new media actors to give an air of importance to their commentary and the news narratives they want to feature. On further inspection, and as we will see, it becomes clear that *Ongehoord Nederland's* claims of journalistic independence are also cloaking divisive, political agendas by couching them in the narratives of newswork. Even when genuine news is reported on these sites—and there certainly is news being presented on peripheral, antagonistic sites—it becomes difficult to disentangle these performances of journalism from other agendas these alternative media are advancing, especially when it is all caught within a political slipstream.

Alternative, peripheral, populist

An alternative voice, an alternative approach to doing journalism. There is an understandable appeal to this sort of content, one that both agonists and antagonists take advantage of. It is one that draws on a legacy of political pamphleteering in previous centuries,[6] connects even more closely to the tradition of alternative political newspapers[7] and pirate radio broadcasts in the twentieth century,[8] and has extended into a digital age.[9] In their approach to journalism, alternative news media channel a sense of frustration felt by journalists and audiences alike. Similar to the appeals made by *Ongehoord Nederland*, alternative media identify with their audiences, expressing allegiance with those who feel "unheard" or see their stories untold. They reinforce a sense of camaraderie by sharing their own thwarted efforts to report meaningful stories when they worked for traditional news media, confirming that the public's disenchantment with news aligns with journalists' own frustrations.

Alternative news media argue further that the way to achieve journalism's stated societal goals of honest, truthful reporting is to abandon a sense of middle-road balance and the false equivalency that objectivity offered.[10] At times more radical, at times more community-oriented, alternative media have favored more "oppositional practices" to journalism which,

> emphasize first person, eyewitness accounts by participants; a reworking of the populist approaches of tabloid newspapers to recover a "radical popular" style of reporting; collective and anti-hierarchical forms of organization which eschew demarcation and specialization—and which importantly suggest an inclusive, radical form of civic journalism.[11]

Within this space, oppositional practices that were adopted in a digital age later came to define how peripheral journalistic actors described their journalistic practices. Initial examples of interloper media, like *WikiLeaks*, established a contrast to traditional mainstream media by prioritizing primary source material and transparency, publishing large data sets and building their work around tranches of public documents.[12] These peripheral actors also adopted controversial practices, bucking institutional norms that they saw as contradicting journalistic ideals. *Guido Fawkes'* journalists made this explicit by live-tweeting a press briefing in defiance of the rules of the Westminster Lobby "cartel" because they saw it as constraint on transparency, and live-tweeting was an opportunity to scoop their journalistic peers.[13]

In part, these are also features of alternative media's nontraditional status, and it is impossible to disconnect this resistance to traditional norms and practices from

the "outsider" narrative about journalism that these media offer. By eschewing access and traditional institutional belonging, peripheral journalistic actors see their diminutive status as an asset in the pursuit of honest reporting and holding power to account. As Ashley Feinberg said to me for the "Interrogating Antagonists" study highlighted in Chapter 3:

> The manner in which I do my job is different than other journalists, but I think that the end result is the same … I mean, if I had different aspirations, I would probably try to aim more towards mimicking whatever serious journalism is supposed to look like but, ugh, I am perfectly happy sort of right now.[14]

Especially online, the contrast drawn between peripheral journalistic actors and "serious" journalism underscores the journalistic ambition of peripheral actors who see themselves as more honest, more ambitious, less beholden to those in power, and, in short, simply more "journalistic" in their approaches to gathering, verifying, and reporting news that holds the powerful to account.[15] They argue they can do better journalism because of their outsider status, and with each dismissal by other journalists who critique their style or approach, they are emboldened in their journalistic commitment to "constrain the powerful, and liberate the oppressed."[16]

On its face and in its flyers, *ON!* expresses similar ambitions. Ostensibly, *ON!* taps into various threads of disappointment, repurposing these to express journalistic ideals of independence and a stated, unflagging, commitment to truth that resonates with normative ideals about what journalism *should* do. It frames itself as a response to timid, mainstream Dutch news media, adding to the diversity of media voices and contributing to a better-informed society. Surely, if there *are* untold stories and unheard voices, then in our aspirations to build a pluralist democratic society we should prioritize ensuring these voices are heard. In the abstract, this sort of contribution—this widening of media offerings in a country to represent more of its people—would allow the populace of any society to become more aware of the diversity of views held by those who surround them (and this is all the better to serve democracy, the argument goes).[17] In their 2022 report, the independent body that supervises compliance with Dutch media regulations, *Het Commissariaat voor de Media*, drew this connection explicitly when commenting on the emergence of *Ongehoord Nederland*. They noted that while *ON!* would not focus primarily on news, it was plausible they would contribute to a pluralism of news and opinions in the media space.[18]

However, media do not exist in an abstract space, and *ON!*'s track record dampens any plausible hope of contributing to news pluralism agonistically. Since securing a space on the airwaves, they have been sanctioned three times for spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories and for giving voice to hate

speech and extreme politicians without also scrutinizing their claims. They have been fined more than €130.000 for failing to live up to the broadcast standards *ON!* agreed to when given access to the Dutch airwaves.[19] The same commissariat that saw a plausibility in *ON!*'s potential for pluralism was later called upon to address their shortcomings in living up to obligations. It is hardly conclusive, but such instances certainly cloud any claims *ON!* makes toward being a constructive news voice in service of democratic pluralism.

However, Karskens and *ON!* used each fine and censure from the NPO as a call to all those who felt their voices were being "unheard." After all, what better way to suggest that there is a cabal working against you than a censure. This left *ON!*, arguably more able to claim they are speaking honestly for those voices that are going "unheard," pointing to each new complaint as proof they are fighting those that would silence them.[20] While their initial appeal towards diverse media voices serving an "unheard" segment of Dutch society would be welcome, at least in the abstract, these media cannot be evaluated in the abstract. They need to be understood in the contexts of the highly contested spaces where journalism is currently being defined, where online there is a heated contest that is shaped and shaping the political, cultural, and societal forces that give the journalistic field its dimensions, and which are defining and trying to dissolve its boundaries.

In this respect *ON!* is not alone. Its argument that it is being silenced by elites who want to see it disappear resonate with claims by conservative media of an elite liberal media cabal in the United States, and of an elite conservative cabal silencing progressive voices in the UK, claims that are frequently made, though hardly conclusive.[21] Their insistence they are contributing to media pluralism, while simultaneously facing accusations of misinformation, echo contradictions we have seen when looking the conservative site *The Gateway Pundit*, which has been sued for trafficking in conspiracies about the 2020 U.S. Presidential campaign, and has not relented in saying so since.[22] *ON!*'s continued public and legal fight against the NPO—the Dutch broadcasting organization—allows it to align itself with other embattled media that have claimed they are being attacked for simply giving the public what they want (as *GB News* has insisted in the UK when sanctioned for using politicians to interview other politicians,[23] despite recent statements by regulators that *GB News* was treated more leniently because of its smaller media footprint).[24]

These examples across Europe and across the Atlantic suggest a once-permeable barrier between news and politics has been rendered open by certain populist peripheral journalistic actors who see much to lose, and little to gain, by adhering to a strict division between journalism and politics. As we will see further in this chapter, these types of political, alternative news media show where

there is an appetite for polarizing and populist media that tells the audience they are being "let in" on something that the mainstream media doesn't want them to know. That appetite is being sated by peripheral, journalistic, actors who affirm those perspectives and disrupt our understanding of what journalism is—and what it is becoming.[25]

The journalism we have, the journalism we want, and the journalism we need

Examples like the flyer from *ON!* that insist they alone can stand tall in the face of a larger force of elites trying to silence them are not unique to the Netherlands, or to this moment. Nor are the contradictions between their journalistic claims and their journalistic performances. In 2018 in the United States, a network of local television news stations owned by the Sinclair company—whose owner had close links to the conservative movement and Trump White House—were told their news anchors had to devote time on their programming to denounce "fake news," to stand strong for journalistic values, and stand against "biased and false news".

Like *ON!*'s claims to serve the unheard voices, on its face, these media were expressing an admirable, journalistic, position. However, given Sinclair's proximity to Trump, and his own use of "fake news" as a label for news he did not like, it piqued reporters' interest as it became clear that this was a message, the same message, that local television journalists across the country were being told to read. It was quickly seized upon as a piece of political propaganda, and follow-up reporting showed these were not organic expressions of journalistic values, but rather the result of Sinclair ownership's interference with their local affiliates. When Timothy Burke, then at *Deadspin*, spliced together the many bits of footage to produce a mosaic video of all these anchors reading their scripts, Sinclair was criticized for masking political agendas with narratives of journalistic ideals, and mocked by showing the scale of this intervention in all its synchronicity.[26]

Sinclair, like *Ongehoord Nederland* and *Gateway Pundit* and *GB News,* blurred lines between claims of working within the journalistic field on behalf of the people, and acting as a politicized countervailing force working *against* the journalistic field through their adoption of a populist, politicized rhetoric. Their claims to defend shared societal values through the news they produce is not itself disqualifying; this echoes the theories of journalism's normative, democratic contribution. But in context, we see that the specific focus and approaches adopted by *ON!* and Sinclair and others reflect a particular approach to presenting news and

defining the field of journalism through a populist us-versus-them dichotomy. This becomes apparent when these media make a direct appeal to people who feel forgotten by societal institutions, and they include the traditional news media among those who have forgotten the public. Moreover, they confirm to their readers and audiences that their sense of being left behind is something genuine.

In the Netherlands, while not as dramatically as in other countries, the appetite for such populist and polarized approaches to news seem to reflect declining rates of trust in the news and in institutions more generally. This has been linked to a rise in populist support, and further tied to a disenchantment with the idea that the government can do anything for the people.[27] Whether this disenchantment reflects political fatigue, larger trends of change, or a combination of factors, they have given shape to populist politicians' campaigns and rhetoric. These have been a consistent if undulating force in Dutch politics recently. In the UK, trust has also fallen, a decline tied to public perceptions of a refugee crisis and the public's real experiences with inflation and rising energy costs following a pandemic that strained the social fabric.[28] Given these trends, if you see yourself reflected in these data—feeling left behind, and losing confidence—then the reasons to feel isolated and ignored by those in power are also apparent.

When these feelings of being ignored or unheard grow, we know from studies of news avoidance that people tend to either turn off or turn elsewhere to find information that is meaningful to them.[29] It is specifically when people turn elsewhere that peripheral and new media voices step in, promising to speak to those forgotten people and to address their lingering worries. To comfort their discomfort, and assure them their feelings are valid.

This motivation is just as clear in the self-presentation of *Ongehoord Nederland* above as it is with another example from the United States—*PJ Media*. In their appeal for paid members, *PJ Media* presents itself as "a leading voice in conservative media, focusing relentlessly on defending the values that make America great."[30] Like with *ON!*, *PJ Media* says they are pushing back against censorial forces: "[W]e face unprecedented attack [sic] from Big Government, Big Tech, and more. They want to silence us for good, and we need your help to keep fighting!" They also see themselves in contrast to societal elites, including traditional news media, a sentiment reflected in their very name. From 2005 to 2011, they went by *Pajamas Media*, a self-deprecating moniker directed at Jon Klein, the CBS television news executive who said: "You couldn't have a starker contrast between the multiple layers of checks and balances at *60 Minutes* and a guy sitting in his living room in his pajamas." Like many peripheral journalistic actors and those seeking to be recognized as journalists online, *PJ Media*'s claims are not entirely bluster. They rose to prominence in conservative circles for forcing a retraction and later

resignation of Dan Rather from *60 Minutes.* They went from a "fragile startup" in 2005, to now boasting 24 million unique monthly users and over 100 million monthly page views across the media group they are a part of.[31]

PJ Media, similar to *Ongehoord Nederland, GB News,* and *Gateway Pundit,* position themselves in response to a perceived mainstream narrowing of news agendas, and a further narrowness in thinking about what journalism could become. What they offer is news that is more subjective and more outspoken, but also closer to "the people" (as they define "the people"). They stand up to power and against "elites" (as they understand power, and as they define elites). Each of these media has also seized upon the glut of opportunities that the internet had to offer for publishing. They launched websites, podcasts, newsletters, and video series, taking advantage of the ability to speak to—and speak for—an invested public of like-minded (or at least, likely persuadable) readers and listeners that has been made possible by the internet. And each also reflects the ways in which our societies, fractured and fragmented as they've become, are divided in ways that see difference as a point of grievance, against which stories of identities and cultures and political viewpoints cannot be easily separated from news.

Given the overview above, the emergence of politicized and populist, peripheral media echoes something we've watched in other contexts where digital media actors have challenged "mainstream" media in aggressive and alternative ways. *ON!* promises to address news that major news players are too timid, too captured, or too comfortable to cover. So too did *Gawker* when it cemented itself as a brash voice reporting on those in the tech, political, celebrity, and media world who they felt deserved scrutiny. So too did *Guido Fawkes* and *Novara Media* in the UK, when each saw specific limitations in the journalism they saw around them. So too has the blog-born site *ThePostOnline* in the Netherlands, which presents itself as operating "without ideology," though it is more often described as sitting on the ideological right.[32]

It is easy to see why the blurred lines between news and politics these media represent might raise alarm bells. "Het is nu of nooit! [It is now or never!]" read the flyer slipped through my mail slot in its appeal to get *ON!* onto the broadcast spectrum. On the flyer, Arnold Karskens is wearing a red cap with the ON! logo embroidered in white. If the similarities to Donald Trump's all-caps MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN headwear weren't obvious enough, the backside of the flyer invokes similar populist agenda items to what the MAGA movement espouses. *ON!* promises to address topics like mass immigration (which, according to *ON!,* is threatening housing, and bringing criminality to the Netherlands), "het verdedigen van de eigen cultuur [the defense of one's own culture]" (which they tie to controversies like the use of blackface when depicting Zwarte Piet during

Sinterklaas festivities), and to protect "onze pensioenen [our pensions]" from the European Union. Echoing populist fervor, these serve to polarize society rather than bridging societal and political divisions, and give voice to the backlash against change.

Cultural backlash

Somewhere in our processes of modernization, it seems we found opportunities to be more aggrieved, more distrustful of institutions, and more likely to be at ease with animosity. For this, the work of Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart offers us some insights. What Norris and Inglehart argue is that as our societies have developed, and as our economies have improved (pulling more people out of poverty, statistically speaking, and widening opportunities to more people), each generation has moved further away from having to "fight" to survive, or work to survive, than the one that preceded it. Inglehart described this in his book, *The Silent Revolution* (1977), where he shows that, since World War II and in most Western societies, each generation has benefited from a mixture of factors that increased their sense of security relative to the generation that preceded them. Inglehart's thesis, summarized quite briefly here, was built on surveys tracking intergenerational change. With this long-term view, he argues that within these Western societies, through both modern and postmodern eras, each generation demonstrates an ability to pull itself further away from the need to prioritize economic and material stability. Already in 1977, Inglehart argued this was evident in the ways each generation moved further from materialist concerns, hypothesizing that "those who had been socialized under conditions of peace and relative prosperity would be likeliest to have Post-Materialist values."[33] By nature of being born in a period of prosperity, relative to those before, and living in societies with better-established social safety nets (to greater and lesser degrees), the values that drove political movements in modern societies began to shift toward *post-materialism*.

What Inglehart argued then and in later work with Norris is that this post-materialist turn allowed each generation the opportunity to devote their attention and shape their values around concerns other than basic and financial security. In the opening that this transition allowed, new political movements emerged, defined in cultural terms and wrapped around identity-driven politics. As it becomes apparent over time that certain aspects of societies were shifting, for example "the slow process of value change arising from generational, educational, gender, and urban transformations," what resulted were feelings of being left behind, that "deepened cultural cleavages in many Western societies and changed

the relative balance between liberalism and conservatism."[34] This encapsulates cultural backlash theory, and the cultural and identity-driven political movements which have fomented a sense of backlash against change. Building from the work Inglehart started, and further long-term studies by Norris and Inglehart, the rise of a fractured, identity-driven politics comes alongside the development of our societies toward globalization, and as more "progressive" social values started to shape policy, legislation, and workplace conditions In other words, for those who felt progressive change was not serving their interests, or representing their voices, or giving them the same chances at advancing, a sense of backlash developed—one that increasingly pointed towards conservative, populist, and anti-systemic politics..

While this shift was already apparent in the 1970s, by the turn of the twenty-first century the post-materialist values Inglehart identified were becoming embedded in political allegiances either for or against these developments. Where they were defined "against" change, often in identity-derived terms, politics reinforced an increased distrust of institutions, including news institutions.[35] As time moves on, populist movements stoking this distrust gained support, and the number of people who adopted populist views of distrust towards "elites," and feeling left behind increased as a proportion of society. In Western societies especially—where the absence of sustained military conflict allowed for increased material stability and the conditions of post-materialism—identity-driven politics were able to persist, and Norris and Inglehart have argued this trend is evident at scale.[36]

To be certain, there is clear evidence of economic inequality and genuine experiences of precarity even in these countries and contexts, as there is also a clear gap between those who have benefited from globalization and those "left behind." Even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there have also been sustained and significant conflict in parts of Europe since World War II. For this reason, Norris and Inglehart distinguish between trends in Western Europe and those in Eastern Europe, and identify economic inequality as a substantive concern that has been capitalized by political parties—populist parties, in particular—who appeal to the "precariat" in Western European and North American settings.[37]

Acknowledging these genuine divisions in experiences of stability and economic progress, by looking at people's *perceptions* of societal developments, Norris and Inglehart highlight where these perceptions are in conflict with other socio-economic and demographic indicators of progress. In other words, these feelings of being left behind or ignored may be distorted, and political actors' responses to these changes might amplify this distortion. And in that amplification, they make these feelings and perceptions all the more real. The short version of their argument is that,

long-term inter-generational, educational, and urbanization change have gradually shifted the balance between social liberals and social conservatives in Western societies, and how this, in turn, has triggered a cultural backlash among social conservatives with intolerant attitudes.[38]

Cultural backlash starts slowly and then reaches a tipping point where authoritarian and populist tendencies take over.[39] As an endpoint to a series of developments that begin with social structural change (reflected in greater economic and social opportunities) for some, and a sense of being left behind or ignored felt by others, it helps us understand the forces that are shaping divided societies, one that is roughly distributed between those who hold socially liberal values— primarily younger generations—and a conservative cohort, primarily among older generations.

Seeing backlash as the outcome of social trends is a reminder that context matters, and that perceptions of being among the "haves" or "have nots" can be an impactful factor in the ways we orient ourselves in our social worlds. We can use this understanding of backlash to better interpret the ways ideologies and identities are expressed within news discourses as well, allowing us to see these as a series of reactions to change. The concept of cultural backlash also reminds us that being born in an era or in a country with a high degree of economic stability changes things, and within developed societies "existential security is conducive to open-mindedness, social tolerance, and trust, secularization, and acceptance of diverse lifestyles, identities, and values."[40] It also reminds us that these specific markers of progress are not universally agreed to, and the same conditions that build open-mindedness can introduce unease with the changes being seen.

While it would be too crude to argue that new perspectives on how society should be organized have developed in the space and time we have carved out for ourselves as we moved further away from needing to hunt woolly mammoths and figure out fire, it is also not so far away from this simple analogy. To the extent that with each subsequent generation individuals' days are devoted less to securing economic and material stability than their predecessors, then it stands to reason that the ways in which we organize as selves and communities also become less centered around terms of basic economic and material needs, and driven less by them. It follows, as well, that in these environments we have more avenues for fostering and expressing these sentiments. In other words, we are now freer to worry differently about different things and to develop our identities around those concerns. And online, we have a glut of opportunities to do so.

This becomes clear when we look to studies that show that while for many social change and industrialization reflected positive developments, this was not

universally felt. Benefits were experienced primarily by those segments of society where greater industrialization, stronger social safety nets, and greater gender parity ushered in greater opportunities for upward mobility. However, these developments have been experienced differently depending on whether you were afforded the education and socio-economic background to seize upon them. They are also seen differently based on where one lives. In studies of cultural back-lash, those who feel left behind are largely concentrated in rural areas, where they feel like "strangers" in the countries they thought they knew. As Arlie Hochschild describes in her rich study of rural Louisiana, *Strangers in Their Own Land,* the backlash that voters in rural areas expressed toward the institutions and power center around them reflected a sense their religious beliefs were being threatened by the government, that their tax money was being spent on anyone but them-selves, and that their sense of honor was being disrespected by the federal govern-ment.[41] Not only do these sentiments contribute to an anti-elite (and specifically, anti-government) reaction, they feed into a sense of resentment toward those who have benefited from social change, and a parallel appreciation of those who address their concerns in campaigns and political rhetoric.

As we have seen, these sentiments are also invoked by populist and peripheral media like *Ongehoord Nederland!* and *PJ Media* who invoke this sense of backlash and being abandoned, and in doing so they define the shape of society through the media they produce as unapologetically "for you, the people" and "against them, the elites." This sense of backlash within rural communities is also apparent in farmers driving their tractors from rural areas of the Netherlands to the Randstad in the Dutch southwest, where we find the headquarters of banks, oil companies, and multi-national corporations in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Utrecht, as well as the center of government in the Hague. It is reflected in the ways those living in "fly over states" in the middle of the United States disdain coastal elites and the mainstream media based on those coasts.

It also becomes clear in the context of the rise of populist, nationalist, nativist, and fascist politics in Europe and the United States, that an *antagonistic* values-based and identity politics can take hold in such spaces. Since the late 1960s in France, and later in the United States and in Western Europe (the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany), this sentiment and perception of being overlooked has fu-eled the contra-movements that have developed into prominent populist political parties, pushing back against the forces of globalization that accompanied postwar change.[42] Within these movements, from the populist PVV in the Netherlands, to the MAGA movement in the United States, to the more recent Reform UK party, populist politics have coalesced around preserving traditional, conservative, cultural values, or around reacting to the seemingly breakneck pace of change that

each new generation pursues. They do so by creating a sense of fear among their supporters that without some sort of reaction to change, they will continue to lose their social status.[43] Their voices will go unheard.

In their work on cultural backlash theory, Norris and Inglehart offer a detailed explanation for the success of conservative politics and parties and, more recently, the rise of populist politics. They have their supporters[44] and detractors, though critiques have primarily focused on the degree to which their data reflect evidence of intergenerational polarization in the growth of authoritarian populism and whether or not their models can explain the specific political circumstances of rising right-wing politics in Europe.[45] When we turn toward considering backlash and populism and authoritarian tendencies in relation to media, however, these concepts become instructive. Moreover, Norris and Inglehart offer anchor points and insights for seeing how societal fragmentation and reactionary moods are capitalized on by politicians and political movements, and as well will see—by journalists and media operating on the periphery of the journalistic field.

Glut and grievance

For our purposes, the research reinforcing cultural backlash theory offers an important set of parallel considerations for understanding how dynamics of backlash are evident in a shifting journalistic landscape and the more fractured journalistic field that has emerged since digitalization took hold at the turn of the century. In that interest, I will outline these connections within parallel categories of *glut* and *grievance*, introducing this as a heuristic tool that allows us to explore where the expansion of opportunities in a digital age evident at the level of the journalistic field (the microcosm) can be understood in terms of the fragmentation we have seen at the level of society (the macrocosm).

Regarding the journalistic field, the microcosm, the concept of *glut* refers to both the increased access individuals have to media online, whether via social media—which is beyond the focus of this book—or in the wide and widening array of news media that populate the news ecosystem online.[46] However, glut also refers to the increased opportunities for individuals and organizations to engage with news and journalism, and how alternative and peripheral journalistic actors have widened the field of journalism at its boundaries by demonstrating that journalism can be done in new ways that challenge the traditional media hold on what it is to be a journalist.[47] At that level, *glut* refers to how, with the rise of a more interactive digital web, there have been more opportunities for those who want to adopt a journalistic identity (genuinely or superficially) in order to publish news

and commentary online (either explicitly describing their content as news or as journalism, or implying as much). In short, at the level of journalism, there is a glut of opportunities to both consume news and to produce content that is seen as news, including news that pushes back against prevailing notions of journalism established in the twentieth century.[48]

These dynamics parallel experiences of glut at the societal level, the macrocosm, where *glut* refers to the relative growth in economic security and increased social, educational, and physical opportunities for upward mobility that have been evident in modern and postmodern Western societies since the mid-twentieth century. These trends have been tied to an opening of society and the development of progressive social values, at least where these benefits have been felt most clearly (within urban centers, and among younger generations primarily). However, even in those areas and among those people, societal progress has not forestalled the rise of populist and anti-institutionalist sentiments.

For that, we need to also consider how the same developments and experiences of a glut of opportunities that allowed societies to improve in terms of economic security may have also given space for individuals to network within communities coalescing around *grievance*. In short, following Inglehart, with fewer material concerns, people have more time on their hands to devote to post-material values of cultural and identity politics. They have more time to spend consuming and expressing political viewpoints, whether in advancing progressive change, or oftentimes in a pointed, aggrieved, narrative of backlash, amplifying divisions between "us" and "them."

To some, this has been described as an evolution of Putnam's thesis of individualization and the decline of civic and community life.[49] As memberships of clubs and civic groups decreased from the 1950s onward, and as people shifted from defining their communities as those associated with these groups toward connecting in digital social spaces, we saw an expansion of "the dimensions of [cultural and societal] conflict to include identity-based issue groups."[50] In short, individuals having more leisure time available. In the post-material context, absent regular meetings of clubs and groups, this contributes to their ability—as an opportunity, but not a requirement—to spend that leisure time online, and if they spend that time engaging within polarized political networks, then their sense of being left behind might be reinforced and amplified through the networked relations they form by and through media.[51] While an audience study is beyond the focus of this book, we can nevertheless reflect on how an increased amount of time (*glut*) would allow for space for populist, aggrieved, sentiments to be reflected and reinforced by the media that articulate a sense of disaffection (*grievance.*)

More urgently, we can see how a sense of this dynamic is reflected in the discursive exchanges that occur between peripheral news media and their audiences, especially by those media that explicitly reinforce and demonstrate reasons for individuals and groups to feel aggrieved, arguing they should feel left behind and should see societal institutions and political adversaries as enemies to be fought against. When cross-comparing this fomenting of grievance to the increased channels for consuming news, then we see where the conditions of *glut,* in terms of relative prosperity and widespread information access, also afford individuals more time that can be devoted to cultural and identity politics, and where this is then reflected in reactionary politics and reactionary media through expressions of *grievance*.

This conception of grievance closely follows Norris and Inglehart's description of the ways "grievance and resentment exploited by Authoritarian-Populists has helped legitimize xenophobic and misogynistic forces, making bigotry respectable in some circles, providing an avenue for its expression."[52] It also reflects the sense of anger and animosity toward institutions that Hochschild describes among supporters of the populist conservative Tea Party.

At the level of journalism, we can understand grievance as something rooted in two wider, societal trends—one older, found in a backlash to mainstream media that has been prevalent since the 1980s and 1990s and all the more pronounced in a digital age. The second is more recent, where grievance has become a feature of antagonistic journalistic media that reinforce populist sentiments. As societies engage in the push-and-pull that shape their developments, pursuing cosmopolitanism and progressive values, those who advocate traditional, conservative values and culture, push back. In theory, these larger shifts are reflected in the media spaces as well, for example in the "culture wars" that play out between religious and irreligious positions in U.S. society (e.g., over the rights to gay marriage or access to reproductive healthcare).

At the level of society, we see grievance in our politics when politicians and movements embrace being left behind to curry favor from voters. A political study also extends beyond the focus of this book, but in the dynamics discussed so far and in the media that reflect them, we can already see how a politics of grievance is evident in this discussions of populism and backlash, including how they emerge in the media from peripheral actors (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1: A Typology of Glut and Grievance

	Glut	Grievance
Journalism	*Increased access to media channels for audiences (diverse media landscape); Increased access to media opportunities (diverse media practices)*	*Backlash to Mainstream Media (e.g., for suggesting "change" is a net good); moving toward antagonistic media that reinforce a sense of grievance*
Society	*Greater economic security + Greater space/time for developing cultural and identity politics*	*Sustained progressive change result in feeling "left behind," expressed through voting, protest, and media practices*

Reframing the rules of the game

There is a larger sense of cultural backlash that cannot be so easily ascribed to the positions taken for commercial or political reasons by different news media and different pundits. Since the liberalization of markets in the 1980s and 1990s, this sense of being "left behind" or "left unheard" has been levied against "the media" itself, portrayed as an elite institution uninterested in others in society. This became a point of cultural criticism with the growth of commercial radio and (in different contexts) commercial broadcasters, and became pronounced as neoliberal policies were promoted by the conservative governments of Thatcher and Reagan in the UK and United States, alongside the greater liberalization of markets in the EU as well (though, to a lesser degree). With these developments, a related decline in safeguards against ardent position-taking emerged. Dropping fairness doctrines and other modes of regulatory balance created an entry for "the right to offend" within public discourse.[53] In the United States, this took hold on talk radio, as conservative voices established a media space for their own version of polarizing politics, where conservative members of society could hear their grievances affirmed and participate in the narratives of backlash that emerged.[54]

The internet brought about a whole new level of backlash. With the rise of the web, it also brought about a more aggrieved style of journalism. Narratives of backlash have become brasher, and a class of journalistic actors who define themselves around challenging institutions have become bolder, no longer satisfied with objecting to different approaches of news media in the media "system," but objecting to the whole system itself.[55] This pushback against authorities and elites can be found within progressive and conservative media during this period,

and among both left-leaning and right-leaning digital media in the digital age a rejection of institutional mores that would have constrained a journalistic voice replacing deference with defiance becomes increasingly salient. In the drumbeat of scandalous news about Bill Clinton found on the *Drudge Report* in the late 1990s one would find similar conservatism but far less institutionalism than they would have in the conservative news magazine *National Review*. A few years and one presidency later, the critical voice of *Talking Points Memo* offered a similar contrast compared to the long-form writing at the progressive news magazine *Mother Jones,* in that *TPM* saw the internet as a democratizing, independent, space for new approaches to journalism.

However, just because these trends have both progressive and conservative examples, these narratives cannot be treated as equally justified. To put it crudely, while there are more opportunities for these battles between people and groups at different political and cultural positions to play out online, and an existing inclination to resist and even reject authoritative voices that can be coupled with the ability to do so online, the ways in which these opportunities have been taken up differ. There can be understood in the distinction between more agonistic, critical, digital journalistic actors, and more aggressive, destructive antagonistic ones. This distinctions draws our attention to the democratizing effect the internet was assumed to have, one which was greeted by so many observers in the early 2000s, and which has since led to a fractured space of divisiveness and populism. The case of *ON!* set out at the beginning of this chapter illustrates this, and when we turn to making sense of how journalism is being presented to audiences in a digital age, it is an exemplar of how we have been forced to confront rather difficult questions as to the nature of journalism in a fractured society.

To be certain, *Ongehoord Nederland* rankles a lot of journalists and journalism scholars with its claims that it is reporting news and that it is doing journalism, both for its attention to a narrow set of news agendas and for its flippant approach to journalistic standards. But it is much harder to say that *ON!* fails to speak to a portion of the populace, just as it is difficult to say that everything that *ON!* does is in contravention of journalistic norms—or, at least, what we might see as norms when adopted by other news media, including tabloids and cable news channels. We might dislike it, or think it is a poor showing of what journalism should aspire toward, but that assessment alone does not remove a site like *ON!*—that explicitly describes what it does as "news"—from this conversation. Media like *Ongehoord Nederland* and others maintain audiences and continue to demonstrate support, and they are *seen* as news by many who support them. This is the same challenge we face when considering other iconoclastic media as well. To many observers, for example, the Dutch site *GeenStijl* is little more than a crass forum for content

riffing on the news of the day.[56] But for many others, it is a source of news. Among Dutch news consumers, it is tied with the NRC online—a national newspaper's website—and outpaces CNN.com in a survey of news users.[57]

This reflects the challenges of distinguishing between news and politics that permeate both the journalistic field and its place in our modern societies. Similar to other personas behind these alternative media, it is not so easy to dismiss someone like Arnold Karskens when they present themselves as a journalist. Despite a rather robust set of controversies to his name, Karskens has a degree in journalism, and had a successful career as a reporter before *ON!*, working both independently and for major broadcasters as a correspondent. In no way does this absolve or explain his controversies, in the same way that the controversies don't negate any other accolades. Rather, it provides context for the difficulty we face when trying to consider *ON!*'s claims of doing journalism, as one exemplar of many similar cases, and where both the gravitas and journalistic cachet of someone like Karskens can be used in service of other political ideals, seeking to activate a public around the same agenda.

Notes

1   In the Dutch system this means a new organization that could produce content to be distributed on one of the public broadcast channels; a time-slot in the programming, rather than a channel itself.
2   Ongehoord Nederland n.d.
3   Karskens was dismissed as chairman of ON! on 11 October, 2024, during the final revisions of this manuscript.
4   Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019, 862.
5   SKWAWKBOX 2005.
6   Atton 2002, 12.
7   Hamilton and Atton 2001.
8   Mare 2013.
9   Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019.
10   Overholser 2004.
11   Atton 2003, 267.
12   Eldridge 2014a; Eldridge 2018b.
13   Mayhew 2020.
14   See also: Eldridge 2021, 25.
15   Eldridge 2019b, 14–15.
16   Denton 2016.
17   Ihlebæk et al. 2022.
18   Commissariaat voor de Media 2022, 8.

19 Villamedia (2023) "Ongehoord Nederland krijgt geldboete, NPO wil erkenning van de omroep laten intrekken [Unheard Netherlands gets fine, NPO wants broadcaster's recognition revoked]." Accessed September 17, 2023, at: https://www.villamedia.nl/artikel/ongehoord-nederland-kri jgt-derde-sanctie-van-npo-boete-van-bijna-132.000-euro

20 Ongehoord Nederland 2023.

21 Cushion 2022; Hmielowski, Hutchens, and Beam 2020.

22 Ellison 2024; Hancock 2023.

23 Maher 2023.

24 Sherwin 2024.

25 Lewis 2020.

26 Eldridge 2019a.

27 CBS Statistics Netherlands 2023.

28 King's College London 2023.; IPSOS 2023.

29 Broersma and Swart 2022; Stier et al. 2020.

30 This language appears in a pop-up when visiting https://pjmedia.com/vip

31 *PJ Media* (n.d.) "About Us," accessed 27/09/2023 at: https://pjmedia.com/about-us

32 Buyens and Van Aelst 2022.

33 Inglehart 1977, 28.

34 Norris and Inglehart 2019, 45.

35 Verboord et al. 2023.

36 Norris and Inglehart 2019.

37 Norris and Inglehart 2019, 136–137; 153–154.

38 Ibid., 48.

39 Wejnert 2023.

40 Norris and Inglehart 2019, 90.

41 Hochschild 2018, 35.

42 Burgoon 2013; Norris 2024.

43 Norris and Inglehart 2019, 135.

44 Kafka and Kostis 2021.

45 Kriesi 2020; Schäfer 2022.

46 Swart and Broersma 2023; Swart et al. 2022.

47 Maares and Hanusch 2023.

48 Eldridge 2014a.

49 Putnam 1995; Putnam 2001.

50 Putnam and Garrett 2020, 100.

51 Rodríguez-Pose, Lee, and Lipp 2021.

52 Norris and Inglehart 2019, 51.

53 Conboy 2023, 82.

54 Nadler and Bauer 2020.

55 Holt 2018.

56 See discussion of Geen Stijl as a digital tabloid here: Eldridge 2021.

57 Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2023.

Affirm, affect, affront, aggrieve: Counterpublic narratives

In 2015, the right-wing U.S. news site, *PJ Media*[1] addressed their readers directly, writing: "Not only do they not know you, they don't know anybody who knows you."[2] "They" do not know "you." *They* do not know anyone *you* know. A near-perfect distillation of the fragmentation of our current epoch, and the fractured nature of journalism and society that has been the focus of this book. These fractures are apparent in the obvious populist divisions between "you" and "they," and the narrative of collective grievance found in the allusion to your interests being ignored.

Under the headline "Seven Reasons Why We Really Hate the Media," in this article from March 2015, *PJ Media* describes the forces fracturing journalism not as points of disagreement, but of loathing. They are amplified through profound differences that are both targeted and emotional, adopting phrasing that is fundamentally ideological, emphasizing their own solidarity with their readers by contrasting this against how other media (apparently) see them. In this example, we see *PJ Media* doing several things at once—addressing their public as a distinct audience that they understand, drawing ideological lines between themselves and other media, and demonizing by denominating the rest of the news media in the process.

"They" are the mainstream media, described as an externalized enemy that right-wing antagonists see as worthy of animosity. To *PJ Media*, "they" may as well be treated as part and parcel of liberal politics, and the suggestion is that

"they"—these other media—are in cahoots with Democratic politicians, not working as independent journalistic voices but as mouthpieces for the worst progressive ideologies. Applying the critical discursive frameworks of ideological positioning Van Dijk introduces, this is clear denomination of "the Media", as it reinforces the structures ideological grievances between conservatives and a supposed-liberal media elite that conservative audiences would recognize (by the time this article was published, the narrative of a liberal media elite had been in circulation among conservative media for more than 25 years.)[3]

As for "you"? The implication by contrast is that *PJ Media* does know you, and they know those who know you. You are likely conservative, Republican, and fed-up in the same ways that *PJ Media* is frustrated with the state of affairs. As I will elaborate below, these types of discourses allow peripheral media to *affirm* to their audiences that their views are being represented, and that their worldviews and understanding of society are shared by the media they are engaging with (*PJ Media* in this case). Moreover, they affirm to that audience that they are right to feel that the rest of "the Media" do not "get you."

Affirm is one of four discourse categories (alongside *Affect*, *Affront*, and *Aggrieve*) identified from an analysis of metajournalistic discourses produced by agonistic and antagonistic media in this chapter. These categories are apparent in the ways these media address their publics as discrete counterpublics who can be activated towards political ends. These discourses are engaged with both by agonists and antagonists, invoking these narratives as they address their audiences as specific, discrete, publics. By amplifying political and ideological differences between themselves and others, these media also encourage their audiences to see themselves not as idle consumers of news, but as counterpublics with political agency in the ideological and political struggles against other powerful actors in society.

These discourses are examined here as a form of public address, through which peripheral actors engage in a form of speech act that aligns their interests with their audiences. By circulating politicized and ideological narratives of both belonging and difference, these discourses can develop in *agonistic* ways that seek to activate progressive, community-oriented, groups toward cohesive activism built around constructive criticism of powerful institutions. In these instances, we find audiences being addressed as a counterpublic that has been cordoned off from hegemonic, elite structures of power, but also able to push back against this subjugation.

However, narratives of public formation are also made *antagonistically*, within language that reinforces polarization, that suggests an intractability of different people and groups based on their politics, ideological beliefs, or sense of cultural backlash, and which widens rather than mends societal fractures. This is apparent

when we find a more profoundly aggrieved set of discourses that reinforce animosity and populist disdain, contributing to the formation of a populist, polarized, self-perceived counterpublic that understands itself as subjugated (whether or not this perception holds water, as explored below).[4]

For its analysis, this chapter looks at discourses that peripheral agonists and antagonistic actors engage in when appealing to their audiences within their news content. These appeals emerge within content that contains metajournalistic discourses, showing where these public-facing narratives about journalism serve as a specific vehicle for agonists and antagonists to construct their audiences as politicized publics. Found within news discourses that challenge journalistic boundaries, they reinforce peripheral actors' identities as alternative and reliable sources of news, and as media that have specific groups in society and their interests in mind.

Before examining these discourses in detail, I will first explore how news media, and peripheral journalistic actors in particular, engage in the discursive construction of their own publics in ways that contrast their own contributions to those made by the rest of the journalistic field. Exploring these discourse categories within conceptual frameworks of counterpublics, with some critical interventions around the usage of this framework, I will focus on the way media discourses function as a form of "public address." Joining this with our understanding of metajournalistic discourses will allow us to see how discursive interaction shapes the relationship between different media, between these media and their publics, and between different segments of society. It also shows how public address and metajournalistic discourses offer interrelated, co-occurring narratives of identity and ideology, for both society and the journalistic field.

A public, called into existence

Thus far, this book has devoted much of its attention to understanding how journalism has situated itself in society, and how this has been made more complicated by the emergence of peripheral journalistic actors. It now turns its attention toward examining how these journalistic actors address their publics through discourses that amplify peripheral actors' sense of belonging to the journalistic field while demarcating their public as one that is distinct, and distinctly addressed by peripheral actors.

In the choice of addressing journalists' audiences as "publics", I am intentionally referring to the ways peripheral journalistic actors address their audiences as a group that can be (potentially) activated toward political or activist ends.

This reflects the incentives peripheral actors have when addressing their audiences as a politically active—or able-to-be-activated—group of citizens; by amassing public support, these media are then emboldened to carry on with their approaches to politicized news because that politicization speaks to a higher, civic or political, purpose.[5] This draws on a distinction between audiences, users, and publics, that is—at best—blurry, and often reasonably chosen based on research interests.[6] Clearly, the publics peripheral actors appeal to are also catered to in the ways audiences often are, as groups addressed for commercial incentives, and they can be seen as users, where peripheral media content satisfies different informational needs.[7] The term "public" gives us a way to describe audiences who are imagined in terms of their political agency (their ability to act within society), this choice is made here because it highlights the ideological convictions that are invoked by peripheral actors who aim to bind together a collective group of citizen-strangers, and is further reflected in the specific ways these efforts at activation are addressed differently by agonistic and antagonistic actors.[8]

In order to deepen this approach to understanding media publics, looking across scholarship on the media-public relationship, a central theme is that a public does not inherently exist. Rather, a public is called into existence when addressed. Michael Warner argues a public "exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, websites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists *by virtue of being addressed*."[9] This is not to say that a public is only in service to these ends; when media call a public into existence, they also provide people with a sense of identity and belonging to a group in society that extends further than their immediate surroundings. However, it is through media where publics—by nature of being addressed—coalesce around the discourses that circulate among them, including discourses that originate from journalistic media. The importance scholars like Warner place on public address encourages us to pay attention to news media and the language they use when defining their publics.

In that focus, we can also understand how journalistic media are inclined to define their specific public in terms that resonate with their own ideals. Scholarship on journalism-public discourses has shown that the public has historically been conceived of in a way that allowed journalists to imagine the audience they were addressing (including an audience of other journalists, it turns out), but that they do so in terms that best suit the media themselves.[10] Their goal is resonance with their public, and in a mass media era journalists tried to address a public that is first of all coherent, and second of all likely to engage with that media (over and over, and over time). So, if journalists established a consistent media-public relationship, then there could be a predictable audience and a predictable revenue stream. Journalists and news media also seek out a coherent, consistent public in order to

reinforce their own claims of serving citizens (claims that grant journalists norma-tive authority within democracies), and to be able to demonstrate their status as an intermediary between the public and the powerful (all the more likely a politician engages with a media that will reach the most voters, for example). For all these reasons, the existence of a public cannot be taken for granted.

This brings us to a second point of Warner's. Despite the suggestion by *PJ Media* at the start of this chapter that they "know" their public, it is fairly unlikely that *any* media or publics truly know one another, at least not fully. Rather, "a public is a relation among strangers."[11] This is a specific condition of modernity, Warner argues, referring to the way each of us exists as an individual that is part of a larger public. We know we are mostly strangers to one another, but we also know that we are all somehow connected to one another. When addressed by news media, this relation among strangers is invoked, as we are each reminded and motivated by a sense of commonality and belonging that media demonstrate for us, and in turn see ourselves as a part of a larger public.

This relation among strangers is perhaps most clearly illustrated by public opinion polling. We are used to hearing things like "six in ten citizens agree on the importance of voting in democracy," when in reality those "ten citizens" never actually discussed the issue of voting with one another. Nevertheless, in someone being asked their opinion on a topic (like voting), they are, first, made aware that their view is one that might be shared by others, and, second, when seeing the result of the poll, they are made aware of the common threads of the public that they belonging to, whether as one of the six or one of the remaining four. This is the case even when someone who was not polled sees their own opinion being articulated by others in a poll, or in a news story, allowing those individuals to see the extent to which their own views are widely shared. In other words, people are addressed as individual strangers, but they come to know themselves as a belonging to a public—an individual within a collective of strangers—when they see common threads in their own and other perspectives, including perspectives reflected in news.

And yet, even as a collective of isolated strangers who neither know one another nor are likely to meet as a collective public, we have become comfort-able with the idea of imagining ourselves as tied to other people who we simply do not know. We can understand how a public is imaginary in the outlines that Benedict Anderson provides, where "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."[12] Such an imagina-tion is necessary for journalists to do their work—they must imagine who they are communicating with to better tailor their approach, and must imagine their

content as a form of communication between themselves and a larger community that is not one-to-one, but one-to-many.[13] For journalism as a field to maintain its societal status, it is also necessary for audience members to share in this acknowledgment of being part of a collective. They must be able to imagine for themselves that, when they read news they agree with, they are not alone in agreeing with the perspectives being offered. Rather, their agreement with that perspective signals to the individual that they are part of something greater than themselves; a wider public.

All of this results in something of a circular paradox, which Warner addresses by asking: "How can the existence of a public depend, from one point of view, on the rhetorical address—and, from another point of view, on the real context of reception?"[14] Going round-and-round to determine whether a public is constructed by either the journalist addressing the public or by the audience feeling united as a public is the whole point. In each direction, different societal actors are guided to act in accordance with the tenets of this relationship; media actors communicating to individuals that they hope will see themselves as part of a collective, and individuals hoping to see media as reflecting their interests, representing these as something more widely shared.

However, this rests on a lot of assumptions and reminds us that while we can make certain assumptions about the public (who they are, and what type of dispositions they might have), a public only exists once it has been addressed, and individuals only see themselves as part of a public when they feel they are being addressed—when they also see their world being reflected within the messages that are addressed toward them, they are more firmly at home in that public. When this occurs, we can see it as the social reality of that public being constructed. As Warner describes this process of circulation and reality construction: "all discourse or performance addressed to a public must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate, projecting for that world a concrete and livable shape, and attempting to realize that world through address."[15]

This emphasis on circulation is central to the journalism/public relationship. As a specific form of public address, journalism is more dependent than others on the nature of circulation, and is therefore highly invested in a public being called into existence, "without which public address would have none of its special importance to modernity."[16] In short, we can understand publics as coming into formation when media—any media—speak outwardly through their content (as a form of public address), but journalism has built its societal value around members of a public reading and engaging with their content (as a form of reception), and recognizing its informative and possible civic attributes so that individual can orient themselves and their actions in democratic society (as a public).

As news media content is circulated among individuals, either directly or in the conversations around shared societal narratives that Anderson describes in his *Imagined Communities* thesis, publics form around this circulation of seen-as important news and information. This circulation contributes to a constant reification of individuals' own understanding of society and their place in it, and through these dynamics, individuals are then able to identify with a larger portion of society (and in doing so, gain a sense of having greater power within society as a 'relation among strangers').

Counterpublic formation

How do we make sense of this circulation in the context of the fragmentation that has become apparent in the context of journalism in a fractured society? While all publics are formed through the interaction of *address* and *reception* that Warner outlines, we are all-too-frequently reminded of the context of societal fragmentation that Asen highlights when arguing "some publics develop not simply as one among a constellation of discursive entities, but as explicitly articulated alternatives to wider publics that exclude the interests of potential participants."[17] This is where the concept of counterpublics becomes instructive, and where drawing on the work of Robert Asen, Nancy Fraser, and Michael Warner we can better theorize the nature of fractured societies and the narrow publics peripheral media address.

In terms of their formation, counterpublics hold many similar attributes to the wider concept of publics. "They work by many of the same circular postulates,"[18] Warner argues, including being addressed, being defined, and coming into formation through the circulation of media discourses. But as Warner goes further, a counterpublic is a public comprised of individuals who are actively seeking alternatives. They see themselves as marked by differences both in the media they consume (compared to others) and in how they see themselves as fitting within their social worlds (compared to the general public). People associate themselves with distinct publics, or discrete counterpublics, when they see their own identities, beliefs, and ideologies reflected in specific media, and especially when this is placed in contrast to dominant political and media narratives that are seen as "hegemonic."

While on the surface, this dynamic seems straightforward, it has its challenges. Superficially, we can imagine how any of the media we have discussed in this book might speak to a "narrow" audience in the ways outlined here. Warner gives us one way of understanding this by referring to how *Field & Stream* magazine addresses anglers and hunters, for example. The inverse also seems clear, where individual

hunters and individual anglers feel they belong to a larger group of hunting and fishing enthusiasts when they see their interests mediated in *Field & Stream*.[19] Warner goes on to argue, however, that these individuals do not have to remove themselves from a larger "general public" in order to identify as a counterpublic, and we can both imagine (and assume) our place in multiple publics at any one time (e.g., we are both anglers and liberal, or hunters and libertarian, belonging to multiple collectives). Nancy Fraser echoes this in her critique of Habermas' public sphere theory, arguing we might all exist in multiple publics in egalitarian, multicultural societies, and while these distinct spheres act as "arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities"[20] where institutions including media provide the space for these identities to be uttered, we are not confined to one sphere.

But there are further points to unpack here, beginning with counterpublics being distinguished first and foremost by their distance from the space of the dominant. Or, put differently, counterpublics differ from publics in their very sense of being different from "the rest." For this reason, they are often defined not in egalitarian terms, but in terms of a subaltern or subjugated status. To label a counterpublic "subaltern" becomes a point of nuance working within the scholarship on counterpublics.[21] Nancy Fraser introduced the concept of subaltern counterpublics within a critique of Habermas' singular public, describing the inherent power imbalances between a dominant public and subaltern counterpublics.[22] Warner draws on Fraser's distinctions, but goes one step further to argue that for a counterpublic to be more than simply standing "in opposition" to a dominant public, it must also actively maintain "an awareness of its subordinate status," something that can be achieved through the circulation of media.[23] Robert Asen sees the counterpublic concept somewhat differently, arguing we might consider them as emergent collectives that resist the binaries of altern and subaltern. Catherine Squires' work on the Black Public Sphere reinforces this, arguing counterpublics need to be understood not in terms of binary differences primarily, but in terms of uneven societal resources that counterpublics have access to when compared to those in the dominant public. For Squires, a subaltern counterpublic is routinely deprived the same levels of access to public spaces of discourse, and met with extreme sanctions including both threats and enactments of violence when they do engage (e.g., the heavy-handed police responses to Civil Rights protests in the United States.)[24] This power and resource difference extends to other subaltern counterpublics, especially those defined according to their subjugated status as ethnic, gender, or religious minorities, identity markers that then become markers of marginalization among those with lesser commercial or political power.[25] This work encourages us to be cautious in avoiding simplistic counter/general dichotomies based on single identity categories, while also

recognizing how these categories can fuel difference-making by both political and media actors. For Asen, an altern/subaltern dichotomy overly simplifies critiques of Habermas based on a view of multiple publics, and ignores social complexity by reducing "persons, places, or topics as necessary markers of counterpublic status."[26]

For our purposes, we can work to avoid this reductivism by focusing on the discursive function of "address" that all manner of media engage in, from the vociferously populist right (e.g., *The Gateway Pundit, Ongehoord Nederland*) to the unapologetically left (e.g., *The Canary, Raw Story*), to those who define their audience and themselves in values other than a narrow left-right spectrum of politics (e.g., *Common Dreams*, *Truthout*). Doing so reveals similarities in the ways different agonistic and antagonistic media foreground their journalistic "offer" using a straightforward discourse of traditional journalistic narratives, and also how this is then made complex when media invoke ideologies and politics in order to convey to specific publics that they have been subjected to a level of segregation from society.

To put this in context, being addressed as part of the public of a right- or left-wing media often means being addressed as an ideologically distinct group that stands apart from the general public; what could be described as a "fractured counterpublic." The discursive dynamics that reinforce these fractures, however, raise important conceptual and analytical questions, including whether or not applying the label of a counterpublic or subaltern counterpublic is warranted. If we consider the nature of right-wing media appealing to conservative, White, often Christian audiences, including the narrative offered by *PJ Media* at the top of this chapter but also those from *The Conservative Woman* and *Ongehoord Nederland* explored below, we can see a narrow form of public address based on identity and a perception of subjugation. For instance, describing Dutch heritage and culture as under attack, *Ongehoord Nederland* addresses their audience as a subaltern or dominated counterpublic. But these are not media or publics that have been deprived of resources in the way Squires identifies,[27] and their narratives of marginalization are more reflective of a sense of cultural backlash toward progressive change than they are any effort at liberation or elevation of silenced, powerless voices as Jackson and Kreiss remind us.[28] We could reasonably ask whether (largely) White, progressive, groups that are addressed by niche progressive blogs suffer from significant structural marginalization in society as well, and whether seeing their self-presentation as marginalized and subaltern holds any weight.[29]

Nevertheless, it becomes apparent within the sample of media analyzed in this chapter that despite this intellectual in coherence, peripheral media *do* construct their publics in ways that suggest they are marginalized, downtrodden, and subaltern, and they base this on specific, politicized, markers of cultural subjugation and perceived difference, even when this is in conflict to available evidence

(e.g., right-wing media given space to broadcast their views, and traditional cultural representations continuing to have a space in public conversations).[30] For example, conservative movements have long made an appeal to a "silent majority" invoked by conservative media that suggested *their* public was being silenced and marginalized due to their cultural and religious identities. This was offered against all evidence that conservatives were being deprived of liberties or resources.[31] Recently, we have seen populist digital media construct their audiences as subaltern counterpublics in a similar manner. By drawing on a narrative of "us" and "them" populist terms that suggest their own political righteousness (defending their cultural identities, as we saw with *Ongehoord Nederland*) by suggesting their "counterpublics" are part of a small portion of our societies who are in-the-know, more informed than the rest of society, and marginalized as a threat for that reason.[32]

This highlights a further complication with the subaltern counterpublic concept, especially when counterpublics are being formed around a sense of indignation toward powerful actors. Jackson and Kreiss offer an elaboration of these subgroups, defining them not as counterpublics but as *defensive publics* who are not so much pushing against power (they are in positions to enjoy societal privileges), but pushing back against changes that would share that power among more people.[33] This nuance helps us signal the differences between those who have been systematically and structurally marginalized and those who nevertheless claim counter- or subaltern status, when "what might appear, at least on the surface, 'counter' might in fact embrace the same underlying logics of social structural power."[34]

This final consideration also helps us advance a contradictory but useful tension between the *expressed* sense of aggrievement and the *self-perception* of being subjugated, and the *demonstrable* subjugation that is otherwise apparent in fractured societies when some voices are simply unable to be heard "due to forced differentials in political, social, and economic power," whereas others simply assert they are not being heard, despite their ability to echo through halls of power and media spaces.[35] It also provides us a mode of critique, allowing us to append a label *defensive publics* to those who use narratives of marginalization to instead advance a sense of cultural backlash, when political actors or social groups who have long enjoyed power and societal ease smooth over the embedded, structural, and historical advantages that they possess. Right-wing conservative movements, to invoke Jackson and Kreiss' example, have long enjoyed power, economic security, and cultural supremacy, whereas groups marginalized and minoritized for reasons of race, class, and gender have not.[36] Folding these two discussions together, we are reminded that, while *performing* as counterpublics, right-wing media and the right-wing movements they represent are not deprived of resources or spaces, and

have rarely been met with the same degree of sanction in terms of public or political backlash, exercises of state power, or other forms of violence that marginalized, subaltern counterpublics have experienced. Instead, following Squires, by co-opting counterpublicity through a performed marginalization, these groups engage in a form of sanction that deprives legitimate subaltern counterpublics of their own identity and distinction.[37] This helps us separate counterpublics that are asserting their voice, perhaps for the first time, against institutional power that they have been excluded from, from those counterpublics that are doing so instrumentally, reflective of a backlash to new and progressive challenges to hegemonic power.

Incorporating these differences into our thinking about the nature of counterpublics and how peripheral actors amplify subaltern claims, we can build out from Fraser's conception of a subaltern counterpublics while benefiting from the conceptual language it provides. Fraser recognizes that a subaltern counterpublic is one that *sees itself* as disempowered, and for that reason it engages in a "conflictual relation to the dominant public."[38] The framework Fraser introduces gives us further purchase when addressing the way media can be situated within these perceived power imbalances. Emphasizing not only the social and political stratification that has emerged as a product of capitalist and neoliberal societies in the latter twentieth century, Fraser also gives us a way to consider the role of fragmentation that has reinforced these strata in the twenty-first.[39] Subaltern counterpublics, writes Fraser,

> have a dual character. On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. … This dialectic enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies.[40]

Following this formulation, subaltern counterpublics can be linked to efforts by individuals and groups trying to "reclaim" their position in society.[41] For groups marginalized along dimensions of race, or gender, or various combinations therein,[42] agonistic peripheral media might provide spaces where these counterpublics can withdraw in order to "regroup" and better agitate toward progressive societal change.[43] When the same sense of subjugation is perceived and adopted by activist and activist-militant groups who see themselves as simultaneously outside and resisting the dominant forces in society (including groups circulating conspiracy theories, and prominent alt-right and anti-fascist groups), antagonistic peripheral media offer the same space for "withdrawal and regroupment."

When this occurs, we can see how these groups have apparently learned from the language of the marginalized, co-opting discourses of subordination, as Squires argues, echoing Fraser's "dual character" of counterpublics as they use media as a space for collectivity, and as a means for agitation.[44] The media spaces that address these groups as discrete counterpublics offer resonance chambers for populist politics, for example, and when they develop as spaces where perceptions of grievance can be circulated as ideological narratives, they reinforce both a self-perceived marginalization and inspire further political action. When this occurs, a sense of an external political threat is reinforced, amplified as grievance, regardless of there being any truth to these claims of subordination.[45]

This is illustrated by the examples at the top of the chapter, where *PJ Media* induces its audience to see themselves as a counterpublic, united as a conservative "us," in opposition to a liberal "them." This construction depends on media providing specific discourses of society to a public that can be made distinct, in contrast to a wider general public, where media provide "a multicontextual space of circulation, organized not by a place or an institution but by the circulation of discourse."[46] It does not depend on that sense of oppression being demonstrable or genuine, but merely perceived and performed, as we will see further below.

Peripheral media as counterpublic spaces of circulation

Warner draws our further attention to a characteristic that differentiate mediated speech-acts from other forms of public address. Media engage in an asynchronous form of address, where "otherwise unrelated people" can engage in a shared, circulating, discourse irrespective of time and place.[47] Mediated discourses, even those that are built around the timeliness that journalism insists upon, can be called upon repeatedly, and differently. In this ability to overcome challenges of synchronicity, media are able to activate publics toward change, just as Milton's approach to printing rather than speaking his disdain for censorship and arbitrary governance allowed that thinking to circulate long after it was written.[48]

For public-forming discourses to be effective in forming a counterpublic, however, they need to be actionable and discrete; they need to outline an agenda toward some sort of societal change that specific counterpublics can be activated toward, and so they need to make explicit some sort of incentive towards action, whether that is arresting an impending change from a conservative position, or advocating for greater change from a progressive one. In either direction, the role of discursive circulation is meant to be "transformative, not replicative merely."[49]

Fraser, for example, talks about how those who do not see themselves represented in the dominant public might find comfort when uniting around media that reflect their interest, seeing these media as fostering an "inter-public discursive interaction" that acknowledges both the multiplicity of publics (that publics are many, rather than monolithic) as well as their own individual and collective existence in stratified hierarchies. In doing so, these media provoke transformation, or at least foster resistance to subordination.[50]

The concept of counterpublics sits well within the apparent fractures within our societies. It helps us understand how discrete publics are being formed and transformed by peripheral actors who address them, presenting a worldview that is somehow both obvious (the world as these media represent it is agreed to) and divisive (belonging to one media public is defined by being in opposition to others.) It sits less well in other ways, notably when any sense of marginalization seems politically strategic rather than genuine. However, insofar as we might see political viewpoints other than our own reflected in different alternative media (as observers, as citizens, as scholars) it benefits us to consider these as spaces populated by more-or-less embattled true believers.[51] This resonates with the ways in which these audiences are treated by these media, who also speak to them as true believers. We can see this when, through their public statements, they address their audiences as counterpublics who are known, allowing them to be seen as individuals ("I am being spoken to"), and strangers ("I am among those being spoken to"). They are not finite, a public can expand beyond its known group of participants, but they are often distinct.

To provide some anchor points to move from this discussion toward the analysis below, we can focus on three shared, key components that can be traced across the different arguments posed by Asen, Fraser, and Warner.

First, diverse conceptualizations of counterpublics tend to center around a shared "recognition of social complexity and sociocultural diversity,"[52] Adopting this framework, we can acknowledge that complexity gives us greater latitude to consider the ways different political and discursive actors engage in society. This resonates with Fraser's critique of Habermas, and it might well be because the nature of cultural and ideological fracturing that has taken over political differences since the 1990s has coalesced under a resistance to institutions, from both the left and the right.[53]

Second, scholars of counterpublics share a related dissatisfaction with any idea of a singular public as Habermas' theories would promote. They agree, as Mouffe outlines, that arguments that see a singular public as something to aspire toward fail to account for hidden and structural power imbalances, objected to by counterpublics who remind us of the constant negotiation that goes into shaping

our ongoing societies.[54] This reveals the impossibility of there being a singular public, whether (as Asen argues) this would presuppose "contemporaneous face-to-face encounters among all citizens potentially affected by issues under consideration,"[55] or because it fails to account for the way that, even if this face-to-faceness were possible, existing norms and rules guiding deliberation impinge upon the potential for those who exist outside those spaces of deliberation to engage. This is an *a priori* disadvantage to anyone trying to enter such a space, as Mouffe's critique of Habermas explored in Chapter 2 captures.

Third, across this scholarship the role of media and mediated discourse is central. When Warner outlines how "a counterpublic comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers," he refers to the public address engaged with by media, including news media and journalism.[56] The circulation of media also "overcomes" the impossibility of contemporaneous engagement within any given public inherent to our modern world, and it is on this point that the analysis will now develop.

These three points allow us to better consider the ways that publics and counterpublics can be understood through the way they are *addressed* by media, within their content, and through the discursive interaction that all media engage with when addressing their audiences. This public address is one half of the address-reception relationship Warner identifies, and reception is beyond the scope of this study. Yet by addressing the aspects of public address, this chapter is able to establish the *context* of how specific media are likely to be received. This allows us to see language used by journalists as providing guide for how any individual should understand and engage with the specific media they are encountering. Following Teun van Dijk and his description of a "preferred reading," the way media messages are constructed offers us a framework for considering the universe of possibilities for their interpretation.[57]

A discursive counterpublic

Given this context, I turn now to consider how peripheral actors, and both agonistic and antagonistic media, are not simply treating their readers or viewers as masses to be spoken to, but rather as individuals who have collective political power that can be activated through the ways they are addressed. The differences in different media and their forms of public address become apparent in language emphasizing collective belonging (narrowly in the use of "we" and "us," reflected in the plural use of "you," and more broadly in references to collective beliefs and ambitions). As such, the individual reader/listener can see (and assume) they are

part of a larger set of individuals being addressed as the public, even though they do not know (all of) those individuals. This is one way in which a conceptual focus on *counterpublics* encourages a focus on how the audiences of these media are approached in terms of their specific and narrow ideological, cultural, and political belief systems, and how these can be evaluated through the use of a specific discourse that these counterpublics would recognize as their own.

This is a distinction evaluated in terms of difference, and it is ideological in the largest sense of offering a worldview reinforced through language. In taking this focus, ideology is approached not as a political alignment (e.g., left-right political ideology), but in terms of the beliefs and belief systems that unite groups of people.[58] By bringing in a focus on ideology, we can also build a parallel consideration of where these media fit within an agonistic model of democratic society, to consider whether Mouffe's encouragement to allow for multiple, disagreeing perspectives that can coexist, with none able to subjugate or subordinate the others, is within reach.[59] Further, it allows us to see whether or not these media share aspects of a specific journalistic *doxa*, *habitus*, and *nomos*, and whether they make their specific appeals to their audiences in ways that align with the ambitions and shared ideals of a journalistic field, opening the door to consider a more agonistic formation of that field.[60]

Taken together, this offers us a link between the ways agonists' and antagonists' publics are addressed, and how through public address these publics are encouraged to coalesce around specific markers of difference. When this occurs, ideological narratives that define journalism and society can serve both as indicators of belonging and as indicators of non-belonging. For example, a dominant ideology of journalism is something that has been built by tradition as an ideal-type and recognized for its dominance, but it is also something that can be challenged by those who look to push back on power, and especially by alternative media who see their *distance* from that dominant space as a demonstration of their independence and their ability to buck mainstream pressures. Using Van Dijk's ideological square, the analysis in this chapter draws on the ways language emphasizes and deemphasizes certain traits in favor one ideological group and at the expense of the other (see Figure 7.1).

This can be illustrated with the example from the start of this chapter. In that piece, *PJ Media*'s Michael Walsh uses a Frank Bruni column in the *New York Times* as a device to critique all mainstream media. Bruni's piece pushes back against the spate of criticism that had been levied against mainstream political journalism, which comes from all sides and attacks these journalists as "bloodthirsty raptors intent on finding flaw where none exists."[62] In terms of ideology, the *PJ Media* article responds in a way that:

Emphasize *Our* good things	Emphasize *Their* bad things
De-emphasize *Our* bad things	De-emphasize **Their** good things
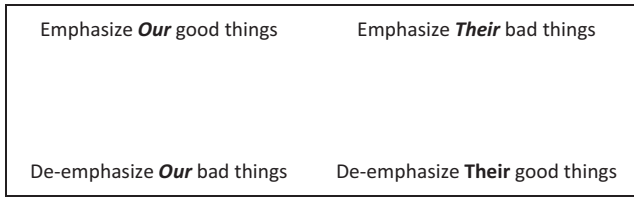
Figure 7.1: Teun van Dijk's "Ideological Square"[61]

- **Emphasizes** *our* **good things**. Describing *PJ Media* and its readers collectively as "us"; Walsh describing his own expertise on journalism's problems: "Trust me on this, as I was part of it for 25 years."
- **De-emphasize** *Our* **bad things.** Omitting critiques of political bias against *PJ Media*; framing its advice as common-sense, offered "so they [journalists] would know what the hell they're talking about"
- **Emphasize** *Their* **bad things**. Presenting a list of negatives about mainstream political media, e.g., having "incestual" relationships, being irreligious or atheist, and simply stating "they don't know anything about anything, except journalism'," to suggest they are narrow-minded.
- **De-emphasize** *Their* **good things**. Omitting positive contributions from mainstream media, including Bruni's recommendations for a better approach to campaign coverage.

In weighing ideological aspects, we need to also return to our earlier discussion of contingencies and context, recognizing that the language we study needs to be considered both in terms of the information being presented explicitly, and also how news carries implied discourses that are recognizable to members of those communities being addressed, using their own lexica, discursive frameworks, and cultural reference points. This is particularly apparent when populists and the media that support then appropriate insults lobbed against them as a form of distinction; a badge of honor. We saw this in 2016, when Hillary Clinton described some Republican voters as "deplorables,"[63] after which Republicans started using this term themselves. Recently, a similar example emerged when farmers in the Netherlands reclaimed the label "boerenstand [peasantry]" as a moniker of populist distinction, adopted as an appeal to their own sense of subjugation on populist media like *Ongehoord Nederland*.[64] In our example above from *PJ Media*, the discussion of "bloodthirsty raptors" quoted from a Frank Bruni's piece at the *New York Times* refers to birds of prey. But the same phrase is used later and repeatedly by political commentators as a way to allude to the velociraptors made famous in the *Jurassic Park* books and movies. In that use, the same metaphor is used to

describe how conservative politicians and their supporters were "testing the fences" (as the velociraptors did in *Jurassic Park*) looking for weaknesses in democratic institutions.[65] This should remind us that the use of conspicuously negative labels ("raptors", "deplorables," and "peasantry") can be appropriated and reappropriated, reinforcing a sense of being marginalized to some or a sense of difference to others, that can only ever be understood in the "context of social relations" in which a specific discourse emerges.[66]

Pejoratives like these are taken as a diminution that is enacted *on* counterpublics. They are an exercise of violence from those in power, reinforcing the sense that you belong somewhere, just not in the dominant space. Of course, these individuals and groups might not want to be a part of that dominant public in the first place, and counterpublics formed through the circulation of polarized, populist antagonistic rhetoric might prefer to "mark themselves off unmistakably from any general or dominant public," to the extent that being demeaned and labeled through pejoratives allows them to circulate narratives of being ignored, silenced, or subjugated by those in power.[67]

This brings our attention back to the demands of discourse approaches, especially when engaging language within hyper-political peripheral news spaces and interpreting language within an equally politicized set of narratives. Language offers us clues as to what is being implied, and this develops as a sort of *knowing-unknowing* that is embedded within news discourses of all types. From peripheral journalistic actors who employ a coded language of belonging and difference, this is reflected in the language and terminology that media employ when they address their publics. They *know* who they want to appeal to, and they *know* to a certain extent this public can be called into existence through in-group references. References to Christian heritage and a loss of culture, or culture wars and allusions to political correctness, will likely be recognized by right-wing audiences as a nod to their shared ideological position. On the left, appeals to justice and intergenerational responsibilities, or to community values and bodily autonomy, will surely be recognized as markers that these media are for you, and you are their public.

But there are also *unknowns*, including how the members of any given public will receive the content being sent their way, and whether they will see themselves as united because of it.[68] Within polarized and politicized media, the *unknowns* are certainly apparent by how they are counteracted. Peripheral media attempt to mitigate "unknowing" by invoking specific political, ideological, and cultural touchstones that they and their imagined audiences will recognize, signaling to their audience the nature of this larger public of like-minded or similarly interested strangers by referring to preserving traditional culture (an appeal to the right), or fighting corporate influence (an appeal to the left). They cannot guarantee that the

gap between knowing and unknowing can be fully resolved, but they can work to minimize this distance through the language they use, and the appeals they make.

Minimizing this sense of distance has a two-fold effect. It can give those who associate themselves with counterpublics a stronger grip on the ideologies that give their individual and collective identities coherence (as will be explored further below).[69] It can also give solace to those who have been told that they are, in fact, distinct from others in society, indicating they are not alone (for both better and worse). However, their functional similarities—that publics are called into existence through the discursive interaction of public address and reception, and that these can be found in news media—allow us to specify three aspects of public/counterpublic formation, and the role of discourse in that process. These anchor my interpretation of the ways agonists and antagonists address their specific publics within their own content, studied below:

First, discourse is crucial for all journalism, as all journalism is indebted to a public that is only brought into existence by being *addressed* within media content.[70] How this public is constructed is especially significant for agonists and antagonists, who must overcome their outsider status vis-à-vis traditional journalism to try and reach as wide audience as possible while also pushing back against the dominance of the field's mainstay members.[71]

Second, it is necessary for both agonists and antagonists to position their work as both providing news-as-information and providing news-as-ideology to create a bind between themselves and a *distinct public*. They present their content within a narrative that caters to their specific public (and perhaps, no other), as if to say, "we know you, and we know those who know you."

Third, both agonists and antagonists are benefited when the individuals they address can more readily see themselves as part of a larger, like-minded collection of individuals, through discourses that emphasize "*a relation among strangers*" that rests on shared ideological, cultural, and political perspectives.[72]

These considerations help organize our thinking about the destructive and divisive discourses antagonist media use when addressing their publics, and how they differ from the constructive critical discourses employed by agonists. To the extent, we can see the discursive appeals above as efforts by *PJ Media* toward constituting their discrete counterpublic, and we have good reason to do so, we can see where their appeals to their publics reflect the calcified and already-entrenched worldviews that have fractured our modern societies. Divided into factions of progressives or conservatives, or of those seeking something new or hoping to return to how things were, the language woven into the forms of "public address" made by these media play into dynamics of fragmentation. They reinforce a polarized, antagonistic, orientation in our fractured societies.

Analysis and approach

All of the peripheral media analyzed in this chapter claim to be doing journalism, either explicitly by describing their work as "journalism" or their content as "news," or implicitly by referring to their work as reporting, investigating, or uncovering information (for more on sampling, see the Appendix). This sampling approach reflects a specific research agenda that I've outlined in greater detail elsewhere,[73] which argues that in order for us to understand the journalistic field as a field of forces and a field of power,[74] its boundaries,[75] and how these are changing,[76] we need to take seriously those who aspire to be seen as journalists, no matter how nontraditional their approaches. We especially need to take seriously those who seek to change journalism and those who would radically alter the field's norms given the opportunity, alongside those who see their contributions as critical responses to perceived journalistic failings.[77]

Doing so, however, requires both being open to finding journalism in new spaces, including—and especially—when it defies normative assumptions about what journalism should be. To achieve this, we need to limit our analysis to those who openly claim to be journalists. This calls for a systematic approach to drawing distinctions between new journalistic actors (or would-be journalistic actors) and the rest, a process that begins by discerning those who identify themselves as journalists, or their work as journalism, and those who resist such a label. By having a criterion of a clear expression of journalistic identity, we are also given examples of peripheral journalistic actors' efforts at contesting the boundaries of the journalistic field (they demonstrate where, and in what terms, they are seeking journalistic legitimacy), and from that we are better able to explore the extent to which their content also reflects extant ideas about journalism.

For example, *ThePostOnline*, a conservative Dutch site, describes their reliance on trustworthy news sources in both the content they link to and in their own reporting practices at length, noting flippantly that when they report, they rely on sources, "En ja, dat zijn er altijd minstens twee [And yeah, there are always at least two of them]."[78] Sampled media also employ more implicit references to journalistic roles, "holding the powerful accountable through fearless, adversarial journalism" (*The Intercept*), fostering "intense debate" (*El American*), and providing "straightforward and relevant information" (*Punching Bag Post*). This self-presentation invites our further consideration of their journalistic identities, the news they produced, and their position with regard to the field. It also gives us a way to be more critical as to how well they perform those roles or live up to the

identities they have espoused. This approach sees this as a specific opportunity to "take seriously their claims of doing journalism."[79]

At the same time, caution is warranted. Appending a journalistic label to one's website, or employing a journalistic lexicon in one's work, while necessary, is not sufficient. Research has shown this label is also used to give one's work greater authority, as a "guise" of journalism that affords the media and their content certain gravitas.[80] In this light, "about" pages and mission statements become spaces of scrutiny, where we can consider the way agonists and antagonists foreground their own preferred journalistic identity, and seat this within a larger socio-political or ideological context. As overt spaces of *both* journalistic and political identity formation, this allows us to see how media demonstrate their appeal to their publics in ways that both divide (e.g., left-right or conservative-progressive politics), and unite, bringing together like-minded audiences as publics being served by the media they engage with.

For its analysis, this chapter draws on examples of explicit, public-facing demonstrations of journalistic belonging made by agonists and antagonists in "about" pages, mission statements, and solicitations for donations and paid subscriptions (often as "memberships"). For the time being, it does not seek to distinguish between genuine, or suitable, applications of this journalistic identity; I will return to this in the next chapter. In addition to "about" pages and similar sign-posted narratives, other prominent narratives found on these sites are also weighed, including those found in highly visible spaces on these sites, such as banners, sidebars, and the fundamentally unavoidable pop-up windows appealing for donations. "About" pages and membership appeals are also productive because they provide information that an uninitiated audience member might seek out to better understand the media they are consuming, whether on a website they have stumbled across or perhaps more likely on a page they were directed to via a link sent by a friend or shared online.[81] They also give each of us a way to spot-check how a specific media tries to align with their readers' own worldviews.

Within these types of statements about why they do what they do, media talk— they talk about who they are, they talk about their ideas and identities, and importantly they talk with their audience about who they are, and what they think about. Both peripheral agonists and antagonists engage in these discourses, amplifying different ideological and political positions, whether to foreground elements of populist backlash and populism (antagonistically), in order to widen and reinforce societal divisions, or through critical-constructive calls to action, prodding publics towards unity in the struggle for progress and resolving divisions, agonistically. In particular, public-facing narratives of journalistic identity found in the work of antagonistic journalistic media deserve our focused attention now more than ever, as

these demonstrate the ways a *glut* of media opportunities can be utilized to stoke *grievance*, rather than contribute to a pluralistic democratic society and journalistic field. Those that have taken this approach have been implicated in the rise of polarization (as demonstrated in the previous chapter), by invoking and amplifying societal division.

To facilitate this attention, outlets were sampled based on adversarial identification; I consulted right-wing indices of left-wing media to identify progressive media, and left-wing indices of right-wing media to identify right-wing media. I then cross-compared these lists to non-partisan sites dedicated to tracking media bias and the use of mis- and disinformation. Additionally, media in the Netherlands and the UK were sampled based on previous research projects— also to capture now-closed media for historical comparison—and, finally, media choices were discussed with colleagues. Full details including a list of analyzed media outlets can be found in the appendix.

The final sample contains eight left-wing sites, 13 sites considered progressive, six that are center-left, two have gone back-and-forth in their political position, seven are center-right or conservative, and 13 are right-wing. This amounts to 26 more left-leaning media, and 23 more right-leaning media in the sample when looking at their current positioning, and 24 and 25 when looking accounting for political shifts over time. The initial criterion for selecting media for analysis is that they self-identify as engaging in news and journalism. This criterion has become all the more important as the study of interlopers and peripheral actors in journalism has expanded, opening doors to research that reflects on different agents engaging in informative media work from beyond journalism's traditional boundaries.

More than just a methodological point, these decisions are tied to further a conceptual concern. While it is in no way my ambition to herd intellectual work, I join others in raising concerns over whether or not the recent attention placed on journalism's periphery has, incidentally, weakened our understanding of both journalism as a field and those who challenge its boundaries. This occurs when we do not make stronger distinctions between peripheral actors who challenge journalism from outside newsrooms and traditional organizations, and a range of other actors who contribute to the production of journalism by being brought into newsrooms.[82] Grouping these together under the "peripheral" banner might also result in a wider range of non-journalistic media being brought under the umbrella of "journalism," even when they do not identify as such.[83]

The choice to focus on only those media that make a clear acknowledgment of their journalistic identity is meant to focus scholarly inquiry into those who are actively and explicitly challenging the journalistic field's boundaries, seeking entry into it and appropriating (rightly or wrongly) language of journalistic authority

and legitimacy.[84] Analytically, this also offers a way to check ourselves when revisiting the field's boundaries. Go too far, and we risk diluting a socially shared idea of journalism by associating it with all manner of informative media. Work too narrowly, and we define journalism according to standards that no longer apply, and reassert the very power dynamics that led to a backlash to mainstream journalism and an outpouring of new approaches to journalism in a digital age.[85] This helps avoid weakening our scholarship by presenting unreasonable critiques, when holding different societal actors to journalistic standards they never sought for themselves, and might have even rejected.[86]

Metajournalistic discourses of agonists and antagonists

Following the conceptualization I introduced in 2018, peripheral journalistic actors' identities are firmly situated within a *heretical* approach to journalism; they are defined in terms of their critique of the established journalistic field, its doxa and its habitus, even as they seek recognition of themselves as journalists and their work as journalism. This is an identity that claims to speak more honestly to publics through peripheral news, including by describing traditional journalism as overly dogmatic, or as too conservative or "orthodox" in their allegiance to balance and objectivity.[87]

   For peripheral media, journalistic orthodoxy is perhaps most closely aligned with objectivity, and peripheral actors attack even the assumption there can be something like impartiality in reporting, describing objectivity as cowardly at least, and deceptive at worst. For example, *TPO Online* in the Netherlands (which is often conservative in its stances, but is not as right-wing as media like *Ongehoord Nederland*) describes itself as "iets minder objectief en netuuraal dan Reuters [something less objective and neutral than Reuters]." *The Gateway Pundit* speaks to the "many Americans [who] continue to lose trust in the purportedly unbiased nature of older newspapers and networks." Others see the objectivity as something that is used by powerful actors to suggest there is a natural order of things (echoing Bourdieu), creating only a sense of homogeneity within journalism that does not reflect reality. *Talking Points Memo* takes up this critique, saying: "The goal of our journalism is neither balance nor objectivity but accuracy, fairness and a fundamental honesty with our readers and members at all times."

   Setting aside a longer debate about the utility of objectivity as a standard in journalism and as a prevailing doxic value, one that has rested on uneven footing

in both scholarship and in the field itself, the attention paid *to* objectivity within peripheral media discourses is salient for what it reinforces to their publics. These actors tell their publics that they have been lied to by the suggestion that there is an objective truth, and that news can you tell you what it is. Further, they suggest that objectivity is not possible (nor worth striving for), framing its pursuit as malicious. *The Dispatch* describes objectivity is a guise that journalists use for their own egos: "[T]he very worst journalism hides behind a pretense of objectivity and the stolen authority that pretense provides." So does *Guido Fawkes*, which champions its subjectivity: "We don't believe in objective impartiality nor pretend to it [sic]."

These sorts of statements are reinforced by an anti-institutionalist narrative that positions peripheral actors as a corrective to a false promise made by traditional news. Invoking impartiality and the mainstream media era, *Punching Bag Post* emphasizes this by describing traditional media as engaging in hagiography:

> When television news was king, journalists prided themselves on being impartial, one could trust Walter Cronkite with the truth and the news icons known throughout the country were never questioned.
>
> It was never actually true, however. Every journalist comes with their own biases and most do not even realize it.

That last phrase, "most do not even realize it" is typical of the ways both *antagonist* and *agonist* peripheral news media—especially conservative sites like *Punching Bag Post*—present themselves to their readers. They offer their publics a corrective to a journalism that doesn't even know how bad it is.

Affirm: Narratives of journalistic belonging and counterpublic isolation

While the digital media examined here are far from what we might label "traditional," many express an allegiance to the functions and ideals that traditional news media have espoused. At *Wonkette*, a liberal politics blog founded in 2004, it presents itself to its readers in familiar terms, saying: "We're liberal, terrible, hilarious, *usually* safe for work pottymouths who know what the hell we're talking about. Stick around long enough, and you will too." No doubt there is a political alignment here, and—in being terrible, hilarious, and only *usually* safe for work—its content will not bear a passing resemblance to the average newspaper. But there is also a narrative of journalistic service. *Wonkette* promises its journalists "know what the hell we're talking about," and by reading their news they say, "you

will too." An informative intermediary that offers you a space of community and belonging, whose content allows you to know what's going on in society from people like you. This echoes the intermediary role Habermas describes for media, just as it does Benedict Anderson's imagined community and Robert Park's seeing news as a type of knowledge.

Similar appeals to journalistic tradition are invoked by peripheral media who position themselves as watchdogs, staring down "unchecked power in government and business" (*The American Conservative*). They describe performing basic journalistic functions, "providing information, opinion, analysis and good journalism" (*El American*), and say they are guided by traditional ideals, such as being "Eerlijk en zonder blad voor de mond [Honest, without mincing words]" (*Ongehoord Nederland*). A similar commitment is made by *The Liberal Patriot,* which promises "honest analysis and original commentary to help advance a vital center perspective in American politics."

In making these claims, these media *affirm* their own sense of belonging to the journalistic field, elevating their positive attributes by de-emphasizing any that would contradict that self-presentation. These are not dissimilar to the descriptions found in the editorial agendas of any newspaper or broadcaster. It is hardly exhaustive, and the comparisons can be overwrought, but we see how *El American's* mission above echoes the BBC's, which commits: "To provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them." It also echoes *The New York Times'* claims: "We seek the truth and help people understand the world. This mission is rooted in our belief that great journalism has the power to make each reader's life richer and more fulfilling, and all of society stronger and more just." *Salon.com*, a forerunner of digital native news sites makes this promise specifically within the context of societal divisions, as their reporting "helps you make sense of a contradictory world, leading the evolving, challenging dialogue on building a more democratic, innovative and humane future." By providing content and news that is important for society and presenting it to a civically interested public that they are eager to embolden, peripheral media are able to align themselves with journalism's history and legacy of public service. Other peripheral media describe themselves as doing "vital work" (*Truthout*), "campaigning against political sleaze, corruption and hypocrisy" (*Guido Fawkes*), and creating an "informed public" (*Project Censored*), which also resonate with traditional journalistic functions of shining a spotlight on misdeeds, holding power to account, and serving a public.

However, this is just about where one-to-one comparisons end, and it doesn't take much scrutiny to find differences between those we would consider "traditional" news actors and more divisive peripheral actors. These differences emerge in

the ways media appropriate a normative discourse of a free press catering to a diverse society, reframing these within an antagonistic, politicized discourse. To illustrate this through contrast, we can draw on two Dutch examples. To begin with the traditional, the NPO—the Dutch Foundation for Public Broadcasting—outlines in its own mission statement that it strives to serve a pluralistic society. It invokes pluralism by promising a pluriform media offering, saying: "We brengen mensen samen en zijn daarmee een verbindende factor in onze veelkleurige samenleving [We bring people together and are thus a unifying factor in our multicoloured society]." From the periphery, *Ongehoord Nederland* claims the same ideals, using the same appeal to pluralism in its own mission statement. However, it positions this claim in direct opposition to the NPO and its standards, going so far as to argue the NPO is engaged in a form of censorship that limits *ON!*'s voice (they have argued that regulation, censures, and fines for content violations contravene pluralism, and that the NPO is trying to silence *ON!*, despite the fact that *ON!* broadcasts on NPO channels). *Ongehoord Nederland* invokes its own claims of pluralism as part of a commitment to resist "politieke correctheid [political correctness]"[88] saying it is, "die pal staat voor vrije, pluriforme meningen en behoud van Nederlandse cultuur [standing firm for free, pluralistic opinions and the preservation of Dutch culture]," by which it means expressing contrarian and even extreme political perspectives.[89]

This calls to our attention the complexities of the use of both a familiar journalistic lexicon and how these terms can be politicized in language within peripheral media spaces, and returns our analysis to the larger discussion of co-option when antagonistic media appropriate the language of marginalization in their content and self-presentation. *Ongehoord Nederland*'s advocacy for pluralism is focused on maintaining Dutch traditions, including the traditional depiction of Zwarte Piet as a prominent example. Zwarte Piet is the name for the assistants of St Nicholas during the Dutch "Sinterklaas" holidays. While more could be said on this, the short version is that Piet is typically portrayed in person by someone wearing black makeup, and traditionally quite a lot of black makeup that has been seen by many as equivalent to wearing blackface. This depiction has been the focus of protests, prompting both changes to his portrayal (with Piet wearing small smears of "soot" makeup instead), as well as resistance to that change by populist supporters and the media that back them.

ON! amplifies these protests and the voices of pro-Piet protesters to establish its own claims of serving multiculturalism and pluralism. It argues that Dutch culture is being suppressed, within a collective, marginalized, framing. In the flyer introduced in Chapter 6, *ON!* align themselves with this cause and the would-be marginalized Dutch public, saying: "Samen zorgen we ervoor dat de *ON!*-stem

in iedere huiskamer klinkt over het verdedigen van de eigen cultuur [Together we make sure the *ON!* voice is heard in every living room defending our own culture].” In adopting this mantel, and pursuing these goals, *ON!* tells its publics that they are also going up against a conspiratorial effort at silencing their contribution to media pluralism, saying “ON! zich onmiskenbaar van het bestaande aanbod binnen de NPO [*ON!* unmistakably distinguishes itself from existing offerings within the NPO].”[90] Adopting the language of the subaltern, and the counterpublic as they do.

In *Ongehoord Nederland's* efforts to contrast what they do with a perceived-as-hegemonic mainstream media, they show where the invocation of “pluralism” and how it is interpreted differently by different media actors can be a point of ideological attention. It is also an ideological device that is being used by *ON!* to *affirm* their own publics' senses of being marginalized, and *ON!*'s claims of service. By reframing pluralism from a value that encourages multiple perspectives, toward one that sees any constraint on extreme voices or misinformation as censorship, as *ON!* has done, they appropriate democratic agonistic narratives to, instead, amplify antagonistic narratives between these media, their publics, and some sort of dominant amorphous oppositional “other.”

This is a common thread among conservative peripheral media, who describe pluralism as when they are able to say uncomfortable or undesirable things, often by advocating for the freedom to use a “politically incorrect tone” (*Guido Fawkes*), or to say things that might offend. *The Gateway Pundit* commits to being “a trusted news source for the stories and views that are largely untold or ignored by traditional news outlets.” At the less-than conservative *Free Press,* a similar, but more constructive, wariness towards ideological power is presented in a more agonistic, critical framing. They say “we focus on stories that are ignored or misconstrued in the service of an ideological narrative. For us, curiosity isn't a liability. It's a necessity.” *Free Press* goes further to describe their commitment to telling honest stories, without fear and in the void left by a complacent traditional news media: “We publish investigative stories and provocative commentary about the world as it actually is—with the quality once expected from the legacy press, but the fearlessness of the new.” *Progressive NewsWire*, from the left, adopts the same framing and describes itself as pushing against the “filter of the corporate-media [that] ignores those voices.”

The above examples reflect the dual function of affirmative discourses oriented around belonging and belief and working in two directions, tailored to the two audiences peripheral actors address in an effort to reimagine the journalism's sense of vision and division—its nomos: Toward other journalists, peripheral actors affirm a sense of journalistic belonging through a discourse that indicates they are

serving their public's informational needs, and toward their publics, they affirm they are working on their behalf to push back against those in power *agonistically* (by offering an improved and more engaged form of journalism).

A second affirmative discourse, one that is more ideological and one that invokes a sense of ominous fear and *antagonism*, suggests that these media not only represent their publics, but share a set of beliefs with their counterpublics and a sense of needing to engage politically towards change. They not only acknowledge polarized, populist concerns as legitimate points of grievance (affirming their sense of marginalization or silencing, for example), they also tell their publics that they are not alone in their beliefs (by showing that the media are "on their side"). This often emerges in an *antagonistic* discourse that widens ideological divisions by framing themselves as engaged in polarized and pluralist "battles" on behalf of their publics, as *Ongehoord Nederland* has said, outlined in the previous chapter.

For this reason, a distinction needs to be made between affirmation found within *agonistic* criticism of actual power and affirmative reinforcement of struggles to push back against hegemonic powers, and how *antagonists* engage in affirmative discourses in ways that are polarizing, co-opting a discourse of marginalization to foment a sense of division or backlash.[91] We can see the latter in the following examples. In the UK, *The Conservative Woman* addresses their public in affirmative language, appealing to those who share a belief that there is an ongoing assault on "freedom of conscience." In the United States, *The Gateway Pundit* appeals to those who are being silenced by a "politicized establishment media." These forms of public address channel a sense of "us versus them" populism, foregrounded in ideological language of confrontation that makes an affective and moral appeal, as we will explore further below. In seeking to affirm populist ideologies, these media also position themselves within ideological projects that are geared more toward belief systems (reflected in language around "freedom of conscious"), placing these within a narrative of improved information provision (in contrast to "establishment media"). This complicates, rather than clarifies, our efforts to distinguish between different media that compete in the same digital media spaces to change and challenge the journalistic field.

Out of that complication, caution in making these determinations is warranted, as it is not obvious on its face what differentiates agonistic and antagonistic forms of counterpublic address based on marginalized belonging and domination. Both convey a sense of coming together, and both identify shared beliefs. But just as these affirmative discourses of belief and belonging are more apparent in some instances than others, some ideological discourses are more apparent in some media, while others are harder to parse if we take affirmative metajournalistic discourses at face value.

To try and untie this knot, we can see this with Canada's *The Post Millennial*—included in this sample because it is closely tied to its conservative U.S. owner and draws on U.S. news for much of its commentary—that describes a "verve for equality in thought" and a commitment to journalistic principles, saying: "We don't take reporting the news lightly, it colours how people see important issues and can be a medium that enhances community or divides it."[92] While the latter quote speaks to community-building and journalistic ideals, the former reference to "equality in thought" should pique our interest. It utilizes the language of conservative populists in the United States (and elsewhere) who argue people in power are trying to control people's freedom of expression via education (suggesting an ominous "thought police," as one frequent right-wing co-option of otherwise more liberal Orwellian language).[93]

Affirmative discourses can also, contradictorily, be both discomforting and reassuring. While they remind their like-minded readers of their cordoned-off status in society, they can also assure individuals that they are, nevertheless, not alone. They might well be strangers, but there are other strangers they can relate to. This is made all the more apparent when we see peripheral media invoke solidarity in addressing their publics. Progressive and left-leaning peripheral actors tend to highlight their readers as a community, as bases of support—including financial support—but also as committed to their shared mission. *The Palmer Report*'s community serves as a source of pseudo-character references: "Ask our longtime readers about our consistent track record." At *The Dispatch*, its public is comprised of "engaged citizens," and *Common Media*'s public knows that news is best when it is "encouraging critical thinking and civic action." *Novara Media* see its news as content that it "actively intends to feed back into political action" taken up by their public, and *Raw Story* describes their media-public relationship in near identical terms to the theories drawn on here, committing to: "engaging people not as a passive audience of consumers and spectators, but as active—or soon-to-be activated—participants in the struggle for a better world." Peripheral media like *BlackCommentator* show they are devoted to reshaping power imbalances through efforts to invoke camaraderie among their readers, as "allies in the movement for economic justice, social justice and peace."

From these examples, we are encouraged to think of these media as serving a public that identifies as distinct, segmented off from larger society in terms of their politics or convictions, and yet working alongside one another to overcome society's fractured nature, and strive towards something collective. This is a public that is resistant, but also recognizes that: "Without regular forums for advocacy and debate, a people are at the mercy of their adversaries" (*BlackCommentator*).

However, that same balance of comfort and discomfort is also invoked by peripheral media who amplify isolation and reinforce division, rather than coming together. *Punching Bag Post*, for example, describes their audience as standing apart, in contrast to the "small minded reader" who seeks infotainment. They *affirm* a sense of disconnection and abandonment. For other media, their means of affirming division often builds around specific culture war narratives and polarized societal differences. *El American* explicitly targets isolated, conservative Hispanics who have been "orphaned of reliable information," just as *Ongehoord Nederland* promises to speak for the unlistened to: "Wij brengen uw ongehoorde stem naar Hilversum [We bring your unheard voice to Hilversum]," the center of Dutch broadcasting. When they suggest their publics are strangers among other strangers, this is done in a way that is either self-aggrandizing—by foregrounding the "millions" of readers of *Daily Caller's* "wildly popular newsletters and apps"—or conveyed in polarizing narrative, by speaking to a public that is pitched in a conflict on the side of "all who believe in liberty," for whom these media remain "ever vigilant" (*The Conservative Woman*).

Affect: Structured feeling

In the competitive (even, saturated) digital media ecosystem, incorporating emotion within news gives digital media a leg up in attracting and maintaining their audiences.[94] For agonists and antagonists, this goes a step further, where affective dimensions of public formation and activist mobilization are woven throughout their content, disregarding the constraints of rationalism that Habermas prioritizes, to instead shape "affective publics."[95] In peripheral media uses of affective discourses, we begin to see greater divergence between affective communitarian discourses we would describe as agonistic, and affective discourses made in the interest of political causes we can consider antagonistic. Through the latter, language speaks to and even activates publics to respond to power imbalances in societies in ways that reinforce and enhance "affective polarization," doing so through heated narratives of animosity.[96]

To consider affect within discursive appeals to peripheral media's publics, we need to begin with Papacharissi's use of Raymond Williams' "structures of feeling." This describes affect as something shaped by the "forms and conventions shared by those living through a particular era."[97] Williams own description narrows our attention further, allowing us to see affect as something that "is as firm as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity."[98] Specifically, Williams notes how the intangible—the unique

"characteristic approaches and tones in argument"—that are drawn upon by those living in any given period when communicating are marked by different forms of expression and then embedded in the cultural objects they produce, including media as a form of "documentary culture."[99]

Through these objects, culture is transported from one generation to the next, but the structures of feeling themselves are not immutable. Rather, when provided these cultural artifacts,

> the new generation responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting, taking up many continuities, that can be traced, and reproducing many aspects of the organization, which can be separately described, yet feeling its whole life in certain ways differently and shaping its creative response into a new structure of feeling.[100]

For our purposes, Williams' conceptualization of structured feeling is both conceptual, and cautionary. It aids our approach to seeing news media as a cultural object that is shaped by and reflective of the argument and tone of those producing that media, for example, signaling political fervency and antagonism. It also reminds us that whatever conclusions we draw about these emotive, affective, aspects of news, they necessarily sit somewhere between the approachable and the approximate. In other words, we might be able to arrive at a *sense* of the larger culture that shaped a specific piece of news, and might be able to draw from a rich array of information to understand it, but we "shall not suppose that we can ever do more than make an approach, an approximation" as to the structure of feeling for those who participated in creating any particular piece of culture or specific activity.[101] For these reasons, we can and should refine our interpretive frameworks and our analytical approaches in ways that help shorten that distance between our observation of a cultural object and how it might have been experienced, so long as we also recognize this gap will never be fully closed.

Among the most apparent affective discourses are those that invoke a sense of loss, expressed most clearly by right-wing, populist peripheral media who use a specific affective discourse to sign-post feelings of unfortunate change and overwhelming loss to their publics. *The Gateway Pundit*, for example, describes a sense of weariness at the limits of U.S. news, offering an alternative for "readers tired of limited options and a politicized establishment media." *The Dispatch* offers a similar lament, emphasizing a feeling of loss of confidence and loss of connection brought about by the divisiveness of our digital age:

> It is less a World Wide Web linking us all together than an accelerant, quickening trends long in the works. Our confidence in the institutions that once anchored us was declining even before the internet became a fixture in our lives, but its arrival has only made us feel even less fixed to a common landscape.

In this example, not only is there an affective dimension of disconnection and loss, *The Dispatch* sets this up in the parameters of cultural backlash, offering a response to "quickening trends" of change. They reiterate the reasons that you—a reader who belongs to their public—might no longer see yourself reflected in a society that has moved on without you.[102] *The Conservative Woman* describes this as a backward trend, itemizing the reasons for feelings of disenchantment: "Whether on climate, gender, relations between the sexes or race, it can feel as if we are entering a new Dark Age of anti-reason." Others, like *The American Conservative*, combine affirmative belief with an affective, moral sense of natural inclination, to structure belief around specific ideological conventions: "We believe conservatism to be the most natural political tendency, rooted in man's taste for the familiar, for family, for faith in God."

It is not surprising that affective discourses emerge more prominently among conservative and right-wing peripheral media. This aligns with research that finds politicians from the right, and particularly populist interpretations of rightward politics, have been successful in part due to their affective and emotional rhetoric.[103] Others have argued modern politics, and conservative politics in particular, are organized primarily according to affective dimensions.[104] Moreover, and specific to the public address of counterpublic formation, these narratives serve as a form of permission for feelings of disconnection and disillusionment that are affirmative and affective, assuring audiences that their feelings are legitimate.[105]

Affect is also invoked in explicit critiques of affective approaches to journalism as well, with peripheral media arguing emotions are antithetical to good journalism and cloud the information that publics need. *Punching Bag Post*, for example, describes infotainment as in service of profit, not the public: "[I]t's fun, it's interesting, it's design [sic] to outrage, to pull on heartstrings, to relate to some inner emotion. But infotainment makes no attempt to be impartial because impartiality simply doesn't add to the bottom line." They go on to promise to "throw away the crap, and get to the real issues at hand." *Guido Fawkes* goes in the opposite direction, touting the benefits of an affective response to news:

> If any time you read the site it makes you laugh or angry, or hopefully tells you something you didn't know before, it has succeeded. Readers come here for tittle-tattle, rumour and gossip. Sure, *Guido* sometimes campaigns on serious political issues we think are important, we never forget we're in the infotainment business.

By channeling *affect* within different forms of public address, media we might describe as *antagonistic* are better able to give direction to ideology, in ways that join up "feeling and belief" by reinforcing distinctions in society that are productive insofar as they advance the binary differences that politicized peripheral

media depend upon.[106] These discourses give emotions purpose, situating them within a larger struggle, providing "a form of emotional release that simultaneously invigorates and exhausts tension."[107] But antagonists also play loosely with the sincerity that this sense of loss warrants, and this can be indicative of a *defensive* backlash and co-option of a narrative of struggle, disguised as a genuine uphill climb.[108]

This becomes clearer when we look at the affective appeals made by peripheral media that take a more *agonist* approach, where affective discourses provide persistent, activistic, structure to emotions that are primarily committed to change. These media address their publics as "well-informed, well-intentioned—and just plain fed up and fired-up—people" (*Common Dreams*), using language that is *affective*, but not mournful or aggressive. Its aim is inspiration towards progressive change, *affectively* prodding their public to continue to "fight," while affording them the opportunity to see they are not alone in that struggle by *affirming* their shared belonging.

Affront: Defining the opposition, and the offense

Tied to affective discourses are forms of public address I categorize under *affront*, through which peripheral media establish the divisions between themselves by identifying their ideological, political, and cultural opponents. Affronting language does two things: It channels the moral dimensions of affective discourses (often in terms of righteous indignation, or a moral hierarchy),[109] and it establishes a binary distinction between a public (served by these media) and their opponent.

Affront is most apparent among conservative and rightward peripheral media, where these discourses adopt a moral language—what I categorize as "orthodox affront," as it responds to something seen as unnatural or heretical. This closely resemble elements of the cultural backlash thesis, when those who advocate for progress "ignore" the cultural mores of those who identify with conservative traditions—those who, as a result, are "left behind." When invoked by liberal and leftward peripheral media, they highlight affront within a struggle for societal betterment and progressive change, and the challenges they face. As *The Real News Networks* foregrounds: "[Y]ou cannot provide rigorous journalism in a North American context without acknowledging and challenging the historical legacy and continuing existence of racialized violence and dispossession." It is that legacy which they see as an affront.

Where affirmative discourses construct media as spaces of belonging, and affective discourses give structure to feelings and ideology, discourses of *affront* widen divisions between groups in society. By framing opposing views as offensive,

they offer a marked distinction between what is seen as natural, and what is seen as a heretical, blasphemous, heterodox alternative. Further, they clarify divisions between "us and them" by naming who "they" are. When peripheral media frame ideological positions by highlighting how *other* media are insulting, they reinforce a sense of affront. To someone on the left, everything conservative might be an affront— not just to "us" as the public and the media, but to "you" as an individual who should feel under attack. In many cases, affront is framed discursively as a conflict within a dependent relationship where the articulation of an opponent refines public address. This underscores a David-and-Goliath nature to the way affront is situated in conflictual dichotomies between would-be-subaltern media and their would-be-subaltern counterpublics. While there are clear similarities in the emphasis on politics, there are also clear differences in how antagonistic and agonistic media see their roles in this dynamic. This becomes apparent in terms of what they are fighting for, or fighting against.

CounterPunch embeds their sense of affront in their name, which makes clear the sense of opposition they hold toward conservative opponents. So does *Clash Daily*, and how they see themselves as "clashing" with "the left." We see a less overt (but nevertheless implied) conflictual language at *Talking Points Memo*, from the U.S. progressive Left. Their and their public's opponent is identified as "abusers" who deviate from the larger societal contract: "We are particularly focused on reporting on abuses of power and betrayals of the public trust." Within *The Canary*'s appeal for subscribers, they position themselves in opposition to power by standing for "people," saying: "*The Canary* exists to disrupt power and amplify people. We're proudly worker-owned and working-class-led, and we don't want you to miss any of our stories." This shows where the nature of affront can be made in moral terms, as a form of righteousness, which *The Real News Network* does as well, standing "on the frontlines of fights against injustice" just as *Common Dreams* fights for a "better future," by identifying itself in contrast to its named opponent— "an alternative to the commercial media."

In the way peripheral media present discourses of *affront* within their content, both agonistically and antagonistically, they demonstrate how media can serve to form counterpublics in the ways Fraser describes, by providing "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups *invent* and *circulate* counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."[110] That is to say, the presentation of affront can be self-serving and performative, defining a tension between two ideological or political camps (inventing), and then reinforcing their polar differences in ways that reinforce the media-public bond (circulating). They can also be, broadly speaking, realistic and factually accurate, emphasizing for a subaltern counterpublic how they have been

marginalized (inventing) by elevating an otherwise ignored or overlooked issue for an otherwise overlooked counterpublic that warrants attention (circulate).

The misuse of these two functions becomes apparent in the more destructive discourses of opposition circulated by antagonistic actors, where affront is found in the presentations made by media in support of the political right. For example, when they narrate a sense of affront through an unabashed free speech ethos, fighting against the politically correct left, sites like *The Gateway Pundit* address their publics in ways that tie together *affective* and *affronting* discourses. They claim: "We must have courage in order expose the truth about powerful interests that may be angered by our coverage." And yet, recent events show that these narratives are not necessarily in service of honest coverage; *The Gateway Pundit* settled a long-running defamation case in 2024, after being taken to court for spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories about election workers in the 2020 U.S. presidential election.[111] Similarly, *The American Conservative* structures their position against a failure of conservative politics, situating this in ostensibly moral, and rational, terms around economics and global geopolitics, while it steeps this in a call for defiance, and confrontation, against others in society, not in agonistic terms, but ardently aggressive, antagonistic ones:

> So much of what passes for contemporary conservatism is wedded to a kind of radicalism—fantasies of global hegemony, the hubristic notion of America as a universal nation for all the world's peoples, a hyperglobal economy. … Against it, we take our stand.

An antagonistic nature of *affront* is made salient when peripheral media allude to a face-to-face "battle" or conflict, often with an irrational opponent. *El American* does this by defining the media they contrast as irrational and violent: "flooded by radical leftists and enemies of freedom," but also as amoral: "In a landscape dominated by left-wing, biased and unprincipled media." Other times, the nature of affront is more nuanced; the left-leaning site *Truthout* promotes its "independence from the influence of corporate and political forces." In their contrasts, these examples make clear the position of sites like *El American* (on the political right) and hint at the position of *Truthout* (toward the political left), and how they see the rest of the journalistic field (as "enemies of freedom," or influenced by "corporate and political forces"). Through these narratives, we see more antagonistic media consistently defining their opponents as those who would hide the truth from you, who need to be fought against from the independent position these media occupy. This speaks back to a diminutive position that these media adopt in order to position themselves and their publics as subaltern, marginalized, and

oppressed. They refer to a perceived elite media/liberal politics cabal, and the invocation of a looming threat to the status quo.

Such appeals ring similar bells to the form of public address provided by *Ongehoord Nederland*, which commits itself to fighting for the Netherlands, to prevent Dutch people from losing their culture, just as *PJ Media*'s references to "fellow travelers" invoke a spurious communist opponent who they commit to "fighting." They frame this fight within an ominous portent of the future, describing "the left" and mainstream media as harbingers of a declining America. In describing themselves as collectively defending the country for "our kids and grandkids," there is a clear us-versus-them clear delineation between *PJ Media*, their public, and "our opponents and their relentless attacks on all that we hold dear." *PJ Media* makes a "promise to stay in this fight." And a fight is often what we get.

This stands in contrast to the approach by more *agonistic* approaches other media take, primarily from the left, where in progressive peripheral news media tend to frame their work as serving a public interest in a changing society—offering a heterodox view, where these media offer alternative interpretations of what journalism can do, in contrast to the affronting and constraining mainstream journalistic norms. We could summarize this by distingiuishing between affront as a sense of grievance *against* change shared by antagonists, and one activated *toward* change among agonists and their appeal to publics who "at the very least share our questions while not admonishing our curiosity" (*Novara Media*), working in ways that can "spark action by revealing systematic injustice and providing a platform for progressive and transformative ideas" (*Truthout*).

Aggrieve: Resentment and unfairness

Drawing a thread through these three discourse types, we arrive temporally and thematically at grievance and, more specifically the ways in which discourses of public address amplify division and difference that are both apparent in our politics and also embodied in media effort to tell publics they should feel *aggrieved*. While these discourse types are not, strictly speaking, cumulative, in the nature of aggrieved discourses we often find a crescendo that builds on narratives of belonging (affirm), emotion (affect), and opposition (affront), in a final outburst of grievance. Closely related to affect, an *aggrieved* discourse is made distinct by its sense of resentment and unfairness. It is separated out as a discursive category in this analysis so we can pay specific attention to the nature of grievance in our modern politics, and how this emerges in the spaces of peripheral media.[112] Aggrieved discourses engage in an active discursive construction of grievance, using this as

a counterpublic tenet to reinforce a sense of marginalization. It is not simply that there are differences between different groups in society, politically and culturally, it is that these differences are, somehow, unfair. And it is not only that there is a resentment over difference (particularly in moments when one perspective seems to be prevailing in society), it is because those prevailing perspectives are not *yours*.

Aggrieved discourses bring us back to those we associated with *affirmation*: To be aggrieved is to belong, and narratives of grievance can unite a counterpublic around being unfairly treated, and being told that how you were treated was unfair. From Inglehart and Norris' work on cultural backlash, aggrieved discourses convey a sense that it is not enough that things have changed, they have changed the balance of what one considers "fair."

Within peripheral media, aggrieved discourses are found in the language of taking, depriving, and diminishing. As a discourse, this breaks from the solely political rhetoric of grievance thriving in our politics, where grievance invoked around culture and identity is often an election garnisher. The nature of grievance within agonistic and antagonistic peripheral media is similar, but it goes further by giving substance and justification to that feeling, often because it takes identity and cultural markers and weaves them into a narrative around news. This sense of justification is set alongside narratives of serving a public in a pitch by *PJ Media* for VIP Membership (emphasis added):

> By joining *PJ Media* VIP, you'll not only have access to our premium content, you'll also be helping us to further *our mission of promoting liberty and preserving our culture*— doing your part to make the United States a place *where our kids and grandkids can be safe and thrive*. As our opponents continue their relentless *attacks on all that we hold dear*, we promise to stay in this fight, calling out *the left and their fellow travelers* in the mainstream media—and holding them accountable. With your help, we'll win this fight. Join PJ Media VIP today.

These sorts of messages reiterate and then irritate existing divisions in contemporary societies by circulating discourses that pique aspects of grievance and unfairness that are already resonant in fractured societies replete with political and ideological polarization.[113] *PJ Media* uses a denominative pejorative to categorize "the left," as (implicitly Marxist, socialist, or conservative) "fellow travelers," and suggest that without their—*PJ Media*'s—conservative voice as an alternative source of news that pushes back against these forces, future generations would be unsafe were liberal politicians to be in office. We are given leeway to make these interpretations because the same allusions are made by *America Out Loud,* which promises "to say what must be said to keep us all informed of the evil politics and machinations of the Marxist Left." At first reading, this makes a fairly unambiguous political

appeal, at least in its phrasing. But when looked at in terms of argument and tone, that phrasing is more revealing. That phrasing matters because it resonates with other right-wing appeals that echo forms of populist animosity found outside media, in political campaigns that refer to liberals and Democrats as "Marxists." It also echoes cultural backlash and ideological narratives of affective polarization, by defining the opponent as an enemy, one who is evil.

Through aggrieved discourses, we can also see where peripheral media, and particularly those reflecting reactionary and identity-driven ideological positions, break from Warner's conception of a counterpublic that can be distinct but not fully removed from the "general public." *Antagonistic* discourses of aggrieved division benefit from removal, and these media call upon their constituent publics to "cease for a moment to think of themselves as members of the general public as well,"[114] to quote Warner. This is reiterated within a form of public address that encourages their publics to identify themselves as uniquely isolated, situated within the political-ideological enclave that these media also exist within.

As *El American* describes its public, they are the orphaned. As *Ongehoord Nederland* suggests, they are unheard. At the same time, peripheral media engage in this form of public address in a manner that allows that disaffected and isolated member of society to—contra their isolated status—consider themselves as society's "most representative members."[115] They are the only ones who can preserve what is "good about our society and culture" (*The Conservative Woman*). This final consideration of *aggrieved* forms of public address helps bring together the various forms of address that have been outlined in this chapter, where through narratives of grievance we can see which peripheral media are more-or-less *affective* in their approach, *affronting* in their structure, and more-or-less *agonistic* or *antagonistic* in their sense of journalism and of their understanding of society.

A typology of counterpublic address

The forms of public address I have presented in this chapter can be understood in several ways. They can be understood minimally as media speaking to an audience of interested news readers. But they can also be seen as a form of public address, where by engaging with a group of like-minded individuals media construct a coherent public around shared ideologies, politics, and understandings of society. Perhaps disaffected, almost certainly polarized, in many of these narratives there is a clear message coming through explicit appeals to different audiences that point us toward considering their work not only as alternatives to the journalistic mainstream, but as invested in defining and reinforcing a society fragmented

into counterpublics. In their different forms of public address, both agonists and antagonists amplify an understanding of themselves and their public through *affirmative*, *affective*, *affronting*, and *aggrieved* discourses, though these differ in intensity and divisiveness. At times, these narratives emerge in ways that define peripheral media publics as subaltern counterpublics, as media seek to describe their audiences as marginalized and oppressed, whether we would consider that description accurate. They also do so in ways that narrow the distance between peripheral media and the publics they address, and widen the fractures between these publics and others in society. This is reflected in the typology below (Figure 7.2).

My aim in developing this typology is to help us explore different forms of public address that peripheral media engage when appealing to their publics. By reflecting on these narratives through a counterpublic framework, I have hoped to showed how we are better able to situate peripheral media like these found at the intersections of journalism and politics as engaged in counterpublic-building.

AFFIRM	AFFECT
– *Affirmed belonging:* e.g., by tradition and culture, within generations	– *Affective legitimation:* e.g., a right to be 'fired up' to act, or feel angry about change
– *Affirmed beliefs:* Validating perspectives (e.g., being downtrodden)	– *Affective beliefs:* Legitimating emotion via structured belief (e.g., religion, ideology)
AFFRONT	**AGGRIEVE**
– *Orthodox Affront:* Seeing opponent-others as morally impure 'enemies'	– *Moral Grievance:* e.g., Drawing on 'affronting' language to collapse 'mainstream media' and 'the left'
–*Heterodox Affront:* Distinguishing between own and others' professional/institutional values (e.g., 'objectivity')	– *Ideological Grievance:* Positioning against 'power' or 'losses of trust'

Figure 7.2: Typology of Counterpublic Discourses

The examples above show that peripheral actors are aware the positions they hold are not universally shared (no matter how strongly they might believe they are clearly correct), and that they recognize that if these positions are properly channeled, they can resonate with a specific public that will see them as a call to action (either for change or for resistance). The advantages of such a typology are both reflective, illustrating the ways non-traditional media actors communicate the nature of division in our fractured worlds, but they also provide means for thinking more fully about how these dynamics have emerged, including over time

where indications of a shifting relationship between alternative, peripheral, media and their audiences can be assessed. To demonstrate this, briefly and in passing, we can return to the "Ideological Square" offered by Van Dijk, in this instance doing so to look at how these discourses have changed over time. Compare how *Common Dreams* identified its approach to journalism in 2001 as: "An eclectic mix of politics, issues and breaking news with an emphasis on progressive perspectives that are increasingly hard to find with our corporate-dominated media."

- **Emphasize Our good things:** An eclectic approach to breaking news, covering stories with a progressive approach.
- **Emphasize Their bad things:** Corporate-dominated meeting that "fail" to cover important stories

These points of emphasis are drawn in contrast, by absence, of any acknowledgment of *Common Dreams'* negative traits, or corporate-dominated media's positive ones. By 2023, this narrative shifted:

> *Common Dreams* is committed to not only being your trusted news source but to encouraging critical thinking and civic action on a diverse range of social, economic, and civil rights issues affecting individuals and their communities.

Using the framework above we can find *affirmative* and *affective* discourses, "being your trusted" news source on "issues affecting individuals and their communities" and a further normative, journalistic dimension of engaging critical thinking and civic action. All of which emphasize their best positive attributes, while saying little about their ideological opponents aside from saying *Common Dreams* provides "an alternative to the commercial media." This suggests a more pluralist, *agonistic,* yet nevertheless tailored approach to serving a specific counterpublic in our more contentious, fractured, societies.

In contrast, *The Conservative Woman* described itself in 2014 as "a new voice for social conservative values and solutions to modern day problems." In every aspect, this is emblematic of the positive contributions alternative, agonistic, media can offer—a new value-laden voice and searching for solutions to society's challenges. By 2023, however, the narrative has changed to one steeped in an *aggrieved* discourse that encouraged its public that their find *affront* in their ideological opponents, describing their own counterpublic in no uncertain terms as a marginalized faction of society, saying: "All who believe in liberty will share my concern about the growing threats to free speech, freedom of conscience and to our Western Judeo-Christian heritage." Who poses those threats, who is the "them" in contrast to *The Conservative Woman's* "us" remains ominous, and in the offing. But

it nevertheless reflects the rise of a more fractured world, and the avenues that *antagonistic* peripheral media take to stoke division within it.

Distinguishing antagonistic and agonistic discourses

The ways in which we understand peripheral media and their appeals to down-trodden counterpublics warrant further discussion, and just because there are similarities that I have highlighted here between more divisive and more contrarian media, and between those rallying audiences towards change and those invoking a sense of isolation, does not mean these actors are equivalent in either their allegiance to journalistic ideals (*agonistically*), or in their reinforcement of societal difference (*antagonistically*). We should not discount these clear differences.

From the analysis in this chapter and the frameworks I have explored, it seems clear that all types of peripheral media, both agonistic and antagonistic, invoke a sense of a divided society, split between those who are in power and those who are not. But how these media understand and communicate these divisions, and how they see themselves in service to their audiences in addressing these fractures are clearly different. *Talking Points Memo* positions its work as serving the public by pushing back against "abuses of power and betrayals of the public trust." *The American Conservative* advocates for its public, as it "opposes unchecked power in government and businesses." They offer these commitments from polar opposite political and ideological positions, but nevertheless invoke their specific ideals as a pledge to their audiences that elevate normative, democratic values, situating their narratives of journalistic belonging in a unifying "coming together" of society. They differ, but do so *agonistically*.

Antagonists on the other hand engage in the opportunities for *glut* and *grievance* afforded by the internet and amplified in our polarized politics to suggest a society divided by ideology and culture. Where agonistic media, primarily on the left but also on the right, engage grievance when channeling a sense of injustice against those who have broken social contracts (*Talking Points Memo*), or those who distort facts through emotive sensational reporting (*Punching Bag Post*), *antagonists* use *affective* and *aggrieved* language to establish a sense of affront and imbue political and news narratives with heated, violent rhetoric, and a language of conflict (e.g., engaging in "battle"). They do so repeatedly, and in ways that double down on ideological and political differences, doing little to mend fractures in our societies. As we saw with the examples form *El American, The Conservative Woman,* and *Ongehoord Nederland*, these differences are something to fight over, to

go to war over, and which insist that political opponents should be seen as ominous threats.

At the same time, acknowledging the ways counterpublics are addressed by peripheral media who see themselves as an improvement on traditional media—whether as *agonists* or *antagonists*—allows us to think through the challenge peripheral media are responding to. They cater to those left out of dominant narratives of society who, for various reasons, traditional news media have ignored. To those who feel isolated, either ignored within mainstream narratives of news and politics, or enclaved in their beliefs and visions of the world, peripheral media offer a lifeline.[116] To the isolated and left behind, acknowledging their pain, their feelings of being disaffected, peripheral media take their case to these subaltern counterpublics by saying their feelings are genuine and that they deserve to have their voices heard.

While we might appreciate one version of this appeal more than another, for example welcoming agonists who rally their audiences towards progressive change, or seeing value in a critical conservative countervailing voice, neither the peripheral agonist or antagonist gets out these discussions "clean." The analysis above also shows that both agonistic and antagonistic peripheral media employ narratives that can stoke division, apparently seeing a benefit in adopting the language of counterpublic resistance as a way to embolden their own status by forming a stronger link to their own specific audiences. This is apparent in language that reinforces a sense of being downtrodden, or invokes a sense of being ignored or pushed down by those in power, and reinforcing this sentiment to a public that are also told that they should look warily around the corner for they are also under threat.

In some instances, we might encourage this sort of framing and media-public appeal. When sites like *BlackCommentator* and *The Real News Network* foreground marginalized voices and concerns, they do so to engage with digital resources that challenge hegemonic, structural inequality—these powers and pressures are real, and so invoking the threat of subjugation seems justified. Given that subordination is anathema to democratic societies within an agonistic model that prioritizes pluralism and many voices, this can be a point of productive agonistic journalism, striving to elevate these concerns to public attention. On the other hand, as we've certainly seen in the populist vein of politics and the antagonistic media that reflect the same sense of subordination, this same sense of being downtrodden has been at the root of divisive political dynamics, where the same sense of marginalization can be weaponized by media who suggest there is a "cabal" of left-wing powerbrokers working against you, or a "Marxist" left depriving you of your heritage. Against such voices, *antagonistic* peripheral media make little attempt to

strive towards constructive solutions, stoking fear and foreboding instead. Or, as *The Conservative Woman* darkly comments on its stance as a guardian for its conservative public, and their families: "As we have grown, similar sites have bitten the dust. We are the only site doing what we do – explaining and promoting the virtues of people's instinctive social conservatism and its importance for children's wellbeing."

In this chapter, we have seen signs of progressive and constructive voices emerging from journalism's periphery. These are apparent in media that *affirm* their counterpublic's subaltern identities, and afford that counterpublic significant "emancipatory potential," by giving them a means to resist (if not undo) further subordination if they adopt peripheral media's construction of society, and use it to rally toward change.[117] We see this version of counterpublic advocacy in the mission *Progressive News Wire*, "speaking out on the issues of our time," *Truthout*'s pledge to "spark action by revealing systemic injustice and providing a platform for progressive and transformative ideas," and *Common Dreams'* aspiration for a better future "if enough well-informed, well-intentioned—and just plain fed up and fired-up—people demand it."

However, if we are to encourage seeing emancipation as a response to marginalization primarily in progressive terms, we need to also be open to considering where these are subjectively held positions that can also be invoked as an *affront* from an antagonistic and right-wing media, responding to progressive change. "We take on the challenges of our generation so that we can preserve future generations," claims *America Out Loud*. A backlash to progressive change, perhaps, but one that is nevertheless oriented toward the future in the same formulation progressive media present, and one that is categorically different from those championed by media who amplify and construct an *aggrieved* public, stoking a division built around a sense of *affront* towards ideological and political opponents. We are right to be cautions when we ask whether and where the surface-level claims of journalistic belonging might mask more fundamentally destructive and antagonistic narratives, a distinction I will aim to navigate in the final chapter of this book. At the same time, we need to be mindful of where an over-caution towards certain ideological positions can lead us to treating both agonistic and antagonistic media in the same way, and where drawing on the approaches in this chapter we can better interpret these discursive appeals.

In these examples, we see that not all constructions of counterpublics should be raised as emancipatory or progressive (a critique of Fraser's work raised by Warner), and that not all claims of subaltern marginalization are equally valid. We can also recognize where the sense of subordination being expressed is being expressed by those who we might otherwise associate with dominant social groups

if we were to use history or socio-economic demography as our guide. They are defensive, as Jackson and Kreiss might suggest, and certainly indicative of a sense of cultural backlash that Norris and Inglehart have outlined.[118] Yet, in conveying a sense of being under threat and subjected to undesirable societal change, peripheral media allow members of these social groups to self-identify as "marginalized" counterpublics who are at risk of diminishment, doing so in ways that invoke the same populist appeals and narratives of cultural backlash that we know are circulating in contemporary Western societies, and in the media content that reinforce these perceptions. Regardless their legitimacy, these media allow a perceived aggrievement, a perception of being marginalized, to be understood, amplified, and adopted by specific publics who see themselves as subaltern.

This opportunity is as available to those on the left, including *The Canary* which identifies themselves as "proudly working class-led and produce upfront journalism that amplifies marginalised communities," as it is apparent to the right, including when the UK's *The Conservative Woman* describes themselves as preserving society for those who see it as under threat: "Our mission is all-important if what is good about our society and culture is to be conserved, if Britain is to become an independent, self-reliant and thriving nation state again and if our children's future is to be secured." From the examples in this chapter, we can also see where peripheral media advocating for racial justice and equity in the United States use the same language of being oppressed and marginalized as those who see themselves as fighting for the preservation of Western Christian heritage in the United Kingdom. These are categorically different claims, and forces us to consider how the same discourses of counterpublic formation belonging can be used, regardless their substantiation (i.e., if they are used in the context of demonstrable socio-economic and racial discrimination, or merely perceived attacks on the dominant White, Christian, British population).

Thinking of the latter form of address not as an appeal to a *subaltern counterpublic* but as the construction of a *defensive public*, as Jackson and Kreiss encourage[119], allows us to better understand that media see a benefit in conveying a *perceived* subaltern public. They do so in similar terms, whether you are a woman who would see yourself as part of a feminist counterpublic pushing back against your subaltern status, as Fraser describes, or a white, middle-class British or Dutch man who does not suffer from that same subordination in real terms, yet is being told to feel marginalized by antagonistic media narratives you have repeatedly engaged with online and in alternative news spaces. White and Male, you are still being told to see yourself as dominated and marginalized in the face of an increasingly diverse and changing country. For both sets of actors, and for the composition of both of their counterpublics, cultural change is resonant, as *either* the silent

revolution (expanding and advancing rights) or as the cause for a sense of backlash to change (seeing tradition and identity as under assault). And the media that circulate within their spheres reinforce these perceptions.

But drawing on these comparisons does not require adopting moral equivalence, and should in fact give us tools to avoid that trap when we are able to place these discursive appeals to publics in the fuller political, societal, and cultural contexts in which they appear. When we find similarities in public address, we might initially explain this as a finding that all alternative, peripheral, media are engaged in an insincere claim of journalistic belonging and public service. Or we might, instead, argue all alternative media are able to advocate for emancipatory change, and air the voices of overlooked audiences. Neither of these answers is entirely correct, but both ring true as reflections of the fractures and divisions in our societies.

From the frameworks and theories we have built this discussion on, we are better able to recognize that in media spaces where grievance toward the status quo can be expressed, and where the nature of being aggrieved is a subjective one that can be articulated by media reporting on society in various ways, and further where these subjective positions can be agreed to by different publics. They also show where we need to refine our frameworks and tools for doing so. The analysis here shows that at least a *sense* of marginalization and the need for some form of emancipation can be held by different subsections of society—not always honestly, not always convincingly, but often quite loudly. In the final chapter, I will return to our considerations of agonism to try and offer a path forward for making sense of journalism in our fractured world with these points in mind.

Notes

1   PJ Media identifies itself as a news source, and has been described including by NPR and others as a "conservative" news source. On its own page, it describes itself this way: "Since its inception in 2005, PJ Media has been focused on the news from a center-right perspective—from the insightful commentary provided by our all-star lineup of columnists to our writers' quick takes on breaking news and trending stories."

2   Emphasis added; quoted from Walsh, Michael (2015) "PJ Tattler: Seven Reasons Why We Really Hate the Media: Incest is best, and it gets worse from there," *PJ Media*, March 2, 2015, at: https://web.archive.org/web/20150303013557/http://pjmedia.com/tatler/2015/03/02/seven-reasons-why-we-really-hate-the-media/

3   Nadler and Bauer 2020; Van Dijk 2011, 396.

4   Dowling, Johnson, and Ekdale 2022.

5   Frischlich et al. 2023.
6   Livingstone 2005.
7   Nielsen 2020.
8   Livingstone 2005.
9   Warner 2002b, 413; emphasis in original.
10 Conboy and Eldridge 2017.
11 Michael Warner 2002, 55.
12 Anderson 1983, 7.
13 Conboy and Eldridge 2017.
14 Michael Warner 2002, 50–51.
15 Ibid., 81.
16 Warner 2002b, 418.
17 Asen 2000, 424.
18 Michael Warner 2002, 81.
19 Michael Warner 2002, 84.
20 Fraser 1990, 68.
21 Loehwing and Motter 2009.
22 Fraser 1990.
23 Michael Warner 2002, 86.
24 Squires 2002, 460.
25 Vrikki and Malik 2019; Weisser 2008.
26 Asen 2000, 426.
27 Squires 2002.
28 Jackson and Kreiss 2023.
29 Squires 2002.
30 c.f. the discussions of subaltern counterpublics in Fraser 1990, and the discussion of hipness in Michael Warner 2002.
31 Bauer and Nadler 2020.
32 Wasilewski 2023.
33 Jackson and Kreiss 2023.
34 Ibid., 102.
35 Ibid., 103.
36 Squires 2002, 464–465.
37 Ibid., 460.
38 Michael Warner 2002, 82.
39 Ferree et al. 2002; Fraser 1990.
40 Fraser 1990, 68.
41 Weisser 2008; Vrikki and Malik 2019.
42 Banjac 2021.
43 Trott 2021.
44 Reijven et al. 2020; Xu 2020.
45 Waisbord 2018; Waisbord 2022
46 Michael Warner 2002, 85.
47 Ibid., 51.
48 Milton 1644.

49 Ibid., 88.
50 Fraser 1990, 68.
51 This is a point that was also made by Karin Wahl-Joregensen at a conference I attended in Kalmar, Sweden in October 2023, in a keynote that encouraged scholars to take seriously media who engage in emotive and populist appeals in a manner similar to my own in this chapter and book.
52 Asen 2000, 425.
53 Norris and Inglehart 2019, 74–76.
54 Lünenborg 2019.
55 Asen 2000, 425.
56 Michael Warner 2002, 86.
57 van Dijk 2009, 196; van Dijk 1988.
58 van Dijk 2009, 193.
59 Mouffe 2000.
60 Bourdieu 2005.
61 Van Dijk 2011, 396.
62 Bruni 2015.
63 Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019, 146.
64 Pospěch, Fuglestad, and Figueiredo 2021, 8.
65 SE Cupp Unfiltered [@UnfilteredSE] 2019.
66 Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 184.
67 Michael Warner 2002, 84.
68 Conboy and Eldridge 2017.
69 Loehwing and Motter 2009, 223.
70 Conboy and Eldridge 2017.
71 Pierre Bourdieu 1977, 169.
72 Michael Warner 2002, 55.
73 Eldridge 2018a.
74 Bourdieu 2005.
75 Carlson and Lewis 2020.
76 Eldridge 2022a.
77 Rae 2021.
78 "En ja, dat zijn er altijd minstens twee" (https://tpo.nl/f-a-q/).
79 Eldridge 2018a, 99.
80 Wasserman 2020.
81 Steppat, Castro, and Esser 2023.
82 Broersma 2019.
83 Tandoc Jr. 2019.
84 Ihlebæk et al. 2022.
85 Ibid.
86 For example, satirists and parodic actors who see their media work as informative, but not journalistic (like John Oliver, or Jon Stewart, among others); Eldridge 2018a, 156.
87 Eldridge 2018a, 107.
88 "Political correctness" on its own is a loaded term, reflective of the culture wars that emerged in the 1990s, repurposed in our current populist era.

89 Ongehoord Nederland n.d.

90 Ibid.

91 Squires 2002.

92 While both *The Post Millennial* and its parent media *Human Events* have been prominent conservative media in Canada and the United States, respectively, *Human Events'* editors and reporters have been implicated in the spread of conspiracy theories and inflammatory language and politics, including its Senior Editor Jack Posobiec and Senior Contributor Charlie Kirk.

93 Orwell 1949.

94 Wahl-Jorgensen 2020, 175.

95 Lünenborg 2019.

96 Iyengar et al. 2019.

97 Papacharissi 2016.

98 Williams 1961, 48.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid., 49.

101 Ibid.

102 Inglehart 1977; Norris and Inglehart 2019.

103 Boler and Davis 2018; Klinger, Koc-Michalska, and Russmann 2023.

104 Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck 2022; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019.

105 Hochschild 2018.

106 Papacharissi 2015, 3.

107 Papacharissi and De Fatima Oliveira 2012, 280.

108 Jackson and Kreiss 2023; Squires 2002.

109 Norris and Inglehart 2019, 248.

110 Fraser 1990, 67. Emphasis added.

111 Levine, 2024.

112 Capelos, Salmela, and Krisciunaite 2022.

113 Michael Warner 2002.

114 Michael Warner 2002, 84.

115 Ibid.

116 Fraser 1990, 77.

117 Fraser 1990, 68.

118 Jackson and Kreiss 2023; Norris and Inglehart 2019.

119 Jackson and Kreiss 2023.

Agonism and antagonism: Journalism in a fractured world

In the wake of political upheavals brought about by recent elections and referenda, traditional journalists have presented themselves as somewhere between self-flagellating and deeply introspective. It has become a routine of coverage following a "surprising" election result or an "unexpected" referendum outcome for journalists to pore over their past work, and try to unpack what journalism got wrong. Going back to the 2016 context introduced in Chapter 1, many such reflections followed Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president. Nearly a year after Brexit, the BBC presenter and former politics editor Nick Robinson said: "We're in unchartered territory with Brexit, and most people, including me, didn't see the results coming. Boy, do we have to look at ourselves and ask ourselves tough questions about whether we're interviewing the right people, asking the right questions."[1] In one of their 2016 election post-mortems, the *New York Times'* Jim Rutenberg and James Poniewozik raised a similar concern, describing "a big disconnect between mainstream reporters and Trump supporters," bemoaning their own efforts to bridge those divides. Still, even in their reflective state, these journalists seemed resigned to little changing. Poniewozik wryly commented: "I take these morning-after regrets the same way I do a political party's postelection autopsy. Wake me up if they ever implement it."[2] In *de Volkskrant*'s own reflections following the November 2023 election that saw Geert Wilder's PVV party take the

largest share of seats in parliament, Michael Persson acknowledged that journalists had much to learn from what they got wrong in coverage of the election:

> Natuurlijk maken journalisten fouten. Op elk artikel en elk programma is kritiek mogelijk. Het kan zeker beter. Maar wie van journalisten de vijand maakt, is niet uit op verbetering. Die is uit op ondermijning van een kritische tegenmacht, en daarmee de democratie.

> [Of course journalists make mistakes. Every article and program can be criticized. It can certainly be better. But those who make journalists the enemy are not out for improvement. They are out to undermine a critical counterforce, and thus democracy.][3]

Whether seen as journalists trying to stay relevant in newly defined political and media landscapes, or as a *mea culpa* for mistakes and oversights, these reflections have become staples of journalistic introspection, followed by efforts to identify shortcomings and sometimes even overcome them.

But many of these efforts were seen as limited at best, and inadequate at worst, and others have been decried more as branding than substantive change. For their part, in 2016 the *Guardian*'s editor Kathleen Viner laid out how *Guardian* journalists would navigate a period, "defined by dazzling political shocks and the disruptive impact of new technologies in every part of our lives. The public sphere has changed more radically in the past two decades than in the previous two centuries."[4] The Scott Trust (owners of the *Guardian*) launched theguardian.org. This U.S.-based foundation provides the *Guardian* with resources for reporting ventures that support democracy and civic engagement.[5] Other news media responded by expanding their cadre of opinion writers to include more conservative voices, or juxtaposing news from both sides of the political spectrum on their homepages.

These responses are important, but I am not sure we've seen the lasting changes that newspapers' post-mortems and democratic initiatives were hoping for, and if we look from journalism's periphery towards its traditional core, we would likely conclude that they could never achieve such an outcome. In the previous chapters, many of the examples we have seen suggest that, in our current political and media climate, aggressive and political news media are widening rather than repairing fractures in our society. There does not seem to be an eager run towards democratic pluralism, or a media environment that would encourage this. At least not online, and at least not in the spaces where political, peripheral, media hold sway.

Perhaps this puts proof to the challenge. While well-intentioned, traditional journalists' efforts to change the circumstances that led to the "shocking" campaign results have also ignored the conditions that led to those results, minimally

responding to a reality that many of those who voted for Trump, Wilders, Brexit, or similar would describe. To those voters, the same media who are "shocked" are part of the problem, and their solutions seem woefully insufficient, and inconsistently adhered to. While the *Washington Post* introduced a "Democracy Team," putting backing to its post-2016 masthead slogan "Democracy Dies in Darkness" by dedicating journalists to reporting on democratic processes at state and national levels,[6] its journalists—who embraced this call—felt thrown under the bus in 2024 when the *Post*'s owner (Amazon owner, Jeff Bezos) told its editorial board not to endorse anyone in the U.S. presidential race between Trump and Kamala Harris. In response, the same slogan advocating journalism as a centurion for democracy was thrown back in the *Post*'s face, including by its own editorial cartoonist, Ann Telnaes.[7]

Such moves by Bezos amplify an undercurrent of distrust and a widespread perspective that traditional media and traditional journalists, are part and parcel of the elites who disaffected, populist voters are voting against. Margaret Sullivan makes this clear in her critique of newspapers' efforts to reach new sources in the heartland of the United States. The end result of this superficial attempt resulted in what she described as "the Endless Diner Series, in which coastal reporters interviewed Trump voters in their hometown eateries, all competing to find the most 'average' Americans and to learn that they hadn't changed their minds."[8]

The same voters still backing Trump, or Wilders' right-wing PVV party, or the anti-immigrant Reform UK party also haven't changed their minds about traditional journalism, nor have they abandoned their general disdain for them. But this is not a uniquely conservative or populist sentiment, and mainstream media are still seen as overly liberal to conservatives, and overly conservative to liberals. To both, they contribute to a disenchantment that only pushes audiences to tune out, or turn elsewhere for news that satisfies their polarized political identities.[9] In continental Europe, where alternative news media are often seen as too extreme or too political to those who favor traditional news sources, alternative media audiences see traditional media the opposite way, describing them as too corporate and too close to political power. For those audiences, alternative media, like the peripheral media studied in this book, are seen as a necessary corrective to entrenched power.[10]

This bears out in the Dutch context, where survey research shows populist voters "self-select media content that actively articulates the divide between the 'innocent' people and 'culprit' others."[11] In the UK, this is increasingly reflected in opinion polls that show even those traditional news media that are generally trusted are struggling to overcome significant forces of distrust, forces that cut along political lines. In a 2023 YouGov poll, the BBC was trusted by 44 percent of

respondents, offset by 22 percent who saw it as untrustworthy.[12] More starkly, when breaking down measures of trust by political allegiance, the same poll shows the *Guardian* with a 47-point trust gap between Labour voters (+41) and Conservative voters (-6), while the relatively new *GB News,* itself a conservative response to the BBC, showed nearly the exact opposite, with low trust among Labour voters (-39) compared to Conservatives (+7).

Part of the reason for this persistent divide might lie in the way traditional journalists have covered the political moments we are currently living through. Setting aside the retrospective discussions of journalism's failure to cotton on to the rise of certain political figures or populist movements that I introduced at the top of this chapter, the root of these disruptions might also lie in how these same media are reaching out to the publics they see themselves as serving. As Andrea Wenzel has shown, voters' reasons for voting the way they do are complex, and they are not well represented by news coverage that stereotypes "hillbillies" in rural U.S. communities as inarticulate followers of political pied pipers.[13] Furthermore, when ideological and political complexities are reduced to binary left-right, or rural-urban problems that journalists simply need to highlight more often rather than more complexly, they fail to recognize that it is the ways in which these media *address* and understand their publics that is the problem. The more this recurs, the harder it is to find hope for a pluralist media and for pluralist democratic societies where fractures can be mended.

To put it more directly, if the solution proposed by traditional media is to simply get more of their content in front of more citizens' eyes, to reinforce their own understanding of the field's doxa, habitus, and nomos, rather than trying to understand why it is those citizens turned elsewhere for their news in the first place, then it's no wonder why peripheral journalistic media have found success; after all, they don't speak down to their audiences, they don't tell them they're wrong. Instead, they affirm their senses of being ignored, their perceptions of being dominated by more powerful forces, and the sense that their voices are going unheard. Where post-mortems decry missed opportunities to reach more voters, peripheral media have gone in the opposite direction, reaching out directly to address their audiences, speaking explicitly about the interests of farmers in overlooked rural communities, or amplifying young people's frustration with a lack of environmental policy, telling both groups their feelings of being ignored are genuine and that their voices are finally being listened to. To at least some of those same citizens, peripheral media have absolved themselves of having to revisit "shocking" election results and "surprising" campaign outcomes in the same woeful terms because they have already found a way to tell their audiences: "you are heard, your concerns are real, and we are here to offer another path." They have nothing to

apologize for because for those media and their audiences there is an alignment between what the media do, and what their audiences seem to want.

This is obviously a *far too-rosy* narrative of peripheral journalistic actors and their democratic contributions. They are not all diversifying the journalistic field in optimistic, democratic, and productive ways, and as we have seen, peripheral actors are no less prone to reducing complexity to simplistic narratives of "us" and "them" than their traditional counterparts. Among peripheral actors, *antagonists* make this divisiveness a feature of their coverage. Their efforts to appeal to populist audiences as overlooked publics stoke affective divisions around a feeling of frustration, and channel that frustration into divisive, aggressive, and hostile ideologies and political action. They also stoke division between themselves and mainstream news media, and when *antagonistic* media describe traditional media as spaces of inaction and elite conspiracy, they make the challenges faced by newspapers like the *Washington* Post and broadcasters like the *NOS* all the more difficult. They make the news media a political opponent, and for these antagonistic, polarizing, populist media, that is the same as making them an enemy for which there is nothing better than defeat.

Within simplified narratives of cultural backlash and perpetual victimhood, fundamentally destructive and divisive *antagonistic* media, including extreme and ideologically populist media, portray so-called media and societal elites in the same conglomerating, broad-brush way that they resist for themselves. Their own politics and beliefs should be seen as nuanced, but everyone else can be seen as a collective "other." By setting themselves at an oppositional remove from those in power, we have seen that in their many assertions of independence and standing up for their "unheard" and "ignored" publics they also affirm their audiences that their sense of being downtrodden is real, further amplifying a populist sense of grievance. When they describe the world as one riven by societal schisms, they justify their public's feelings of distance. Lumping together anyone who represents change or presents an ideological challenge as an elite or an enemy, the analysis in this book has shown antagonist media have done little to ameliorate fractures, and might instead be thriving on the difference they encourage. It might leave us back where we started, with feelings of despondency as we observe the fractures in our societies all around us, and left asking "what do we do now?"

Revisiting peripheral journalistic actors

Ultimately, this is a book about the social forces that shape journalism as a field, and how in the content of news we find a reflection of the social forces that shape

our societies. It has argued that these forces shaping journalism and those at play in society cannot be treated as separate. This is, first, because the journalistic field is "a microcosm set within the social macrocosm,"[14] subject to the whims and trends of politics and culture, not to mention changes in the use of technology and how it is being adopted within society. In that thinking, when there are divisions in society we can expect to find these also show up as divisions in the field. Second, this helps us understand journalism and its place within Western societies, and in the second part of this chapter dynamics of news will be dealt with in particular in terms of "the symbolic ordering of social relations"[15] that Mouffe describes in *The Democratic Paradox*.[16] In Mouffe's writing, the ordering of social relations becomes all the more crucial in the pursuit of pluralist societies where what is at stake is the legitimacy of *dissensus*, or "the legitimation of conflict and division."[17]

Bringing dynamics of political and ideological division into a conversation about journalism can be illuminating. These discussions can help us understand where our societies are more fractured or more fragmented, where breaks between groups can either be mended, or where the forces behind these divisions are more permanent. This also helps us understand how we come to know about or worlds through news, and how through news we can know better where to go next. One argument for returning our attention to the positional genesis of "peripherality" and the differences that both agonistic and antagonistic peripheral media depend upon, as I have tried to do in this book, is that it gives us greater purchase when trying to think through the nature of contestation and the various socialization factors that have spurred on new journalistic actors. In Chapters 2 and 3, I outlined these as emerging out of different theories of democracy, and different understandings of the socialization of the journalistic field to give us a language to understand how peripheral journalistic actors challenge the boundaries of journalism. In Chapters 4 and 5, I argued this has developed through an *agonistic* journalistic identity that pushes for critical, constructive change, showing where we can see this reflected in peripheral actors' metajournalistic discourses, where in news content these journalists advocate for a "better" approach to journalism. In doing so, I also showed in Chapters 6 and 7 where the same sense of distance from mainstream news is used by *antagonistic* actors who mask political campaigns and agendas in the language of journalism, stoking division and animosity in service of more populist and polarizing ambitions. In this conclusion, I now turn towards drawing these findings together to offer a path forward for making sense of these actors, and their place in a more dynamic journalistic field and in our fractured world.

By finding value in the contributions that *agonistic* peripheral journalistic actors make, and the way *agonistic* media adopt similar journalistic ambitions

to the field's core, we are able to convey the ways journalism has developed as a less-bounded, more dynamic space in a digital age. As I argued throughout this book, this allows us to understand journalism as something that takes shape in the meeting up of technology, culture, and politics, where shifts in any of these aspects of our worlds will have an effect on the other. Looking at changes in journalism as influenced by these larger societal changes, and to then relay this understanding to our approaches to understanding new journalistic actors, offers a more fulsome appreciation of the field as it has developed in a digital age. It also encourages us to consider society as more dynamic, less-bounded, and more complex as well. This provides a framework for considering *agonistic* peripheral journalistic actors and their ideological stand-taking as a valid reflection of a changed journalistic field within a changed society, and also allows us to identify where a self-perceived diminutive, outsider position is instead reflective of a *defensive* performance of polarization advanced by *antagonists* pursuing political agendas.

Inasmuch as the metaphor of a "periphery" has been productive in this effort for how it naturally evokes a discussion of boundaries and a perceived (if problematic) contrast to a journalistic "core", our efforts to think through this binary distinction has also left a trail of underexplored questions, and the analysis in Chapter 6 highlights some of its insufficiencies as a conceptual metaphor when applied too liberally. Among these is the role of certain media critical voices embraced by peripheral actors, and how we account for an often-antagonistic public-facing expression of journalistic "fitness" within studies of periphery/core boundary work. Complementary work in this area of scholarship, including work exploring the idea of interlopers as a set of alternative digital media, has addressed how these actors both present themselves as journalists and as vocal critics of traditional journalism that has failed to live up to its own ideals.[18] But this scholarship has also highlighted where these actors perform a sometimes-tenuous balancing act in terms of professional[19] and political norms.[20] The caution that emerges from these studies, built upon in this book, can be summarized simply—anyone can claim to be a journalist, and once they do we need to develop modes of scrutiny for assessing whether or not they "fit" or "live up to" that identification. Of course, this work itself should be read as complementary in that same vein, and its effort to provide ways of thinking through that challenge draws inspiration from substantive work that had already opened up discussions as to whether the centrality of a traditional journalism that held sway in the twentieth century should, in light of lowered barriers to both the means of doing journalistic work and ways of producing journalistic content, be reconsidered.[21] Optimistically, this body of research has suggested the presence of a variety of journalistic actors situated differently in relation to the traditional core-periphery distinction of the field might

change our perspective when thinking about what journalism was, is, and might become.[22]

Realistically, it has called for caution. Peripheral journalistic actors have signaled an evolving field comprised of both traditional, familiar, established journalistic actors and iconoclastic and alternative newcomers, including outspoken actors who blend journalism and activism, politics, and cultural commentary. In studying whether these could be seen as journalists, the conclusions drawn view these new journalistic actors as challenging journalism[23] and blurring[24] the boundaries of the journalistic field. This framework has allowed those of us working in this area to entertain the idea of a pluralistic journalistic field, one where a diversity of journalists and approaches could exist within an agonistic field comprised of "critical friends."[25] Such a reimagined field seemed possible in part due to the attention new heterodoxic actors were garnering for shaking up of the journalistic landscape, and even more so because the diverse range of digital journalists that had already established platforms for their contributions online around the turn of the century had made it simply impossible to ignore the changes going on in the journalism's digital transformation.[26]

In reality, this book has shown that any such evolution toward a differently shaped field has been neither progressive in a linear sense, nor straightforward in a conceptual one. For that matter, it has also not been progressive in an ideological sense, nor straightforward in any journalistic sense.

While early digital journalists successfully pushed back against the claims that they were either ineffective amateurs or mere political "keyboard warriors," and in moments have seen their work applauded as journalism, more recently they have been met with backlash for failing to live up to the ideals the field has set for itself.[27] Rather than championing independent journalistic opportunities, journalistic outsiders have come to be seen as political apparatchiks.[28] Once-independent news blogs that broke strangleholds on arcane press institutions, also dropped journalistic ambitions to instead pursue political campaigns, including by working within activist networks.[29] Independent media sites have also had change forced upon them. They have been bought up by venture capitalists and investment firms, stretching the notion of independence to its breaking point as these firms intervened in day-to-day coverage, only to eventually be shuttered, reshaped, and reborn as unfamiliar replicants of their previous selves.[30] At the same time, once-outspoken champions of the peripheral news space are now being criticized by their erstwhile peers as "shit posters" who present toxic media commentary absent any clear journalistic purpose, providing vapid opinion absent genuine explanations, rather than enrich public debate from their online platforms as they once did.

These developments have involved many of the media studied in this book, and challenge earlier narratives of a different kind of journalism highlighted in Chapter 1, found within the early hope that a new kind of journalism would emerge in a digital age, one that would be more agile, more reflective of society, and more resonant with the times we live in. To the extent the arguments in this book has shown where *antagonistic* media have stoked divisions that are already in force in our societies, it is perhaps only that final point where we see a digital media environment that is reflective of our society. This might seem like a point of resignation, and dampens the optimism of the early years of the digital era, when new media were seen as something positive, something that could strengthen democracy by contributing to news diversity and offering more perspectives and spaces for more journalistic voices and audiences to be heard. If this has not been realized, then it becomes all the more important for scholars to ask whether initially discounting new voices from the edge of what might be considered acceptable journalism is a line we draw based on our own assumptions, and our own preferences for the journalism we want. This is not to say "anything goes." Rather, it is a prompt to ask the extent to which peripheral actors are expanding the aperture through which we can understand society through news.

When we situate journalism as a complex social field within our societies, it forces us to consider some rather complex assumptions. Among them, we need to confront what it means when our first inclination might be to dismiss antagonistic voices such as the one Arnold Karskens has promoted at *Ongehoord Nederland*. By most measures, *ON!* is politically and journalistically problematic, but we cannot make that determination without also recognizing its counterargument—that *ON!* has given voice to a changed society marked by populist and polarized politics, and has risen to prominence because it successfully appealed to those who feel ignored.[31] Whether we like it or not might be less important than whether we are able to account for *antagonists'* approaches, including how they resonate with the political and populist sentiments of the publics they speak to. Their approaches might contravene shared journalistic norms, the way they appeal to their publics might mask defensiveness in a narrative of domination, but they are nevertheless gaining traction.

This does not make the questions we are faced with easy; it makes them hard. And it is reasonable to ask whether fractures in our societies can be mended, and whether the journalistic field has any hope of contributing to that effort.[32] When looking at how different traditional and peripheral journalistic media respond to each other, it makes sense to wonder aloud whether anything is likely to change on the field's periphery where news media embrace their distance from a journalistic

core as core to their journalistic identities It encourages us to ask, again, what that means for the field as a whole as it tries to appeal to a larger, general, public.

But the options in front of us are not drawn only between "traditional" journalism and populist antagonistic journalistic actors alone. As we have seen, there is a space for critical journalistic agonism in this conversation, if we make room for it. By expanding the way we think about journalism, in order to accept contrarian voices—and even countenance and encourage holding a space for them, as Mill suggests in *On Liberty*—these more critical journalistic voices could find a foothold in the journalistic field. It requires journalists and scholars alike to foster a stronger, healthier, field and a stronger, healthier, society, where a robust and agonistic sharing of differences can thrive.

This requires a shift in both our academic and professional tendencies, one that emphasizes similarity between an array of less- and more-traditional journalists, and prioritizing these markers of comparison over boundaries based on difference. This would allow us bring into a pluralist journalistic field those agonistic, diverse, voices that embrace shared priorities and support, even if critically, their journalistic peers. This is in line with my initial argument for imagining an agonistic journalistic field in 2019, when I suggested:

> Rather than attend to difference, which might otherwise define the field narrowly, choosing to focus on similarities among a diverse set of actors helps to find points of agreement … if we want to understand journalism more complexly by expanding its boundaries, we must ask to what extent this is feasible, and how we can be inclusive without conceptualizing our ideas of journalism so vastly they become meaningless. We must revisit where and how we draw such lines.[33]

If we are to try to do so, we nevertheless need to draw boundaries between those we embrace as agonistic journalsitic actors in contrast to those media voices who embrace antagonism. To do so, we can build from the specific dimensions of journalism *practitioner, practices, and propositions* that Carlson and Lewis have used to structure dimensions of boundary work.[34] This allows us to preserve a semblance of the journalistic field's distinction, borrowing on journalism's shared ambitions and ideals in order to identify criteria for inclusion and exclusion that reflect our current cultural, political, and societal realities, also reflecting considerations of critical-constructive agonism in contrast to destructive antagonism that I have developed in this book.

This approach also requires a certain vulnerability, particularly among journalists but also among scholars who have advanced a highly traditional understanding of the field and its boundaries. In order to sacrifice space to allow for difference and share authority, journalists need to be willing to open the door to

Table 8.1: A Typology for Distinguishing Agonism and Antagonism in Journalism

	Expansion (Agonism)	Expulsion (Antagonism)
Participants	*Commit to journalistic ideals; portray other journalists as "critical adversaries" while trying to change field for the better*	*Prioritize political/ideological conflict; portray ideological opponents as "enemies" in trying to undo the field to suit ideology*
Practices	*e.g., fact-based reporting, fair representation of reality in news, engaging multiple perspectives*	*e.g., using deceptive practices subjugating alternative voices, obscuring counterarguments*
Propositions	*e.g., embracing priorities of true, transparent, honest, reporting; allowing for subjectivity, activism, positionality*	*e.g., embracing grievance, emotional rather than fact-based framing, and prioritizing specific political outcomes*

constructive, critical, agonist voices. In that interest, my efforts at developing a framework for distinguishing between agonistic and antagonistic journalism drops Carlson and Lewis' third focus on "protection of autonomy," as such a protection needs to be abandoned, at least in part, to allow for a field that is more vibrant, diverse, and disagreeable in the interests of representing a society that is also vibrant, replete with diverse perspectives, and at ease with disagreement.[35]

This outline offers a framework, but it is not a simple one. It forces us to think critically about how we talk about journalism as a field that is a microcosm within the larger societal macrocosm, invoking Bourdieu's conceptualization of a societal field as something that is never quite free from the larger political and social forces at sway in society. It also takes on board Mouffe's encouragement to allow for dissensus, and disagreement, where even within the journalistic field ideological and political passions to be channeled toward a "good society." That requires a certain vulnerability from journalists, who are being asked to be less defensive and more amenable to a wider field, recognizing the loss of authority and status that comes with sharing the spaces of journalism with a wider set of actors. But it has its clear benefits, including bolstering the journalistic field's claims towards democratic pluralism, allowing a competitive and robust dialogue between dominant and alternative voices, and between journalism's traditional core and its agonistic, critical periphery.

This framework draws a contrast between what journalism might become, and what our current understanding of journalism seems to be. Or at least, it does so

in part, based on our current examples of traditional journalism's treatment of political polarization and the rise of populism as a problem that can be solved with "more journalism". It does so by acknowledging that while the diagnoses offered at the start of this chapter—that news media could have done better—might seem obvious, the prognoses offered have not led to fundamental changes. When societal upheaval is described as a political problem that journalists simply need to identify sooner and more loudly, and when in the narratives offered by traditional journalists it is framed as a problem that journalists simply failed to identify in time, then the visions of where our fractured societies are headed—the narratives that journalists offer about where they should go from here—propose a too-neat solution for forward progress. To disenchanted audiences and disaffected publics, these reflections read as blame, as if to say: The problem is only party ours because we did not convince you to engage with our content. The real problem is you, the reader, listener, or viewer, who has simply not engaged enough with the journalism we produce.

As a solution to societal fractures, this falls short. It is, however, one that instrumentalizes a traditional, normative understanding of journalism in democracy, where journalists are the guardians of democracy, and if they are only better able to provide people with information, then they alone can forestall anti-democratic tendencies. It reflects the normative, liberal, understanding of the journalistic field explored in Chapter 2. However, based on the analysis and theoretical discussions in the previous chapters, it also overlooks some more fundamental problems.

What next? Building the conditions for a pluralist field

To be clear, I find it encouraging, and important, that news media have focused attention on democracy and the challenges it is experiencing within their coverage. It is also laudable to see resources devoted by media owners toward this ambition and toward engaging with more critical discussions of politics, society, and their interplay. However, to the degree this is adopted as a path forward, it is limited from the start if it defines journalism in democracy narrowly, and based on a normative, traditional understanding of the field derived from its deliberative, rational legacy. When this happens, the responsibility for responding to a changing society is offered as an imprimatur granted to the "core" of the field, and as we have seen this often results in traditional journalists offering a one-note response

to a challenge facing democracies that is far more complex. As numerous surveys have shown, and as peripheral journalistic media studied here have capitalized on, elections and individual campaigns are simply the top notes of much more sonorous challenges within our democratic societies, challenges that are amplified by a cacophony of outspoken media, both agonistic and antagonistic, who channel a larger set of societal forces at play within politics, journalism, media, and society at large.

Moreover, when traditional journalism doubles down on a commitment to providing democratic information to a democratic society, without recognizing how their approach has alienated swathes of their societies, this is only more likely to feed into existing, bubbling, tendencies toward polarization and antagonism. When narratives of what *journalism* can do to save democracy are found primarily within mainstream news media expressed by journalists who see themselves as the praetorian guard for democracy itself, it reinforces a narrative that those who feel their views and their experiences are left out of that conversation are right to feel marginalized. For those audiences, agonistic media provide "spaces of withdrawal and regroupment" just as antagonistic media can serve as "bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics."[36]

It is not a stretch to say that if there was hope for pluralism in the widening, digital media environment we first saw at the outset of the century, events over the past decade have soddened the promise of journalistic diversity, at least in part, and democratic progress within society (at least in part). Yes, there have been ambitious journalistic endeavors that promoted normative ideals of journalism and advanced democratic principles. But we have also seen many digital media embrace divisive politics and rising animosity within our body politic, catering to politically narrow publics in their news and in how they address their audiences. Applying the framework above, we can remain cautious when considering hyperpartisan media in the United States including *Breitbart* and the *Daily Wire,* which first emerged as conservative news platforms offering a new approach to journalism, to then develop into more extreme narratives of the news, and which have since become more prone to partisan misinformation.[37] In the UK, *Westmonster* followed a similar path, moving from an alternative voice in an already partisan news environment to one that was funded by political campaigns, embracing a "politically incorrect" agenda.[38] In the Netherlands sites like *ThePostOnline* further blurred news and politics distinctions, foregrounding populist viewpoints within what Niederer and Groen refer to as "tendentious-hyperpartisan" news.[39]

Drawing from theories of agonism and field theory to think about journalism's place in our societies also allows us to consider theories of cultural backlash, building from post-materialism, to contextualize this as a conversation that is not

limited to journalism. In the context of journalism we find trendlines that are reflective of the wider sense of grievance and disillusionment within our current societies. In that way, I have argued that we can find parallel divisions in journalism to those in societies riven by polarization and populism, or by cultural and societal forces of solidarity and backlash. By presenting a way of thinking about journalistic talk found within metajournalistic discourses, we can account for different dimensions of journalistic discourse that takes place within alternative, agonistic, and peripheral journalistic spaces as particularly constructive. In these spaces, on the edges of the erstwhile journalistic field, we can examine how news can be understood as a conversation about journalism.

It is on the edges of the journalistic field where we find an opportunity for more nuanced narratives of belonging within a community, within society, and within the journalistic field. There are differences, there will always be differences—they are inherent to all our societies, as Chantal Mouffe reminds us. But these need not be seen as a problem. Differences can provide the foundation for more pluralistic visions of both society and the journalistic field. However, for this to be realized, we need to acknowledge and confront that among the irreducible differences within our societies, there is a line to be drawn between those that offer a productive opportunity, and represent an *agonistic* pursuit of a shared ambition, and those that are destructive, and *antagonistic,* geared toward fomenting division and animosity. If we hope to encourage a more *agonistic* society and a more *agonistic* journalistic field, we need to foster disagreeable commitments to overarching societal goals. However, to do so we need to address how any hope for agonism in society is being challenged by heated narratives of grievance and division. Within reactions to pluralism that bear out in an "us versus them" populist narrative written into the news stories of our era, these more *antagonistic* dispositions and the media that reflect them prove challenging to shared commitments toward a "good society."[40] Even within a pluralist society, these become difficult if not impossible to countenance. Contra Mill's sense of liberty, we cannot and should not imagine a society nor a journalistic field that insists upon allowing for its own undoing, and need to hold as a consistent baseline the pursuit of a similar ambition toward a good democratic society, and journalism's contributions toward that good society.

An agonistic field, diversifying journalistic voices in a pluralist society

As scholars and students of journalism studies we might cast a negative eye toward the types of media that I have examined in this book. Sites like *Guido Fawkes* and *Raw Story* represent a political, alternative, and contradictory understanding of what journalism should be that grates against journalism's history and legacy. Some of the examples explored here (including *Ongehoord Nederland* and *The Gateway Pundit*) are news media that in their mission statements claim to encourage news diversity, when in practice they foreground one set of viewpoints representing one set of political positions over another, and both have faced accusations of misinformation at least, and hateful speech at worst.

We might bristle when these types of media say that what they are doing is journalism. But if we do, we need to also acknowledge that this is likely not a universally shared perspective. In other words, we need to recognize in our scholarship and in our thinking that *antagonistic* media like *Ongehoord Nederland* have only been able to gain a spot on the airwaves because they attracted thousands of paid members, and because their programming continues to attract thousands of viewers.[41] For that matter, *Gateway Pundit*, which has been implicated in spreading conspiracy theories and misinformation, has also been legitimated as a news source, given White House press credentials by the Trump administration. For all we might point to *GB News* being fined for violating broadcasting standards, or highlight *Gawker's* failures to adhere to journalistic standards of ethics, we might also take a moment to reflect on how these media's rejection of standards and running afoul of journalism's institutions actually improves the standing of some media in the eyes of their audiences, especially when they are approached as a specific counterpublic that feels otherwise "unheard."

To reiterate a position I spelled out in the first chapter, these sorts of challenges force us to recognize where, as a social field, our experiences with (and understanding of) journalism is often messy and contentious. We can wish for it to be more straightforward, and be frustrated as we do so, or we can try to engage with that mess for what it is. This does not mean that we adopt all peripheral actors' claims of covering under-covered news stories blindly, and in this book I have tried to offer ways of thinking through these distinctions in ways that are meaningful, while also recognizing where we need to confront uneasy truths (like the ways even disagreeable journalistic voices can contribute to our wider understanding of society). We also need to acknowledge that the challenges they reflect are not merely academic. They reflect the challenges we face when trying to make sense

of what journalism is in our fractured societies, and the challenges we face when advocating for *both* a diverse pluralist democracy, and a diverse pluralist journalistic field. It seemed nigh on impossible to design a set of criteria that excludes some forms of media we might not want to associate with journalism (or with the way we teach journalism or research journalism), without also excluding new, alternative, approaches that we would otherwise be open to, even if only because these alternative media reflect our own ideological or political positions. We will struggle to make an intellectually sound argument that allows for one, and not the other, based on ideological allegiances alone. We need something more.

Given all of the tensions we have identified within and surrounding the field of journalism, it would not be unreasonable see pictures of an ominous future as peripheral journalistic actors and divisive political forces cater to fragmentation rather than cohesion. Nor would it be unreasonable to see the picture of society painted here as a difficult one to navigate, or to be at ease with. But the worst examples of divisiveness and fractured societies can also overwhelm a more fulsome understanding of journalism and its place in society. Divisions are apparent. That's for sure. But these cannot be avoided—they are "inherent to all human societies," Chantal Mouffe reminds us[42]—and for those of us who study journalism, it cannot be treated as separate or isolated from these fractures.

In this book, I have tried to outline where and how disagreement can be made sense of, and even be made productive, if we bring together our understandings of society and journalism, and our ways of making sense of both. Doing so, we can benefit by leaning on agonism, seeing Mouffe's outline of democratic pluralism to form a better understanding of the contrasts between what we value and what we find objectionable. In other words, we will be able to better know ourselves, to know where we stand and who we stand with, by disagreeing with our intellectual and ideological opponents, and doing so in ways that allows space for disagreement without insisting upon consensus. Building a space for pluralist dissensus, for agonistic disagreement, would benefit all of us in society, and it would benefit the journalistic field as well—the macrocosm, and the microcosm.

Notes

1   Anthony 2017.
2   Rutenberg and Poniewozik 2016.
3   Persson 2023.
4   Viner 2017.
5   theguardian.org n.d.
6   Washington Post 2022.

7   Telnaes, 2024.
8   Sullivan 2022, 94.
9   Sanders 2023.
10 Vliegenthart et al. 2023.
11 Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese 2017, 481.
12 Matthew Smith 2023.
13 Wenzel 2020.
14 Bourdieu 2005, 32.
15 Mouffe 2009, 18.
16 While both *The Democratic Paradox* and *Agonistics*, cited below, are essay collections featuring work Mouffe has presented and, in part, published elsewhere, for ease of conferring with sources I cite the widely available books they are collected within, published by Verso.
17 Mouffe 2009, 19.
18 Dowling, Johnson, and Ekdale 2022; Kim and Shin 2021; Nygaard 2023.
19 Schudson and Anderson 2009, 98.
20 Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019; Rae 2021.
21 Singer 2003; Deuze 2003.
22 Deuze and Witschge 2018.
23 Zelizer 2009, 30.
24 Domingo and Heinonen 2008.
25 Budarick 2019; Mouffe 2013.
26 Ferrucci and Eldridge 2022.
27 Tandoc and Jenkins 2017.
28 Eldridge 2020b.
29 Di Salvo 2020, 155–174.
30 Salmon 2021; Vasudevan 2022.
31 Bos and Brants 2014; Tunderman 2022.
32 My profound thanks to Sandra Banjac for helping focus this narrative.
33 Eldridge 2019b, 15.
34 Carlson and Lewis 2020.
35 Carlson and Lewis 2020.
36 Fraser 1990, 68.
37 Rae 2021.
38 McDowell-Naylor, Cushion, and Thomas 2023.
39 Niederer and Groen 2020.
40 Mouffe 2004, 42.
41 Omroepvereniging Ongehoord Nederland 2022.
42 Mouffe 2013, 2.

Methods & data sampling

The table below lists all the media sampled for specific analysis in this book; it does not include all media generally referred to, which are cited individually, and rather focuses on media whose content was subjected to specific scrutiny. All media and quoted content in this book come from digital political news sites identified and selected from lists compiled by various media watchers. While not all media listed below are quoted explicitly in this text, their mission statements, "about" pages, and other forms of public address were assessed using Atlas.ti, following principles of thematic analysis and grounded theory.

Right-wing media were identified from lists at *The Righting*, which is a site that reports on and monitors what they see as right-wing media; it also presents an index of left-wing sites, which was consulted.[1] Left-wing sites were identified by the extreme, right-wing activist site Discover the Networks, which monitors—and attacks—what they see as left-wing media. This site is a project of the David Horowitz Freedom Center, which has been described as "giving anti-Muslim voices and radical ideologies a platform to project hate and misinformation" by the Southern Poverty Law Center's "Hatewatch" project.[2] This adopts an adversarial approach to most-different sampling, and because I am interested in exploring fragmentation along political and journalistic lines, these two political indices make these divisions stark.[3]

There are considerations that have to be made with such a sampling strategy. First, the accounts of which media are right- or left-bias cannot be considered explanatory, as these lists are maintained by purported opponents. Sites that were

identified from these indices were identified, sampled, and cross-checked, using the indexed site at *MediaBias/Fact Check*, which evaluates bias (left or right leaning) as well as credibility, conspiracy peddling, and publishing misinformation.

Second, both of these resources are U.S.-focused, and while their lists also incorporate international media, media from the Netherlands are underrepresented in these indices. Additional sampling of both UK and Dutch media on the left-right spectrum come from my own research and from the collaborative editorial work on alternative media I have done with colleagues across Europe.[4] These were gathered in part from experience working on editorial projects that feature studies of alternative Dutch media, as well as through research discussions with colleagues at the *Centre for Media and Journalism Studies* at the University of Groningen, and other research networks.

Finally, some examples come from data gathered over time by myself studying these sites. Where historical comparisons are drawn in the analysis, content was gathered from the Internet Archive's Wayback machine, which offers invaluable as a tool when sites have either been closed, changed formats, degraded, or simply do not offer rich enough archives that follow traditional indexing protocols.[5]

Site Name	Country/Focus[1]	Political/Ideological Orientation[2]
*The Canary^*	UK	Left-Wing
Eschaton	U.S.	Left-Wing
*The Palmer Report^*	U.S.	Left-Wing
*Project Censored^*	U.S.	Left-Wing
The Intercept	Global	Left-Wing
Raw Story	U.S.	Left-Wing
Novara Media	UK	Left-Wing
SKWAWKBOX	UK	Left-Wing
Jezebel	U.S.	Progressive
Deadspin	U.S.	Progressive
Defector	U.S.	Progressive
Wonkette	U.S.	Progressive
Talking Points Memo	U.S.	Progressive
Gawker	U.S.	Progressive
Truthout	U.S.	Progressive
The Real News Network	U.S.	Progressive

Site Name	Country/Focus[1]	Political/Ideological Orientation[2]
The Black Commentator	U.S.	Progressive
Common Dreams	Global	Progressive
CounterPunch	U.S.	Progressive
Progressive NewsWire	U.S.	Progressive
Joop.nl	NL	Progressive
Gizmodo	U.S.	Center Left
Splinter	U.S.	Center Left
The Liberal Patriot	U.S.	Center Left
Salon.com	Global	Center Left
Sikkom	NL	Center Left
*GeenStijl**	NL	Center/Center Left
*Little Green Footballs**	U.S.	Center Left/Previous Conservative
The Free Press	U.S.	Center Right
Drudge Report	U.S.	Conservative
The Dispatch	U.S.	Conservative
America Out Loud	U.S.	Conservative
The American Conservative	U.S.	Conservative
Punching Bag Post	U.S.	Conservative
Clash Daily	U.S.	Conservative
Guido Fawkes	UK	Conservative/ Right-wing
ThePostOnline	NL	Right-Wing
Westmonster	UK	Right-Wing
*Breitbart UK^*	UK	Right-Wing
The Conservative Woman	UK	Right-Wing
El American	U.S./Latin America	Right-Wing
Daily Caller	U.S.	Right-Wing
The Post Millennial	Canada/U.S.	Right-Wing
PJ Media	U.S.	Right-Wing
*De Andere Krant^*	NL	Right-Wing
*Breitbart^*	U.S.	Right-Wing
*Ongehoord Nederland^*	NL	Right-Wing

Site Name	Country/Focus[1]	Political/Ideological Orientation[2]
The Gateway Pundit^	U.S.	Right-Wing
Human Events^	U.S.	Right-Wing

1 Country/Focus is based on location, and area of coverage (e.g., *The Post Millennial*, which is based in Canada but presents U.S. conservative news.)
2 Categories Left-Wing, Progressive Center-Right/Left, Conservative, and Right-Wing, determined based on a close reading of the sites and consulting existing research for political alignment.[6]
* Indicates changes or ambiguity in political allegiance over time.
^ Indicates media accused of or having been found to have distributed conspiracy theories, misinformation, or disinformation.

Notes

1 Adair, Bill (2022) "A Reporter in Right-Wing 'Crazy Town,'" 27 June 2022, *The New Yorker*.
2 SPLC (2023) "David Horowitz," *Hatewatch*, SPLC accessed 9 August 2023 at: https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/david-horowitz
3 Eldridge and Bødker 2019, 306.
4 Eldridge 2021; Ihlebæk et al. 2022; Frischlich et al. 2023.
5 Eldridge 2020a.
6 Including, among others: Cushion 2024; McDowell-Naylor, Cushion, and Thomas 2023; Hameleers 2020; Steppat, Castro, and Esser 2023; Harambam 2023.

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Frontiers in Journalism Studies

The aim of the series Frontiers in Journalism Studies is straightforward: journalism as a field, and journalism studies as a way to make sense of it, both face the challenge of keeping pace with a range of developments. Buffeted by new, mostly digital, changes in content, journalistic production, media technologies, business models, political pressures, and audience interest, not to mention still unfolding questions around algorithms, data and privacy, and platforms, the challenges for making sense of journalism are many and the changes have been significant. But changes can be made sense of, and even the most novel developments come from somewhere.

Frontiers in Journalism Studies embraces an opportunity to understand journalism's place in society anew. It does so in work that is:

- Conceptually rich, abundantly clear. This series provides a platform for a clear and approachable discussion of journalism's new frontiers, matching theoretical richness with accessibility.
- Research for tomorrow. The books in this series prioritize forward-looking research agendas that avoid being quickly 'outdated' by not focusing too narrowly on technological changes or current trends.
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